

MINI-LESSON

How Can Hate Crimes Impact Schools?

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.

In this mini-lesson, students learn about vandalism committed by a group of high school seniors at their school, which was determined to be a hate crime. Students explore the impact this crime had on the people directly affected by the vandalism as well as on the community as a whole.

What's Included

This lesson uses the following student material:

- Reading: [A Black Principal, Four White Teens and the 'Senior Prank' That Became a Hate Crime \(Washington Post\)](#)

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 1: Note on Offensive and Dehumanizing Language

The reading in Activity 2 of this lesson contains offensive images and slurs, including the n-word and a homophobic slur, the f-word. We have redacted these words from the reading. We advise against reading the racist and homophobic terms in this text aloud. Students/teachers could instead substitute “F” or “the f-word” and “N” or “the n-word” if saying these aloud.

In life and in school, many students will encounter language that has been used historically to perpetuate racism and/or dehumanize people. Such language might be used to intentionally cause offense, and it might also be something they encounter in lessons, when reading literature or historical texts.

Teaching a text that includes racist or homophobic slurs or other derogatory words can elicit fear and anxiety in educators. As educators, we know that unless we prepare to address language with intention and care, we risk causing harm and creating inhospitable classroom environments where students may feel like they do not belong and where they cannot learn. Some racist and dehumanizing terms, such as the n-word, have the power to destabilize a classroom environment if they are encountered without adequate preparation

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).

or groundwork. In her talk "[Why It's So Hard to Talk about the 'N' Word](#)," Dr. Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor states: "I hear from students that when the word is said during a lesson without discussion and context, it poisons the entire classroom environment; the trust between student and teacher is broken" (11:31).

Such terms can also make students who belong to the targeted groups feel uncomfortable and singled out. In her talk, Stordeur Pryor goes on to say: "My black students tell me that when the word is spoken or quoted in class, they feel like a giant spotlight is shining on them" (12:32).

The dehumanizing power and loaded history of the n-word cannot be ignored, nor can the impact it may have on students if not handled sensitively. If it appears in texts or resources that are being used, it is necessary to acknowledge it, understand its problematic nature, and set guidelines for students when reading aloud or quoting from the text. Otherwise, the presence of this word might both harm students and distract them from an open discussion on a particular topic. We can benefit from applying this same understanding and approach whenever students encounter dehumanizing language in the course of learning. If you realize that you will be asking students to hear, process, and discuss passages with dehumanizing language on a regular basis, however, it is important to reflect on the purpose of the text and its cost to students' emotional well-being.

As always when discussing sensitive topics that may provoke feelings of fear, anger, or concern, it is helpful to revisit your [class contract](#) and remind students of your classroom norms for respectful and safe discussion.

Teaching Note 2: 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 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. Why Is it Important to Feel Safety and Belonging in School?

Ask students to respond to the following prompt in a private journal entry:

When do you feel safe and accepted at school? When do you not?

Tell your students that in this lesson, they will learn about some of the impacts that hate crimes can have on schools, including how they affect students' sense of safety and well-being.

2. What Impact Did Hate Speech and Vandalism Have on a Maryland High School?

The *Washington Post* article "[A Black Principal, Four White Teens and the 'Senior Prank' That Became a Hate Crime](#)" explores an incident involving racist, homophobic, and antisemitic vandalism on a high school campus in Maryland. Read the entire article with your students. (Note: This article includes and discusses offensive and dehumanizing language and hate symbols. Preview before sharing with your students, and use the Note on Offensive and Dehumanizing Language at the top of the lesson to determine how you will approach this reading with your class.)

Then discuss the following questions with your students:

- How might hate crimes, including vandalism, impact individuals in targeted groups?
- How do such crimes impact people who haven't been directly targeted?
- How do they impact whole communities?
- Why do you think acts of antisemitism, racism, and homophobia occurred together in the school described in the article? What is the relationship between these different acts of hate?
- What is an appropriate response by a school community when students have committed acts of hate? What should justice look like? What should the consequences be for the perpetrators, and how might those perpetrators contribute to healing their communities?

3. Final Reflection

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

What is one change our school could make to help students feel safer and have a stronger sense of belonging? Why do you think this change would help?

Extension: New York Connections

In addition to the *Washington Post* article in Activity 2, ask your students to read the ABC News article "[12-year-old New York boy arrested in connection with anti-Semitic graffiti at school](#)." When antisemitic incidents occur in school, they can have profound effects on students. After reading the article, share with your students the following short passage, which describes the impact that antisemitic attacks had on a student in another school:

When Paige was a senior in high school at a public school in New Jersey, she was the target of a string of antisemitic attacks by her classmates. She described her reaction afterwards: "The anger consumed me and I really didn't know what to do. I knew I didn't belong there."⁴

You can use a selection of the questions in Activity 2 to guide a class discussion about this article and short passage.

⁴ Sharon Otterman, "[She Was Excited for a New School. Then the Anti-Semitic 'Jokes' Started](#)," *New York Times*, March 7, 2020.