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CONTRIBUTE TO RAISING AWARENESS IN A COMMUNITY

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Although society endeavors to improve the living conditions of different marginalized communities, hate crimes persist as constant problems that underlie broader social issues of power imbalances and marginalization. The criminal justice system requires major reform to ensure that resources are distributed with equity among the vulnerable populations to receive the support of law enforcement. However, certain states face significant problems of hate crime underreporting, which requires changing state policies in accordance with community needs. An examination of hate crime underreporting in Wyoming illustrates the lack of confidence in the police and the presence of distrust that prevents individuals from reporting such crimes. However, a comprehensive change that includes revised police training and a distinctly outlined hate crime policy complemented by police-community engagement would improve the situation.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Whereas several states, such as California, witness surges in hate crimes, other states do not report similar trends. When law enforcement recognizes that the rates of hate crimes elevate, this problem draws the public's attention. It potentially incites decision-makers to act to positively influence the situation and change the status quo. On the contrary, the underreporting of hate crimes leads to the misrepresentation of the problem and potentially reflects the profound mistrust people experience toward the police and other governmental institutions. Wyoming is a state with a deeply rooted philosophy of conservatism that prevents vulnerable individuals and communities from seeking the help and support that they require (Davis & O'Neill, 2016). Davis and O'Neill (2016) mention that Wyoming reported only four hate crimes in one year and clarified that low numbers of such crime reporting signify the lack of acknowledgment hinders stakeholders from achieving justice.

As the mentioned Wyoming statistics come from a rather outdated source, it is useful to analyze how the situation has changed over the past several years. For example, the U.S. Department of Justice (2020) used the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to identify that 17 crimes against persons were committed in Wyoming, with the motivation being mostly related to race, ethnicity, or ancestry, while other hate crimes were related to religion, sexual orientation, gender, and gender identity. Although more hate crimes were reported in the state in 2020 than in 2016, the number remains significantly small, pointing to a reporting gap that occurs due to the actions of both the police and the victims.

Wyoming has gained a negative reputation as a state where a cruel crime was perpetrated against a gay student in 1998. Although much time has passed, many LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) individuals feel unsafe due to anti-trans bills and discrimination (Camdessus, 2022). Liberal-leaning stakeholders put effort into promoting activism in Wyoming in pride parades and other activities; however, the state has many more changes to overcome. Addressing the hate crime underreporting must become one of the priorities for practitioners and policy-makers as the mistrust toward law enforcement harms communities and the police, who should protect people from discrimination and unfair treatment.

Therefore, the chief concerns and complaints about hate crimes in Wyoming are associated with their underreporting. Pezzella et al. (2019) emphasize that this problem is evident from the comparison of data from different sources; for example, the UCR included a nationwide average of 8,770 incidents in 2004-2012, while the National Crime Victimization Survey revealed a nationwide average of 269,000 incidents in the same period. This statistical discrepancy reveals the underreporting of hate crimes. As a major public concern, the issue might cause more bullying and violent behavior targeted at people from diverse groups.

POLICY REFORM RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy reform recommendations are based on the necessity for people living in Wyoming to understand the antecedents of the problem and accept the proposed solutions.

As mentioned earlier, the state gained a negative reputation due to the murder of a gay college student; this case likely dissuaded many individuals from expressing their identities. In particular, Matthew Shepard was kidnapped, driven to a secluded area, beaten, and left to die due to his sexual orientation (Camdessus, 2022). Although the perpetrators were arrested, convicted, and incarcerated, the crime demonstrated that the lack of controls and preventative measures allowed this crime to occur. Hate crimes directed at people of different races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, genders, and gender identities should be prevented to avoid deadly violence. Shepard's murder occurred in the political and social context when the public was particularly against HIV-positive individuals, associating them with the LGBT community only (Sikk & Meyer, 2019). This revelation demonstrates that the history of homophobia and violence against gay people created a foundation for further injustices, including the hate crime gap.

The proposed policy reform should include a comprehensive approach combining the reimagining of justice-informed training and the community action that unites the efforts of police officers and public members to overcome the divide about hate crimes. The strategies and methods adopted should consider the reasons for underreporting to resolve this problem. Specifically, Pezzella et al. (2019) unveil that victims of hate crimes often view the police as illegitimate, which leads them to have no confidence in law enforcement and to make disclosures to other officials. The research results accentuate the mistrust people experience toward law enforcement since they consider the police inefficient in handling hate crimes.

The policy reform recommendation dwells on the necessity to change and improve law enforcement training. Training may be insufficient to contribute to positive change; however, it remains a crucial component that provides officers with guidance to identify crimes motivated by biases related to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other diverse identities. The FBI and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) have developed training opportunities that help state and local law enforcement institutions to improve officers' awareness of the context and related factors predetermining hate-motivated crimes (Pezzella et al., 2019). Such improvement endeavors are paramount, as Lantz et al. (2019) explain, that inadequate police training prevents officers from understanding the full scope of hate-motivated violence since ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, and gender identity are highly diverse in different cultural realities. For this reason, the policy reform should include revising current training practices. Wyoming law enforcement officers should acquire new information that would prepare them to detect hate-motivated crimes.

The training should also take a personalized approach for officers to identify their prejudices and biases that must not become a reason for them to avoid labeling a crime as a hate crime since biased policing is a problem affecting the reporting of such cases (Lantz et al., 2019; Murphy et al., 2018). As training would help officers identify their limitations and mitigate the subsequent damages of biased thinking, alternative courses of action should also be embraced. The approach to eliminating prejudice from the police's service should be based on the written hate crime policy (Pezzella & Fetzer, 2021). The development of such a document offers stakeholders a guide to dealing with correct crime identification.

Furthermore, the policy reform would create an alternative course of action by creating prerequisites that improve opportunities for communities to mobilize and act. Community action should be supported by cooperation with law enforcement as this strategy will decrease the mistrust of people toward police officers. The combined efforts from law enforcement officers and community members would strengthen the attempts to close the hate crime reporting gap. Nguyen (2019) warns against instrumentalizing social workers, educators, and healthcare workers as the continuation of law enforcement's power prejudiced against people belonging to minority groups. With this idea in mind, community action projects should contribute to the development of initiatives that unite police officers and regular citizens to discuss issues related to hate crimes. Community and police relationships should become symbiotic by creating opportunities for forging the trust necessary for hate crime reporting (Pezzella & Fetzer, 2021). The creation of informational campaigns on social media could improve by raising awareness and demonstrating that law enforcement has accepted the necessity to identify biased crimes.

MAJOR IMPLICATIONS

The identified course of action has major implications for the community and law enforcement. The combination of revised training programs and community-police cooperation may change the status quo in Wyoming related to hate crimes, especially their underreporting. Changes to the status quo are important as the current situation promotes the inequities observed in the accessibility of the criminal justice system, including the inequitable distribution of resources associated with addressing crimes (Lantz & Wenger, 2022). The comprehensive approach to changing the underreporting situation would help two major stakeholder groups. On the one hand, police officers would improve their service by becoming more considerate of the community's needs. Law enforcement would receive vast information for prejudice detection and mitigation. At the same time, a written policy reform on hate crimes would guarantee the clarity of definition and crime identification standards. On the other hand, the proposed policy reform would give the public more confidence in the police departments in the state. Particularly, police-community cooperation projects would forge understanding and open communication that may encourage victims to report state crimes.

These major implications have significance specifically for the case of Wyoming. As the state has a low percentage of hate crimes reported, it is anticipated that the community will experience an improvement in the confidence people feel about law enforcement. Revised training, a written hate crime policy, and police-community cooperation may solve problems in the community by encouraging victims to report hate crimes and prompting law enforcement officers to label these crimes as such in their respective reports. This change may become a paradigmatic shift for people in Wyoming to start viewing hate crimes as a serious issue that must be reported. It will also enable the police officers in the state to realize the importance of improving the credibility of their agencies to ensure victims and witnesses have confidence in the police, which motivates them to report hate crimes. Ultimately, such a change will likely improve the presence and treatment of social problems. As many people from minority groups feel unsafe in modern society, the state's strong position on the unacceptable nature of hate crimes would contribute to the feelings of safety and confidence among the different marginalized individuals.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the tendency to underreport hate crimes by victims or police officers signals that the state of Wyoming must change its approach to the controversial topic. The lack of trust and confidence in law enforcement should be addressed with the help of a multidimensional policy change plan. It should embrace the need for revised training for officers to recognize their biases and learn to identify hate crimes. Another component of this plan is a written hate crime document; as the last step in this pursuit, police and community engagement would improve the current mistrustful relationships and change the treatment of hate crimes while eliminating social disparities.

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