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CLARIFYING THE DEBATE:

Psychology Examines the Issues

Hate Crimes Today: An Age-Old Foe In Modern Dress

Answers to Frequently Asked Questions About Hate Crimes

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The Special Nature of an Extreme Expression of Prejudice

Hate crimes--violent acts against people, property, or organizations because of the group to which they belong or identify with--are a tragic part of American history. However, it wasn't until early in this decade that the federal government began to collect data on how many and what kind of hate crimes are being committed, and by whom. Thus, the statistical history on hate crimes is meager. Psychological studies are also fairly new. Nevertheless, scientific research is beginning to yield some good perspectives on the general nature of crimes committed because of real or perceived differences in race, religion, ethnicity or national origin, sexual orientation, disability, or gender.

According to the FBI, about 30% of hate crimes in 1996, the most recent year for which figures are available, were crimes against property. They involved robbing, vandalizing, destroying, stealing, or setting fire to vehicles, homes, stores, or places of worship.

About 70% involve an attach against a person. The offense can range from simple assault (i.e., no weapon is involved) to aggravated assault, rape, and murder. This kind of attack takes place on two levels; not only is it an attack on one's physical self, but it is also an attack on one's very identity.

Who commits hate crimes?

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Many people perceive hate crime perpetrators as crazed, hate-filled neo-Nazis or "skinheads". But research by Dr. Edward Dunbar, a clinical psychologist at the University of California, Los Angeles, reveals that of 1,459 hate crimes committed in the Los Angeles area in the period 1994 to 1995, fewer than 5% of the offenders were members of organized hate groups.

Most hate crimes are carried out by otherwise law-abiding young people who see little wrong with their actions. Alcohol and drugs sometimes help fuel these crimes, but the main determinant appears to be personal prejudice, a situation that colors people's judgment, blinding the aggressors to the immorality of what they are doing. Such prejudice is most likely rooted in an environment that disdains someone who is "different" or sees that difference as threatening. One expression of this prejudice is the perception that society sanctions attacks on certain groups. For example, Dr. Karen Franklin, a forensic psychology fellow at the Washington Institute for Mental Illness Research and Training, has found that, in some settings, offenders perceive that they have societal permission to engage in violence against homosexuals.

Extreme hate crimes tend to be committed by people with a history of antisocial behavior. One of the most heinous examples took place in June 1998 in Jasper, Texas. Three men with jail records offered a ride to a black man who walked with a limp. After beating the victim to death, they dragged him behind their truck until his body was partially dismembered.

Researchers have concluded that hate crimes are not necessarily random, uncontrollable, or inevitable occurrences. There is overwhelming evidence that society can intervene to reduce or prevent many forms of violence, especially among young people, including the hate-induced

violence that threatens and intimidates entire categories of people.

How much hate crime is out there?

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Educated "guesstimates" of the prevalence of hate crimes are difficult because of state-by-state differences in the way such crimes are defined and reported. Federal law enforcement officials have only been compiling nationwide hate crime statistics since 1991, the year after the Hate Crimes Statistics Act was enacted. Before passage of the act, hate crimes were lumped together with such offenses as homicide, assault, rape, robbery, and arson.

In 1996, law enforcement agencies in 49 states and the District of Columbia reported 8,759 bias-motivated criminal offenses to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the federal government agency mandated by Congress to gather the statistics. However, points out the FBI, these data must be approached with caution. Typically, data on hate crimes collected by social scientists and such groups as the Anti-Defamation League, the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium, and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force show a higher prevalence of hate crime than do federal statistics.

The Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 1998, introduced in both the House (H.R. 3081) and Senate (S. 1529), seeks to expand federal jurisdiction over hate crimes by (1) allowing federal authorities to investigate all possible hate crimes, not only those where the victim was engaged in a federally protected activity such as voting, going to school, or crossing state lines; and (2) expanding the categories that are currently covered by hate crimes legislation to include gender, sexual orientation, and disability.

As with most other offenses, reporting hate crimes is voluntary on the part of the local jurisdictions. Some states started submitting data only recently, and not all jurisdictions within states are represented in their reports.

In addition, time frames for reporting are uneven, ranging from one month to an entire year, depending on the jurisdiction. In 1996, only 16% of law enforcement agencies reported any hate crimes in their regions. Eighty-four percent of participating jurisdictions-including states with well-documented histories of racial prejudice-reported zero hate crimes.

Another obstacle to gaining an accurate count of hate crimes is the reluctance of many victims to report such attacks. In fact, they are much less likely than other victims to report crimes to the police, despite-or perhaps because of-the fact that they can frequently identify the perpetrators. This reluctance often derives from the trauma the victim experiences, as well as a fear of retaliation.

In a study of gay men and lesbians by Dr. Gregory M. Herek, a psychologist at the University of California, Davis, and his colleagues, Drs. Jeanine Cogan and Roy Gillis, about one-third of the hate crime victims reported the incident to law enforcement authorities, compared with two-thirds of gay and lesbian victims of nonbias crimes. Dr. Dunbar, who studies hate crime in Los Angeles County, has found that victims of severe hate acts (e.g., aggravated and sexual assaults) are the least likely of all hate-crime victims to notify law enforcement agencies, often out of fear of future contact with the perpetrators.

It also appears that some people do not report hate crimes because of fear that the criminal justice system is biased against the group to which the victim belongs and, consequently, that law enforcement authorities will not be responsive. The National Council of La Raza holds that Hispanics often do not report hate crimes because of mistrust of the police.

Another reason for the underreporting of hate crimes is the difficulty of identifying an incident as having been provoked by bias.

What is the emotional damage?

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Intense feelings of vulnerability, anger, and depression, physical ailments and learning problems, and difficult interpersonal relations-all symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder-can be brought on by a hate crime.

Dr. Herek and his colleagues found that some hate crime victims have needed as much as 5 years to overcome their ordeal. By contrast, victims of nonbias crimes experienced a decrease in crime-related psychological problems within 2 years of the crime. Like other victims of posttraumatic stress, hate crime victims may heal more quickly when appropriate support and resources are made available soon after the incident occurs.

Why do people commit hate crimes?

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Hate crimes are message crimes, according to Dr. Jack McDevitt, a criminologist at Northeastern University in Boston. They are different from other crimes in that the offender is sending a message to members of a certain group that they are unwelcome in a particular neighborhood, community, school, or workplace.

Racial hatred

By far the largest determinant of hate crimes is racial bias, with African Americans the group at greatest risk. In 1996, 4,831 out of the 7,947 such crimes reported to the FBI, or 60%, were promulgated because of race, with close to two-thirds (62%) targeting African Americans. Furthermore, the type of crime committed against this group has not changed much since the 19th century; it still includes bombing and vandalizing churches, burning crosses on home lawns, and murder.

Among the other racially motivated crimes, about 25% were committed against white people, 7% against Asian Pacific Americans, slightly less than 5% against multiracial groups, and 1% against Native Americans and Alaskan Natives.

Resentment of ethnic minorities

Ethnic minorities in the United States often become targets of hate crimes because they are perceived to be new to the country even if their families have been here for generations, or simply because they are seen as different from the mainstream population. In the first case, ethnic minorities can fall victim to anti-immigrant bias that includes a recurrent preoccupation with "nativism" (i.e., policies favoring people born in the United States), resentment when so-called "immigrants" succeed (often related to a fear of losing jobs to newcomers), and disdain or anger when they act against the established norm. In the second case, negative stereotypes of certain ethnic groups or people of a certain nationality can fuel antagonism.

Hispanics. People from Latin America are increasingly targets of bias-motivated crimes. Of 814 hate crimes in 1995 motivated by bias based on ethnicity or national origin, the FBI found that 63.3% (or 516) were directed against Hispanics, often because of their immigration status.

Attacks on Hispanics have a particularly long history in California and throughout the Southwest where, during recurring periods of strong anti-immigrant sentiment, both new immigrants and long-time U.S. citizens of Mexican descent were blamed for social and economic problems and harassed or deported en masse.

Asian Pacific Americans. Bias against Asian Pacific Americans, which is increasing today, is long-standing. The Chinese Exclusion Act passed in 1882 barred Chinese laborers from entering this country. Along with trepidation that these workers would take jobs away was the feeling expressed by one Senator during the Congressional debate and reported in Chronicles of the 20th Century, that members of this group "do not harmonize with us." The act was not repealed until 1943. Moreover, although the act specifically referred to the Chinese, Japanese people were also affected because most people could not tell the two groups apart. To this day, according to the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, hostility against one Asian Pacific American group can spill over onto another.

In May 1997, a 62-year-old Korean American woman, in the United States since 1939, was attacked on a San Francisco street and her hip was broken. The man who assailed her thought she was Chinese.

According to the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium, 461 anti-Asian incidents were reported in 1995, 2% more than in 1994 and 38% more than in 1993. Moreover, the violence of the incidents increased dramatically; aggravated assaults rose by 14%, and two murders and one firebombing took place. The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights and other experts in the field find that present-day resentment is frequently fueled by the stereotype that Asian Pacific Americans are harder-working, more successful academically, and more affluent than most other Americans.

Arab Americans. Another growing immigrant group experiencing an upsurge in hate crime, largely as a result of Middle East crises, are people of Arab descent. Often they are blamed for incidents to which they have no connection. Thus, at least 227 Muslims were victims of harassment in the period immediately following the bombing of the Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City; an Iraqi refugee in her mid-20s miscarried her near-term baby after an attack on her home in which unknown assailants screaming anti-Islamic epithets broke the windows and pounded on her door, reports the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights.

Religious discrimination

Most religiously motivated hate crimes are acts of vandalism, although personal attacks are not uncommon. The overwhelming majority (82% in 1996) are directed against Jews, states the FBI. The 781 acts of vandalism that year represent a 7% increase from 1995. However, acts of harassment, threat, or assault went down by 15%, to 941, from a total of 1,116, a decline that the Anti-Defamation League attributes to stronger enforcement of the law and heightened educational outreach.

Bias against Jews has long persisted in the United States. Members of this religious group have

been barred (frequently along with black people and Catholics) from attending certain schools, entering certain professions, holding certain jobs, or moving into certain neighborhoods. Although these abrogations of civil rights are now illegal, conspiracy theories about Jewish involvement in international cabals and Jewish exploitation of African Americans still make the rounds today.

Most of the property crimes involve vandalism. In 1997, for example, SS lightning bolts and swastikas were among the anti-Semitic graffiti discovered in Hebrew and Yiddish books in the University of Chicago library, and an explosive device was detonated at the door of a Jewish center in New York City. But personal assaults against Jews are not uncommon. That same year, two men with a BB gun entered a Wisconsin synagogue and started shooting during morning prayers. In 1995 in Cincinnati, a gang member revealed that one of the victims of his group's initiation ceremony was chosen just because he was Jewish.

Gender-based bias

Gender-based violence is a significant social and historical problem, with women the predominant victims. Only recently, however, have these acts of violence been characterized as hate crimes. The Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 1998 would make gender a category of bias-motivated crime.

Except for crimes against homosexuals, the federal Hate Crimes Statistics Act does not collect data on gender. However, a recent national survey found that 7.2 of every 1,000 women each year are victims of rape. In testimony for a Congressional hearing on domestic violence, University of Maryland psychology professor Dr. Lisa Goodman reported that two decades of research indicates that at least two million women in the United States may be the victims of severe assaults by their male partners in an average 12-month period. At least 21% of all women are physically assaulted by an intimate male at least once during adulthood. More than half of all women (52%) murdered in the United States in the first half of the 1980s were killed by their partners.

The more violence a woman experiences, the more she suffers from psychological distress that spills over into many areas of life. Most violence against women is not committed during random encounters but by a current or former male partner. Exposed to attacks and threats over and over again, victims often live with increasing levels of isolation and terror. Typical long-term effects of male violence in an intimate adult relationship are low self-esteem, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder. These problems are compounded by psychophysiological complaints such as gastrointestinal problems, severe headaches, and insomnia.

Disdain of gay men and lesbians

The most socially acceptable, and probably the most widespread, form of hate crime among teenagers and young adults are those targeting sexual minorities, says Dr. Franklin. She has identified four categories of assaulters involved in such crimes, as follows:

- Ideology assailants report that their crimes stem from their negative beliefs and attitudes about homosexuality that they perceive other people in the community share. They see themselves as enforcing social morals.
- Thrill seekers are typically adolescents who commit assaults to alleviate boredom, to have fun and excitement, and to feel strong.
- Peer-dynamics assailants also tend to be adolescents; they commit assaults in an effort to prove their toughness and heterosexuality to friends.
- Self-defense assailants typically believe that homosexuals are sexual predators and say they were responding to aggressive sexual propositions.

Lesbian and gay victims suffer more serious psychological effects from hate crimes than they do from other kinds of criminal injury. In their case, the association between vulnerability and sexual orientation is particularly harmful. This is because sexual identity is such an important part of one's self-concept.

Of nearly 2,000 gay and lesbian people surveyed in Sacramento, California, by Dr. Herek, roughly one-fifth of the women and one-fourth of the men reported being the victim of a hate crime since age 16. One woman in eight and one man in six had been victimized within the last 5 years. More than half the respondents reported antigay verbal threats and harassment in the year before the survey.

Scorn of people with disabilities

Congress amended the Hate Crimes Statistics Act in 1994 to add disabilities as a category for which hate crimes data are to be collected. Because the FBI only began collecting statistics on disability bias in 1997, results are not yet available. However, we know from social science research that the pervasive stigma that people apply to both mental and physical disability is expressed in many forms of discriminatory behaviors and practices, including increased risk for sexual and physical

abuse.

The Judge David L. Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, a national organization representing low-income adults and children with mental disabilities, holds that such hate crimes are motivated by the perception that people with disabilities are not equal, deserving, contributing members of society, and, therefore, it is okay to attack them.

Does the economy play a part?

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Although racial and ethnic tensions are thought to increase during economic downswings, Dr. Donald P. Green, a political scientist at Yale University, has found that a weak economy does not necessarily result in an increase in hate crimes. His analysis of past incidents shows scant evidence that lynchings of black people in the pre-Depression South increased in response to downturns in cotton prices or general economic conditions.Ó Monthly hate crime statistics gathered by the Bias Crime Unit of the New York City Police Department show similar results: High unemployment does not give rise to hate crimes "regardless of whether we speak of black, Latino, Jewish, Asian, gay and lesbian, or white victims," according to Green.

However, one form of economic change that may set the stage for racist hate crimes occurs when minorities first move into an ethnically homogeneous area. According to Dr. Green, the resulting violent reaction seems to be based on a visceral aversion to social change. The offenders frequently justify the use of force to preserve what they see as their disappearing, traditional way of life. The more rapid the change, holds Dr. Green, the more likely violence will occur.

The 1980s, for example, witnessed the rapid disappearance of homogeneous white enclaves within large cities, with an attendant surge in urban hate crimes. A classic example is the Canarsie neighborhood in Brooklyn, which was primarily white until large numbers of nonwhites arrived. The influx led to a rash of hate crimes.

Conversely, says Dr. Green, integrated neighborhoods, sometimes characterized as cauldrons of racial hostility, tend to have lower rates of hate crime than neighborhoods on the verge of integration.

Is there anything we can do?

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Because of insufficient information on the extent of hate crimes, it is likely that many law enforcement agencies and communities are not taking the necessary steps to stamp out these violations of law and order. It is also likely that only a small percentage of hate crime victims receive the medical and mental health services that public and nonprofit agencies make available to victims of violent crime; thus, their pain and suffering is more likely to become a heavy burden and last many years longer than is typical for other crime victims.

The American Psychological Association, therefore, has urged that Congress undertake the following actions:

- Support federal antidiscrimination laws, statutes, and regulations that ensure full legal protection against discrimination and hate-motivated violence. Most important, enact the Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 1998.
- Increase support of the Community Relations Service (CRS), an arm of the Department of Justice that works with local officials to resolve racial and ethnic conflicts and is often seen as the federal government's peacemaker.

Law enforcement officials, community leaders, educators, researchers, and policymakers must work together to halt hate crimes. Failure to enforce the law against these crimes leaves entire groups of people feeling isolated and vulnerable.

- Support programs that offer training for police and victim-assistance professionals on early intervention techniques that help hate crime victims better cope with trauma. The curriculum could be similar to one developed by the CRS.
- Encourage communities to launch educational efforts aimed at dispelling minority stereotypes, reducing hostility between groups, and encouraging broader intercultural understanding and appreciation. Specifically, according to Dr. Franklin, it is important that school administrators, school boards, and classroom teachers constantly confront harassment and denigration of those who are different. Antibias teaching should start in early childhood and continue through high school. Teachers must also know that they have the backing of administrators and school board members to intervene against incidents of bias whether inside the school or on the playground.

For more information, contact the following organizations.

The Community Relations Service, Department of Justice, is the only federal agency whose primary task is to help communities respond appropriately to organized hate groups. It was created by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. CRS helps prevent and resolve communitywide conflict stemming from

race, color, and national origin. Its staff provides mediation and conciliation, technical assistance, training for law enforcement personnel, public education and awareness, and contingency planning for potentially provocative events. In 1996, the agency helped resolve 800 cases of conflict in all 50 states.

Community Relations Service (CRS)
U.S. Department of Justice
Second and Chestnut Street, #208
Philadelphia, PA 19106
215/597-2344

The Office for Victims of Crime, Department of Justice, gives grants to states to provide victim assistance and victim compensation in the event of a hate crime. Upon the request of a state, the Office will also send out a response team from one of its eight regional offices to help.

Office for Victims of Crime
U.S. Department of Justice
810 Seventh St., NW
Washington DC 20531
202/307-5983

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