Predicting bias homicide across victim groups: A county-level analysis

Kayla Allison[a,*], Casey T. Harris[b]

[a] Departments of Criminal Justice and Sociology, Indiana University-Bloomington, 302 Sycamore Hall, Bloomington, IN 47405, United States
[b] Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice, University of Arkansas, 525 Old Main, Fayetteville, AR 72701, United States

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Outside several notable exceptions, few studies have examined variations in bias crime occurrences across American communities, and how community-level factors may differentially shape violent and non-violent bias crimes across victim groups. Drawing from ecological theories of crime, this study asks, (1) what are the structural predictors of the likelihood of bias homicide occurrences? and (2) how do structural predictors differ across bias victim groups? To answer these questions, data on bias homicide are derived from the United States Extremist Crime Database (ECDB) for the years 1990 through 2014 and paired with socio- structural variables from the United States Census Bureau. Results are discussed relative to the goals of understanding where fatal bias crimes are more likely to occur as a means of informing law enforcement and policymakers interested in preventing and responding to this specific form of crime.

1. Introduction

Interest in lethal violence motivated by hate or bias[1] has risen in recent years, largely spurred by sensational incidents and the accompanying media and political spectacles surrounding them (Colomb and Damphousse, 2004).[2] In response, scholars have focused on the important task of examining bias crime as a distinct type of offending. On the one hand, micro-level empirical scholarship has found that bias-motivated offenses differ from more routine crime types in terms of their offenders, victims, extent of injury, and co-offending (Klein and Allison, 2017; Levin and McDevitt, 1993; Martin, 1996; Messner et al., 2004). On the other hand, a growing body of macro-level literature has begun to examine the ecological correlates of bias crime in the United States to better understand the environments in which these crimes are most likely to occur and how these environments might be similar to or different from those places where routine crimes most often take place.

While this latter line of inquiry has made important strides, including establishing differences between bias crime and routine crime more generally (see Grattet, 2009; Lyons, 2007), a number of shortcomings remain. First, researchers have yet to establish if bias homicide is more likely to occur in places where traditional homicides occur or to examine how the types of places where bias homicide occurs might differ across bias victim groups (e.g., race/ethnicity, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender [LGBT], homeless). In light of significant differences found in individual-level characteristics of bias crime across victim groups (see Gruenewald and Allison 2018; Martin, 1996; Messner et al., 2004; Stacey, 2011), it is important to examine if and how victim-based differences may also be

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reflected at more aggregate levels. Second, research has often utilized varying levels of analysis (dependent upon both research question and the availability of official bias crime data) and, as such, the community markers associated with bias crime remain unsettled. For instance, some research finds poverty and measures of social disorganization to be positively associated with state-level bias crime (Gale et al., 2002; Medoff, 1999), while scholars utilizing smaller units (e.g., counties, cities, neighborhoods) have found no evidence that bias crime is more likely to occur in comparatively more impoverished communities (for example, see Green et al., 1998a,b; Lyons, 2007). Thus, much of what is known about how bias crime varies across locales remains unsettled.

Overall then, and despite the significant contributions to bias crime research made over the previous two decades, much remains to be done to understand the ways in which important social-structural factors shape bias homicide across American communities. The purpose of the proposed research is to utilize an alternative database and measurement strategy to explore the relationships between ecological conditions and specific types of bias homicide across United States counties, while contextualizing these findings within macro theory. In doing so, our study not only illustrates an important methodological consideration by disaggregating bias homicides into types, but makes a theoretical contribution by exploring the utility of macro-sociological theories for explaining bias homicides as compared to lethal violence more generally, as well as in laying the foundation for more direct theorizing aimed at explaining the occurrence of specific bias homicides types. For example, building off of group threat (Blalock, 1967) and social disorganization theories (Shaw and McKay, 1942), we specifically examine the differences in the types of communities that do and do not experience the most serious form of bias crime, homicide. Although we do not offer a complete test of the two theories, understanding if and how social-structural conditions related to both theories affects bias homicide uniquely from routine homicide, as well as between bias victim groups, remains important both conceptually (through disaggregation) and theoretically.[3] In sum, two related questions are asked: *(1) What are the structural predictors of the likelihood of bias homicide occurrences*? and *(2) How do structural predictors differ across bias victim groups?* To answer these questions, we draw on bias homicide data from the United States Extremist Crime Database (ECDB) (Freilich et al., 2014), an open-source database that includes information on violent crimes committed in the United States against persons based on their social identities.

More broadly, the current study advances the extant literature in three crucial ways. First, we recognize that official crime data sources have historically underrepresented bias crime in many American communities, as law enforcement agencies often fail to classify crimes as bias-motivated. In response, we rely on an alternate open-source database that includes information on bias homicides that are officially classified as bias-motivated by police, as well as those that never are recorded for various reasons that we elaborate on below. In utilizing this database, a second advantage is that we are able to compare victim groups with a history of federal protections (i.e., race/ethnicity groups), to victim groups that have acquired federal protections more recently (i.e., LGBT groups), and to victim groups that have state-level protections in some areas but are not yet considered a federally-protected group (i.e., homeless persons). Indeed, the reliability of official bias crime data over extended periods of time is questionable and, as such, remains incapable of addressing the distinction between these various bias homicide types. Finally, third, we avoid making assumptions of homogeneity across bias crime types. Whereas many previous studies combine both serious and more minor offenses (as well as lethal and non-lethal), we focus exclusively on bias homicide that occurred in the United States between 1990 and 2014. We center our analytical focus on cases of bias homicide not only because they are the most harmful to communities, but also because fatal attacks are the most likely to produce the largest volume of publicly available information from which data can be systematically garnered (Chermak, 1995; Graber, 1980).

The current study unfolds as follows. First, we review prior empirical research on bias crime, focusing in particular on extant macro-level research and the persistent problems within this literature. Second, we draw on prominent sociological and criminological theories to discuss the expected relationships between key social-structural features of communities and the likelihood of (a) total/overall bias homicide and (b) bias homicide disaggregated by victim group. Third, we describe the parameters of the current study, including the sources of data, the methodology employed, and the results of the empirical models. Fourth, we discuss the implications of these findings relative to both prior research and theorizing, while simultaneously identifying directions for future research.

2. Theory and prior evidence

Bias crime research to date has largely focused at the individual level of analysis on differences in the circumstances, as well as the victim and offender characteristics, of bias crime incidents as compared to criminal events more generally (Green et al., 2001). While some researchers have found that thrill-seeking bias-motivated offenders often commit non-bias related crimes as well (Levin and McDevitt, 1993), individual-level research relying on official data has demonstrated important differences between bias crime and non-bias offenders. For instance, bias crimes are more likely to involve multiple offenders (Martin, 1996) and these offenders tend to be younger than those participating in similar non-bias crimes (Martin, 1996). Likewise, the extent of injury to victims tends to be greater in bias incidents (Messner et al., 2004) and involve multiple victims (Martin, 1996). In short, bias motivated offenders and the circumstances of their offending differ from non-bias crime important ways.

Increasingly, however, others have sought to examine the broader contextual factors associated with aggregate rates or

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[3] It should be noted, however, that it is beyond the scope of the current study to definitively test each of these theories because (a) relevant variables are shared across perspectives (e.g., racial composition within a geographic locale) that cannot be used to adjudicate one perspective from another, as well as (b) both social disorganization and group threat perspective include a variety of conditional and mediating processes that are not able to be operationalized given our geographic scope and the sources of data that we draw upon.