

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/violence-against-the-lgbtq-community-extends-beyond-the-massacre-in-orlando>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

In the early hours of Sunday morning, a gunman murdered 49 people and injured another 53 at a shooting during Latin Night at Pulse, a gay nightclub, in Orlando, Florida. Forty-nine individuals, [overwhelmingly people of color](#), whose lives were cut short in the very space considered to be [refuge or haven](#) for the LGBTQ community. Later that day, police arrested a heavily armed man in Santa Monica, California, allegedly on his way to the Los Angeles gay pride parade. Together, these events have reawakened impassioned discussion about terrorism, hate crimes, and Muslim immigration within the United States. In the hours after what would become the most deadly shooting in U.S. history, the Orlando gunmans fathers [speculated that his sons actions](#) were motivated in part by anger towards the gay community. Although its still early in the investigation, President Obama [told a grieving nation on Sunday afternoon](#), we know enough to say that this was an act of terror and an act of hate.

While Sundays attack may be one of the most high profile crimes targeting the LGBTQ community in recent memory, it is not an isolated incident. According to [FBI statistics](#), while the plurality of hate crimes are motivated by racial bias, there were over 1,200 victims of anti-LGBTQ hate crimes in 2014. For transgender people, and especially transgender women of color, the threat of violence is [particularly severe](#). Yet these statistics likely significantly underreport the true number of hate crime victims in the United States. Due in part to victims [feelings of perceived helplessness and distrust or fear of the police](#), the Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates that [60 percent](#) of hate crimes went unreported in 2012, down from 74 percent in the previous year. Further, the Southern Poverty Law Center estimates that LGBTQ individuals are victimized over [eight times their expected rate](#) compared to the groups population size, the most likely group in the U.S. to be targeted by violent hate crime.

To respond to this victimization, governments and law enforcement throughout the country should be equipped with the means to adequately address, investigate, and respond to hate crimes whenever they occur. [Fifteen states](#) do not include sexual orientation and gender identity within their hate crime statutes, and where these protections do exist, law enforcement often fails to appropriately identify and respond to allegations of bias. For those who do report, encounters with police are often negative [80 percent of LGBTQ victims report that law enforcement respond to reported victimization with indifference or hostility](#) and claims of further verbal or physical abuse on the part of the police themselves are not uncommon. Earlier this year, Vera staff started a research project to address these concerns. Funded by the National Institute of Justice, Vera researchers are investigating the causes of hate crime underreporting amongst LGBTQ, Muslim, and immigrant communities, and are working to develop possible solutions to help law enforcement identify and respond to such incidents appropriately.

Although many characteristics of the shooting at Pulse are exceedingly rare the sheer number of victims, the connection to international terrorism, and the fact that [the majority of hate crimes do not involve the death of the victim](#) varying degrees of discrimination and hate levied towards the LGBTQ community are not. Further, since hate crimes often [severely psychologically impact members of a targeted group beyond those directly victimized](#), the widespread negative effects of this discrimination extend far beyond official reported numbers. Law enforcement and other first responders need to take these crimes seriously, treating victims with dignity and compassion, and must be equipped with the means to appropriately and swiftly respond. It is through these actions that the many victims whose stories are not front page news will achieve justice.

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