Hate Crimes:  
Psychological Research on the Origins and Impact of Bias-Motivated Crimes

Summary
Hate crime is defined as any felony or crime of violence that manifests prejudice toward a group of persons and can be understood as the extreme expression of prejudice.\(^1\) Treating hate crimes as other felonies or violence crimes is insufficient because they have more severe health consequences, affect entire communities, and are divisive.

What Is Different About Hate Crimes?
Hate crimes, compared to other violent crimes, have a broader impact on victims and communities because they target people for core aspects of identity.


Policy Implications
Current federal law (18 U.S.C. §245) defines hate crimes as felonies or violent acts that are directed at an individual because of his or her race, color, religion or national origin. It does not cover all groups affected by hate crimes. The Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Protection Act (H.R. 1592) and Matthew Shephard Act (S.1105), both introduced during the 110\(^{th}\) Congress, would extend coverage to individuals victimized on the basis of their sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, and disability.

Without action, many hate crimes committed in our country will go unrecognized, unprosecuted, and unpunished. Targets of prejudice will continue to be attacked and suffer physical and mental health consequences.

Research Findings
Available psychological research provides strong support for the need for this legislation.

Long-Term Mental Health Impact of Hate Crimes
Victims of hate crimes are at heightened risk for psychological distress beyond that of the consequences of violent crime in general.\(^2\) Psychological distress following victimization by hate crime can include depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder.\(^3\)

Impact on the Community that Shares the Victim’s Identity
Hate crimes threaten the group that the victim belongs to in addition to the particular individual.\(^4\) Members of a community targeted because of a central identity (e.g., one’s race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation) may feel less safe after a fellow group member is targeted.\(^5\) Witnessing discrimination against someone who is from the same group as oneself (e.g., same gender, ethnicity) can lead to depressed emotion and lower self-esteem.\(^6\)
Prevention: Understanding Hate and Methods for Reducing Prejudice

Social psychological research offers a perspective on the underlying processes of hate that can inform prevention.

Motivations for hate crimes include desire for excitement and power display, defense of turf, mission to rid world of inferior groups, and retaliation for a real or perceived hate crime. Hate may build up over time through a self-reinforcing cycle of predisposing contexts, negative attitudes, shared stereotypes, strong emotions, moral justifications, and hateful behaviors. Severe hate simplistically stereotypes targets and involves moral condemnation and enthusiasm for inflicting harm.

Research indicates that perspective taking, contact with other groups under certain conditions, and highlighting common group identities can reduce prejudice.

About SPSSI

The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) is an international group of approximately 3000 psychologists, allied scientists, students, and others who share a common interest in research on the psychological aspects of important social issues. In various ways, the Society seeks to bring theory and practice into focus on human problems of the group, the community, and nations, as well as the increasingly important problems that have no national boundaries.

For more information, please contact Alex Ingrams, SPSSI Policy Coordinator, at (202) 675-6956 or aingrams@spssi.org.
