Lectio praecursoria

Religion and Hate Victimisation among Youth: A Comprehensive Approach from Methodology to Theory and Practical Solutions

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Sophie Litvakin väitöskirja ”Religion and Hate Victimisation among Youth: A Comprehensive Approach from Methodology to Theory and Practical Solutions” tarkastettiin Helsingin yliopiston valtiotieteellisessä tiedekunnassa 28.2.2025. Vastaväittäjänä toimi professori James Hawdon Virginia Tech -yliopistosta ja kustoksena professori Janne Kivivuori Helsingin yliopistosta. Väitöskirjan yhteenveto on luettavissa verkko-osoitteessa http://hdl.handle.net/10138/590203.

Four years ago, I moved to Finland at the peak of winter during the COVID-19 pandemic. I arrived knowing no one, yet I was fortunate to be welcomed with open arms. But not everyone has that privilege. Immigration, globalisation and the search for better opportunities or refuge are reshaping societies, making many culturally or religiously homogenous places more diverse than ever before. These changes can be unsettling for those who feel their surroundings are shifting beyond their control, often leading to fear and hostility towards those they see as outsiders, those who, in their eyes, do not belong. This tension grows even stronger in times of crisis, whether it is economic instability, pandemics, war or political turmoil when people look for someone to blame. The rise of extremist movements, conspiracy theories and biased media narratives only add fuel to the fire, deepening the divide between us and them. In this environment, minorities, particularly religious groups, are often singled out as symbols of these broader societal transformations.

This is why I chose to study religious hate crime victimisation, not only to examine its patterns, causes and prevalence (meaning the frequency in which it occurs), but also to understand its broader consequences and explore potential strategies for prevention.

Relevance

One might assume, especially in academia, that the world is moving towards secularisation. However, demographic projections suggest otherwise. Studies predict that by 2050, religious people will outnumber the non-religious, largely due to higher birth rates among religious communities (Pew Research Center, 2015).

At the same time, a growing trend of being “spiritual but not religious” has emerged (Mercadante, 2014). Many young people are leaving institutional religion, sometimes it is for ideological, political, or financial reasons, and yet they continue to hold personal

faith and spiritual beliefs. And as history has shown, religion is constantly evolving. New religious movements are on the rise, whether it be astrology, the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, or the return of pagan traditions. Where religion will go next remains an open question, but one thing is clear, it is far from disappearing.

Hate crime victimisation

Before delving into my research, it is essential to define key concepts. Criminology is the scientific study of crime, its causes, consequences, and prevention. Among many other crime-related aspects, it examines offenders, victims, and justice institutions like the police, courts, and correctional systems. Victimology focuses on crime victims, their vulnerabilities, and their interactions with the justice system. It explores the broader impact of crime and strategies for harm reduction. Victimisation refers both to the process of individuals or groups becoming victims of crime and the study of the factors that contribute to their victimhood. My research examines how religious affiliation influences the risk of hate crime victimisation, shaping not only individuals' exposure to harm but also their coping strategies, social interactions, and sense of belonging in society.

Hate crimes

Hate crimes, sometimes referred to as bias-motivated crimes, refer to violent threats or criminal acts directed towards individuals, groups, or property due to bias against characteristics such as race, religion, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, or disability. Beyond physical harm, it carries a symbolic impact, reinforcing exclusion, fear, and intimidation.

Hate crime has no universal legal definition (Schweppe, 2021). The way it is defined often varies by country, and what is considered a protected group in one jurisdiction may not be recognised in another, or in some cases, may even be deemed illegal. This lack of uniformity makes comparative research challenging, but it also underscores the importance of studying hate crime beyond a single national context.

One of the pioneers of hate crime studies, Barbara Perry (2001) describes hate crimes as "acts of violence and intimidation directed toward already marginalised and stigmatised groups" (p.10). She emphasises the role of power dynamics and social inequality in reinforcing existing hierarchies. In this view, hate crimes serve as a means of keeping targeted groups in their place, sending a clear message that they do not belong or are not considered equal to the dominant group.

Similarly, Chakraborti & Garland (2012) highlight that hate crimes can be seen as "message crimes", while an individual is targeted, the real message is directed at the entire community they belong to. The crime serves as a warning: you could be next. Their definition focuses on difference and vulnerability, arguing that victims are often chosen because they stand out in the eyes of the offender. This perceived difference, whether it is based on race, religion, gender identity, or another characteristic, makes them more vulnerable to attack.

Hate crime is rarely driven by a single factor, and not all members of a targeted group experience victimisation the same way. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2017) explains how overlapping identity traits shape how individuals are targeted. For instance, a Muslim woman and a Muslim man may both face Islamophobic hate crime, but gender alters their experiences. Similarly, a Black Jewish man may be targeted differently than a white Jewish man due to the intersection of race and religion. Understanding intersectionality reveals that multiple identity factors influence both the nature and likelihood of victimisation.

One of the biggest challenges in addressing hate crime is underreporting (Pezzella et al., 2019). Many victims never report their experiences to authorities, meaning that official statistics significantly underestimate the true scale of the problem. But why do victims remain silent?

Mistrust in authorities, shame, stigma, guilt, fear of retaliation or ridicule, and uncertainty about whether the incident is even worth reporting are some of the key reasons (Vergani & Navarro, 2023). Some victims normalise the attack, believing it to be an unavoidable part of life. From the police perspective, in many countries, there is a lack of awareness, training, and understanding of how to properly document and handle hate crime reports. According to the literature (Vergani & Navarro, 2023) even when a report is made, it often leads nowhere, with little to no follow-up, leaving victims feeling like reporting was pointless in the first place.

But just because something isn't reported doesn't mean it isn't happening or that it doesn't have serious consequences. To get a clearer picture of hate crime victimisation, we rely not just on police records, but also on self-reported surveys and other forms of data to shed light on these "dark figures" of hate crime.

And what we see is that religious hate crime is on the rise, both in Finland and globally. In Europe, the refugee crisis has fuelled right-wing extremism and hostility toward outsiders, while acts of terrorism have led to collective blame and violence against certain groups based on a single shared characteristic (Obaidi et al., 2018, 2022). Wars in the Middle East have triggered attacks on Jewish places of worship and Holocaust memorial sites, just as the Christchurch mosque attack in New Zealand and the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting exemplified the global scale of religiously motivated violence (LaFreniere Tamez et al., 2023; Rolston, 2019; von Schnurbein, 2023). There are far too many cases to list, but the pattern is clear, people continue to be harassed, assaulted, and see their places of worship vandalised simply because of their actual or presumed religion.

Speaking about the consequences, the impact of these crimes goes far beyond the attacks themselves. Research shows that victims of hate crimes experience higher levels of PTSD, anxiety, panic attacks, sleep disorders, and self-esteem issues compared to victims of non-bias crimes (Díaz-Faes & Pereda, 2022; Iganski, 2001). Hate crime often leads to vicarious victimisation, where entire communities feel the impact (Farrell & Lockwood, 2023), pushing individuals to alter their behaviour, appearance, or avoid certain places to reduce their risk of becoming targets.

Among young people, hate crime victimisation occurs more frequently than among adults and is linked to a higher risk of depression, anxiety, and even suicidal thoughts (Hardy & Chakraborti, 2020; Klomek et al., 2008). The impact is not just immediate, it can shape how young victims see the world, trust others, and navigate their daily lives.

Now that we have taken a deep dive into hate crime victimisation, let's turn to my research. It is time to explore the central theories that frame my study, the key questions that guide it, and the findings that illuminate the victimisation of young people from different religious backgrounds.

Criminological theories and hate crime victimisation

To understand why some individuals face a greater risk of victimisation, my research draws on key criminological and victimological theories. Two perspectives are particularly relevant, Routine Activity Theory and Lifestyle Exposure Theory. While these theories

are often used together in research, they approach victimisation from distinct angles, and recognising that distinction is crucial.

The Routine Activity Theory, developed by Cohen and Felson in 1979, explains that crime occurs when three key elements are present in the same place at the same time, a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian, which could be a person, such as law enforcement or bystanders, or an object, such as CCTV cameras, that can deter offenders by increasing the risk of being caught (Felson & Cohen, 1980). The theory has been applied to various forms of crime, including hate crime. In this context, religious visibility, whether through clothing, symbols, or public worship, can make individuals more recognisable and, in hostile environments, more vulnerable to being targeted.

The Lifestyle Exposure Theory, (Hindelang, Gottfredson & Garofalo, 1978), takes a different approach. Unlike Routine Activity Theory, which focuses on where and when crime happens, Lifestyle Exposure Theory examines what people do and how their behaviours influence risk. It argues that an individual's lifestyle, shaped by factors such as age, gender, income, and social roles, determines their risk exposure. Certain activities inherently bring people into closer contact with potential offenders. For example, going out at night to drink alcohol in an unfamiliar area presents a higher risk of victimisation than visiting a friend's house to watch a film. Here, it is not just about being in a public space, it is about the nature of the activity itself.

When applied to religious hate crime, these theories offer complementary insights. Routine Activity Theory explains why visibly religious individuals, such as those wearing religious attire or gathering for worship, become targets. Lifestyle Exposure Theory highlights why some are more vulnerable than others. For example, young religious individuals who spend time in public, particularly at night or within minority faith groups, face greater risks. At the same time, religious communities can protect through structured activities, strong communal ties, and collective guardianship, thus reducing exposure to risk.

The Dissertation

This dissertation consists of four interconnected studies, each building on the previous one to deepen our understanding of religious hate crime victimisation.

The first study investigated how individuals, communities, and institutions attempt to prevent religious hate crime victimisation and whether these measures are effective. The findings showed that blending in, hiding religious identity by removing attire or modifying behaviour, was the most common personal strategy, while changing routines to avoid risk was also frequently mentioned. At the collective level, community resilience, intergroup contact, and stereotype reduction programs were widely used. Institutional studies were few, but they focused on improving trust and cooperation between victims and authorities, particularly the police. Experimental studies on interfaith dialogue, contact between different groups, and psychological perception change showed statistically significant results in reducing bias and hostility.

The second study examined patterns of religious hate crime victimisation across different religious groups and whether routines or risky lifestyles explained the likelihood of being targeted. Using data from over 5,400 adolescents in Finland, the study found that Muslim and non-religious youth had the highest risk of victimisation. Muslim youth were more often attacked by adults and in public spaces, while non-religious youth were more frequently victimised in schools. Unlike general assault, where routine activities and risky behaviours played a significant role, religious

hate crime victimisation was not explained by these factors, suggesting that victims were targeted based on their identity rather than their behaviour.

The third study focused on how religious hate crime is measured in international surveys and whether existing tools accurately capture victimisation experiences. A review of multiple large-scale victimisation surveys revealed substantial gaps in how religiously motivated hate crime is assessed. To address this, I developed a new survey module that includes measures on religious routines, experiences of hostility after religious disaffiliation, change in religiosity and risk-reduction strategies. This tool aims to improve the way religious hate crime is studied and enable more accurate international comparisons.

The fourth study tested this new survey module in an international survey of 4,122 young adults from Finland, Germany, the USA, and Israel. It examined which aspects of religiosity increase the risk of victimisation and how victims adapt their behaviour in response to hate crime victimisation. The findings confirmed that religious visibility and public religious practices increased the likelihood of victimisation while associating with friends from the same religion provided a protective effect. The study also found that victims of religious hate crimes, regardless of their religion, were significantly more likely to change their routines, carry weapons, and socialise primarily with coreligionists. These adaptations vary in national contexts, reinforcing the importance of international comparisons in understanding religious hate crime victimisation.

Together, these studies provide a clearer picture of who is at risk, how victimisation occurs, and how individuals respond to it across different settings.

Conclusion, implications and future needs

In conclusion, religion has long shaped how people dress, behave, and engage with society. Yet, for religious minorities, these expressions can increase the risk of hate crime. This dissertation set out to deepen understanding of this phenomenon, particularly among young people, by examining its causes, patterns, and prevention.

Academically, this dissertation makes two key contributions. First, it offers a systematic review of religious hate crime prevention, offering a roadmap for future research. Second, it introduces a new survey module, tested across four countries, to enhance measurement and cross-comparisons. This tool can also aid studies on racism, ableism, and LGBTQ+ discrimination, helping scholars better understand victim experiences and risk factors.

In terms of policy, these findings offer key insights for crime prevention and victim support. The first study revealed that individuals often blend in, avoid public spaces, or carry weapons for protection, reflecting a lack of institutional support. Strengthening law enforcement training, improving reporting mechanisms, and increasing security measures like personnel, emergency buttons, and CCTV could enhance victim protection and reduce reliance on self-defence.

The findings highlight the need for early intervention. Research shows that prejudice reduction programs, interfaith dialogue, and education-based initiatives can counteract bias before it escalates into hate-motivated violence. Since biases form in youth (Raabe & Beelmann, 2011) Schools are a crucial setting for these efforts.

Another key issue is the lack of coordination between victims, communities, law enforcement, and policymakers. Many victims are unaware of available support. Raising

awareness, improving police training on hate crimes, and incorporating victim voices into policy are essential steps to bridge this gap. Finally, this dissertation emphasises that hate crime victimisation is not experienced equally. Gender, race, ethnicity, and societal context all shape risk. While no single solution exists, this research identifies patterns and strategies that can inform future policies and academic studies.

The goal of this work has been not only to expand our understanding of religious hate crime victimisation but also to provide practical solutions to make societies safer for those targeted by hate. There is still much work to be done, but by strengthening research, policy, and prevention efforts, we can move closer to ensuring that no one has to hide their identity out of fear.

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