

The Internet's Promise to Improve Bias-Crime Reporting: The Case for Including Bias Crimes on Official Crime-Reporting Websites

Jordan Blair Woods*

The Internet has expanded the available methods by which law enforcement can respond to criminal incidents and distribute information about crime. On many official police department websites, individuals can access crime statistics, read official press releases, and learn how to become involved in community policing programs. With the click of a button, people can use their personal computers to report crime and to send anonymous crime tips to the police.

Law enforcement is not taking full advantage of the various potential improvements to crime reporting that are offered by the Internet. A number of police departments have developed links on their official websites that enable people to report crime online. On each of these websites, people are permitted to report only minor crimes, such as damage to property, phone harassment, theft, and fraud, in which no suspect information is known. People must contact law enforcement directly, either in person or by telephone, to report other categories of crime or crimes with known suspect information.

This article argues that online crime reporting has the potential to improve bias-crime reporting and proposes that U.S. law enforcement departments include bias crimes on their official crime-reporting websites. In this article, I use the term *bias crime* to refer to criminal offenses committed against persons or property intentionally selected on the basis of identity characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, disability, gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Academics and practitioners agree that bias crimes are severely underreported (Herek & Berrill, 1992; Perry, 2001; Gerstenfeld, 2004; Hall, 2005; Wong & Christmann, 2008). Cultural and language barriers, distrust of police, fear of additional victimization by the police, fear of deportation, and fear of public exposure are some of the common factors that contribute to the underreporting of bias crimes (Herek & Berrill, 1992; Perry, 2001).

Online bias-crime reporting has the potential to avoid some of these obstacles, and thus improve bias-crime reporting, by giving victims and

* Ph.D., University of Cambridge, expected 2013; M.Phil., University of Cambridge, 2010; J.D., UCLA School of Law, 2009; A.B., Harvard College, 2006.

witnesses the opportunity to report bias crimes in a setting that is distanced from the stresses of police stations and police officers. The Internet may also be a more appealing method of bias-crime reporting for youth, who are more inclined to use computer technology, and also fail to report bias crimes at high rates (Woods, 2009). Through crime-reporting websites, law enforcement can communicate to bias-crime victims and witnesses that the proper handling of bias crimes is a priority. Law enforcement can also distribute contact information for nonprofit organizations that provide victim support services, and assure victims that responding police officers will be experienced in handling bias crimes.

Part I of this article focuses on the problem of bias-crime underreporting. Part II discusses the limited use of online crime-reporting systems by U.S. law enforcement agencies. Part III explains the benefits of online bias-crime reporting and responds to possible objections to including bias crimes on the crime-reporting websites of law enforcement agencies.

I. THE PROBLEM OF BIAS-CRIME UNDERREPORTING

The existence of bias-crime laws, police officers who are specially trained to handle bias crimes, and qualified prosecutors cannot guarantee that bias crimes will be punished. If such crimes are to be punished, victims or witnesses must first report them to the police. If victims do not report bias crimes, then law enforcement cannot gather sufficient incriminating evidence to arrest and to charge suspects.

Bias crimes are severely underreported (Herek & Berrill, 1992; Perry, 2001; Gerstenfeld, 2004; Hall, 2005; Wong & Christmann, 2008). Although the exact percentage of unreported bias crimes is unknown, researchers have estimated that the rate may run as high as 90-95% for certain bias crimes (Herek & Berrill, 1992; Sorensen, 2002). Because of underreporting, official statistics do not paint an accurate picture of the actual number of bias crimes that occur (Rubenstein, 2004).

Many factors contribute to the severe underreporting of bias crimes. Victims and witnesses may not report bias crimes to the police because they distrust law enforcement, feel that law enforcement will not take the crimes seriously, fear deportation, or fear additional victimization by the police (Berrill & Herek, 1992; Bowling, 1994; Sorensen, 2002). These fears stem from negative histories and experiences that racial and ethnic minorities, immigrant and refugee populations, women, religious individuals, LGBT people, and individuals with disabilities have had with law enforcement (Perry, 2001; Davis & Henderson, 2003). Language barriers, fear of retaliation, and fear of public exposure are other common factors that discourage people from reporting bias crimes (Lawrence, 1999). Members of refugee

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and migrant populations may also choose not to report bias crimes to the police because they believe that the crimes are inconsequential compared with the traumatic events that they fled from in their home countries (Wong & Christmann, 2008).

The three primary methods of crime reporting that are available to bias-crime victims and witnesses in the United States (in person reporting, telephone reporting, and third-party reporting) feed into these fears. First, victims and witnesses can report bias crimes directly to law enforcement by entering police stations or by approaching police officers. But victims and witnesses who belong to communities that have histories of conflict with law enforcement may perceive police stations as hostile and uncomfortable environments. For instance, a black man who is violently targeted because of his race in an area with an overwhelmingly white police force may believe that he will be treated in a racist fashion if he enters the local police station or approaches a white officer on the street to report the bias crime. Or, an undocumented female immigrant who is violently targeted because of her national origin may fear that she will be detained and deported if she walks into a police station or approaches an officer to report the crime.

Many other factors could discourage victims and witnesses from reporting bias crimes directly to police stations or individual officers. For instance, victims and witnesses cannot predict whether officers will take bias crimes seriously or be sympathetic to their injuries when they approach officers or enter police stations. Bias-crime victims and witnesses from particular minority communities may also fear that they will bring shame to their immediate and extended families if they are seen entering police stations or interacting with police officers (Wong & Christmann, 2008). Non-English speakers could be discouraged from reporting crimes at police stations or to individual officers due to a lack of confidence that officers will be able to communicate in their language. In some cases, the cost of time lost from work or daily routines may prevent victims and witnesses from traveling to police stations or from seeking law enforcement officers to report bias crimes.

Second, victims can report bias crimes to law enforcement by calling 911 or local police stations. Telephone language banks provide 911 access in a variety of languages to potential victims and witnesses of crime. Despite widespread access, victims and witnesses who distrust law enforcement may still be hesitant to report bias crimes by telephone. These individuals may fear that the receptionist will not take the crimes seriously, may put them on hold, or may trivialize their injuries.

Bias-crime victims who are afraid of revealing private information, such as their citizenship status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability, may also be hesitant to report bias crimes by telephone. For instance,

I vividly remember an incident during my volunteer work with an LGBT nonprofit organization in which a transgender woman contacted the police after being violently assaulted because of her gender identity. The woman left her phone number for the police to contact her about the crime. Upon returning the call, a police officer left a message on the answering machine that inadvertently disclosed the victim's gender identity. The victim's roommate, who did not know about her gender identity, was the first person to listen to the message. The victim later had to move out because her roommate was hostile toward her because of her gender identity. Stories like this illustrate that victims and witnesses may fear using the telephone to report bias crimes because law enforcement could reveal sensitive information to other individuals who may answer the telephone, such as family members, roommates, or co-workers.

Finally, in some regions, victims can report bias crimes to third-party agencies, such as community centers or anti-violence projects that help facilitate interactions between bias-crime victims, witnesses, and law enforcement. For example, a Latina immigrant who is victimized on the basis of her race, ethnicity, and/or national origin may be able to report her crime to a local Latino community center. A representative from the center will then document details about crime and provide support during her initial and follow-up interactions with law enforcement.

One limitation of third-party reporting is that it may be unavailable to many victims and witnesses because there is a lack of organizational support for populations that are most vulnerable to bias crime in many non-metropolitan areas. Victims and witnesses may also be hesitant to contact identity-based organizations if they do not want to associate openly with particular identity groups. For instance, a closeted gay man who has been assaulted because of his sexual orientation may refuse to contact an LGBT anti-violence project if he fears that initiating contact with the organization will expose his sexual orientation.

Therefore, the three main methods of bias-crime reporting have qualities that may discourage victims and witnesses from reporting bias crimes. In highlighting these inadequacies, I am not arguing that in person, telephone, and third-party bias-crime reporting methods are ineffectual or should be abolished. Even if online bias-crime reporting is made available, a substantial proportion of victims and witnesses will continue to report bias crimes through traditional methods. These criticisms merely demonstrate that there is a need for law enforcement to create new bias-crime reporting methods that appeal to a particular subset of victims and witnesses who may be hesitant to report bias crimes through traditional reporting methods.

II. THE LIMITED AVAILABILITY OF ONLINE CRIME REPORTING

After the use of the Internet expanded rapidly during the 1990s, researchers predicted that it would transform crime-reporting practices (Lasley & Palombo, 1995). Many police departments have developed links on their official websites that allow victims and witnesses to report certain categories of crime online. A systematic analysis of these websites, however, reveals that victims and witnesses are only permitted to report crime online in very limited circumstances.

In my research, I investigated the official websites of the police departments that are located in the fifty largest cities in the United States as determined by census population estimates (U.S. Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/popest/cities/SUB-EST2008.html>).¹ Nineteen of these police departments have developed links on their official websites that enable victims and witnesses to report certain crimes online.² All of the nineteen departments permit victims and witnesses to report crimes online only if (1) there are no known suspects or information that can lead to identifiable suspects; and (2) the crime is a minor crime, such as damage to vehicles or property, phone harassment, theft, or fraud. Victims and witnesses must report other categories of crime, and crimes with known suspect information, in person, or by telephone.

Law enforcement agencies control the circumstances in which victims and witnesses can report crimes through official online crime-reporting systems. Researchers have not explored the reasons for law enforcement agencies' using online crime reporting in such a limited fashion, but I posit that three factors may explain its limited use. Given the lack of research in this area, these factors are not intended to be an exhaustive list, and other factors may explain the limited use of online crime reporting by law enforcement agencies.

The first factor explaining the limited use of online crime reporting by law enforcement involves the bureaucratic structure of law enforcement agencies. Social theorists, such as Max Weber (1946), have argued that as modern society evolved after the Industrial Revolution, its institutions became increasingly goal-oriented and designed according to rational principles. Social institutions, including law enforcement agencies, became more bureaucratic in nature. Many law enforcement agencies are currently structured according to hierarchies of command, have specialized departments, and standardize their procedures (Dantzker, 2005). Bureaucracy often causes law enforcement agencies to operate through extensive paperwork, records, and formal rules (Collins, 1999).

The limited use of online crime reporting may be explained by the need for efficient ways to process crime in law enforcement agencies char-

acterized by bureaucracy. As of 2010, online crime reporting manages minor and mundane cases that ordinarily would be processed by individual officers or receptionists. These cases would likely result in no arrests or law enforcement follow-up due to a lack of evidence. By filtering these cases to online crime reporting systems, individual officers and receptionists no longer have the burden of manually completing initial reports, and therefore can dedicate more time to handling other crimes. This practice may be fostering the perception that the utility of online crime reporting lies only in its ability to promote efficiency by filtering crimes that require little to no follow-up.

The second factor that may explain the limited use of online crime reporting involves the integrity of evidence-gathering procedures. The police departments that have developed online crime-reporting systems state on their websites that victims should contact the police directly when suspects are known or evidence exists that could lead to identifiable suspects. Law enforcement may believe that evidence will spoil or that suspects will flee by the time that officers would respond to an online bias-crime report. This belief may be perpetuated by the current practice of law enforcement departments to monitor online crime reports a few times per day. Law enforcement may also fear that victims or witnesses will make mistakes on online reporting forms that could undermine cases, mistakes that could be avoided if the police could clarify information in person or by telephone.

The impersonal nature of the Internet is the third factor that may explain the limited use of online crime reporting. The Internet provides a less personal method of communicating with law enforcement than the telephone or in person because victims and witnesses do not have to engage with law enforcement officers to provide information about crime. Law enforcement officials may believe that if a crime is serious enough, then victims and witnesses should communicate directly with police officers. Direct communication enables law enforcement employees to give necessary instructions or dispense needed support for victims.

In summary, efficiency concerns, evidence-spoiling fears, and skepticism regarding the impersonal nature of the Internet may explain why law enforcement agencies are using online crime reporting only in limited circumstances. As the following analysis argues, these concerns may be fostering certain misconceptions about the utility of online crime reporting, especially in regard to bias-crime reporting.

III. PROPOSAL: INCLUDING BIAS CRIMES ON ONLINE CRIME-REPORTING WEBSITES

The following analysis explains the benefits of online crime reporting and why it may be appealing to bias-crime victims and witnesses who are hesitant to report crimes through traditional methods. It also illustrates why efficiency considerations, evidence-spoiling fears, and the less personal nature of the Internet are unpersuasive reasons to exclude bias crimes from the crime-reporting websites of law enforcement agencies. Finally, the analysis answers practicality and efficacy objections to including bias crimes on crime-reporting websites.

A. *Advantages of Online Bias-Crime Reporting*

Online crime reporting differs from in person, telephone, and third-party reporting in ways that may increase its appeal to victims and witnesses who are hesitant to report bias crimes through traditional reporting methods. Online crime reporting provides informants with the opportunity to report bias crimes in a setting that is distanced from the potential stresses of law enforcement stations, officers, and receptionists. Bias-crime informants can take as much time as they need to formulate a detailed written description of incidents in their own words. Victims and witnesses who are hesitant to use in person or telephone reporting methods can also set up their own private e-mail accounts to use for initial communication with law enforcement. Using private e-mail accounts may be more appealing than leaving telephone numbers if victims or witnesses fear that upon responding to a report, law enforcement will reveal private information to other individuals who may answer the telephone. Additionally, since it is relatively easy to establish website links in multiple languages, online crime reporting can be accessible to bias-crime victims and witnesses who do not speak English.

Online bias-crime reporting also has numerous advantages from the perspective of law enforcement. Through crime-reporting websites, law enforcement can communicate to victims that the officers who will respond to online reports are experienced in handling bias crimes, can communicate in the reported language, and are sympathetic to bias-crime victims' injuries. Law enforcement departments can also underscore their commitment to handling bias-crime reports promptly and appropriately, tell victims the appropriate steps to take in order to preserve evidence, and provide contact information for organizations that can provide victim support services.

B. *Overcoming Misconceptions About Online Crime Reporting*

Despite these advantages, three misconceptions about online crime reporting must be corrected in order to persuade law enforcement departments to implement online bias-crime reporting systems. These misconceptions are correctable through conversations with law enforcement administrators who influence decisions regarding information technology.

First, law enforcement departments must acknowledge that online crime reports do not need to function as complete criminal reports in order to have utility. Currently, the information that victims provide in online crime reports serves as the basis of the complete criminal report. After the report is submitted online, it is usually reviewed by a law enforcement officer without alteration and filtered into an information database. This practice is likely influenced by the fact that victims and witnesses can only report crimes online that often result in little to no follow-up due to a lack of suspect information.

The utility of online bias-crime reporting lies in its promise to facilitate initial communication between law enforcement and bias-crime informants, and not in its promise to create complete criminal reports. For instance, bias-crime victims can submit as much information as they can recollect about their crimes in online reports. Law enforcement agencies can use the information provided online not as the complete criminal report, but as the basis for more comprehensive follow-up discussions and investigations. The information provided by informants in online reports can then be validated during subsequent interactions between the informants and law enforcement.

Second, law enforcement must acknowledge that online crime reporting can be appropriate for cases with existing evidence or suspect information. If victims and witnesses who report bias crimes through crime-reporting websites would have refused to report their crimes through traditional methods, then the evidence of those crimes would have spoiled anyway. In certain cases, online reports may generate more information about bias crimes than initial reports made by telephone or in person. For instance, some victims may initially provide less information during a telephone call than in an online report because they are afraid that they will cry if they speak about the crime, and they do not want police officers to hear them cry.

Law enforcement officials can take numerous steps to decrease the risk of evidence spoiling when bias crimes are reported online. Crime-reporting websites can provide bias-crime victims with guidance on preserving evidence. Moreover, to reduce the amount of time that it takes for officers to respond to online bias-crime reports, any online reports should be for-

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warded immediately to the e-mail accounts of bias-crime police units or to the pagers of individual police officers who handle bias crimes.

The concern that bias-crime informants will make mistakes on online reports that could undermine cases also should not discourage law enforcement agencies from including bias crimes on online crime-reporting systems. Traditional methods of bias-crime-reporting have similar risks. For instance, in the case of bias-crime reporting answering machine hotlines, there is no person on the other end of the phone to clarify ambiguities. In third-party reporting centers, the staff member taking the initial report is not a law enforcement officer, and therefore, could make mistakes or collect information that may undermine a case. Despite these risks, these methods of reporting are viewed as useful because they facilitate future interactions between law enforcement and bias-crime informants that could lead to complete criminal reports in the future. Online bias-crime reporting is no different; the information contained within online reports can be corroborated during later follow-up discussions and during formal investigations to construct complete criminal reports.

Finally, the less personal nature of the Internet should not discourage law enforcement departments from including bias crimes on their crime-reporting websites. The Internet now plays a major role in everyday communication. Many people prefer to communicate with others through the use of e-mail, instant messaging, and other Internet technology. Extending online crime reporting to bias crimes simply acknowledges the central role that the Internet has in the communication practices of today's society.

Law enforcement should not view online crime reporting as impersonal simply because it is an indirect method of communication. One of the benefits of online crime reporting is that it provides victims and witnesses with a safe space to tell their own versions of criminal events. Writing out a narrative can be just as emotionally taxing as orally recounting the events of a crime either in person or by telephone. Moreover, online reporting does not trivialize the consequences of bias crime by forcing victims and witnesses to approach reporting through a series of checkboxes. The purpose of online bias-crime reporting is to give informants who are hurt or scared, and afraid to report bias crimes through traditional methods, an alternative space to tell law enforcement about bias crime.

Law enforcement may fear that online bias-crime reporting will waste resources by opening a floodgate of false reports. Law enforcement should emphasize in bold on bias-crime reporting websites that filing a false report with the police is a crime that will be punished accordingly. Admittedly, the less personal nature of the Internet may increase the risk of false reports. However, the risk of receiving false online bias-crime reports is not dramatically greater than the risk of receiving false reports through other reporting

methods. For instance, any person can go to a pay phone and file a false report with the police by telephone. Moreover, some police departments are establishing websites for people to send anonymous crime tips to the police. The risk of false reports on these systems is far greater than in online bias-crime reporting systems, given that any person can submit a false tip for a wide range of crimes.

Of course, law enforcement has legitimate reasons for preferring direct contact with bias-crime victims and witnesses. Interaction is important, especially when victims need support, as is the need to shape information received by victims and witnesses. Law enforcement officials should continue to encourage direct contact, especially in emergency situations. At the same time, law enforcement employees must acknowledge that some informants may prefer to report crime initially through more indirect means. Law enforcement officials should not perceive including bias crimes on crime-reporting websites as a new trend to replace personal with impersonal communication. Rather, the inclusion of bias crimes on these websites merely expands the available reporting options to appeal to particular victims and witnesses who may not otherwise tell the police about the crimes.

C. Practicality and Efficacy

Practicality considerations should not discourage law enforcement departments from developing online bias-crime reporting systems. Developing and maintaining bias-crime reporting websites is relatively inexpensive. Law enforcement departments merely have to (1) construct the appropriate links on their official department websites and (2) designate point people to monitor the incoming reports. Many departments already have officers that are trained specifically to handle bias crimes; these officers would be the appropriate point people to monitor submitted online bias-crime reports.

In my view, the most convincing evidence in support of the practicality of including bias crimes on crime-reporting websites comes from the United Kingdom. During the past five years, many police constabularies in the United Kingdom have established online bias-crime reporting systems, including Avon and Somerset Constabulary, Fife Constabulary, Metropolitan Police, Norfolk Constabulary, and Surrey Police. Consistent with my proposal, many of the bias-crime reporting websites emphasize the department's commitment to respond to bias crimes, as well as explicitly acknowledge the reluctance of some victims and witnesses to come forward to the police to report bias crimes.

Of course, there is a risk that online bias-crime reporting systems may be ineffective because individuals will not use them. In the course of my

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research, I was unable to assess how many bias-crime victims use online reporting as opposed to other reporting methods in the United Kingdom. Police constabularies commonly responded to my public record requests by saying that it would be too burdensome to determine from existing bias-crime case files how many individuals used online versus other reporting methods. During informal discussions, I learned that the method of reporting bias crimes was not often documented and that many case files are difficult to find, lost, or destroyed. Even if this information were obtainable, it would not necessarily reflect the potential efficacy of online bias-crime-reporting systems. A lack of use could simply reflect the possibility that bias-crime victims in the United Kingdom do not have knowledge that these systems exist.

Although empirical research in this area is rare and needs further development, existing studies may provide support for the notion that bias-crime victims and witnesses would use online crime-reporting systems if they were available. During the height of the Internet's explosion in the 1990s, Lasley and Palombo (1995) undertook the first empirical study to examine whether computer-based reporting methods would affect crime-reporting behavior. The study was a fully randomized experiment involving 140 undergraduate students enrolled in a large urban university that compared the use of telephonic and computer interactive crime reporting methods for low to moderate criminal acts. Serious crimes were not examined in the study.

Lasley and Palombo found that crime reporting increased, in terms of both telephonic and online reporting, as the perceived seriousness of the crime increased. However, they found substantial differences between the two methods in terms of the absolute percentages of victims that reported low and moderate criminal acts. The experimental subjects who used computer interactive reporting were three times more likely to report crime of low seriousness than control subjects who used telephonic reporting (17.1% versus 5.7%). Experimental subjects were also one-and-one-half times more likely to report moderately serious crime than the control subjects using telephone reporting (37.1% versus 24.3%). Based on these findings, Lasley and Palombo predicted that computer-based reporting had the potential to increase the reporting of low and moderate criminal offenses.

Bias crimes can range in severity from vandalism to homicide. Lasley and Palombo's findings may indicate that the reporting of minor and moderate bias crimes, such as vandalism, harassment, and non-aggravated assaults, would increase if law enforcement made online bias-crime reporting available to victims and witnesses. Additional research that focuses specifically on the reporting of bias crimes is needed to support this hypothesis.

Recently, Wong and Christmann (2008) conducted one of the first

empirical studies examining victims' decisions to report bias crimes. The small-scale study included participants from members of five groups that traditionally are victimized by bias crimes: (1) racial and ethnic minorities, (2) lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals, (3) refugees and asylum seekers, (4) individuals with disabilities, and (5) religious individuals. Only 53 participants were included in the study.

In one part of the study, Wong and Christmann asked the respondents about their willingness to report a bias-motivated incident based on its severity. They found that respondents were generally more likely to report severe bias crimes (robbery, physical violence with weapons, threats to kill, arson, assault) than minor bias crimes (name-calling, spitting, graffiti, verbal abuse, public "outing"). Damage to the home was a minor offense that respondents had a high willingness to report.

In another part of the study, Wong and Christmann asked respondents about which method they would use to report a bias crime. Approximately 36% preferred telephone reporting, 23% preferred in person reporting, 17% preferred third party reporting, 8% preferred website reporting, 6% preferred text message reporting, 6% preferred telephone hotline reporting, and 4% preferred e-mail reporting. The respondents that preferred online reporting methods (website and e-mail reporting) indicated that they would use these methods only to report minor bias crimes.

Wong and Christmann interpreted these results as suggesting that only a marginal percentage of bias-crime victims would use non-traditional reporting methods. I interpret these results more favorably. Although a majority of respondents preferred traditional reporting methods, a considerable percentage of respondents (approximately 25%) preferred other methods. Even though the study included only 53 respondents, this percentage may highlight a demand for less traditional bias-crime reporting methods.

Two types of respondents could fall within the 12% of respondents that preferred Internet bias-crime reporting. For some respondents, online bias-crime reporting could be a non-exclusive preference. These respondents may prefer Internet reporting, but would still use other methods if Internet reporting were unavailable. However, for some of the respondents, Internet reporting could be an exclusive preference. These respondents would not report bias crimes if online bias-crime reporting were unavailable, and therefore, these crimes would never reach the police.

The proportion of respondents that fell within either of these two categories in Wong and Christmann's study is unclear, and the percentage would likely differ among future studies. At the very least, Wong and Christmann's finding that 12% of the respondents preferred website and e-mail bias-crime reporting supports the notion that online crime reporting would be used if it were available to victims and witnesses. Given the

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severe underreporting of bias crimes, which has been estimated to run as high as 90-95%, a 12% figure is far from marginal. But as Wong and Christmann's findings illustrate, it is unclear whether informants would use online crime-reporting systems to report more serious and violent bias crimes.

Wong and Christmann (2008) also acknowledged an age gap between respondents who preferred online crime reporting and respondents who preferred traditional crime-reporting methods. Younger respondents seemed to view online crime reporting more favorably than older respondents, who expressed difficulties in finding and using the crime-reporting websites. A technology age gap may also explain the receptiveness of the 140 university subjects in Lasley and Palombo's (1995) study to using computer-based methods. Other studies suggest that college students are inclined to use crime-reporting websites (Iriberry, Leroy, & Garrett, 2006).

Although further research is needed to support this hypothesis, online crime reporting may reach a younger subset of bias-crime victims who are more inclined to use computer technology. This is by no means a negative or irrelevant point. Researchers have estimated that at least one out of every four bias crimes involves at least one youth offender, and approximately three in every five bias crimes committed against youth victims are perpetrated by youth offenders (Woods, 2009). Researchers have also found that hate crimes involving youth are severely underreported. One study released by the Massachusetts Governor's Task Force on Hate Crimes revealed that only 3% of the polled students who were victims of bias offenses reported the offenses to law enforcement (Rosenwald, 2002).

To conclude this discussion of practicality and efficacy, I offer six suggestions to help law enforcement departments develop successful online bias-crime reporting systems. First, bias-crime reporting websites should be easy to find and to use. Second, bias-crime victims and witnesses must have knowledge of bias-crime reporting websites. Law enforcement agencies should publicize these websites in public locations, such as supermarkets or community centers, and in geographic areas populated by identity groups that are vulnerable to bias crime. Third, bias-crime reporting websites should automatically forward submitted reports to bias crime units or officers who are designated to handle bias crimes. This will decrease the amount of time that it takes for officers to respond to submitted reports. Fourth, bias-crime reporting websites should underscore law enforcement's dedication to respond to bias crimes, acknowledge the reluctance of some bias-crime victims and witnesses to come forward to report bias crime, and assure informants that the officer who will respond their submitted report is experienced in handling bias crimes. These statements will help to persuade bias-crime informants that law enforcement officials can be trusted. Fifth,

crime-reporting websites should inform bias-crime victims of the support services available to them and provide contact information for the organizations that provide victim support services. Finally, to increase the accessibility of crime-reporting websites to non-English speaking bias-crime victims, law enforcement departments should develop bias-crime reporting websites in a variety of languages.

IV. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the Internet has the potential to improve bias-crime reporting and that U.S. law enforcement agencies should include bias crimes on their official crime-reporting websites. More specifically, it has outlined the reasons behind the appeal of online bias-crime reporting to victims and witnesses from minority communities who may be hesitant to report bias crimes through traditional reporting methods because of distrust of police and fears of public exposure, deportation, and retaliation. This article has also explained that online bias-crime reporting may appeal to youth, who are frequently involved in bias crimes, yet fail to report them at staggering rates.

Online bias-crime reporting should be viewed as a supplementary crime-reporting method that expands the available options by which victims and witnesses can report bias crimes. Many victims and witnesses will continue to report bias crimes in person, by telephone, or to third-party agencies. The important characteristic of online bias-crime reporting is that it serves as an important springboard to facilitate interaction between law enforcement employees and bias-crime informants.

Finally, I conclude by making a broader point. Developing online bias-crime reporting systems is one of many steps that law enforcement agencies should take in order to improve their handling of bias crimes. Law enforcement agencies should train all officers regarding bias-crime issues, institutionally affirm their commitment to combating bias crimes, and develop community outreach efforts to build trust with members of minority communities. Improving bias-crime reporting is only one piece of the puzzle in ensuring that bias crimes are handled appropriately by members of law enforcement.

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NOTES

1. In order of descending population, the fifty largest cities in the United States are: New York City, NY; Los Angeles, CA; Chicago, IL; Houston, TX; Phoenix, AZ; Philadelphia, PA; San Antonio, TX; Dallas, TX; San Diego, CA; San Jose, CA; Detroit, MI; San Francisco, CA; Jacksonville, FL; Indianapolis, IN; Austin, TX; Columbus, OH; Fort Worth, TX; Charlotte, NC; Memphis, TN; Baltimore, MD; El Paso, TX; Boston, MA; Milwaukee, WI; Denver, CO; Seattle, WA; Nashville, TN; District of Columbia; Las Vegas, NV; Portland, OR; Louisville, KY; Oklahoma City, OK; Tucson, AZ; Atlanta, GA; Albuquerque, NM; Fresno, CA; Sacramento, CA; Long Beach, CA; Mesa, AZ; Kansas City, MO; Omaha, NE; Cleveland, OH; Virginia Beach, VA; Miami, FL; Oakland, CA; Raleigh, NC; Tulsa, OK; Minneapolis, MN; Colorado Springs, CO; Honolulu, HI; and Arlington, TX.

2. The police departments that have developed online crime reporting systems are located in Houston, TX; Philadelphia, PA; San Jose, CA; San Francisco, CA; Fort Worth, TX; Charlotte, NC; El Paso, TX; Denver, CO; Tucson, AZ; Albuquerque, NM; Fresno, CA; Sacramento, CA; Cleveland, OH; Virginia Beach, VA; Oakland, CA; Tulsa, OK; Minneapolis, MN; Colorado Springs, CO; and Arlington, TX.

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