

## Hate crime: the facts behind the headlines

Briefing note: October 2016

In the aftermath of the EU referendum there have been many reports of an increase in hate crime in the UK. This briefing addresses the following questions: what exactly constitutes a 'hate crime' and to what extent has the reported rise in hate crimes been based in reality?

There were media reports about a rise in hate crime during the EU referendum campaign, but the frequency of the reports increased in the days following the result. The following are examples of some of the headlines in the days after the vote: 'Racist incidents feared to be linked to Brexit result' (*The Guardian*),<sup>1</sup> 'Brexit: Wave of hate crime and racial abuse reported following EU referendum' (*The Independent*),<sup>2</sup> 'Police on alert as reports of hate crimes increase following EU referendum' (*ITV News*),<sup>3</sup> 'Police on hate crime alert over post-Brexit vote racist incidents' (*MailOnline*),<sup>4</sup> 'Hate crime surge as racist abuse of foreigners in UK condemned' (*Financial Times*),<sup>5</sup> 'Police call emergency meetings to deal with post-Brexit vote explosion of racist hate crime' (*Daily Mirror*).<sup>6</sup> By the following Monday, June 27th, so many incidents had been reported that the prime minister, David Cameron, condemned the 'despicable' rise in hate crime, specifically citing examples of verbal abuse hurled at ethnic minorities and racist graffiti left on the walls of a Polish cultural centre.<sup>7</sup>

The headlines all suggest a substantial rise in hate crimes in the aftermath of the result. The examples used in these reports were almost exclusively non-violent in nature, or were acts of vandalism. Virtually none of the reports cite violent incidents against people and most are based on two sources: anecdotal evidence and a single data release. There were two main sources for these reports. The first was the reporting of anecdotal incidents of hate crime and the second was a release of data from a police website called True Vision, which showed a 57% increase in reported hate crimes in the days after the referendum to a corresponding weekend a month earlier. This data release will be tackled in more depth later on in this report.

Much of the news coverage in the days after the referendum centered on a few incidents. One of the most notable was the leaving of allegedly xenophobic graffiti at the Hammersmith Polish Social and Cultural Association in West London on June 26<sup>th</sup>.<sup>8</sup> Another particularly

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/26/racist-incidents-feared-to-be-linked-to-brexit-result-reported-in-england-and-wales>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/brexit-eu-referendum-racial-racism-abuse-hate-crime-reported-latest-leave-immigration-a7104191.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.itv.com/news/2016-06-27/reports-of-hate-crimes-increase-by-54-in-four-days/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/pa/article-3662038/Sadiq-Khan-asks-police-alert-rise-post-referendum-hate-crimes.html>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/d6c3c43e-3c66-11e6-8716-a4a71e8140b0.html#axzz4LeLt3C2C>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/police-call-emergency-meetings-deal-8296935>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36643213>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jun/27/brexit-polish-centre-london-reeling-after-graffiti-attack>

well-documented incident was the smashing of the window of a Spanish restaurant, Donde, in South London, which is explored in greater depth later in this report.<sup>9</sup> Aside from these two well-known incidents, many others came to prominence because they had been logged online, in forums such as the Facebook group Worrying Signs,<sup>10</sup> the Twitter account PostRefRacism<sup>11</sup> and the website iStreetWatch.<sup>12</sup> Just four days after the referendum, the Worrying Signs group already had over 7,500 members and had logged dozens of hate crimes. The incidents logged by the group were widely picked up on in the press. For example, the website was documented in depth by the BBC on June 27<sup>th</sup>.<sup>13</sup> The group went on to gain extensive international coverage, being cited by NBC News on the same day, for example.<sup>14</sup> The vast majority of the incidents logged were verbal insults. Many of the incidents logged were ‘racist’ or ‘xenophobic’ conversations overheard in public.<sup>15</sup> It is unclear how many of these anecdotal reports were reported to the police.

As mentioned, graffiti was left on the Hammersmith Polish Social and Cultural Association on June 26<sup>th</sup>. The incident was widely covered in the press, with almost all the coverage tying it in some way to the referendum and inferring that the graffiti was xenophobic or racist in nature.<sup>16</sup> However, there have been suggestions that the attack on the Polish cultural centre was misinterpreted by the press.<sup>17</sup> The exact wording of the graffiti (usually omitted in press reports) was ‘F\*\*k you OMP’. The OMP is a centre-right Polish think tank, translated into English as the Center for Political Thought, that was pro-Brexit and welcomed the referendum result.<sup>18</sup> There has therefore been suggestions that the graffiti was written by a member of the Polish community angry with the OMP think tank for its stance on Brexit, rather than it being a xenophobic or racist attack.<sup>19</sup>

## What is a hate crime?

The government’s definition of a hate crime is as follows: ‘Any crime that is motivated by hostility on the grounds of race, religion, sexual orientation, disability or transgender identity can be classed as a hate crime.’<sup>20</sup> This definition is also the one used by the police and the

<sup>9</sup> <http://metro.co.uk/2016/06/28/spanish-and-turkish-restaurants-in-lewisham-have-had-their-windows-smashed-5970826/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-36634786>

<sup>11</sup> <https://twitter.com/postrefracism>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.istreetwatch.co.uk/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-36634786>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/brexit-referendum/did-brexit-referendum-embolden-racists-britain-s-streets-n599451>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/brexit-facebook-page-highlights-racism-after-eu-referendum-vote-triggers-spike-in-hate-crimes-a3281951.html>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3660960/Polish-community-centre-vandalised-graffiti-saying-f-off.html>; <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/crime/polish-embassy-shocked-and-concerned-at-postbrexit-racism-a3281641.html>; [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2016/06/26/racist-abuse-scrawled-on-polish-cultural-centre\\_n\\_10682724.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2016/06/26/racist-abuse-scrawled-on-polish-cultural-centre_n_10682724.html)

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.getwestlondon.co.uk/news/west-london-news/polish-centre-graffiti-misunderstood-suggestions-11578663>

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.getwestlondon.co.uk/news/west-london-news/polish-centre-graffiti-misunderstood-suggestions-11578663>

<sup>20</sup> As defined in the government’s strategy for tackling hate crime, published in July 2016: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/543679/Action\\_Against\\_Hate\\_-\\_UK\\_Government\\_s\\_Plan\\_to\\_Tackle\\_Hate\\_Crime\\_2016.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/543679/Action_Against_Hate_-_UK_Government_s_Plan_to_Tackle_Hate_Crime_2016.pdf)

Crown Prosecution Service.<sup>21</sup> Hate crime entered into British law with the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, which was passed by the government of Tony Blair. When originally passed, the law only referred to discrimination on the grounds of race and religion. However the Criminal Justice Act 2003 expanded the definition to include sexual orientation, disability and transgender identity. There are currently moves to include gender in hate crime legislation, with Nottinghamshire Police having trialled the recording of misogyny as a hate crime.<sup>22</sup> Some forces, such as Greater Manchester Police, have recorded attacks on goths, punks and other alternative groups as hate crimes.<sup>23</sup>

There is also an agreed definition of 'monitored hate crime', which is what the police use to record hate crimes and is also the definition used by the Crown Prosecution Service:<sup>24</sup>

A Hate Crime is any criminal offence which is perceived, by the victim or any other person, to be motivated by a hostility or prejudice based on a person's race or perceived race.

This definition also applies for religion, sexual orientation, disability or if a person is transgender.

One of the chief criticisms of hate crimes is that they are rooted in perception. This introduces an element of subjectivity with the victim essentially determining whether it is a hate crime or not; people may see what they want and add a hate crime motivation to what may be an everyday crime or incident. Many of the incidents that fuelled press reports of increasing levels of hate crime were based on incidents logged in forums like Worrying Signs, often by an individual with no independent corroboration or context.

For example, in the attack on the Spanish restaurant Donde, over the weekend following the EU referendum, a pane of glass in the restaurant's front door was smashed. On Monday, June 27th, a picture of this was shared on Facebook, by the user Andrew Burgin. The photo was then picked up by the group Worrying Signs. Its caption read: 'Spanish and Turkish restaurants in Lewisham had their windows smashed over the weekend. Very widespread reports coming in now.'<sup>25</sup> The post quickly went viral, being shared thousands of times in the next few hours. People on social media assumed the incident was xenophobic or motivated by the EU referendum result; this was reflected in a *Metro* report stating that it was 'the latest example of migrants being targeted in the wake of the Brexit vote'.<sup>26</sup> Days later, however, it was reported in the local press that the incident was being reported as a burglary, not a hate crime as has been speculated on social media.<sup>27</sup>

The police record four different types of hate crime. These are:

- Public order offences (includes public fear, alarm or distress)
- Violence against the person (includes violence without injury offences)

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/discrimination/hate-crime/what-are-hate-incidents-and-hate-crime/>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-nottinghamshire-36775398>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-lancashire-22018888>

<sup>24</sup> [http://report-it.org.uk/files/hate\\_crime\\_definitions\\_-\\_v3\\_0.pdf](http://report-it.org.uk/files/hate_crime_definitions_-_v3_0.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3805008/The-great-Brexit-hate-crime-myth-claims-epidemic-race-crimes-referendum-simply-false.html>

<sup>26</sup> <http://metro.co.uk/2016/06/28/spanish-and-turkish-restaurants-in-lewisham-have-had-their-windows-smashed-5970826/>

<sup>27</sup>

[http://www.newshopper.co.uk/news/14584342.Honor\\_Oak\\_Park\\_restaurant\\_\\_ransacked\\_\\_and\\_window\\_smashed](http://www.newshopper.co.uk/news/14584342.Honor_Oak_Park_restaurant__ransacked__and_window_smashed)

- Criminal damage or arson
- Other notifiable offences

The majority of police-recorded hate crimes are non-violent. In 2014/15, 59% of hate crimes were public order offences, 30% of hate crimes were violence-against-the-person offences, 7% were criminal damage or arson offences and the remaining 4% were other notifiable offences.<sup>28</sup> The crimes recorded as violence-against-the-person offences break down as follows: 70% were violence without injury offences and 30% were violence with injury offences.<sup>29</sup> So just under a third of reported hate crimes are violent and just under a third of those that are violent result in injury, suggesting no more than one in 10 recorded hate crimes are physically injurious to the victim.

Hate crime has been trending upwards for the last few years, long before the EU referendum campaign began. In 2014/15 there were 52,528 hate crimes recorded by the police in England and Wales, up from 44,471 in 2013/14 and from 42,255 in 2012/13.<sup>30</sup>

### **What is the truth behind the post-referendum claims?**

So what of the evidence of a recent surge in hate crime? In the three months since the referendum, reports of increased hate crimes have been based on anecdotal evidence and statistical releases.

The statistical evidence has come from releases issued by the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC). These releases were issued on June 27<sup>th</sup>, July 8<sup>th</sup>, July 22<sup>nd</sup> and September 7<sup>th</sup>. The release on June 27<sup>th</sup> was based solely on reports made to the True Vision website, the details of which are explained below. The subsequent releases included all hate crimes reported to police forces across the country.

#### *i. Individual incidents*

In the months following the referendum, there have been many incidents that have fuelled the impression that hate crime is rampant. While the overwhelming majority of hate crime reported seems to have been verbal, there have been a few extremely serious violent hate crimes that have made the news. For example, on August 31<sup>st</sup>, Arkadiusz Jozwik, a Polish national, was murdered in Harlow, Essex. A group of local teens was arrested and questioned in connection with the crime. Many press reports on the killing speculated that it was a hate crime. Indeed local MP Robert Halfon said that the crime would be 'all the more disturbing and shocking' if it turned out to be a hate crime.<sup>31</sup> This speaks to a climate where many crimes are being assumed as hate crimes, even when there is no evidence to suggest that they are. Press reports then often link the incidents to Brexit, even where there is no evidence of a link.

<sup>28</sup> National Hate crime statistics, p.8: [http://report-it.org.uk/files/ho\\_hate\\_crime\\_statistics\\_201415.pdf](http://report-it.org.uk/files/ho_hate_crime_statistics_201415.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> National Hate crime statistics, p.8: [http://report-it.org.uk/files/ho\\_hate\\_crime\\_statistics\\_201415.pdf](http://report-it.org.uk/files/ho_hate_crime_statistics_201415.pdf)

<sup>30</sup> Hate Crime, England and Wales 2014/15, p.4:

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/467366/hosb0515.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/467366/hosb0515.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*

In a similar case, a Czech national was murdered in East London on September 21<sup>st</sup>.<sup>32</sup> A man has been charged for the crime. Despite the fact that the suspect has not been charged with a hate crime, the murder has still been widely reported as such. In fact the Czech prime minister, Bohuslav Sobotka, has called on Theresa May to safeguard EU citizens in Britain in the wake of the attack. He said that ‘the Czech government finds it unacceptable to see Czechs attacked because of their origin and being treated as second-class citizens’.<sup>33</sup> The prime minister has spoken with Mr Sobotka over the phone and has publically reassured him of the safety of EU nationals in the UK.<sup>34</sup>

## *ii. True Vision statistics*

The first official statistical release was on June 27<sup>th</sup> by the National Police Chiefs’ Council (NPCC).<sup>35</sup> This release was based solely on incidents reported to the True Vision website.<sup>36</sup> This press release was the source of much of the initial reporting of a rise in hate crime.

The True Vision website was launched in 2011 and was designed as a resource whereby people could both learn about hate crime and report it. The website was launched and is funded by the NPCC and has the support of every police force in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.<sup>37</sup> As well as information on what hate crime is, the website provides channels by which members of the public can report hate crimes. This includes an online form for people to report hate crimes anonymously: such incidents are still recorded and investigated by the police.<sup>38</sup> This self-reporting is problematic because anybody could log a hate crime, even if it did not happen, and it would still be recorded.

The figures released by the NPCC on June 27<sup>th</sup> showed a 57% increase in hate crimes in the four-day period between June 23<sup>rd</sup> and June 26<sup>th</sup>. Over the four-day period in question, 85 hate crimes were reported to the website, compared with 54 reports over a corresponding four days, four weeks earlier.

This 57% increase in reported hate crime was released with significant caveats. Indeed, Mark Hamilton, NPCC Lead for Hate Crime and Assistant Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, who is quoted in the press release announcing the findings, said:

These reports take into account reports through only one mechanism, reports are also made directly to forces and other community groups so this is not an overall national figure. This should not be read as a national increase in hate crime of 57% but an increase in reporting through one mechanism.<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, the NPCC’s press release also said that there had not been a spike in community tensions in the days after the EU referendum. Notwithstanding these caveats, the

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/sep/25/29-year-old-is-charged-with-murdering-czech-man-in-east-london>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/30/czech-pm-bohuslav-sobotka-urges-may-stop-attacks-eu-citizens-brexite>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-call-with-czech-prime-minister-29-september-2016>

<sup>35</sup> Surge in Hate Crimes in the UK following UK’s Brexit Vote, *Time Magazine*, 27 June 2016

<sup>36</sup> Statement by Assistant Chief Constable Mark Hamilton of the National Police Chiefs’ Council <http://news.npcc.police.uk/releases/hate-crime-is-unacceptable-in-any-circumstances-say-police>

<sup>37</sup> <https://cst.org.uk/news/blog/2011/02/01/police-hate-crime-website-launched>

<sup>38</sup> [http://www.report-it.org.uk/your\\_police\\_force](http://www.report-it.org.uk/your_police_force)

<sup>39</sup> Statement by Assistant Chief Constable Mark Hamilton of the National Police Chiefs’ Council: <http://news.npcc.police.uk/releases/hate-crime-is-unacceptable-in-any-circumstances-say-police>

57% figure was widely reported and usually as a national increase in hate crime.<sup>40</sup> While the reports included the quote of ‘no spike in tensions’ they did not include the NPCC’s full caveat.

### *iii. Police force statistics*

Following this spike in reported hate crimes to the True Vision website, the NPCC requested an early release of reported hate crimes from police forces across the country. These figures were released to the public on July 8<sup>th</sup>. This was a much fuller release, based on actual hate crimes reported to police forces and showed that between June 16<sup>th</sup> and June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 3,192 hate crimes were reported to police forces across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This represents an increase of 915 or 42% over the same period the year before. On the worst day, June 25<sup>th</sup>, 289 offences took place.<sup>41</sup> An exact list of how the offences broke down was not provided in the release, but the most common form of incident reported was violence against the person. This term is defined in the following manner in the accompanying press release: ‘primarily harassment, common assault and other violence (verbal abuse, spitting and “barging”).’ The second and third most prevalent incidents were public order offences, followed by criminal damage.

The NPCC then released data for the period after the referendum on July 22<sup>nd</sup>. Between July 1<sup>st</sup> and July 14<sup>th</sup> 2016, there were 3,001 hate crimes and incidents reported to police forces in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This is a decrease of 191 offences (6%) on the previous fortnight but it is a 20% increase on the equivalent period in 2015.

As with the previous two week period, the main type of offence seen during this period is violence against the person, the second and third most prevalent incidents were public order offences, followed by criminal damage.<sup>42</sup> Again a full breakdown of incidents was not provided.<sup>43</sup>

During the research for this report we made a request, using the Freedom of Information Act, of the NPCC, asking them for a breakdown of the hate crime incidents they reported in their press releases, by type of offence and the number of incidents per type of offence. The request was denied on the grounds that the information is not collated by the NPCC but is held by individual police forces.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/brexit-hate-crime-racism-reports-eu-referendum-latest-a7106116.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/30/police-report-fivefold-increase-race-hate-crimes-since-brexit-result>

[http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/post-brexit-racist-attacks-soar-hate-crimes-reported-to-police-increase-57\\_uk\\_57714594e4b08d2c5639adcb](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/post-brexit-racist-attacks-soar-hate-crimes-reported-to-police-increase-57_uk_57714594e4b08d2c5639adcb)

<sup>41</sup> <http://news.npcc.police.uk/releases/hate-crime-undermines-the-diversity-and-tolerance-we-should-instead-be-celebrating-1>

<sup>42</sup> <http://news.npcc.police.uk/releases/hate-crime-incidents-reported-to-police-have-reduced-following-a-spike-after-the-eu-referendum>

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/jul/11/police-blame-worst-rise-in-recorded-hate-on-eu-referendum>

<sup>44</sup> ‘The NPCC does not hold information captured your request. The numbers reported on the website pertaining to 16/06/2016 – 30/06/2016 are crimes and incidents reported to the police which incorporates True Vision incidents where a location is identified and a force is allocated a report. True Vision reported hate crimes and incidents are delivered directly to local police forces, the published totals incorporate True Vision reports. The reports are not processed centrally so the requested information would be held by local forces.’

#### iv. *Campaign groups' claims*

Subsequent to the referendum, several campaign groups have emerged that keep databases of hate crime. Three of the most note worthy are: PostRefRacism,<sup>45</sup> Worrying Signs,<sup>46</sup> and iStreetWatch.<sup>47</sup> All were founded in the immediate aftermath of the referendum and are predicated on the notion that racism has and will increase as a result of the Brexit vote. All have been extensively used as sources for media reports.

The way in which all three collate information is problematic. None seeks independent verification that an incident has taken place: they all simply log the reports as they come in. Each is effectively a catalogue of alleged incidents with no corroboration.

For example, iStreetWatch says that it logs incidents of racism or xenophobia that happen in public. It was started on 28<sup>th</sup> June 2016 as a response to the Brexit vote. However, many of the incidents appear to have nothing to do with the referendum. For example, the first logged incident is as follows: 'Manchester – 28<sup>th</sup> June. A group of young men hurled racist abuse at a fellow bus passenger. Telling him to "get back to Africa" and throwing beer on him.'<sup>48</sup>

If we take this incident at face value and assume that the reporting of it is completely accurate, it is still difficult to see what it has to do with the EU referendum or the campaign. However, the findings of iStreetWatch have been reported in press articles which make a link between the referendum and hate crimes, such as this report in *The Independent*: 'Racism unleashed: Incident by incident - the grim litany of post-Brexit hate crime'.<sup>49</sup>

In fact, most of the incidents logged on the websites of the different groups do not mention the EU referendum or Brexit. However, when the findings of the groups are reported, a link is usually established.

### Conclusion

There was a rise in reported hate crime incidents in the immediate aftermath of the EU referendum. Precisely what this signified, however, is open to question. First, it should be noted that the vast majority of recorded hate crime incidents consist of verbal harassment rather than physical violence. Further to that, the police definition of a hate crime is one that is 'perceived' by the victim to have been based on prejudice; this means that in the strictest sense the surge in reported incidents only represents a surge in perceived prejudice. This is an important caveat usually ignored in media coverage. Many crimes reported as being hate crimes, most notably including specific incidents that have been highlighted by the media in recent weeks, actually have little evidence to support them being classified as such. By the same token, there is usually little if anything to connect individual incidents with the EU referendum, even if there have been many more people reporting 'hate crimes' since the vote.

<sup>45</sup> <https://twitter.com/postrefracism>

<sup>46</sup> <https://worryingsigns.com/>

<sup>47</sup> <http://www.istreetwatch.co.uk/>

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.istreetwatch.co.uk/reports/timeline?page=12>

<sup>49</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/racism-unleashed-brexit-eu-referendum-post-referendum-racism-true-scale-of-post-eu-referendum-a7149836.html>

It should also be noted that reported hate crime has been trending upwards for the last few years, long before the EU referendum campaign began. Does this reflect a widespread increase in intolerance towards certain minorities? Or does it reflect the rising profile of hate crime as a category of offence and the opportunity to report it via, for example, True Vision? It is difficult to say with any certainty but there is no objective barometer signalling rising intolerance. Similarly with the surge in reports in the aftermath of the referendum. It seems as likely that reports of hate crime were being fuelled by the *perception* of a rise of intolerance, which was in turn fuelled by police and media reports driven by that perception, in a vicious circle.



55 Tufton Street, London SW1P 3QL

T: 020 7799 6677

E: [info@civitas.org.uk](mailto:info@civitas.org.uk)

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