Brexit and the Rise in Hate Crimes

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Evidence shows that hate crime surged in the UK in the following weeks after the EU Referendum vote, and still remains at significantly higher levels. For example, reports of hate crimes have risen 58% in the aftermath of this vote, according to the National Police Chiefs' Council. The police have suggested that some people had taken the 'leave' vote as a 'licence' to behave in a racist or discriminatory way. For example, in August 2016, six teenage boys were arrested in Harlow, Essex, after Polish immigrant Arkadiusz Jóźwik died following a brutal street attack which his brother said began after he was heard speaking Polish in the street. The decision to leave the EU in some cases emboldened people to express their feelings of hate and 'legitimised' the prejudice that they had by empowering them to express and verbalise those feelings. According to the British Social Attitudes survey in 2013 over 56% people wanted immigration to be 'reduced a lot' and the Transatlantic Trends (2014) survey found similar concerns, which people had about the levels of immigration from within and outside the EU.

Drawing on data from qualitative interviews with 20 (non-Muslim) men based in the United Kingdom, we examined their lived experiences of Islamophobic hate crime. Our findings showed that participants experienced Islamophobic hate crime because of 'trigger' events namely the Brexit vote, Donald Trump's election as well as ISIS-inspired terrorist attacks in European countries such as France, Germany, Sweden and UK. Participants described being verbally and physically attacked, threatened and harassed as well as their property being damaged. These incidents usually happened in public spaces, on trains, buses, shopping centres as well as workplace – often when other people were there yet did not intervene. The impacts upon victims included physical, emotional, psychological, and economic damage. These experiences were also damaging to community cohesion and led to polarisation between different communities in the UK.

Islamophobic hate crimes have increased significantly both in Europe and in the West following the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the US

(OSCE, 2016). As numerous academics have argued in detail, since 9/11, a particular anxiety towards Muslim 'others' has led to suspicion and outright hostility towards Muslims in the West. Following the attacks on 7/7 and those in Woolwich and Westminster in the UK these anxieties intensified. Muslims in the UK faced significantly heightened levels of religious and racial hatred, manifested as hate crimes and incidents. More recently, the rhetoric surrounding Donald Trump's election, Brexit, and the rise of far right groups throughout Europe have promoted white supremacist ideologies, identities, movements and practices around the world. This resurgent white supremacy is real and violent: in the weeks following both the Brexit vote and Trump's win, hate crimes increased to a level not seen since 9/11's aftermath.

Increasingly, Islamophobia through forms of racialisation has led to 'Muslim-looking' individuals also being the victims of this type of hate crime. Therefore, someone who may have a similar disposition to a Muslim (for example, through appearance, ethnicity or race) is more likely to be seen as an 'ideal' target for hate crimes. As our study shows, this can also include people who come from an Atheist, Christian background and of Jewish heritage. In America, the effects of racialisation and people being targeted for their 'Muslim-looking' appearance is not new. Whilst reported incidents of Hindus, Arab Christians and Latinos being targeted is well-documented, the rise in Islamophobic hate crimes amongst American Sikh men who have continued to be victimised because of the similarities between the Turban and the Muslim Cap is growing.

In the UK, through the lens of a political and cultural threat, those communities who are mistaken for Muslims face a spike in hate crimes following 'trigger' events such as ISIS-inspired terrorist attacks. For example, in 2015, Zack Davies was sentenced for life after he attacked Dr Sarandev Bhambra with a claw hammer and a 30cm-long machete. The attack according to Davies, was for "Lee Rigby" – the British soldier murdered by Islamist extremists in 2013. The fact that Bhambra was not Muslim is significant. This is because, he was only targeted because of his perceived identity of being someone of a Muslim appearance. Bhambra's brother said in a statement: "Sarandev was singled out because of the colour of his skin."

Hate Crime Post Brexit

Hate crime is a social construct, which is culturally and historically situated. This is evident by the fact that there are different legal definitions across countries and jurisdictions. Understanding the prevalence of hate crime (and the development of appropriate responses to its occurrence) depends on 'how hate crime is conceptualized and defined'. By and large, the consensus view tends to be that hate crimes are motivated by the offender's bias, prejudice and/or 'hate' towards the victim's identity. In the British context, legislation is centred around the five monitored strands of identity, namely: disability, race, religion, sexual orientation and transgender status.

Hate crimes may also be driven by bias, prejudice, or 'negative feelings held by the offender towards a social group that, in their eyes, have an outsider status. A key element of hate crime is that offenders target potential victims because of their membership of despised 'out-groups'. Implicit in this argument is that these are 'stranger danger' offences, in which the perpetrator selects the victim not because of who they are as an individual but rather because they are part of a despised 'out-group' in the eyes of the aggressor. Official data on hate crime only capture the "tip of the iceberg", significantly underrepresenting actual levels of hate crime across communities.

In a globally connected world, the impact of Brexit, can lead to counter-reactions against all types of people. This form of hate is amplified by the rising trend of individuals being targeted post Brexit for their visible identity and view that they are the 'other' or 'out-group' and thus should be targeted and treated as victims.