

Teaching Tolerance Reduces Crime and Violence

*Like an unchecked cancer,
hate corrodes the personality
and eats away its vital unity.*

*Hate destroys a
man's sense of
values and his
objectivity. It
causes him to
describe the beau-
tiful as ugly and
the ugly as beau-
tiful, and to confuse
the true with the false and
the false with the true.*

*Darkness cannot drive out
darkness; only light can do
that. Hate cannot drive out
hate; only love can do that.
Hate multiplies hate,
violence multiplies violence,
and toughness multiplies
toughness in a descending
spiral of destruction. The
chain reaction of evil—hate
begetting hate, wars produc-
ing more wars—must be
broken, or we shall be
plunged into the dark abyss
of annihilation.*

—Rev. Dr.
Martin Luther King, Jr.



The United States is built on the foundation of “freedom and justice for all.” It is technologically, scientifically, medically, and educationally more advanced than most countries around the world. And yet it still struggles with issues that have plagued the world since the beginning of time—racism and intolerance. Crimes directed at others because of their actual or perceived race, color, religion, national origin, ethnicity, gender, disability, or sexual orientation occur across the country—a cross burning on a lawn; a person assaulted, even murdered, because of his or her sexual orientation; symbols of hate written on students’ notebooks and appearing on their Web sites; and remarks based on race or ethnicity that demean and belittle. These are learned behaviors. People are not born to burn crosses or dislike people because of their skin color. Whether these behaviors are learned from parents, grandparents, peers, or through the media, they cannot be changed by limited encounters. In order to create a climate of tolerance, behaviors need to be changed. Although people may still believe that certain people are “different,” they can act in a manner that treats others with civility.

Issues of race and discrimination reach into all aspects of society, including education, civil rights, administration of justice, government, and the workforce. This paper will not attempt to provide definitive answers on race, bias, and crime in the United States. Instead, it will provide information to teach young people about the issues of racism and intolerance and ideas on how to involve

them in stopping the violence that intolerance can create. Teens must be engaged in efforts to bridge cultural divides in order to promote tolerance.

Know the Facts About Hate Crimes

Half of all hate crimes in the United States are committed by young people ages 15 to 24.¹

Whether it takes the form of writing racist notes, destruction of property because of the owner's religious beliefs, beating someone brutally because of his or her sexual orientation, or committing genocide, hate crimes affect everyone. A hate crime is any crime in which bias, prejudice, or bigotry is a motivating factor. Hate crimes are directed against people because of what they are, not who they are. And nearly 500 hate groups in the United States were documented in 1998. These crimes take place in all types of communities—urban, suburban, and rural—against all kinds of people. When people are attacked solely because of their race, religion, gender, national origin, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or physical disability, it has a devastating impact on the victims.

Factors that help identify a violent act as bias-motivated include

- symbols or acts of hate: a burning cross, hate-related graffiti such as swastikas and racial/ethnic slurs, desecration of venerated objects, and arson are examples of acts that damage or destroy property associated with the hated target group.
- what offenders say: many acts of bias-motivated violence involve taunts, slurs, or derogatory comments about the target's race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation.
- the absence of another apparent motive: most bias-motivated violence is characterized by the fact that the victim is targeted because he or she represents the hated group rather than because of personal conflict with the offender(s).

To counter trends in hate crimes, federal agencies, national advocacy groups, and local communities have taken action to research the extent and causes of bias-motivated violence. At least 41 states and the District of Columbia have laws against hate crimes. This means that if a bias is involved, a crime such as vandalism, assault, or murder is also a hate crime, and the penalty is more severe than it would be without bias. Moreover, federal prosecutors can seek additional charges that tend to carry a longer sentence if a crime victim is targeted because of his or her race, religion, or ethnicity.

Researchers have found that hate crimes share characteristics that tend to differentiate them from other crimes:

- They are far more brutal than other assaults. Bias-crime victims are four times more likely to be hospitalized for their injuries than the victims of other assaults.
- They are most often committed by groups of four or more people. Researchers have found that many people who would not commit violent, bias-motivated acts by themselves express their hatred freely and violently in groups. Generally, the larger the group, the more vicious the crime.
- They are crimes of youth. Most perpetrators of bias-motivated crimes are in their teens or early twenties. Researchers believe that bias crimes are not acts of youthful rebellion, but rather violent expressions of feelings shared by families, friends, teachers, or communities.

- They tend to be motivated by love or defense of one's own group. Emotions bound to group identity are deep-seated and strong, especially when a person has suffered emotional neglect as a child.

Increasing Respect for Diversity—Reducing Intolerance

Many experts point out that young people sometimes engage in bias-motivated violence because they are ignorant or misinformed about the target group. Education and one-on-one interaction with members of the target group as individuals can help in such situations. It is easy to think of people in “our” racial, ethnic, religious, or other group as “us” and everyone else as “them.” From there, it is a small step to assuming “they” are not only different but inferior. Once this happens, people feel free of moral restraints against hate crimes, including murder. A process called dehumanization leads to violent expressions of hatred against members of certain groups. In dehumanizing another person or group, a person will

- focus on individual differences, such as skin color, in a negative manner
- refer to the target or group by a derogatory name
- stereotype by focusing on specific superficial characteristics (For example, all that might be noticed about a person is that he or she dresses differently from others or was seen coming out of a gay bar)
- justify or explain their attitudes by stating “they” are different.

One night in Wellesley, MA, a suburb west of Boston, some people painted racist graffiti on dozens of cars, homes, and shops. Among the things they wrote were “Whites Only” and “I hate niggers, chinks, and spics.”

A few days after the incident, police charged two 19-year-olds with 26 counts of malicious destruction of property and intimidating individuals based on their race.

In response to this, three Wellesley High School students decided to act. They organized a candlelight rally to protest racism, attended by nearly 1,000 people. The students also bought a full-page ad in the local newspaper to publicly condemn hate crimes. They then helped organize a day-long workshop at their school, bringing in experts to discuss the reasons for hate crimes.

One of the participants said that because of these hate crimes, she decided to change her behavior. “Sometimes people say or do things that offend me by way of offending other people. Before this I would not have said anything. Now I find that when people start telling racist jokes, I say, ‘Could you tell this another time when I’m not here—or could you just not tell them.’ I’m not so scared of offending people when they do those things.”

Because youth are the aggressors in much hate violence, any effort to combat it must include teens playing an integral role. It is important to help teens understand that intolerance for race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, or gender has a profound effect on the extent to which a person is fully included in American society. These biases affect individuals’

- opportunity to receive an education
- means to acquire necessary tools to maintain a good job
- access to adequate health care.

Helping teens understand diversity is a good place to start. This country's growth was founded on diversity—it was not just black and white. And the racial make-up of this country continues to change; by the year 2050, the population will be approximately 53 percent white, 25 percent Hispanic, 14 percent black, eight percent Asian Pacific, and one percent American Indian and Alaskan Native.² Diversity is differences among people in their attributes or characteristics. These differences can be things that are earned or acquired (like education or religion) or things that are innate (like race or gender). A group of people can be called diverse when it includes people of different ethnicities, religious backgrounds, sexual orientation, or physical attributes.

Work with teens to help them refute stereotypes. Have them consider the stereotypes that they hold about other groups of people, such as women, men, blacks, whites, Hispanics, Asians, seniors, Muslims, Christians, Jews, homosexuals, lesbians, people with disabilities, adults, and other teens. It may be extremely difficult for teens to verbalize their stereotypes. They may avoid conversations of race because they feel they will be ignorant on the topic. Help teens to examine when they have been on the receiving end of bias or discrimination. Discuss stereotypes that adults often hold toward teens. The point of getting teens to think about stereotypes is to show that while everyone may have prejudices, it is a choice whether or not to discriminate or translate stereotypes into action. This kind of open discussion about race will begin to help dispel stereotypes.

In New Jersey, a traveling team of teenagers called the Positive Impact Ensemble gives presentations at high schools throughout the state to illustrate the harm of prejudice and discrimination. A series of skits address prejudices against people with AIDS, homosexuals, people with physical disabilities, and religious and minority groups.

In order to create a climate of tolerance, teens need to take responsibility for their actions as individuals, make a concerted effort to reach out to those who are different, and get involved with the community to build diversity.

As individuals, teens can

- appreciate their own and others' cultural values
- object to ethnic, racist, and sexist jokes
- listen to others and not judge them because of their accents or because they are “different” from others
- learn from other people's experiences and ideas
- include people that don't look and act just like themselves in activities
- refrain from labeling people (e.g., she's a Jew, he's gay)
- support victims of hate crimes and their families
- write letters to the editor of local or school newspaper about talking about diversity in the community or school environment
- get involved in peer conflict mediation groups in school
- become a trained peer counselor for victims of bias-motivated violence
- learn how to respond to offensive comments.

Working with others, teens can continue to combat bias-violence and build diversity by

- starting or joining a bias-victim assistance group in their community

- helping to organize a neighborhood or community group that works to end hate violence in the community
- talking with schools or the school board to introduce or improve cross-cultural education and activities
- volunteering to teach younger kids how to be tolerant and to respect and learn from people who are different from themselves
- painting a mural to celebrate diversity, perhaps in response to bias-motivated graffiti
- organizing a poster, essay, or rap song contest on the theme of anti-racism, or friendship and respect for all individuals and groups
- arranging ethnic origins festivals at school or in the neighborhood and encouraging all groups to participate
- starting a “tip” line for bias-motivated incidents at school.

In California, the Youth Together Project joined human rights groups, teachers, school administrators, parents, and students to address the increasing racial and ethnic tensions among youth in schools. The project fosters cross-cultural understanding, establishes preventive programs designed by and for youth, and influences policy within participating school districts.

Since bias is a learned behavior, adult actions, attitudes, and remarks set the example for teens, friends, families, neighbors, and colleagues. As individuals, adults must speak out against hate activity and stop reinforcing the stereotypes created by using racial slurs and labels. A community effort to prevent crime must involve everyone, but special leadership can come from law enforcement; juvenile justice, social service and victim service agencies; local media; schools; businesses; community organizations; parents; and religious institutions that work together to create a climate of intolerance. Adults can bolster teens’ efforts by

- working with schools to improve cross-cultural relations and develop preschool curricula in which children learn about different cultures, ethnic groups, and lifestyles
- helping develop peer-based youth programs
- educating the community against bias-motivated hatred, suspicion, and violence
- reporting incidents of hate crimes to local law enforcement officials
- building a community-wide coalition against hate violence to discuss local trends and prevention strategies
- ensuring that those who work directly with teens such as teachers, school administrators, and law enforcement officers receive anti-bias and diversity training
- organizing public forums to examine possible sources of bigotry and hate violence in the community and brainstorm preventive actions
- supporting local and state hate crime legislation
- encouraging the media to develop an ongoing community anti-bias awareness campaign
- supporting training in identifying and responding to bias-motivated crime for police and sheriffs’ departments and victim service organizations
- working with the school system and parent-teacher organizations to enhance early childhood learning and strengthen teacher preparation and equity so that all students will receive equal education
- promoting the benefits of diversity in grades K-12 and higher education
- involving local colleges and universities in anti-hate crime/bias initiatives
- supporting victims of hate crimes and their families

- encouraging juvenile justice agencies to start offender intervention and diversion initiatives for hate crimes.

Faced with the mountain of data that indicated that juvenile hate crime was increasing, the Massachusetts Attorney General turned to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) New England Regional Office to help develop a program to provide sentencing options for first-time offenders and others whose crimes did not require incarceration. ADL professionals developed the Youth Diversion Program.

Program participants have all been convicted of civil rights violations, such as vandalizing an elementary school with white supremacist slogans, spray-painting swastikas on a house and synagogue, and making telephone death threats to a Jewish family. One of the first lessons the youthful offenders learn is that if they were not juveniles, they would be in jail.

The program uses videos, readings, group discussions, and field trips to educate youth about the seriousness of their offenses. A strong effort is made to closely tailor the program's content to match the offenses of the convicted youth. Since the program's inception in 1989, no participant has committed subsequent hate crimes.³

Resources

American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee
4201 Connecticut Avenue
Washington, DC 20008
202-244-2990
Web site: adc.org

American Jewish Committee
Jacob Blaustein Building
165 East 56th Street
New York, NY 10022
212-751-4000
Web site: ajc.org

Anti-Defamation League
823 United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017
212-490-2525
Web site: adl.org

Asian American Legal Defense & Education Fund
99 Hudson Street, 12th Floor
New York, NY 10013
212-966-5932

Bureau of Justice Assistance Clearinghouse
PO Box 6000
Rockville, MD 20849-6000
800-688-4252
Web site: ncjrs.org

Center for Democratic Renewal
PO Box 50469
Atlanta, GA 30302
404-221-0025
Web site: publiceye.org/pr.html

Center for New Community
6429 West North Avenue, Suite 101
Oak Park, IL 60302
703-848-0319
Web site: newcomm.org

**Federal Bureau of Investigation
Uniform Crime Reports**
J. Edgar Hoover Building
935 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, DC 20535-0001
202-324-3000
Web site: fbi.gov

National Council of Churches
475 Riverside Drive, Room 850
New York, NY 10115
212-870-3004
Web site: nccusa.org

National Crime Prevention Council
1700 K Street, NW, Second Floor
Washington, DC 20006-3817
202-466-6272
Web site: ncpc.org

National Criminal Justice Association
444 North Capitol Street, NW, Suite 618
Washington, DC 20001-1577
202-624-1440
Web site: sso.org/ncja/

References

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3. Anti-Defamation League, *Hate Crimes: ADL Blueprint For Action* (Washington, DC: Author, 1997), 13.



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