

**Neo-Nazis, Skinheads, and the KKK:
Examining the Social and Economic Determinants of Hate Groups**

By Todd Petersen

April 19, 2002

Introduction

When tragedy strikes, it is easy to point fingers at those that are different than us. Although the events of September 11th have brought to light various issues of prejudice and hatred, in this case, against people of Middle Eastern descent, the problem of hatred is a worldwide presence that has been around for centuries. In the United States this is no different, as various hate groups in America have been in existence since its inception. The economic well being of the country is one ingredient that has an influence on the participation of hate groups, especially in conjunction with other sociological and environmental factors. While some statistics seem to indicate the number of hate crimes appears to be in decline, there is evidence that the actual activity of hate groups and their presence is increasing.

The rise in hate group activity is a result of several factors: the consolidation of hate groups; the increase in hate web sites; and more sophisticated recruitment of members mainly youth [1]. William Pierce, leader of the neo-Nazi National Alliance, said this past November "the rise in membership numbers that began two years ago continues and a recession next year should cause membership to rise even more rapidly"[8]. In recent years, there has been a steady increase in the number of hate groups operating in the United States as well as an increase in their actions. The Intelligence Report by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) reported an increase of 57 more hate groups from what was previously reported the year before; this is an increase of about 12.4%, in the number of recognized hate groups [8]. Although part of these increases might be due to a refinement in the way the hate groups are recognized, there have to be other factors contributing to this rise in hate.

The purpose of this analysis is to identify characteristic variables that are significant within states that have a significantly high number of hate groups. By studying several measurable, factors and characteristics it will be possible to identify characteristics that are not immutable and have to potential to be changed through policies, education and legislation. In conjunction with current laws aimed at deterring hateful and discriminative activities, other non-direct policy measure can be put into effect to treat the problem of hate resident within particularly troublesome communities.

Background

A problem inherent in studying hate groups is that most of the data and information that is gathered is targeted around the reporting of individual occurrences of hate crimes and the not the groups and organizations that are in existence around the country. The reporting of these crimes is inconsistent from state to state and the data itself is not representative of the number of biased crimes committed. It is a much tougher task to produce a meaningful measure of the amount of crimes that are bias-based than having an accurate figure for the number of operating hate groups within the country. While the rise of the Internet has made it harder to quantify the actual number of hate groups and individuals spreading the dogma through websites, there is still much valuable information to be learned from the analysis of the situational factors where hate groups are present.

The Hate Crime Statistics Act of 1990, passed in an effort to gain insight into the problem of hate groups in America, has proved ineffective in its goal to accurately collect hate crime statistics. The process by which the FBI collects and reports hate crimes

under the federal Hate Crime Statistics Act is marred with many problems and the national effort to document hate-motivated crime is in shambles [9]. The figures that are compiled by each state and then submitted to the FBI are basically meaningless because of numerous problems within the system. The reporting of hate crimes under the federal hate crime act is voluntary. Alabama for example, “has not reported a hate crime for years including 1999, the year when Billy Jack Gaither was savagely beaten to death and his body set afire in a notorious anti-gay murder in the town of Sylacauga” [9]. Even when the police within a state file a report, the information is often not handled properly. “Based on a survey of 2,657 law enforcement agencies, the study estimated that some 37% of agencies that did not submit reports nevertheless had at least one hate crime. In addition, about 31% of the agencies with reports of zero hate crimes did, in fact, have at least one” [9]. Some of this failure to report hate crimes may come about as a result of political influence to reduce the severity of the problem and make the public seem better off.

One of the main problems with the reporting of hate crimes is the nature of the task at hand. It is often difficult to be able to derive the motive of all crimes that are committed and determine which were motivated by hate. These factors come from several sources: “a lack of training in recognizing hate crimes, the false belief that relatively minor crimes need not be reported to the FBI, an over-eagerness to write off the bias aspect of criminal incidents, to outright opposition to the very notion of hate crimes” as put by one police officer, “I mean, you don’t shoot people because you love them” [9]. Some have said that it is the job of the prosecutor not the police to determine the motive behind a crime.

The basic purpose of the reporting of hate crimes is to formulate an understanding of the problems that precipitate these crimes and counteract these influences. It is impossible to determine which hate crimes have been increasing and in which locations these crimes have been more prevalent. As a result, this information is not an accurate source of information from which to draw conclusions as to how to combat hate. In contrast, the Southern Poverty Law Center's (SPLC) recording of hate groups within the United States portrays a more accurate description of hateful activity within the country. Organizations that are known to be active, whether that activity included marches, rallies, speeches, meeting, leafleting, publishing literature, or criminal acts, were counted in the listing. Groups that appear to exist only in cyberspace are not included because they are likely to be only individual web publishers who like to portray themselves as large organized groups [7]. Although there is still some interpretation into what is considered a hate group, there is less of a gray area measuring the number of hate groups than the number of hate crimes. In addition to this, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) measures hate groups throughout the United States based upon the same criteria as apposed to the reporting of hate crimes which differs from state to state.

Past Research

Much of the research conducted on the problem of hate, has focused on using the number of hate crimes as the method of measuring the problem of hate. It has also focused primarily on the sociological and psychological factors that are involved with existence and participation within hate groups than their economic determinants. There is certainly not one root cause of this problem; the economic factors coupled with other

sociological and psychological predispositions contribute and explain the existence of hate groups in America. It is impossible to put a number on the number of individual people who hold racist beliefs, and frankly it is hard to put a stop to the persistence of hate crimes other than attempting to educate the public. An effective way to study the prevalence of hate crimes is to investigate and analyze the different trends that exist within communities in which hate groups are founded. “If special economic conditions are related to the location of these groups, it might be possible to discourage their formation or continuation by means of special types of regional economic policies” [3].

Phillip Jefferson and Frederic Pryor argue that the “sociological or economic explanations for the existence of hate groups in an area are far less important than adventitious circumstances due to history and particular conditions”[3]. Nevertheless, there are certainly factors apart from a location’s history that contributes to the existence of a hate group. The data deserves another look to determine all of the factors that contribute to the subsistence of hate groups.

In contrast, Green, Strolovitch, and Wong, considers the changing racial composition of various areas in New York City as the determinate of the hate crimes. They concluded that a community that is predominately white engages in hate crimes when there is an influx of non-white people. When this amount reaches a certain level, at which the comfort level of the dominant group is exceeded, they engage in hateful activity. The study focused on the major problem of hate crimes committed by whites, but it didn’t really have much to offer towards hate crimes that exist between minorities or against whites. It also provides a generalization for the reasons underlying why hateful activity might occur as a result of population migration and offers little insight

into solutions to the problem because population migration is natural and unavoidable [2].

Theories on Hate Groups

Hate groups are composed of individuals, who choose based upon their beliefs and values, to engage in hateful activities. It is their rational choice to spend their time participating in hate groups and not in alternative activities. While there are still prevailing factors that are prevalent attitudes within various regions of the country, these are just a few factors that influence the decision-making preferences of individuals. The theories behind many of the potential causes of hate groups seem very plausible, but the difficulty lies in how to measure these bases, their interaction with each other, and the other intangible factors. One way to try to understand the quandary is by looking at the situation from the perspective that people are a product of their environment. Hate groups may be a by-product of the history and the geography of the state to which they are located, the education of the population, the ability of the population to find employment, societal status issues, and the social disintegration of the population [3].

Strain theory, on the other hand, proposes that each person makes choices to improve their overall welfare. Various factors cause an individual to experience a “disjunction between goals and legitimate opportunities or between aspirations and expectations [that] can take the form of economic blockage” [1]. In a 7-year ethnographic study, Randy Blazak derived several factors that members of skinhead groups had experienced various threats to their economic status, racial status, gender

status, and heterosexual status. Skinhead recruiters target schools where some of these factors are prevalent are targets for recruitment by these types of hate groups [1].

One of the major resources that can be studied to gain insight into the problem of hate groups is by studying the members of the hate groups themselves to understand their predispositions and their traits that might be reasons they had joined the gang. Hate groups are fundamentally gangs whose central beliefs and participation revolve around their dogma of hate. The National Gang Crime Research Center conducted research by interviewing gang members to extract some factors which are significant in gang members. There were several trends that were of notice through the research that was conducted. “The mean, or average, age at time of first joining a gang was 12.7 years of age for this national sample”[6]. Almost half of the 4000 gang members surveyed had been in the gang by the time they were 12 and over 75% were members of the gang by age 14.

Every individual makes choices in what activities to engage depending on what they value to be an efficient use of their time. Members of hate groups choose to participate in a hateful activities rather than finding another use of their time. The rational choice model assumes that each individual makes decisions to use their time in a way that maximizes their well-being in whatever way they see maximizes their utility. Because there are constraints on an individuals actions through the amount of time they have and the opportunities available to them, there are tradeoffs that they must consider. Decisions to engage in hateful activity and participate in hate groups also a choice not to engage in other so-called productive activities. The more costly it is to engage in hateful activity, the less people will choose to “consume” of it. Increases in the market wage,

influenced by factors such as education, unemployment rates, age have effects on an individuals consumption patterns and therefore on their participation in hate groups.

There are numerous factors which play a role in an individual's decision to participation in a hate group and subsequently that determine how hate groups are established and survive. "The existence of a hate group in a community may reflect an extreme level of intolerance only particular members of the community. Perhaps, only when some critical level of intolerance is reached does an organized effort to hate become viable"[3]. Although there are a lot of factors that aren't quantifiable, by analyzing the trends that exist in states that have a high ratio of hate groups it will be possible to isolate various factors that can be counteracted through government policies to eliminate some of the societal and economic problems that enable hate groups to develop.

The Regression and Analysis

Sample Design

Data was collected for each state from the Southern Poverty Law Center to determine the number of hate groups in operation within each state. Ratios for the number of hate groups per 100,000 people were derived through the use of data from the 2000 U.S. Census. The United States Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics were used to compile the rest of the data for the independent variables to determine what factors were significant in states with high hate groups to population ratios. All of the data collected was measured as percentages of the population to compare with the ratios of hate groups in each state.

Analysis and Results

Model:			
total ratio = college + residunmarriedbirth + white + confederate+ under25+ unemployment			
Overall Model :			
F Value	5.32		
Pr > F	0.0003		
AdjustedR-Square	0.3412		
Variable	T-Value	Prob value	Parameter Estimate
Intercept	-0.37	0.7146	-0.17743
College	-0.86	0.3936	-0.00518
residunmarriedbirth	1.45	0.155	0.00708
White	-0.61	0.5477	-0.00116
confederate	3.06	0.0037	0.18734
under25	1.06	0.2947	0.01074
unemployment	1.81	0.0774	0.04674

College

It would be assumed that the more educated a person is the more awareness they have of their surroundings as well as the other cultures world perspectives. Having a better comprehension and appreciation for other viewpoints should make a person more tolerant of people. It could be conjectured that people who have the desire to obtain a college degree are not ignorant about different cultures and ways of life and more accepting of others. Through this line of reasoning it is surmised that the greater the ratio of people with a college degree or greater in a state, the lower the ratio of hate groups to the state's population [3].

While the independent variable is not significant, this variable only measures the amount of education achieved not on the type of education. Programs focusing on the problem of hate could have a more substantial effect on reducing the problem of hate.

There are numerous opportunities to explore the effects of education on the deterrence of hate and stereotypes. Further research can be conducted to pinpoint the effectiveness of education on this problem and the types of programs that would be the most effective.

While certain problems are harder than others to change such as the demographic composition of states, this is an area of opportunity to reduce the number of hate groups.

Unmarried Birth

Arising out of the strain theory, it can be presumed that as an individual undergoes more strain and instability in their life, especially during their childhood, there is a larger potential for that individual to participate in a hate group. In an individual's desire to feel accepted due to a lack of stability in their life, they may try to join an organization or group to feel a part of something. While this group could be a school marching band, it is also as likely for this individual to join a gang or participate in a hate group. Through observations and interview research it was concluded by Randy Blazak that many individuals involved with hate groups underwent some form of sociological or economic strain contributing to their participation. "These populations were targeted (by skinhead recruiters) because of their desire for structure, a subcultural solution to their anomie, as well as their need for consistent models of authority and masculinity." [1]

While the residual for the unmarriedbirth variable was not significant at the .10 level, there does appear to be a cweak relation between the percentage of hate groups present and the percentage of births to unmarried women. Because the original variable that measured the percentage of births to unwed mothers was correlated with the percentage of the white population, the residual was used to correct for this problem.

While there exists the possibility that the number of births to unwed mothers is the result of some other factor, it appears that as the percentage of births to unwed mothers increases there is an increase in the number of hate groups.

White

In a study by Donald Green and others, it was concluded that demographic change is the principal cause of racially motivated crimes directed at minorities. Hate crimes become more prolific when the population of the non-white reaches a level that presents a challenge to the dominant social and political positions of the white population [2]. This variable is not at all significant in this model

Nevertheless, changes in racial composition might predict hate group formation. A population that is almost entirely white will not feel threatened by the minute non-white residents and there shouldn't be a high number of hate crimes or hate groups. Likewise in a predominately non-white community, the small white community would not be expected to commit crimes of hate. In this case an increase in the already large non-white population, could actually reduce the number of hate crimes committed and likewise the number of hate groups. There may be a so-called tipping point, at which the white population proportion reaches a level at which hate crimes reach a maximum, but this is brought about due to a community's changing racial composition [2]. It makes sense in the end that the variable is not meaningful in this model, because communities with more homogenous communities, either predominately white or non-white are predisposed to having fewer hate groups. An improvement to the model could be made by using the % change in racial composition as an independent variable in the model.

Confederate

It is often said that the seeds of hate run deep. This certainly seems to be the case in the evaluation of this model, as the fact that a state was a former member of the Confederate States of America is the most significant independent variable in the model. This finding certainly supports the findings of Jefferson and Pryor in their 1998 study, in which they concluded that the history and the geography have a noteworthy influence on the number of active hate groups. “(It) suggests that despite 130 years since the Civil War, the circumstances leading to this war still have an important social impact” [3]. A state that was a former member of the C.S.A. will have a substantially greater number of resident hate groups. This fact is rather disturbing because it is something over which policy makers have absolutely no control. It is a meaningful part of the model, but offers no suggestion towards the remediation of the problem.

Under 25

A measure of the percentage of the population below the age of 25 was included in the model because of the theory of allocation of time based on rational choices to maximize utility. An increase in the value of an individual’s time would make it more costly for them not to work and to engage in hateful activity. At an early stage in life, an individual’s time is not very valuable as compared with later in their life. There is a small issue with this variable because the retired population of a state also has lower income, yet these people wouldn’t be included in this measurement. It does however seem that the younger generation would be more prone to take action on their biases.

Although it was expected to have a significant positive value in the model, under25 turned out to be insignificant. It is possible that a better-defined measurement of this variable would have turned up some significance. In Marshal Medoff's study he concluded that the unemployment rate of the population between ages 15-19 was significant in predicting the number of hate crimes committed [4]. Through research performed by National Gang Crime Research Center teenagers and young adults make up the majority of the people who participate in gangs, which for all intents and purposes, is the general example of what a hate group is. As an extension from the conclusions surrounding the independent variable "college", education at an early age seems to be a significant method of preventing the formation of hate groups. More detailed research and analysis would have to be conducted to determine what type methods would be effective, but the outlook is bright that there are possibilities.

Unemployment

It was expected that the frustration caused by unemployment would increase the amount of people who participated in hate groups. Along with the independent variable "confederate", this was the other significant variable at the .10 level. The increase in frustration and competition for work along with the perception of downward social mobility leaves an individual grasping for reasons to explain their dilemma. This can often lead to individuals blaming their circumstances on the presence of minorities and possibly in them joining a hate group. Unemployment was used as a method of measuring the social mobility and economic status of people and how it influenced the formation of hate groups. Going along with the same lines as the previous theory of

rational choice, the fact that higher unemployment aside from creating frustration and strain over one's economic status, might also make it less costly for an individual to participate in hate groups.

Drawbacks

One of the major drawbacks of this study is the level of detail on which it is conducted. Many of the intricacies and factors that are indicative of hate and the sources of hate groups are lost by measuring statistics on a state to state basis. The diversity of the population can drown out some of the meaningful differences that exist between different areas and even within the same cities. Although New York City is diverse as a whole, the aggregate numbers hide many of the ethnic enclaves that exist within the city. It is easy to see the disparities that exist. Sheepshead Bay was mostly white (84%) in 1990, Flatbush was only 3.5% white and 88% black, while Hamilton Heights was 19.5% white, 39.1% black, and 36.1% Latino [2]. A more detailed study would have brought to light many of the nuances of particular communities that are the prime causes of the formation of hate groups.

Another drawback to this research is the fact that the statistics used were based on a cross-sectional study of the economic and social conditions in the United States making use of static information. Several studies have been conducted to investigate the effect of changing demographic conditions on the promulgation of hate crimes and hate groups. While there might have been a higher level of detail achieved by studying the number of hate groups on a city to city basis, there is still much to be learned from a general standpoint from this study.

Conclusions

After conducting this study, it seems apparent that the history of a particular location is the prime factor that determines the number of hate groups. A changing racial composition is another root cause of the problem. These are factors exist outside the grasp of control, however it is the other factors that when combined with the history and changing population that are the factors that lead to people acting on their inclinations. A person might not be thrilled with their neighborhood changing, but it is only when they feel that their standard of living is decreasing that they will be more likely to engage in hateful behavior. There are other factors that lead to a greater predisposition and ability to take part in a hate group such as being young or coming from a broken home. From the model, it would indicate that the level of unemployment is the most significant of these other factors that leads to the formation of hate groups. It seems that at non-malignant levels of these other factors that there will be no effect on the level of hate groups or hate crimes committed, but once the other dynamics such as unemployment rates reach a level of significance people are apt to blame their struggle on someone else. The demographic and historical circumstances create an atmosphere by which the problems of a community are blamed on minorities and hate groups are formed. Hopefully, through the amelioration of unemployment rates and through additional education there exists the potential to augment this problem of hate groups that exists in America.

References

- [1] Blazak, Randy. (2001) White Boys to Terrorist Men. *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 44 No.6, February 2001, 982-1000.
- [2] Green, Donald P. and others. (1998). Defended Neighborhoods, Integration, and Racially Motivated Crime. *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 104, Issue2, Sept. 1998, 372-403.
- [3] Jefferson, Philip N. and Pryor, Frederic L. (1998). On the Geography of Hate. *Economics Letters* 65 (1999), 389-395.
- [4] Medoff, Marshall H. (1999). Allocation of Time and Hateful Behavior: A Theoretical and Positive Analysis of Hate and Hate Crimes. *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Oct. 1999
- [5] The National Education Association (1998). Hate Motivated Crime and Violence: Information for Schools, Communities and Families. www.nea.org
- [6] The National Gang Crime Research Center. (2001). Preliminary Results of Project Gangmill. www.ngcrc.org.
- [7] Southern Poverty Law Center (2000). Active Hate Groups in the U.S. in 2000. www.splcenter.org.

[8] Southern Poverty Law Center (2001). Intelligence Report Spring 2001: The Year in Hate.

[9] Southern Poverty Law Center (2001). Intelligence Report Winter 2001: Discounting Hate.