

MINI-LESSON

What Makes Hate Crimes Different from Other Crimes?

Overview

About This Mini-Lesson

This is the first mini-lesson in a five-part series on hate crimes and their impacts, created in partnership with the Office for the Prevention of Hate Crimes (OPHC), part of the New York City Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice and the Mayor's Community Affairs Unit.

In this mini-lesson, students learn about what hate crimes are and what makes them different from other types of crime. They also consider how they can take care of themselves and others throughout this unit.

What's Included

This lesson uses the following student material:

- Explainer: [What Is a Hate Crime and How Do Hate Crimes Impact People?](#)

Additional Context & Background

A hate crime is a crime that is motivated, at least in part, by bias. At the federal level, hate crimes include crimes that are committed because of the victim's real or perceived race, color, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, or disability. Most states have hate crime laws as well, and the characteristics protected by state laws vary. For example, New York includes age in addition to all the characteristics listed above, while Alabama includes only race, color, national origin, and disability. While collecting information is challenging, the overall number of hate crimes appears to be increasing in the United States.¹

Some actions that are motivated by hate do not meet the legal definition of a hate crime, but these acts of hate are still harmful to victims. For example, hate speech includes words

¹ Brian Levin et al., "[Report to the Nation: 2020s – Dawn of a Decade of Rising Hate](#)," Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, California State University, San Bernardino (2022).

or symbols that are intended to degrade, humiliate, or spread hatred against an individual or group of people because of their characteristics or identity. Because speech is protected by the US Constitution unless it causes immediate danger, most hate speech is legal. However, even when it is allowed by the law, it can still harm those it targets and make it more likely that people will commit hate crimes.

Nearly two-thirds of hate crime assaults are committed by people under the age of 25. While most people who commit hate crimes are not members of hate groups, they are often influenced by the hateful ideas these groups spread.² The researchers Jack McDevitt, Jack Levin, Jim Nolan, and Susan Bennett divide hate crimes into four different types depending on what motivates the people who commit them. Hate crimes sometimes fall under more than one of these categories. The following is a description of the categories the researchers developed.

Type 1: The most common type of hate crime is committed by a group of perpetrators, often teens or young adults, who are seeking excitement and to feel momentarily powerful. They select victims from a different identity group that they believe are vulnerable.

According to the researchers, this type of hate crime can involve the following people:

- **A “leader”** who instigates the crime and may demonstrate more bias than other group members
- **A “fellow traveler”** who participates in the crime
- **An “unwilling participant”** who does not actively participate in the crime but does not attempt to stop it
- **A “hero”** who attempts to stand up against the crime and stop it

Type 2: The perpetrators of this type of hate crime believe that the victim is invading “their” space or taking resources that should be reserved for their own identity group. The perpetrators may be influenced by conspiracy theories or hate speech, and they are often teens or young adults.

Type 3: The perpetrators of this type of hate crime believe that a hate crime was committed against their own identity group. They seek out a victim from the group they believe was responsible. The perpetrators may be influenced by conspiracy theories or hate speech, and they are often teens or young adults.

² Jack McDevitt, Jack Levin, Jim Nolan, and Susan Bennett, “Hate Crime Offenders,” in *Hate Crime: Concepts, Policy, Future Directions*, ed. Neil Chakraborti, (Willan, 2011).

Type 4: This type of hate crime is the least common but most deadly. Perpetrators believe that they are “crusaders” and are deeply committed to their prejudiced beliefs. They seek to eradicate the group they target and often kill multiple people at once. The perpetrator usually commits the crime alone but is often influenced by—or a member of—a hate group. These perpetrators are usually young adults or adults.

Hate crimes can have a devastating impact, not only on survivors of the crimes but also on people who share—or are perceived as sharing—an aspect of their identity with the victim and on the health of communities as a whole. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, a hate crime “is more than an assault on the victim’s physical well-being. It is an assault on the victim’s essential human worth. A person who has been singled out for victimization based on some group characteristic—such as race, religion, or national origin—has, by that very act, been deprived of the right to participate in the life of the community on an equal footing for reasons that have nothing to do with what the victim did but everything to do with who the victim is.”³

Preparing to Teach

Teaching Note: Teaching Emotionally Challenging Content

In this unit, students will encounter descriptions of hate crimes and their impacts on people and communities. While we have chosen examples that we believe convey the seriousness of these crimes without being overly graphic, this topic is emotionally challenging and can elicit a range of emotional responses from students. We can’t emphasize enough the importance of previewing the resources in this curriculum to make sure they are appropriate for the intellectual and emotional needs of your students.

It is difficult to predict how students will respond to such challenging content. One student may respond with emotion to an account or source, while others may not find it powerful in the same way. In addition, different people demonstrate emotion in different ways. Some students will be silent. Some may laugh. Some may not want to talk. Some may take days to process difficult stories. For some, a particular firsthand account may be incomprehensible; for others, it may be familiar.

We urge teachers to create space for students to have a range of reactions and emotions, while also holding students accountable to your class norms. This might include allowing

³ Amicus curiae brief of the American Civil Liberties Union, *Wisconsin v. Mitchell*, 1993, cited in Phyllis B. Gerstenfeld, *Hate Crimes: Causes, Controls, Controversies*, 4th ed. (SAGE Publications, 2017).

time for silent reflection or writing in journals, as well as facilitating structured discussions to help students process content together. Some students will not want to share their reactions to emotionally challenging content in class, and teachers should respect that in discussions. For their learning and emotional growth, it is crucial to allow for a variety of student responses to emotionally challenging content.

Lesson Plan

Activities

1. What Are Hate Crimes?

Distribute the explainer [What Is a Hate Crime and How Do Hate Crimes Impact People?](#) Read the first section aloud as a class. Then ask students:

- According to what you learned, what is the difference between a hate crime and other types of crime? For example, what would be the difference between property damage that is a hate crime and property damage that is not?
- Why do you think hate crimes are punished differently than other crimes?

2. How Can We Take Care of Ourselves and Others Throughout This Unit?

Hate crimes can be an emotionally challenging topic for students to learn about. Before teaching the following lessons in this unit, take time to either create a class contract using our [Contracting](#) teaching strategy or to revisit the norms in your existing contract with your students.

Provide students with a list of feeling words, such as the following:

- Angry
- Confused
- Curious
- Nervous
- Numb
- “Nothing”
- Eager
- Reluctant
- Frightened
- Sad
- Frustrated

Ask students to respond to the question below using feelings from the list you provided or other ones. You may wish to give them the option to share their responses anonymously (for example, in a word cloud).

What feelings are you carrying with you after reading and talking about hate crimes?

Then discuss the following questions as a class:

- Are there actions you would like to take to help you take care of yourself and process what you learn about hate crimes?
- What do we need from each other to create a safe and brave space for our conversations about hate crimes and their impacts?
- How can our class norms help us hold meaningful conversations on this topic?

3. Final Reflection

Ask students to write their response to the following question on an [exit ticket](#):

What is one norm from our contract that you think will be especially helpful throughout this unit and why?