

CSI 34: Did hate crime double after Brexit?

Summary

- Racially or religiously motivated hate crime in Britain increased by 111.8% between 2011 and 2018.
- Racially or religiously motivated hate crime spiked following both the EU referendum and Manchester Arena bombing in May 2017
- Accounting for time trends and patterns in overall crime, the increase in hate crime after the EU referendum has been over-stated elsewhere, but there was nonetheless a clear increase
- The increase in violent hate crime does not appear to be purely ‘cosmetic’ – it cannot simply be attributed to increased police efforts to pursue these offences or to changed reporting practices

Introduction

On August 29th, 2016 Arkadiusz Józwick, a 40-year old Polish man living in Essex, died after being punched in the head by a young British citizenⁱ. Mr. Józwick’s death occurred in the midst of reports of increasing hate crime incidents in the UK – including the murder of MP Jo Cox – in the weeks leading up to and following the UK’s vote to leave the EU^{ii iii iv vvi}. Concerns about hate crime likewise prompted the Home Affairs Committee to launch an ongoing inquiry into hate crime and its violent consequences^{vii}. This briefing note examines the available data to determine whether hate crime in Britain really did increase after the Brexit referendum.

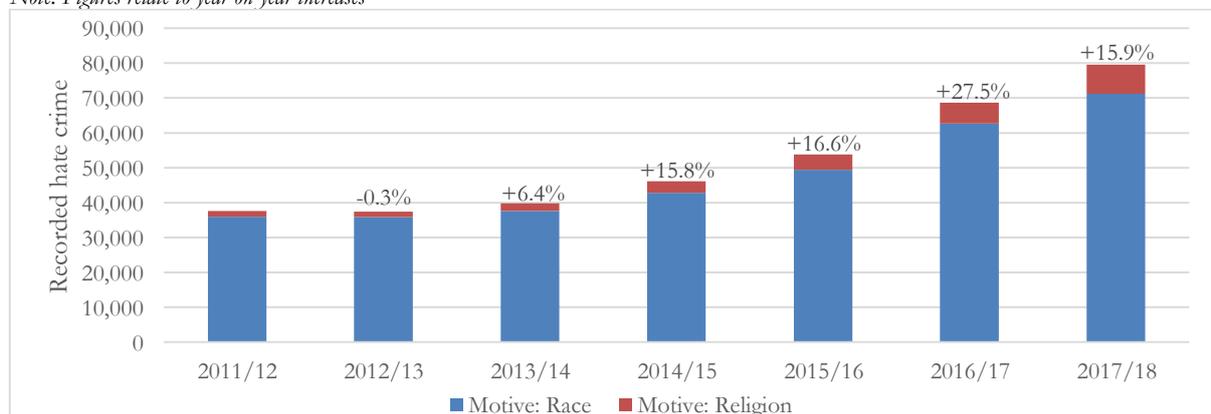
Is hate crime on the rise in Britain?

Figure 1 shows trends in racially and religiously aggravated crime for England and Wales between 2011/2012 and 2017/2018 based on police force data compiled by the Home Office. Hate crime motivated by race or religion – which accounted for 84.5 per cent of the total hate crime offences recorded in 2017/2018 – has been steadily increasing in recent years and more than doubled over this period. Furthermore, the largest variation in hate crime was recorded between 2015/2016 and 2016/2017, where the annual increase of 27.5 per cent was nearly double the average year-to-year variation of 13.6 per cent over this period. The 2017/2018 Statistical Bulletin on Hate Crime in England and Wales did however highlight that part of this trend is believed to be driven by growing public awareness and improvements in police reporting standards.

Figure 1: Racially and religiously motivated hate crime in England and Wales more than doubled between 2011/12 to 2017/18

Source: Home Office^{viii}

Note: Figures relate to year-on-year increases



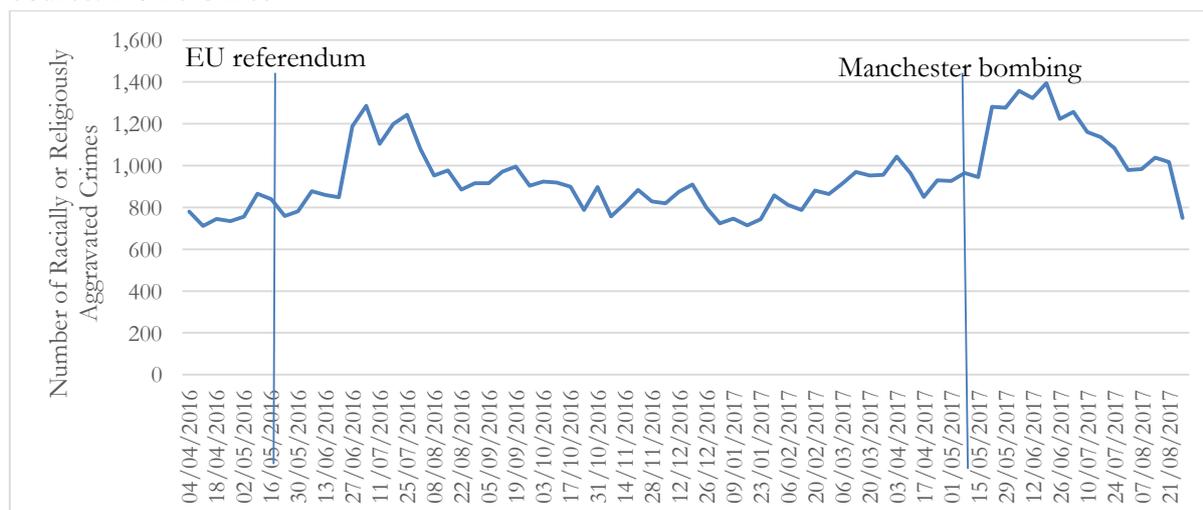
What is hate crime?

According to the definition agreed by the Crown Prosecution Service, UK police forces, and other relevant bodies, hate crime is defined as “any crime where the perpetrator’s hostility or prejudice against an identifiable group of people is a factor in determining who is victimised”. Evidence of hostility includes words or actions around the time of the offence that are abusive towards a personal characteristic or presumed personal characteristic, such as a hijab, a yarmulke or a mobility aid. In this briefing note we focus on hate crime relating to race or ethnicity, and religion or beliefs, although data are also collected on the strands of sexual orientation, disability, and transgender identity.

Did hate crime increase after Brexit?

“The environment leading up to the referendum, the environment during the referendum, and the environment after the referendum has made racial and ethnic minorities more vulnerable to racial discrimination and intolerance” pronounced the UN Special Rapporteur on racism in May 2018^{ix}. Figure 2 shows weekly counts of recorded hate crime in England and Wales between April 2016 and August 2017^x. Hate crime spiked in the week of the EU membership referendum and remained substantially higher than the pre-referendum period, before declining to previous levels during August 2016. Another large spike in hate crime is also observable in the week of the Manchester Arena bombing on May 22nd, 2017, where reports of “doubling hate crime” emerged following the terrorist attack^{xi}. Both the EU referendum and the terrorist attack in Manchester have acted as “trigger events”, which are theorised to result in one group acting on a grievance against another^{xii}. The effect of specific triggering events on hate crime has been widely reported, spanning from terrorist attacks^{xiii} to refugees’ recent influx in Germany^{xiv}.

Figure 2: Police-recorded hate crime rose after the EU referendum and Manchester bombing
Source: Home Office^{xv}



Did hate crime *really* increase after Brexit?

When exploring these patterns, Full Fact – a non-partisan factchecking organisation – estimated that the number of police-recorded racially or religiously aggravated offences was 41 per cent higher in July 2016 than July 2015, the biggest annual increase since January 2013^{xvi}. However, these figures represent naïve estimates of the effect of the Referendum itself on hate crime, since they do not account for the ongoing rise in hate crime, and general underlying crime trends, which complicate matters.

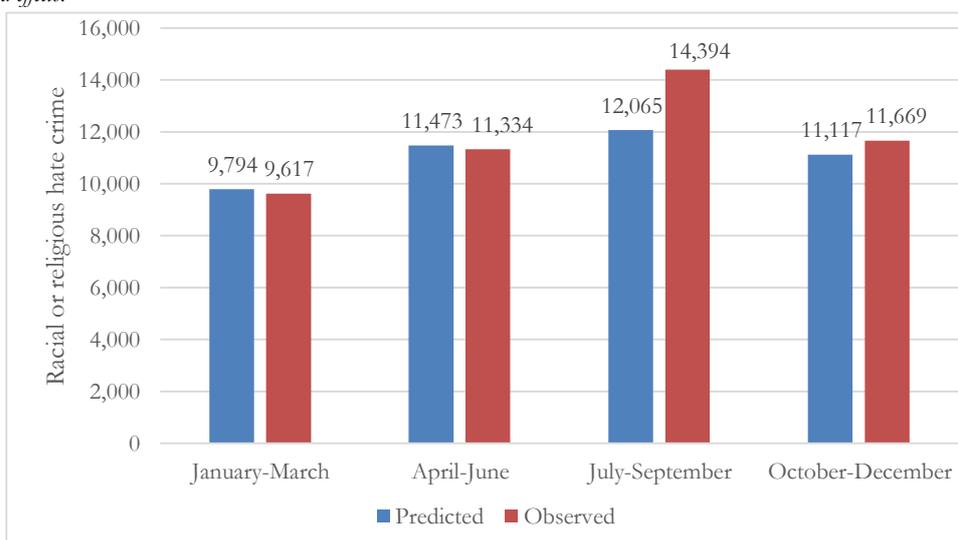
Figure 3: Hate crime after the EU referendum increased by 19.2 points more than predicted

Source: Home Office police recorded crime data.

Note: Predictions based on regression estimates where hate crime is explained by seasonal effects and an overall time trend for the years 2011-2015, accounting for police-force fixed effects.

Figure 3

compares quarterly police reported hate crime figures in 2016 with predicted levels of hate crime, based on a model which leverages all available data prior to 2016 to account for seasonal effects



and overall trends in hate crime. We see that levels of hate crime for the period January-June 2016 were not significantly different from the predicted values. Focusing only on the difference between April-June and July-September, we estimate that hate crime increased by 21.5 per cent in the three months following the EU referendum. In the same period, equivalent non-hate crime (crime which falls under the same four categories used to record hate crime but not flagged as such), increased 2.3 per cent more than predicted. This implies that hate crime “unexpectedly” increase by 19.2 percent after the EU Referendum.

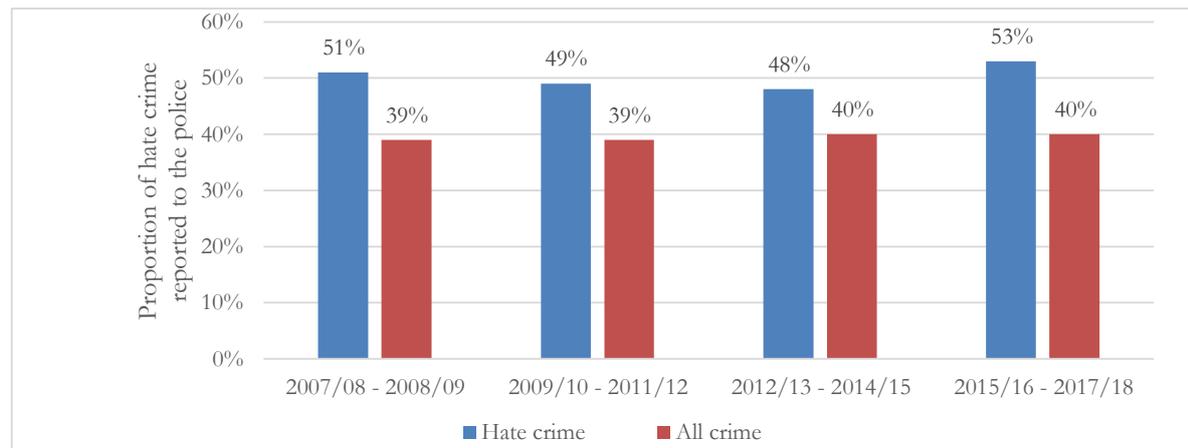
What are “unexpected” rises in hate crime?

When discussing changes over time, it is important to define a benchmark to anchor our expectations. Increased levels of hate crime after June 2016 could have been driven not by the Referendum itself but by overall trends in total crime, or by cyclical factors occurring at the same time. These factors make it more difficult to understand whether hate crime did increase following the Referendum vote. Historical data are valuable here: the increase in hate crime recorded after the Brexit referendum was not matched by comparable rises prior to the Referendum, demonstrating that the increase was “unexpected”, compared to its historical variation in the same period.

Does the apparent increase in hate crime simply reflect changing reporting practices?

Figure 4: The proportion of hate crime reported to police has not changed over time

Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales^{xvii}



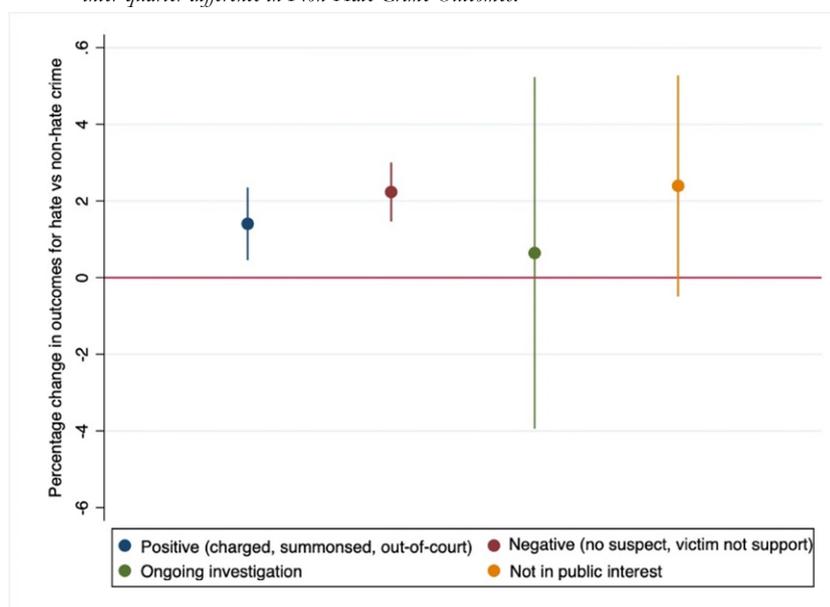
Revised interpretations now suggest that Arkadiusz Józwik was not targeted because of his nationality and was instead killed in an altercation with his attacker. As Ross Clark wrote in *The Spectator*: “*The idea that the referendum unleashed a frenzy of violence against foreigners culminating in the murder of Arek Jozwik [...] has turned out not to be true*”, and argued that a greater proportion of hate crimes were now reported to police^{xviii}. The police may be correspondingly more likely to record reported incidents, and to flag them as hate crimes^{xix}. To explore this possibility, Figure 4 displays the proportion of hate and non-hate crimes reported to the police between 2007/08 and 2017/18. Contradicting Clark, there are no clear changes in reporting practices over time, demonstrating that the increase in racially and religiously motivated hate crime did not reflect a growing tendency for victims to report hate crime.

Have the police changed their responses to hate crime?

Figure 5: There is no evidence of increased police effort after Brexit

Source: Home Office police recorded crime data

Note: Coefficients are estimated using a Difference-in-Differences model, where inter-quarter difference in Hate Crime Outcomes are compared to the inter-quarter difference in Non-Hate Crime Outcomes.



Apparent increases in hate crime could alternatively reflect changing police efforts. In Figure 5 we take advantage of the fact that police force data are periodically updated to link crime instances with their outcomes. These outcomes were categorised as positive (suspect charged, summonsed, or cases of out-of-court settlement) or negative (suspect not identified, or other types of evidential difficulties, including victims not supporting the investigation). We also include

two other categories: one for crimes where the investigation remains open (a proxy for police effort) and the second for crimes not considered in the public interest by the police. If police alertness towards hate crime increased after Brexit, we would expect the latter category to shrink after the Referendum. Figure 5 illustrates changes in these four outcomes in the three months after the referendum, compared to levels recorded in the three months before, and to the inter-quarter change in outcomes recorded for equivalent non-hate crimes. We see that both positive and negative outcomes increased significantly following the EU referendum. However, we do not observe significant changes in the number of ongoing investigations, nor in the number of cases that are discarded as not in the public interest. Taken together, the increase in hate crime did not appear to be driven by changes in reporting.

Conclusions

In this CSI Briefing Note, we have leveraged a range of publicly available data sources to track the dynamics of racially and religiously aggravated hate crime in the aftermath of the UK's European Union membership referendum in June 2016. Several reports had suggested that hate crime increased drastically after the referendum, indicating Brexit as a leading force of deteriorating social cohesion in the country. These claims have frequently relied on anecdotal or, at best, descriptive evidence and failed to take into account potential biases related to data quality issues. Based on police force data, we have shown that a spike in hate crime is empirically observable and robust when accounting for time trends and contextual patterns in overall crime. We estimated that the “surprise” increase in hate crime in England and Wales after the Referendum equalled 19.2 per cent, revising down the widely popularised 41 per cent estimate. Vis-à-vis claims that the observed increase is “cosmetic”, and driven by more frequent reporting of hate crime rather than actual crime, we have shown that reporting of violent hate crime did not significantly change throughout the period. Additionally, there is no sound empirical evidence to claim that the observed increase is driven by police forces making more efforts to pursue these crimes.

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Sources of data on hate crime

In Britain, hate crime statistics are based on two main data sources. The first is police recorded crime, where hate crime is grouped into public order, harassment, criminal damage, and violent offences (with or without injuries), and is available quarterly. However, the UK Statistics Authority judged in 2014 these figures did not meet required standards for designation as National Statistics.

Second, the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) is a victimisation survey that focusses on people's experiences of offences, including hate motivated offences, over the past 12 months in England and Wales. CSEW data has certain advantages over police recorded crime data: it covers crimes that are not reported to the police, and is unaffected by police activity, which may be particularly relevant when examining hate crime after key events. The CSEW is considered a reliable indicator for long-term trends, particularly for common crimes, but the number of hate crime incidents and victims is too small to provide reliable annual estimates. Hate crime statistics based on the CSEW are therefore reported in aggregate form over multiple years, making it unsuitable for studying short-term variations in hate crime.

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- ^{iv} Financial Times, “Hate crimes in UK surge 41% after Brexit vote”, 13th October 2016. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/sep/07/hate-surged-after-eu-referendum-police-figures-show>
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- ^{vii} Home Affairs Committee (2017) Abuse, hate and extremism online. Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmhaff/609/60902.htm>
- ^{viii} Home Office - Hate crime, England and Wales, 2017/2018, Bulletin Tables – Hate crimes recorded by the police, by monitored strand, 2011/2012 to 2017/2018. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hate-crime-england-and-wales-2017-to-2018>
- ^{ix} UNA-UK, “Taking forward the UN’s fight against racism”, Available at: <https://www.una.org.uk/magazine/2018-1/taking-forward-un-s-fight-against-racism>
- ^x Home Office - Hate crime, England and Wales, 2016/2017, Bulletin Tables – Number of racially or religiously aggravated offences recorded by the police, 38 forces, April 2016 to August 2017. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hate-crime-england-and-wales-2016-to-2017>
- ^{xi} BBC, “Manchester attack: Hate crime ‘doubles’ after incident”, 27th May 2017. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-40064424>
- ^{xii} King, R. D. & Sutton, G. M. (2013), High times for hate crimes: explaining the temporal clustering of hate-motivate offending. *Criminology*, 51: 871-894.
- ^{xiii} *ibidem*
- ^{xiv} Jäckle, S. & König, P.D. (2017) The dark side of the German ‘welcome culture’: investigating the causes behind attacks on refugees in 2015, *West European Politics*, 40:2, 223-251
- ^{xv} Home Office - Hate crime, England and Wales, 2016/2017, Bulletin Tables – Number of racially or religiously aggravated offences recorded by the police, 38 forces, April 2016 to August 2017. 2018. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hate-crime-england-and-wales-2016-to-2017>
- ^{xvi} Full Fact, “Hate crime and the EU referendum”, 20th October 2016. Available at: <https://fullfact.org/crime/hate-crime-and-eu-referendum/>
- ^{xvii} Home Office - Hate crime, England and Wales, 2017/2018, Table 3.2 – Percentage of CSEW crime incidents reported to the police, 2007/08 and 2008/09, 2009/10 to 2011/12, 2012/13 to 2014/15 and 2015/16 to 2017/18. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hate-crime-england-and-wales-2017-to-2018>.
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