

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/bias-crime-more-likely-in-time-of-fear-and-suspicion>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

In the days since the November 13th terrorist attacks in Paris, [several anti-Muslim acts of violence have been reported](#) across the United States and worldwide. If history is a reliable witness, these hate crimes—criminal acts motivated in whole or in part by bias against a person's real or perceived race/ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender or gender identity, or disability—will continue to be on the rise, consistent with the aftermath of 9/11. While not the most common type of police-reported bias crime (anti-Black, anti-LGBT, and anti-Jewish crimes are the most common), anti-Muslim bias crime is among the fastest growing, increasing [14 percent in the last year](#).

But this is only a partial picture of the real problem. Last week, the FBI announced that there were [6,418 hate crimes reported by police in 2014](#), representing a rate of approximately three hate crimes per 100,000 people in the United States. However, this rate is unrealistically low; research suggests that hate crimes happen far more frequently in our communities than these statistics would lead one to believe. According to victimization survey evidence from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, [nearly 300,000 bias crimes occur each year](#), a rate of roughly 92 per 100,000 people. It is apparent, then, that bias crimes are often severely underreported or law enforcement often fails to identify reported cases as bias crime.

There are a variety of reasons why people may not report bias victimization. In addition to common barriers to crime reporting (such as fear of law enforcement, feelings of helplessness or perceived powerlessness of police, and the threat of further harm), vulnerable groups—those most susceptible to hate crime—may not perceive their victimization as legitimate. They may feel that police will not recognize the incident as a crime or will not take the crime seriously if reported. Victims may also feel shame, or fear the repercussions that could accompany reporting the crime. During a time of heated debate and suspicion over Syrian refugees and religious extremism, victims of bias crime, especially Muslims, may feel especially fearful and less likely to go to the police.

While there is currently a significant gap in the United States between experiences of bias crime victimization and official police statistics—for every 28 bias crimes experienced by victims, only one is reported to police—it does not have to remain that way. The United States is not alone; other countries face similar difficulties with even higher rates of bias crime. For instance, England and Wales have higher victimization rates than the United States but also have much higher rates of police-reported hate crime. See the chart below for a comparison.

Rates of Hate Crime Victimization: United States vs. England and Wales per 100,000 Residents in 2014

Sources: Uniform Crime Reporting Program, [Hate Crime Statistics, 2014](#) (Washington, D.C.: FBI, 2015); M. Meuchel Wilson, [Hate Crime Victimization, 2004-2012 Statistical Tables](#) (Washington, D.C., Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014 NCJ 244409); Corcoran, H., D. Lader and K. Smith, [Hate Crime, England and Wales, 2014/15](#), (London: The Home Office of the United Kingdom, Statistical Bulletin 05/15/2015).

With funding from the National Institute of Justice and in partnership with organizations in Los Angeles County, California and the State of New Jersey, Vera will study experiences of bias victimization and develop a practical tool that can be used by law enforcement, community groups, and educational institutions to better respond to bias crime. Starting in January 2016, Vera will collect information from bias crime and community experts, students, and other youth and adult members of under-identified Latino, immigrant, and LGBT communities through focus groups, interviews, and surveys.

The resulting tool, available by the end of 2017, will help to better identify bias crime victims; improve data reporting, education, and institutional responses; reduce reporting barriers for victims; and foster more effective service provision. (This project is a collaboration between Vera's Center on Sentencing and Corrections (CSC) and Center on Immigration and Justice (CIJ), with Laura Simich, Richard Andrew Powell, and Karen Mallozzi joining me on the research team.)

The numbers of anti-Muslim bias crimes are likely to climb even higher in the coming months. These fear-based reactions, along with the stigma placed on Muslims, refugees from the Middle East and North Africa, and others, are likely to increase the gap between police-reported crimes and the estimated hundreds of thousands of victims indicated. With Vera's new tool, we hope to meaningfully contribute to the work that needs to be done to promote safety and improve the community and criminal justice response to these victims in the United States.

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