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Increased Hate Speech and Bias-Based Bullying in A Sample of University Students

Elizabeth Englander* and Brian Kretschmar*Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center, Bridgewater State University, USA*

***Corresponding author:** Elizabeth Englander, Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center, Bridgewater State University, USA.

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Opinion

Following years of declining activity, 2016 marked the beginning of increases in hate group activity and hate crimes across the United States and Europe. According to the FBI, in 2018, anti-Semitic homicides rose to their highest level ever, and anti-Sikh attacks tripled. Antitransgender hate crimes rose 34%. African Americans were the most targeted group. It is no longer vanishingly unlikely that a physician, educator, or other caretaker may encounter a child or adolescent with some involvement with hate speech or a hate group, as either a target or a potential recruit. Being aware of how involvement might take place, and the psychological consequences of such involvement and the relationship with other behavioral disorders, can be crucial in addressing this issue effectively within a productive therapeutic or educational relationship.

Increases in hate speech and bias have been noted in children and teens, as well as in adults. Adolescents, especially those who are socially vulnerable and uncertain about issues like identity, may be natural targets for online hate groups that “spoon-feed” them a list of people to blame, along with a supportive “community” and (for boys) a validation of their masculinity. The FBI measured a 25% increase in hate speech in K-12 schools in 2016, and a second, similar, increase in 2017. The vast majority of these were single-bias incidents, most commonly focusing on the target’s race/ethnicity/ancestry, religion, or sexual orientation. Consistent with these national numbers is a study of University students from Massachusetts, in which dramatic increases in prejudiced motivations for bullying and conflict between children were noted.

Between 2014 and 2019, as part of an ongoing cross-sectional study reported elsewhere, researchers at the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State University

recruited approximately 600 subjects each year to take a confidential survey about their bullying experiences during high school and college. All subjects were recruited through the University’s Subject Pool, primarily during the summer and fall of each year, and the majority were undergraduate Freshman. As part of that survey, subjects were asked about the perceived motivations of the “bully” who targeted them. Reported motivations were classified as either “not bias-based” (for example, if someone reported being targeted because they were dating the aggressor’s ex-boyfriend); “bias-based” (for example, if a subject was targeted due to their race); or “possibly bias-based” (for example, if a subject reported being targeted for unclear reasons which might or might not involve bias, such as “because of the way I looked”). The results of this cross-sectional study suggested, consistent with the FBI’s findings, a dramatic increase in bias-based bullying occurring between youth. In 2014 and 2015, approximately one-third of the incidences reported involved “bias” motivations (race, ethnic identity, religion, sexual orientation, immigrant status); but by 2019, that proportion had increased to 49%. Both “possible” bias-based incidents and non-bias-based incidents had decreased over the same time. The first notable increase in bias-based incidents was seen in the 2016 data in which incidents increased to 39.6%, from 34.5% in 2015. The upward trend continued through 2019.

Further, a new qualitative study of the mechanisms hates groups use to recruit youth was conducted in the winter and spring of 2020, again at the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center. Several mechanisms were detailed, including:

- 1) Advertisements aimed at recruiting youth, posted on sites such as YouTube, during media that adults were very unlikely

to see, such as during videos of players engaging in first-person shooter games.

2) Terms being used and misinterpreted as alt right: Snowflakes and Triggered are examples of words used.

3) Memes and images to recast persons such as Hitler as positive; for example: An image of Hitler getting a tip from a man about the invasion of Normandy, used to promote the holocaust as a positive source of information.

4) Online webpage group chats, forums, and threads including 4chan and 8chan, where people can express their opinions without any restraint and use them to persuade others. For example, online posts were found that glorified protests, such as the Neo-Nazi protest in Charlottesville NC and in the general glorification of radicalization.

5) On Google, some examples of disreputable online sources on some webpages were found; and

6) In chat rooms and gaming forums that cater to youth on the Autism spectrum, hate groups were reported to use opportunities to create friendships and build trust on these

pages.

Activity often appeared to be designed to circumvent any adult supervision (e.g., ads on gaming videos, which adults often don't view). Youth who may be particularly vulnerable may be often targeted (e.g., children or teens on the spectrum).

The change in bias and prejudice among youth has been well documented, although its longevity has not yet been established. Regardless, educators, physicians and other caregivers of children and adolescents need to be hypersensitive to attitudes and behaviors that suggest vulnerability to hate speech, either as an aggressor or as a target of bullying or fighting. Adults also need to discuss with youth both the obvious and the more covert methods used by online hate groups to recruit online youth. Adults who work with children need to be aware of these activities to protect every child's interests and mental health.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.