

The Impact of Hate Crime Victimization

Gregory M. Herek, Ph.D.
Department of Psychology
University of California, Davis

This is a brief summary of preliminary findings from a study of the psychological impact of hate crimes based on sexual orientation, funded by the National Institute of Mental Health. A complete report has been published elsewhere (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999).

Background. The purpose of the study was to assess the mental health consequences of hate crimes based on sexual orientation. Nearly 2300 gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals from the greater Sacramento (CA) area participated in the research between 1993 and 1996. The sample included roughly equal numbers of men and women, with a median age of 34 years. Research participants completed an extensive questionnaire that included items about their experiences with crime, their attitudes and beliefs about a wide variety of topics, their community involvement, and their psychological well-being. In addition, approximately one-fifth of them were interviewed at length about their experiences.

Unless otherwise indicated, this summary focuses on respondents who reported a crime against their person (physical assault, rape, robbery) within the previous 5 years.

Principal Findings. Hate crimes based on sexual orientation appear to have more serious psychological effects on lesbians and gay men than do other crimes.

- **Level of distress.** Lesbian and gay survivors of hate crimes showed significantly more signs of psychological distress — including depression, stress, and anger — than did lesbian and gay survivors of comparable non-bias-motivated crimes.
- **Reasons for heightened distress.** Much of the distress that we observed among hate crime survivors may result from a heightened sense of personal danger and vulnerability that becomes associated with their identity as a gay man or lesbian. Previous research has shown that all crime victims are likely to feel more vulnerable after their experience and to perceive the

world as more dangerous, unpredictable, and hostile. The present data suggest that hate crime victims, in addition, often link this sense of vulnerability and powerlessness to their gay or lesbian identity. This association can be psychologically harmful because sexual orientation is such an important part of the self-concept.

- **Duration of distress.** The negative effects of hate crimes may be longer lasting than those of other crimes. Hate crime victims continued to have higher levels of depression, stress, and anger for as long as 5 years after their victimization occurred. In contrast, crime-related psychological problems dropped substantially among survivors of non-bias crimes within approximately two years after the crime.

Other Findings. Consistent with data from other studies, the research shows that hate crime victimization is a serious problem for gay men and lesbians in the Sacramento area.

- **Prevalence.** Nearly one-fifth of the women and more than one-fourth of the men in the study had experienced a crime or attempted crime based on their sexual orientation at some time in their life. One woman in eight had been victimized in the previous five years; one man in six had been a hate crime victim in that period. The types of victimization included assaults, rapes, robberies, thefts, and vandalism.
- **Reporting to Police.** Hate crimes were less likely than other crimes to be reported to the police. Only one-third of the victims of hate crimes reported the incident to law enforcement authorities, compared to 57% of the victims of random crimes.
- **Other Harassment and Discrimination.** Hate crimes based on sexual orientation occur against a backdrop of ongoing harassment. In the year prior to the survey, more than half of the respondents had been

the target of antigay verbal abuse. Nearly one-fifth had been threatened with antigay violence, chased, or both. 16% of the respondents had been the targets of antigay employment discrimination in the previous year — either in hiring, firing, promotion, or treatment in the workplace.

Applying the Findings to Other Groups.

Because comparable studies have not been conducted with other groups, caution must be exercised in trying to generalize from these findings to other victims of hate crimes. However, it is reasonable to expect that victims of hate crimes based on race, ethnicity, religion, or another comparable characteristic may also experience heightened psychological distress because the incident represents a serious attack on a fundamental aspect of the victim's personal identity. At the same time, the experiences of other hate crime victims are likely to differ from those of gay men and lesbians in various ways, simply because each status (race, religion, sexual orientation, etc.) is associated with different kinds of life experiences for the individual and historical experiences for the affected community.

Policy Implications. These findings indicate that hate crimes have a more serious impact on the victim than do other crimes. That impact may be qualitatively different from the aftermath of other crimes because it affects core aspects of the victim's identity and community affiliation. Thus, it is appropriate for legislation and public policy to treat hate crimes as a special case of criminal victimization, one that requires special strategies for prevention, prosecution, and victim services.

Implications for Future Research. This is the most extensive empirical study of antigay hate crimes to date. It may also be the most extensive study ever conducted of the mental health consequences of any kind of hate crime. Additional research is needed in this field to address the following goals:

- Replicate and extend the findings from this study with other samples in different regions of the United States.
- Replicate the findings with hate crime victims from other minority groups.
- Identify appropriate clinical interventions for alleviating the short- and long-term impact of hate crimes for survivors and their loved ones, and assess the efficacy of those interventions.
- Identify the ways in which the mere threat of hate crime victimization affects the well-being of entire communities.
- Identify ways in which services to hate crime victims can be improved through training of law enforcement personnel, health care professionals, mental health professionals, and social service providers.
- Identify appropriate interventions for preventing hate crimes by targeting potential perpetrators, especially school-age youth and young adults, who appear to be the most common perpetrators of hate crimes against strangers in public settings.

Bibliography

Herek, G. M. (1989). Hate crimes against lesbians and gay men: Issues for research and policy. *American Psychologist, 44*, 948-955.

Herek, G. M., & Berrill, K. T. (1992). *Hate crimes: Confronting violence against lesbians and gay men*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Herek, G. M., Gillis, J. R., & Cogan, J. C. (1999). Psychological sequelae of hate crime victimization among lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 67*(6), 945-951.

Herek, G. M., Gillis, J. R., Cogan, J. C., & Glunt, E. K. (1997). Hate crime victimization among lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults: Prevalence, psychological correlates, and methodological issues. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 12*, 195-215.

For more information:

Prof. Gregory M. Herek, Ph.D.

Department of Psychology, University of California

Davis, CA 95616-8686

(530) 752-8085

gmherek@ucdavis.edu