

From Thrill to Defensive Hate Crimes: The Impact of September 11, 2001

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INTRODUCTION

For a period of time following the original usage of the term “hate crimes” in the late 1980s, there existed a gap in the literature of criminology and social science generally regarding important factors underlying the motivation of hate crime offenders. Researchers recognized that certain criminal behavior had its basis in hostility toward people who were different in socially significant ways from the perpetrator. Yet little was systematically articulated to connect various hate crimes with relevant sociological and social psychological explanatory variables. As a result, those practitioners who deal with hate crimes on a daily basis—for example, prosecutors and law enforcement personnel—were at a loss to identify the distinguishing characteristics of hate-motivated offenses. Recognizing this gap in the literature, my colleague Jack McDevitt and I sought to establish an exhaustive typology of offender motivations and to elucidate the range of factors associated with these motives.

I. A TYPOLOGY OF OFFENDER MOTIVATION

More than twenty years ago, Jack McDevitt and I developed a typology of hate crimes that has since been much used by law enforcement, legal practitioners, and social scientists. This hate crime typology has also become part of the National Hate Crime Training Curriculum and is taught at the Federal Bureau of Investigation (“FBI”) Training Academy in Quantico, Virginia.

Our objective for the typology development was to examine the motives that underlie various kinds of hate attacks based on race, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and disability status. In our book *Hate Crimes: The Rising Tide of Bigotry and Bloodshed* (1993), we identified three major types of hate crime motives: 1) *thrill* attacks, which could be characterized as “recreational” in nature and are typically committed by groups of teenagers or young adults who seek excitement as well as “bragging rights” amongst their friends; 2) *defensive* attacks, which are designed to “protect” an individual’s neighborhood, workplace, school, or women from those who are considered to be a “threat,” and 3) *mission*

attacks, which are rare and usually committed by the members of an organized hate group or an offender who suffers from a severe mental illness (e.g., psychosis). Almost a decade later, we included an additional category of hate crime motivation known as *retaliatory* attacks, which are driven by an individual's need for retribution or revenge against a hate attack that was directed against that individual's own group members (McDevitt, Levin, & Bennett, 2002).

Research suggests that most hate crimes are committed by what we might think of as “dabblers,” those who attack on an occasional basis and without affiliation with any organized hate groups. “Dabblers” also tend to fall into the first two categories of motivation, *thrill* and *defensive*. For example, “dabblers” might go out with their friends on a Saturday night to look for someone to assault. “Dabblers” might send a threatening message to a new resident of their neighborhood informing them that “their kind” is not welcome. In reality, organized hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan (“KKK”), Aryan Nations, or the Hammerskins commit very few hate crimes nationally. However, organized hate groups do utilize the internet to recruit, incite, and support a large number of non-organized hate group members (who may be looking to feel important and have a sense of belonging but lack sophistication with respect to the ideology of hate) to commit violent offenses. Organized hate groups regularly facilitate internet chat room and bulletin board discussions to spread propaganda, promote a sense of belonging, and encourage angry and isolated youth to join the ranks of hatemongers. Not only do organized hate groups provide angry and isolated youngsters with effective propaganda; these internet-facilitated chat rooms and discussion boards allow recruits to develop newfound friendships with like-minded persons, including hatemongers.

II. THE IMPACT OF THE SEPTEMBER 11, 2001 TERRORIST ATTACKS

Although internet-generated hate crimes are difficult to track, we recognize that hate crime statistics dramatically shifted following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks (“September 11”). Prior to September 11, a large number of hate-motivated incidents—as many as half to possibly two-thirds—could be characterized as *thrill* hate crimes or those committed by groups of young people who are looking for some excitement at the expense of harming others. These perpetrators would typically go out in a group with the intent to vandalize or assault someone who is “different.” Thrill hate crime perpetrators typically did not focus their attacks on a specific group. For example, these individuals may randomly decide to attack someone who is gay. If they are unable to find someone who is gay, they

might choose to assault someone who is Muslim, Black, or Jewish (Levin & Nolan, 2011).

Thrill hate crime perpetrators tend to express generalized hostility toward a broad range of potential victims. This unspecified preference highlights an important psychological phenomenon underlying these attacks. Specifically, a victim's characteristics seem to be less relevant when compared to the perpetrator's motivation, which is to gain a sense of importance amongst peers and power over others.

Several psychological theories have been developed regarding generalized hostility and are utilized to explain inter-group discrimination and violence. Taking a psychoanalytic perspective, Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, and Sanford (1950) developed the *authoritarian personality theory*, which purports to demonstrate that deep-rooted personality traits predispose certain individuals to be highly sensitive to antidemocratic ideas including extreme prejudice. Beginning after World War II and continuing through the 1970s, proponents of the authoritarian personality theory suggested that such individuals express their prejudice against a range of subordinate groups as result of childhood experiences involving parents who employed harsh and threatening childrearing practices. Because these individuals developed with a sense of powerlessness, authoritarian individuals grew up to identify with powerful figures (*e.g.*, Adolph Hitler) and to become obsessed with securing power and control (Adorno et al., 1950). More recently, *social dominance theory* has taken a similar position with respect to the genesis of hate, albeit in the absence of a psychoanalytic framework (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001).

Prior to September 11, thrill hate crimes seemed to predominate. For example, in 1999, there were nearly 50 attacks on homeless individuals across the country. The offenders were typically teenagers, some of whom videotaped the attacks and could be heard laughing in the background as their victims were being beaten senseless with baseball bats or by fists. By the year 2003, however, the number of assaultive incidents against homeless individuals had dropped to only 10 (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2012).

Thrill hate crimes typically generate minimal public attention, being widely seen as childish pranks rather than harmful offenses against vulnerable victims. Many Americans immediately presume, often erroneously, that whenever the media relays stories of an assault or vandalism based on race, religion, sexual orientation, or ethnicity, an organized hate group was involved in the attack. However, FBI statistics demonstrate that fewer than five percent of all hate crimes can be directly attributed to the members of organized hate groups (Levin & McDevitt, 1993).

Similarly, early reports of church burnings in the South during the

1990s almost invariably attempted to implicate the KKK in some sort of far-reaching conspiratorial plan to destroy the fabric of life for Black Americans, especially those who resided in rural areas of the South. However, after careful study the situation appeared much more complex. Although a limited number of cases did involve the KKK, most of the racially-inspired church burnings had little, if anything, to do with white supremacist groups. In South Carolina, for example, two-thirds of the racially-charged church burnings were actually instigated by teenagers and young adults looking for a little excitement. Some of the young perpetrators had only tenuous links with the KKK, and developed these links simply because they were drawn toward the KKK's powerful symbols. Most of the youth offenders, however, operated on their own, without the direction of the KKK or any other organized hate group.

In actuality, the number of hate crimes committed by teenagers and young adults tends to rise and fall not according to the prevalence of organized hate groups, but rather as coinciding fluctuations in the rate of general violent crime. For example, both anti-Semitic hate crime acts and homicides committed by individuals aged 18-24 increased from the mid-1980s through the mid-1990s and then fell into the early 2000s (Levin & Nolan, 2011).

It is important to note that thrill hate crimes share a common theme with many other criminal acts committed by young people: both types of criminal acts are often perpetrated for similar reasons, albeit not on the same victims. For example, teenagers may seek excitement by invading an unknown residence not to burglarize but instead for the simple purpose of terrifying its occupants (Fox, Levin & Quinet, 2010). Thrill hate crimes similarly yield two psychological benefits for youth perpetrators. First, in committing an offense in a group, young offenders inevitably form a bond of friendship and create an impression that hate crimes are "cool." Second, these perpetrators feel a lasting sense of power and control over their victims, which is something they do not feel when they behave themselves.

III. PURPOSE AND METHOD

The study addressed in this article has a two-fold purpose. First, this study attempted to fill a gap in hate crime literature by specifically focusing on serious acts of violence inspired by hate or bias. Secondly, this study examined the change in the character of hate crimes after September 11. Specifically, the study sought to determine whether the thrill motivation remained the most prevalent motive behind hate crimes committed in the United States after this pivotal moment in American history. To this end, the author's research team conducted a content analysis of accounts from

the Lexis Nexis database of major newspapers, reports from the Southern Poverty Law Center, and articles from local newspapers. Our method yielded a sample of 653 assault incidents from 1991-2010, 197 occurring before September 11 and 456 occurring after September 11.¹

Following the September 11 terrorist attacks, many Americans have felt profoundly insecure in their personal safety. Prior to September 11, 24 percent of all Americans were worried about becoming a victim of a terrorist attack. After September 11, that insecurity soared to approximately 58 percent (Back, Kufner, & Egloff, 2010).

In addition to the increase in anxiety post-September 11, sadism—meaning the deriving of pleasure from the pain and suffering of others—began to find its way into popular culture. Fromm (2011) argued that sadistic urges develop when individual members of society feel a profound inability to control their own destiny and seek to regain that lost sense of power and control. After September 11, sadism increasingly found its way into American popular culture. A growing number of television quiz programs showed contestants being shamed, mocked, humiliated, physically tormented, and terrified. For example, in 2001, *Fear Factor* (a nationally-televised show in which contestants performed daring tasks such as devouring worms and being surrounded by snakes) and *The Weakest Link* (also a nationally-televised show in which losers exited after the show's host bluntly stated "You are the weakest link—Goodbye!") became popular forms of prime-time television entertainment. In 2002, *American Idol* joined the list of popular prime-time programs, in which performers were subjected to harsh criticisms—in this case, from a panel of experts in front of a large studio audience and a viewership of millions who were eager to laugh at any mistake or perceived shortcoming. In 2004, Donald Trump, at the end of weekly episodes of *The Apprentice*, informed losing contestants, in the most insensitive and dispassionate manner, "You're Fired!!!!" *Superstar USA*, which aired on the WB Network (now CW), provided an even crueler version of a singing competition by falsely informing the audience that contestants, who had less than idyllic singing voices, had won the competition as a result of their supposed "fabulous" voices. Hence, that show's slogan was "Only the BAD survive."

The tendency to fight back against "intruders" also increased in the aftermath of September 11. Defending against group threat became a dominant source of inspiration for hate crimes against a broad range of "outsiders." Any groups outside of the mainstream—Muslims, Jews, immigrants, gays, or Blacks—were more likely to be treated with suspicion and mistrust. Beginning with the threat of terrorism, more and more Americans were convinced that they had to defend themselves against actual or potential harm to their life, liberty, property, and even economic survival from

the supposed threats posed by an influx of immigrants, the election of an African-American as President of the United States, a Jewish threat coming from Israel, and so on. Overall, group threat seemed to take a prominent position with respect to determining increases and decreases in hate crimes against particular "others." (Blumer, 1958; Bobo, 1983; Quillian, 1994).

IV. RESULTS

Our findings indicate that assaultive hate crimes that occurred after September 11 were more likely to be committed by older offenders following some threatening event that involved a victim's group. These crimes were less likely to be committed by multiple offenders and more likely to occur on the East Coast (in proximity to the September 11 attacks). Overall, there were apparently fewer thrill-motivated attacks and far more defensive assaults, in which the offender believed to be directly or indirectly threatened by individuals of different racial or religious backgrounds. These incidents were traceable to racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and sexual minority status and major political or legal events that were supportive of such minority status.

For example, the percentage of hate-motivated assaults against Arab and Muslim-Americans soared immediately after September 11. In 2000, there had been virtually no assaultive hate crimes targeting Arab or Muslim-Americans. After September 11, by contrast, 60 percent of all hate crime assaults were anti-Islamic. The FBI reported an increase of 1600 percent in anti-Muslim hate crimes (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2002). Hate-motivated assaults committed against African-Americans peaked from 2007-2009, during the campaign, election, and inauguration of America's first African-American President. On the evening of President Obama's election victory, for example, three white supremacists burned down a predominantly African-American church in Springfield, Massachusetts. Five hours after President Obama was inaugurated in January 2009, a 22-year-old white supremacist fatally shot two dark-skinned Cape Verdean men and raped a Cape Verdean woman in his Brockton, Massachusetts neighborhood.

In 2004, after Massachusetts became the first of many states to legalize gay marriage, hate-motivated assaults against gays and lesbians peaked and then declined after several years. In 2004, the FBI reported that 15.6 percent of hate crimes reported to police were founded on the victim's perceived sexual orientation (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2005)

Two significant events in Israel led to the rise of hate-motivated assaults on Jewish-Americans. First, in 2006, Hamas shot rockets into Israeli cities and Israel retaliated by invading the Gaza Strip. In 2008, Israel

and Hezbollah fought their war on the border of Lebanon. During this period, the percentage of hate-motivated assaults targeting Jewish-Americans escalated. Despite the increase in attacks, the total number of assaults was relatively small—only six in 2008—when compared to the larger quantity of hate crimes, both to property and to person, reported by the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2009). Apparently, groups whose shared salient social identity cannot be easily confirmed by appearance alone are more likely than other more visible groups to suffer attacks to their property (Levin & Nolan, 2011).

Hate-motivated assaults targeting Latinos increased from 2001 to 2010 over the same period of time that the number of immigrants living in the United States also increased (from 31.8 million in 2001 to 37.6 million in 2010) and the amount of state and local-level legislation focused on immigrants and immigration skyrocketed (Camarota, 2010). Social scientists have long suggested that discrimination increases as the relative size of the minority population increases (Quillian, 1994). Not coincidentally, the unemployment rate soared over the same period, reaching almost ten percent in the years 2009-2010.

CONCLUSION

Since thrill hate crimes have a psychological basis, there exists an opportunity to introduce tactics and strategies designed to modify an offender's psychology. For example, first-time offenders who are arrested and placed on probation may benefit from educational resources, community services, and restorative justice measures. Young first-time offenders may also benefit from individual psychotherapy in order to change their thought processes that are directly related to their behavior (Dozier, 2002).

By contrast, perceived threat seems to be a major determinant of hate crimes against particular groups post-September 11. For such offenses, modifying an individual offender's personality may be much less effective, and more difficult to accomplish, than providing structured opportunities for groups to come together in a spirit of cooperation and interdependence. Regardless of the predispositions of the individuals involved, the perception of threat can be reduced to the extent that various groups perceive a benefit to their collaborative efforts toward achieving important shared objectives (Levin & Rabrenovic, 2004).

NOTES

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