

MINI-LESSON

How Can People Promote Belonging in Their Communities?

Overview

About This Mini-Lesson

This is the second 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.

One of the main impacts of hate crimes, as students have learned in the previous lessons, is that they make it more difficult for both the direct target and those who share—or are perceived as sharing—an aspect of their identity with hate crime victims to feel belonging and safety in their communities. In this lesson, students explore three examples of community initiatives that work to promote such belonging and safety, which can help to counteract some of the impacts that hate crimes have on people's sense of community, belonging, and safety. Finally, students consider what actions they, their schools, or their communities can take to foster a greater sense of belonging for all.

What's Included

This lesson uses the following student material:

- Handout: [Big Paper: How Have Communities Worked to Promote Belonging and Safety?](#)

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 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.

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).

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 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.

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.

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).

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 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. Where Do You Feel a Sense of Belonging?

Begin by asking students to respond to the following prompt in their journals:

Close your eyes and imagine a place where you feel a sense of belonging and safety. Then open your eyes and reflect:

- What does the place look like?
- How do you feel when you are there?
- Who else is there in this place? What do you share with them?

When students have finished writing, share the following question with them:

Based on what you wrote, what do you think are the elements that help people feel belonging and safety in a place?

Ask students to write their answers on sticky notes and place the sticky notes on a board in your classroom. (Alternatively, you could ask students to add their words or phrases to a word cloud.)

One of the main impacts of hate crimes, as students have learned, is that they make it more difficult for both the direct target of the hate crime and those who share an aspect of their identity with the victims to feel a sense of belonging and safety in their communities. Explain to students that in this lesson, they will learn about community initiatives that are designed to promote people's sense of safety and

belonging. Initiatives such as these can help to counteract some of the impacts that hate crimes have on people's sense of community, belonging, and safety.

2. How Have Communities Worked to Promote Belonging and Safety?

This activity is organized around the [Big Paper](#) strategy. Print the [Big Paper: How Have Communities Worked to Promote Belonging and Safety?](#) handout and place each example on a large piece of poster paper.

Note: The original photo used in Example 2 contains profanity in the background. For a version without profanity, pause the *Inside Edition* video "[Black Teen Ballerinas Reclaim Space Home to Robert E. Lee Statue With Photo Shoot](#)" at 0:06 and share that image with your students instead.

Place students in groups of three or four and give each group one paper. Students should write their questions and comments on the paper. They can respond to each other in writing but should remain silent.

Once students have finished "discussing" their first text, ask them to rotate to read each of the other papers and add any additional questions or comments in writing.

After students have read and commented on each text, discuss the following questions as a class:

- What did you learn from this activity?
- What other tools do people use to promote belonging and safety in their communities?
- What efforts can you think of in our community that seek to promote belonging and safety?

3. Final Reflection

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

- If our school takes the issue of belonging and safety seriously, we will . . .
- If our community takes the issue of belonging and safety seriously, we will . . .
- If we do nothing, we risk . . .