

# Recognizing and Responding to a Hate Crime

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Orlando, Charleston, Lafayette, and many more. Violence, tragedy, and loss in the name of hate. Whether one person or many is killed, the loss is huge and hard to understand. While experts are not able to pin down the exact number, thousands of hate crimes take place each year. Learning about what a hate crime is and who commits them can help us understand how to prevent them.

## What is a hate crime?

A hate crime is a crime such as murder or arson coupled with bias. It is the violence of intolerance and bigotry. It is meant to hurt or scare someone because of who they are. The U.S. Congress defines it as “a criminal offense against a person or property motivated in whole or part by an offender’s bias against a race, religion, disability, ethnic origin or sexual orientation.” Examples include:

- Painting a mosque to scare people of Islamic faith
- Shooting members of an African-American church while they pray
- Beating up a transgender person

A hate crime on a larger scale, *genocide*, is getting rid of whole groups of people.

Hate on its own can start in smaller, more subtle ways such as jokes about race. While hate alone is not a crime, hurting someone or their property in the name of hate is.

## Who commits hate crimes?

It may seem like all people who commit violent crimes are one type of person. Yet there are many types of people who commit crimes. There are also different factors that work together to raise someone’s risk of violence. Experts studying violence point to some ideas:

- There may be many genes that join forces to raise the risk of violence.
- Low amounts of a certain brain chemical may be linked to violence.
- Imaging in people who commit violent acts shows poor functioning in parts of the brain that help figure out whether things are dangerous or safe.

In working to learn what drives people to commit hate crimes, experts point to a range of ideas:

- They lack knowledge about and are afraid of people who are different.
- They may look down on others to boost their self-esteem.
- They have been targeted themselves and think it is OK to do it to others.
- The person may be self-destructive, and carry out violent acts on others.

- A person who acts out violently may develop thinking that holds others at fault for his problems.

Experts have also worked to understand what drives young people to commit hate crimes. Youth may:

- Use violence to feel powerful or protect themselves
- Feel frustrated and bored
- Learn from others that certain people are to be treated as targets
- Get caught up in a hate crime without knowing how serious it is. Or, they may blame others for pulling them into poor choices.

### **Understanding the role of mental health conditions**

For some, a mental health issue may raise the risk of violence. But most people with stable mental health conditions do not commit violent acts. In fact, very little of the violence in the U.S. is caused by people with mental health issues. They are more likely to experience violence than to commit it. For those who do have mental health conditions, not getting care is what may lead to trouble with the law.

In the case of substance use disorders, there is a greater risk of violent behavior. Both being on a substance and withdrawing from one can boost violence.

Regardless of whether a person has a mental health or substance use issue, or a combination of the two, recovery can be expected once he seeks help. People can and do recover. There is hope for better health and wellness.

### **Can hate crimes be prevented?**

You may wonder if there are signs that can and should be caught before a crime happens. There isn't an easy answer to this. Often, pieces are put together after the fact. This doesn't mean they were easy to spot ahead of time.

Many people believe that there is not enough mental health support. It is true that not intervening when someone is struggling with an illness can lead to problems later. Yet, not all people who have mental health conditions are at risk of violent behavior. Many others think the root of violent hate crimes in the U.S. has to do with gun control policies. Gun control advocates argue that access to weapons is the heart of the problem.

What you can do is report all incidents involving hate. Whether it seems small or large, report it to the police. This may be an important part of preventing other crimes.

### **Responding to a hate crime**

What can you do if you or a loved one experiences a hate crime? Know that they may feel unsafe, fearful, and alone. They may also fear more attacks. If you know someone that has experienced a hate crime, show your support by offering comfort and protection. It is also important to listen.

They will need support as they figure out their next steps.

If you have experienced a hate crime, report it to police. No hate crime is too small to talk about. It is important to ask for help. Seek support from:

- Friends and loved ones
- Community and faith groups
- Health care providers and mental health professionals

As a community, there are also steps to take. The Southern Poverty Law Center offers a community response guide that includes tips such as:

- Pull together allies from local groups, employers and the media to rally against hate.
- Speak up against hate, using media outlets to spread the word.
- Lobby local officials to address hate crimes.
- Teach tolerance at home and work with schools to address hate.

It takes time to heal as an individual and a community. Do not be afraid to seek counseling about your experience or fears. Joining a support group where you can share your experience with others can help provide more support. While hate crimes are hard to cope with, you are not alone.

## **Resources**

Mental Health America

[www.mentalhealthamerica.net/finding-help](http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/finding-help)

(800) 273-TALK

Southern Poverty Law Center

[www.splcenter.org/](http://www.splcenter.org/)

(888) 414-7752

The Federal Bureau of Investigation

[www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/civilrights/hate\\_crimes](http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/civilrights/hate_crimes)

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