



Considerations for Classifying Hate Crime Offenders¹

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

The **Bias Incidents and Actors Study (BIAS)** is a multi-method project conducted by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), and funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice, that examines the characteristics, motivations, and behaviors of a sample of individuals who committed hate crimes in the United States from 1990–2018. The project includes a dataset of 689 violent and 277 non-violent hate crime offenders who were motivated by bias based on (1) race, ethnicity, and/or nationality; (2) religion; (3) sexual orientation, gender, or gender identity; (4) age; or (5) disability. Individuals included in the dataset were randomly selected from a pool of potential subjects who were reviewed according to the project's inclusion criteria and minimum information requirements. The dataset contains more than 100 variable fields with information on hate crime events, victim characteristics, and offender motivations, demographics, and personal histories.

ASSESSING A CLASSIC TYPOLOGY

In 1993, Jack Levin and Jack McDevitt, two influential criminologists based at Northeastern University, released what is still the best-known typology of hate crime offenders. Using police files from Boston between the years of 1990 and 1992, the authors generated a schema that differentiated hate crime offenders according to three distinct motivations: mission offenders, defensive offenders, and thrill offenders.

Classic Types of Offenders	
Mission	Motivated by a singular goal to eliminate an entire community or population of people.
Defensive	Reacting to social or demographic changes in their communities.
Thrill	Driven by a need for excitement or fun, while expressing bias.

For each classification, the authors identified distinct types of attacks, described offender profiles, and suggested relative levels of culpability. This work generated broad insight into the types of hate crimes and has been widely used by law enforcement to identify and counter threats within communities. However, nearly 30 years later, little empirical work has been conducted to verify the typology. Using the BIAS data, START used a national sample to assess the efficacy of Levin and McDevitt's typology in capturing the distinctive characteristics of hate crime offenders.

Disclaimer: The BIAS project is not focused on recent trends. Rather, its focus is identifying the enduring characteristics of hate crime in the U.S. As such, the typology includes nearly 30 years-worth of data. This publication is intended to strengthen the understanding of the commonly used hate crime offender typology developed by Levin and McDevitt.

A MODIFIED TYPOLOGY OF HATE CRIME OFFENDERS

START research found substantial support for the essential components of Levin and McDevitt's typology.

MISSION "Mission" offenders were generally older (median age of 31), ideologically committed, and used deadly tactics. However, in contrast to Levin and McDevitt's findings, BIAS data found that mission offenders were more likely to act with others (57.2 percent) and to have prior criminal histories (71.8 percent).

Characteristics of Mission Offenders		
Older	Act with Others	Have Prior Criminal History
Ideologically Committed		
Use Deadly Tactics		

¹ The term "offender" is used in the original typology produced by Levin and McDevitt.

DEFENSIVE

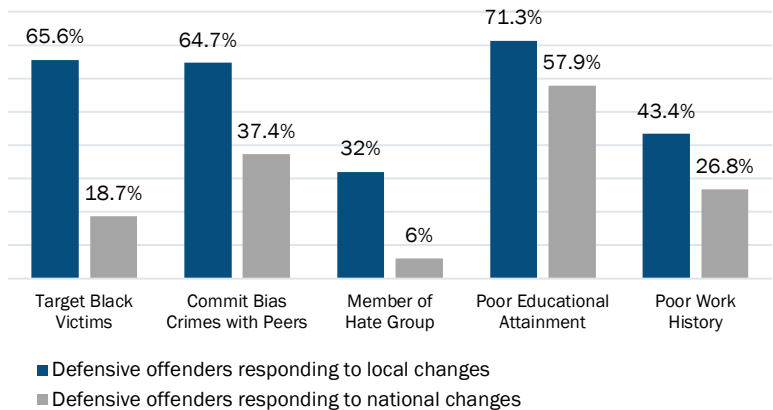
The characteristics of “defensive” offenders varied considerably depending on whether the subjects were responding to changes in their local communities or dynamics at the national level.

Defensive offenders responding to local changes were more likely than offenders with more distant anxieties to:

- target Black victims
- commit hate crimes with peers
- be members of hate groups
- have poor educational or employment records

They also tended to be young (median age of 26 versus 30) and were much more likely to have had prior relationships with their victims (27.2 percent versus 3.3 percent).

Conversely, defensive offenders reacting to national changes or broader political discourse were more likely to target Muslim or Arab victims (58.2 percent versus 5.4 percent) and have documented mental health concerns (27.5 percent versus 14.3 percent).



THRILL

START findings were generally consistent with the original conceptualization of “thrill” offenders, who were the youngest (median age 26) offenders in the data and the most likely to act with others (78.4 percent). Thrill offenders were most likely to target LGBTQ victims, who

made up 23 percent of their targets. This is consistent with Levin and McDevitt’s suggestion that young men seeking to define themselves among peers may hope to bolster their reputations by targeting LGBTQ victims.

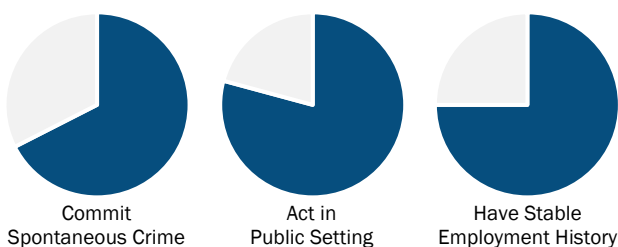
However, START found several areas where the typology did not fully capture the complexity of hate crimes or hate crime offenders in the United States.

A distinct type of hate crime offender emerged: escalation.

START found a substantial number of incidents in which offenders escalated prior to non-bias disputes. This is an important type of spontaneous hate crime. While a minority of these incidents can be classified as another offender type (especially defensive offenders), the majority had no discernable typological motivation, suggesting that these types of offenders were involved in a distinct type of hate crime. Escalation offenders are those who accelerate an initial non-bias dispute, such as an argument over a parking spot, by expressing prejudice based on the other party’s identity characteristics. This could involve using racial or other slurs during the disagreement. This often causes simple disagreements to escalate to violent confrontations.

The offenders in BIAS who had “escalated non-bias disputes” were distinct from mission, defensive, and thrill offenders in several respects. They:

- committed spontaneous crimes at the highest rate in the database (67.5 percent) and were the most likely to act in public settings (79.2 percent).
- had relatively high rates of prior relationships with their victims (29.9 percent) and they were often under the influence of drugs or alcohol when they offended (45.5 percent).
- had fewer risk characteristics than mission, defensive, or thrill offenders.
- had, on average, stable work backgrounds (75 percent).
- had the lowest rates of documented or suspected mental illness (6.5 percent) of all offenders in BIAS.



HATE CRIME OFFENDER TYPOLOGY**

Modified/Expanded Categories

	Mission	Defensive (Proximate)	Defensive (Distant)	Thrill	Escalation
Definition	Perpetrator motivated by a goal to “eliminate” an entire community or population of people.	Perpetrator acting in response to a perceived threat to themselves or their local community.	Perpetrator acting in response to a perceived threat to a more distant community, such as their nation or race, without a more proximate threat.	Perpetrator seeking “fun,” “excitement,” and/or peer approval.	Perpetrator who escalates a non-bias dispute while expressing prejudice.
Example Characteristics/Motivation Details	Mass casualty attackers; those trying to initiate a “race war”; dedicated hate group members.	Offenders reacting to racial integration in their neighborhoods or minority advances in their workplace.	Offenders reacting to national demographic changes or broad political discourse; targets victims outside of their immediate community.	Group of youth target LGBTQ victims for “excitement”; offender commits crime to earn hate group membership.	Perpetrator attacks victim using racial epithets after traffic incident.
Average Offender Profile	Older; ideologically committed or hate group member; previous criminal history; poor work history; high probability of mental health concerns.	Younger; low educational achievements; acts with peers or hate group members.	Older; acts alone, stably employed; higher probability of mental health or substance abuse concerns; higher probability of acting spontaneously.	Young; acts with peers; previous criminal history; low educational achievements.	Older; acts spontaneously while under the influence of drugs or alcohol; stably employed.

**Modified from the original typology as described by Levin and McDevitt (1993, 2002). Although START was unable to classify a significant percentage of BIAS offenders according to the existing typology (38.9 percent), START attributes this to strict coding requirements that typically relied on explicit expressions of motivation from the offender (either in the course of the event, on social media, as reported by people familiar with the offender, or published accounts made to law enforcement or court authorities). In the majority of unclassified cases, public statements to that effect were unavailable.

IMPLICATIONS

Many findings from Levin and McDevitt’s original typology continue to guide policymakers and criminal justice officials today. Although hate crime offenders are defined by their expressed bias toward others, this research shows that attachment to prejudice likely differs among offender types, that bias-motivated attacks are frequently triggered by distinct types of events and interactions, and that attacks differ by tactic, target population, and perpetrator characteristics.

Practitioners should expect defensive hate crimes as neighborhood demographics change and in response to broader national changes and dialogues.

By dividing defensive offenders between those reacting to perceived distant and proximate threats, START updated McDevitt and Levin’s typology to better capture perpetrator motivations in a time of polarized mass media and political culture. Rather than reacting directly to specific neighborhood changes, hate crime offenders also react to large-scale societal transformations or the perception thereof (Levin & Reichelmann, 2015). This has critical implications for identifying perpetrators and anticipating the occurrence of hate crimes.

- While Levin and McDevitt suggest that practitioners should expect defensive hate crimes to occur as neighborhood demographics change, START analysis shows they should also expect hate crimes to occur in response to broader national changes and dialogues (see also Levin & Reichelmann, 2015).
- While Levin and McDevitt state that such crimes will be perpetrated by offenders in their own neighborhoods, START findings suggest that perpetrators reacting to more distant threats might travel to locate victims in other cities or states.
- By adding an “escalation” category, START demonstrates that a substantial number of hate crimes occur in unpredictable circumstances. These findings suggest that a wide range of individuals might become involved in hate crimes, including relatively stable and well-integrated members of society, as well as those who are less socially bonded to their communities, such as hate group members.

SOURCES CITED

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Phillips, N. D. "The Prosecution of Hate Crimes: The Limitations of the Hate Crime Typology." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 24(5), 2009, 883–905.

MORE INFORMATION ABOUT BIAS

The subjects in BIAS were identified through a review of more than 35,000 news articles on hate crimes in the U.S. since 1990, as well as searches of court records and other publicly available information. To have been included in the dataset, individuals must have met all of the following inclusion criteria:

1. The subject was arrested or indicted for committing a criminal offense in the United States from 1990–2018;
2. The subject was 18 years of age or older at the time of engaging in the criminal act;
3. The subject was residing in the United States at the time of engaging in the criminal act;
4. Substantial evidence suggests that the subject committed or escalated the criminal act because of bias against the victim or target's real or perceived identity characteristics (e.g., race, nationality, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, etc.);
5. Sufficient open-source information was available regarding the subject to enter the relevant details of their crimes and, at a minimum, the majority of their demographic traits into the database.

Given the nature of source deterioration and news coverage over time, the BIAS data over-represents incidents from the second decade of the 2000s and high-publicity attacks, which are often violent and involve the most explicit expressions of prejudice. BIAS was not designed as a comprehensive accounting study of all hate crime activity in the United States. Users interested in aggregate hate crime trends should consult data sources that are designed to capture such metrics, like those generated by the [FBI's Hate Crime Statistics Program](#).

www.start.umd.edu/bias

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ABOUT START

START ►► The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) is a university-based research, education, and training center comprised of an international network of scholars committed to the scientific study of terrorism, responses to terrorism, and related phenomena. Led by the University of Maryland, START is a Department of Homeland Security Emeritus Center of Excellence that is supported by multiple federal agencies and departments. START uses state-of-the-art theories, methods, and data from the social and behavioral sciences to improve understanding of the origins, dynamics, and effects of terrorism; the effectiveness and impacts of counterterrorism and CVE; and other matters of global and national security. For more information, visit www.start.umd.edu or contact START at infostart@umd.edu.

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