

UNIT

Teaching About Hate Crimes and Their Impacts

Overview

About This Current Events Unit

This unit is designed to help students learn what hate crimes are and the impacts they have on both individuals and communities, including schools. The lessons also help students understand current trends in hate crimes, types of perpetrator behavior, actions that can help prevent hate crimes, and community initiatives that foster belonging. These resources were created in partnership with the Office for the Prevention of Hate Crimes (OPHC), part of the New York City Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice and the Mayor's Community Affairs Unit.

Essential Questions

These resources help students explore questions surrounding the impact of hate crimes, including:

- What makes hate crimes different from other crimes?
- How do hate crimes impact both individuals and communities?
- What do we know about the types of motives behind hate crimes, and how can this knowledge help with the prevention of hate crimes?
- How can communities work together to foster belonging and counteract hate?

Additional Context & Background

A hate crime is a crime that is motivated, at least in part, by bias. At the federal level, hate crimes include crimes that are committed because of the victim's real or perceived race, color, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, or disability. Most states have hate crime laws as well, and the characteristics protected by state laws vary. For example, New York includes age in addition to all the characteristics listed above, while Alabama includes only race, color, national origin, and disability.

Hate crimes can have a devastating impact, not only on survivors of the crimes but also on people who share an identity with the victim and on the health of communities as a whole. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, a hate crime “is more than an assault on the victim’s physical well-being. It is an assault on the victim’s essential human worth. A person who has been singled out for victimization based on some group characteristic—such as race, religion, or national origin—has, by that very act, been deprived of the right to participate in the life of the community on an equal footing for reasons that have nothing to do with what the victim did but everything to do with who the victim is.”¹

As the number of hate crimes committed in the United States increases, students need tools for processing news of hate crimes, understanding their impacts, and exploring how we can build strong communities that foster belonging.

Preparing to Teach

Teaching Note 1: Teaching Emotionally Challenging Content

In this unit, students will encounter descriptions of hate crimes and their impacts on people and communities. While we have chosen examples that we believe convey the seriousness of these crimes without being overly graphic, this topic is emotionally challenging and can elicit a range of emotional responses from students. We can’t emphasize enough the importance of previewing the resources in this curriculum to make sure they are appropriate for the intellectual and emotional needs of your students.

It is difficult to predict how students will respond to such challenging content. One student may respond with emotion to an account or source, while others may not find it powerful in the same way. In addition, different people demonstrate emotion in different ways. Some students will be silent. Some may laugh. Some may not want to talk. Some may take days to process difficult stories. For some, a particular firsthand account may be incomprehensible; for others, it may be familiar.

We urge teachers to create space for students to have a range of reactions and emotions, while also holding students accountable to your class norms. This might include allowing time for silent reflection or writing in journals, as well as facilitating structured discussions

¹ Amicus curiae brief of the American Civil Liberties Union, *Wisconsin v. Mitchell*, 1993, cited in Phyllis B. Gerstenfeld, *Hate Crimes: Causes, Controls, Controversies*, 4th ed. (SAGE Publications, 2017).

to help students process content together. Some students will not want to share their reactions to emotionally challenging content in class, and teachers should respect that in discussions. For their learning and emotional growth, it is crucial to allow for a variety of student responses to emotionally challenging content.

Teaching Note 2: Offensive and Dehumanizing Language

A reading in Activity 2 of Lesson 4 of this unit contains offensive images and slurs, including the n-word and a homophobic slur, the f-word. We advise against reading the racist and homophobic terms in this text aloud. Students/teachers could instead use the substitutions “F” or “the f-word” and “N” or “the n-word” if saying these aloud.

In life and in school, many students will encounter language that has been used historically to perpetuate racism and/or dehumanize people. Such language might be used to intentionally cause offense, and it might also be something they encounter in lessons, when reading literature or historical texts.

Teaching a text that includes racist or homophobic slurs or other derogatory words can elicit fear and anxiety in educators. As educators, we know that unless we prepare to address language with intention and care, we risk causing harm and creating inhospitable classroom environments where students may feel like they do not belong and where they cannot learn. Some racist and dehumanizing terms, such as the n-word, have the power to destabilize a classroom environment if they are encountered without adequate preparation or groundwork. In her talk [“Why It’s So Hard to Talk about the ‘N’ Word,”](#) Dr. Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor states: “I hear from students that when the word is said during a lesson without discussion and context, it poisons the entire classroom environment; the trust between student and teacher is broken” (11:31).

Such terms can also make students who belong to the targeted groups feel uncomfortable and singled out. In her talk, Stordeur Pryor goes on to say: “My black students tell me that when the word is spoken or quoted in class, they feel like a giant spotlight is shining on them” (12:32).

The dehumanizing power and loaded history of the n-word cannot be ignored, nor can the impact it may have on students if not handled sensitively. If it appears in texts or resources that are being used, it is necessary to acknowledge it, understand its problematic nature, and set guidelines for students when reading aloud or quoting from the text. Otherwise, the presence of this word might both harm students and distract them from an open

discussion on a particular topic. We can benefit from applying this same understanding and approach whenever students encounter dehumanizing language in the course of learning. If you realize that you will be asking students to hear, process, and discuss passages with dehumanizing language on a regular basis, however, it is important to reflect on the purpose of the text and its cost to students' emotional well-being.

As always when discussing sensitive topics that may provoke feelings of fear, anger, or concern, it is helpful to revisit your [class contract](#) and remind students of your classroom norms for respectful and safe discussion.

Explore the Resources

Mini-Lessons in This Unit:

1. What Makes Hate Crimes Different From Other Crimes?

In the first mini-lesson in a five-part series, students learn about what hate crimes are and how they can take care of themselves and others while learning about hate crimes.

2. How Do Hate Crimes Impact People and Communities?

In the second mini-lesson in a five-part series, students learn about the impact hate crimes have on people and communities, and the importance of fostering belonging in our communities.

3. Who Are the Victims and Perpetrators of Hate Crimes?

In the third mini-lesson in a five-part series, students explore the data on survivors of hate crimes, as well as research on the motives and behavior of perpetrators.

4. How Do Hate Crimes Impact Schools?

In the fourth mini-lesson in a five-part series, students learn about the impact a hate crime committed by a group of high school seniors had on their school.

5. How Can People Promote Belonging in Their Communities?

In the fifth mini-lesson in a five-part series, students learn about community initiatives that promote belonging and counteract hate.

Additional Resources:

[Explainer: What Is a Hate Crime and How Do Hate Crimes Impact People?](#)

This explainer helps students understand what hate crimes are, the impact they can have on individuals and communities, and what we know about the victims and perpetrators of hate crimes.

[Teaching in the Wake of Violence](#)

This mini-lesson contains strategies and activities for supporting your students in the immediate aftermath of violent events targeted at people because of their identities.

[Trauma-Informed Teaching in Action: An Expert Interview](#)

This article shares insights from two experts on how to bring trauma-informed practices to the classroom in addition to teaching from an equity-centered lens.