Understanding hate crime statistics
a guide for organisations

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This information sheet provides guidance for criminal justice professionals, journalists, charities and community organisations on interpreting statistics on hate crime.Police reporting figures shape public debate about hate crime, but their implications can sometimes be difficult to understand. The first section of this resource discusses the meaning and influence of police data. The second section suggests steps that can be taken to determine why a particular increase or decrease in hate crime reporting has occurred.

Section 1: The meaning and influence of police data

What does police data mean?

There are many factors that prevent reporting statistics from giving a 'true' picture of hate crime. One of the biggest is under-reporting. To give some context, an estimated 278,000 hate crimes are committed in England and Wales each year according to Government research, yet just 52,528 hate crimes were recorded by the police in these regions during 2014/15 (i). For that reason, the police aim to increase the number of hate crimes reported.

Any change in police figures can be understood in several ways. If the number of hate crimes recorded by the police increases that could mean more offences are being committed, or that communities affected by hate crime are more prepared to report it. If the number of reports decreases, that could be an indication that fewer hate crimes have occurred or that individuals are less inclined to report it than previously. Alternatively, it could be a combination of two factors, for instance, increased willingness to report and more offences happening simultaneously.

Community impacts of police data

Communities have a right to scrutinise hate crime data in order to hold authorities to account. As part of that process, media organisations are understandably interested in highlighting increases of incidents reported to the police, but they often conflate these with increases in the number of hate crimes being committed. On the other hand, decreases in reporting rarely get media coverage. That leaves many people with the impression that the number of hate crimes committed is constantly on the rise, even at times when the opposite is true.

Hate crime sends a message to individuals and communities that they are unwelcome, which can lead to an atmosphere of fear. Making people unnecessarily afraid of escalating hate crime in the way that police statistics are communicated can inadvertently reinforce the message sent by hate crime offenders. There are of course times when the number or severity of hate crimes committed is genuinely rising. Being able to identify this is important in order to tackle it. But there are also times when the increase can be attributed to something else, so care should be taken in the way this information is communicated.

(i) Home Office, Office for National Statistics and Ministry of Justice (2013), An overview of hate crime in England and Wales

Section 2: Steps to analyse police data

The following steps may be useful to help you understand the meaning of a particular set of figures.

Step 1: Understand influencing factors

Factors affecting police reporting figures can include:

- Hate crime committed - Changes to the amount of hate crime occurring can influence how many are eventually reported.
- Preparedness to tell police - Changes to how communities feel about the police, often described as 'community confidence', can influence the proportion of crimes committed against individuals that go on to be reported.
- Recording practices - Recording errors and different policies and practices across police forces mean some hate crimes reported do not get recoded. Changes to recording practice can increase or decrease police hate crime figures.
- Normal fluctuation - This might include regular variation (such as seasonal changes, where fewer crimes are reported in winter) or seemingly random changes caused by the accumulation of many small factors.
- Significant incidents - An event that shakes the confidence of a particular group in the police might decrease reporting, while an event that increases public hostility against a marginalised group can result in more hate crimes being committed.

Step 2: Chose the right timeframe

The standard way to examine changes in crime data is to compare a twelve-month period with the previous one. It can be useful to remember that what looks like a dramatic rise in the short term could actually be part of a long-term decrease when you look back further. It can be helpful to avoid focusing on small changes up or down and instead look for the big picture. A change over the last year might be part of a larger-scale pattern (or a deviation from one) that is only visible once data from a number of years is observed.

Step 3: Investigate community attitudes

Examining changes in the readiness of communities to report hate crime can give an indication about the meaning of police data. Understanding attitudinal changes across diverse communities is difficult, but the following will help to give you some context:

- Expert opinion - Identity-focused organisations, frontline hate crime professionals and academics may be able to provide insight.
- Significant events - Bear in mind the influence of high-profile cases, community events, campaigns, staffing changes or community tensions.
- Community confidence - Some police forces and local authorities conduct research about local levels of trust in the police. Where the results are analysed by demographic characteristics, this can provide insights into the reporting behaviour of groups facing hate crime.
- Victim satisfaction - Satisfaction or dissatisfaction among people who report can influence their future predisposition to do so. Police forces run regular satisfaction surveys with a sample of people who have reported crime to them. It may be possible for them to analyse the answers from individuals who reported a hate crime.
- Fear of crime - Some statutory agencies run surveys about fear of crime, which may provide insight into the impact of hate crime.

Step 4: Investigate complementary data sources

- Research - Academic findings on prevalence, reporting and impact can provide valuable context. Findings related to hate crime within the Crime Survey for England and Wales can be particularly helpful.
- Comparison across strands - Examining changes to reporting figures across the five strands of hate crime (disability; gender identity; race, ethnicity or nationality; religion, faith or belief; and sexual orientation) may assist in understanding data on hate-motivated offences against a particular group.
- Police performance data - This includes police detections (the percentage of reported hate crimes that are 'solved') and conviction rates (the percentage of cases which go to court that result in a guilty verdict).
- Crown Prosecution Service performance data - It may be useful to examine the proportion of hate crime recorded by police that goes on to be prosecuted and the proportion resulting in a guilty verdict.

Step 5: Draw a conclusion

After considering the evidence, make a judgement about whether the change in reported hate crime is positive, negative, neutral or if it is not possible to know. It can be tempting for statutory agencies to conclude that a particular rise is caused by increased confidence in police, while community activists decide the same rise is caused by more hate crime occurring. In order to avoid that, it is necessary to put preconceptions to one side and think objectively. It is sometimes that case that the reason for a change is not possible to know, in which case an increase in reporting might be cautiously welcomed and a drop could be considered a cause for concern.

Step 6: Take action

Understanding crime data is only useful when action is taken as a result. Remember that reporting is only one part of a complex picture and simply telling communities that they should report more will not solve the problem. Reporting has to be supported by work to ensure people who access criminal justice services get an appropriate, effective and respectful response. It is also important to make sure that people who chose not to tell the police about their experiences still get access to good quality advice, support and advocacy services.

Produced 2016. Authored by Nick Antjoule.

This information sheet was produced by Galop, an LGBT anti-violence charity providing support, advice and advocacy to people facing hate crime, domestic abuse or sexual violence. It is a part of a series of 17 resources on hate crime for LGBT people and service providers, created on behalf of the National LGBT Hate Crime Partnership. The other useful information sheets are:

1. Glossary of Terms Relating to Hate Crime
2. Diary Sheets and Guidance on Keeping a Written Record of Hate Crime
3. Hate Crime Laws: A Guide for LGBT People
8. Training Toolkit on LGBT Hate Crime
9. LGBT Hate Crime Quality Standard: A Service Improvement Tool for Organisations
10. Tackling Biphobia: A Guide for Safety Services
11. Tackling Transphobia: A Guide for Safety Services
13. Understanding Hate Crime Statistics: A Guide for Organisations
14. Hate Crime and Older Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans people in Care Settings
15. Housing, Disability and LGBT Hate Crime
16. Commissioning LGBT Hate Crime Services: A Guide for Organisations
17. Building Partnerships to Tackle Hate Crime

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