An official website of the United States government, Department of Justice.

Here's how you know

NIJ National Institute of Justice

STRENGTHEN SCIENCE. ADVANCE JUSTICE.

Home / **Topics**

Hate Crimes: National Database Identifies Traits and Motivations Marking Distinct Pathways of People Who Commit Bias-Based Offenses

NIJ-supported study by START Consortium points to need for flexible approaches to monitoring and rehabilitating hate crime actors

November 30, 2021

Individuals who commit hate crimes do so out of a variety of bias-based motivations, and the demographic and other characteristics of those individuals can vary widely depending on the type of hate crime committed. A recent study of unprecedented scope on what drives people who perpetrate hate crimes found that, in light of those diverse motivations and traits, the tools needed to monitor and rehabilitate those individuals must be flexible and capable of addressing risks in heterogeneous populations.

Among other key findings in the study by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) are:

- Those arrested or indicted for hate crimes motivated by the victims' religious characteristics tend to be older, have more military experience, have higher rates of mental health concerns, and are more likely, compared to those who commit other types of hate crimes, to cause mass casualty events.
- Those motivated by bias on the basis of sexual orientation, gender, or gender identity are often younger, unemployed, and unmarried when they are arrested or charged with hate crimes. They are also more likely to commit hate crimes with peers and while under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

influence of drugs or alcohol.

- Those who target others because of their race, ethnicity, or nationality have higher rates of previous criminal activity. They are most likely to belong to organized hate groups.
- Some who commit or are charged with hate crimes are fully engaged with the worlds of bigotry and hate, while others act upon common themes of prejudice in American communities.
- Those who commit mixed-motive crimes engage in spontaneous crimes at a higher rate and are more likely to act in a public setting.
- Some commit crimes of opportunity, and others premeditate their offenses.

Purpose: A First-Ever Dataset 🔗

The purpose of this study by START was to enhance understanding of characteristics of hate crime, also known as bias crime, in the United States. The study team defined a hate crime "as a criminal offense that is at least partially motivated by some form of identity-based prejudice," according to START's report resulting from the study.

The study advanced research on hate crime by equipping researchers, practitioners, and policymakers with the first-ever dataset of a national sample of hate crime perpetrators, assembling data from the period 1990 to 2018. The database, known as the Bias Incidents and Actors Study, or BIAS, analyzed information on 966 adults who had been arrested or indicted for violent or non-violent hate crimes in any of the following categories:

1. Race, ethnicity, or ancestry
2. Religion
3. Sexual orientation, gender, or gender identity
4. Disability
5. Age

The BIAS dataset employed more than 80 variables to pin down and collectively analyze factors associated with people who commit hate crimes, including:

- Demographic traits
- Education and employment histories
- Criminal records
- Peer associations
- Hate group affiliations

The BIAS database also incorporates details on the nature of the hate crimes covered.

More Key Findings 🔗

The BIAS study distinguished factors that apply to those who commit violent hate crimes from those who commit non-violent hate crimes. When individuals commit violent hate crimes, they often do so with peers while under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Hate crimes are more likely to be violent when committed for reasons of sexual orientation or gender identity. And perpetrators of those acts are more likely to have a violent past. Even among those who commit violent hate crimes, however, there is diversity in terms of behaviors and other attributes. For instance, those planning mass casualty events were significantly more likely, when acting alone, to target religious victims. That group also had high rates of deficient work performance and mental health issues.

The BIAS research also revealed that conventional attempts to capture traits of those who commit hate crimes often fail to capture the complexity of their motivations. The new research showed that:

- Many of those individuals had mixed motives, including financial and other material goals.
- Some targeted victims with whom they had a pre-existing, seemingly amiable, relationship or previous interactions.
- Some were motivated by national demographic changes and political rhetoric rather than local conditions. But the smaller number of individuals motivated by perceived local threats were more likely to join others in committing hate crimes (64.7%) than were those motivated by national conditions (37.4%).

Additional Implications 🔗

Needed flexibility in tools, policies, and programs for monitoring and rehabilitating people who engage in hate crimes would extend common risk assessment measures to cover prejudice type, levels of ideological commitment, and hate crime target selection, the START researchers concluded. In addition, risk assessments should be able to identify more concerning configurations of cognitive, social, and behavioral risk, such as some combination of criminal history, substance abuse, and association with bigoted peers, the START report said. It was noted, however, that there may be no way to preemptively measure hate-crime risk in the many cases that are simply escalations of routine disputes.

Another implication of the study, the researchers reported, was that rehabilitation of

individuals who commit hate crimes must address a wide array of possible concerns.

Study Design 🔗

The Bias Project followed the example of the NIJ-supported PIRUS database[1] profiling political extremists by (a) building a large, open-source database to identify and code attributes of individuals who commit hate crimes, (b) using advanced analytical methods to make robust inferences about those individuals. Of the individuals identified for inclusion, 93.5% were male and 80% were Caucasian.

To qualify for inclusion in the BIAS database, an individual must have met the following criteria:

1. Arrested or indicted for a criminal offense from 1990 to 2018.
2. Eighteen years old or older at the time of the act.
3. Resided in the United States at the time of the act.
4. Committed or escalated the criminal act because of bias against the victim or target's actual or perceived identity characteristics, according to substantial evidence.
5. Was the subject of sufficient information in open-source materials to code the details of their crimes and, at minimum, the majority of their demographic traits.

Individuals eligible to be included in the BIAS database were identified through:

1. The PIRUS database, which yielded over 300 qualifying cases ultimately included in the BIAS database.
2. Searches of news aggregating sites.
3. Watchdog reports and other criminal databases
4. Targeted searches to identify potential names for inclusion from small populations of hate crime perpetrators that do not normally garner as much public attention.

Limitations 🔗

The project's reliance on open sources for data, as well as sensitive and private data, resulted in some gaps in data, but common statistical techniques were used to analyze data with a range of unknown values. Next, the START researchers noted potential limitations in the representativeness of the BIAS sample. There was no national baseline of people who engaged in hate crimes, against which to measure the BIAS database. Further, substantially more data was available on cases from more recent years than cases in the 1990s. The team oversampled cases from 1990 to 1996 to compensate.

The START team cautioned that the BIAS hate crime database was not intended to be, and should not be used as a comprehensive source for reporting aggregate hate crime trends. Rather, the BIAS database is a sample to be examined to learn about traits of persons who commit hate crimes, key risk factors, and pathways to offending.

About This Article ⚭

The research described in this article was funded by NIJ award [2017-VF-GX-0003](), awarded to the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism. This article is based on the grantee report "[A Pathway Approach to the Study of Bias Crime Offenders]()," (2021), M. Jenkins, Principal Investigator, E. Yates, and S. Kane.

Notes

[note 1] The PIRUS database was the product of another project funded by the National Institute of Justice, the [Empirical Assessment of Domestic Radicalization (EADR), award 2012-ZA-BX-0005](). EADR and PIRUS addressed a gap in research on political extremism, that is, a lack of objective, quantifiable information on the population of political extremists. The large, open-source BIAS database on persons engaged in hate crimes follows the PIRUS model.

Cite this Article

Read More About:

Hate crimes   Crime causes   Violent crime   Offenses   Mental health

Databases   Crime

Date Created: November 30, 2021

Related Publications

[A Pathway Approach to the Study of Bias Crime Offenders](#)

Related Awards

[A Pathway Approach to the Study of Bias Crime Offenders](#)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

OFFICE OF JUSTICE PROGRAMS