New study reveals scale of underreporting of hate incidents in Poland

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A new ODIHR-sponsored study shows a high level of underreporting of hate incidents targeting sub-Saharan Africans, Muslims and Ukrainians in Poland.
Hate crimes [2] undermine entire communities. Knowing the scale of the problem is essential to countering these crimes effectively. Governments, civil society groups and international organizations can use victimization surveys to understand how different communities are affected by hate crime. These surveys also give an indication of how many victims are not reporting hate crimes to the police and are used in many states, such as Canada [3], Sweden [4] and the United Kingdom [5]. While the results can be surprising and potentially disappointing, victimization surveys are not an indictment of any one country's approach but an important tool to shine a light on the problem. Their findings can play an essential role in developing tailored public policies that focus on the needs and rights of victims.

The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the Commissioner for Human Rights of Poland sponsored a victimization survey focusing on underreported hate crimes in Poland as part of the Building a Comprehensive Criminal Justice Response to Hate Crimes [6] project. Implemented by Ipsos Poland, the study focuses on three groups: Ukrainians, Muslims and sub-Saharan Africans. These groups were selected because of the bias related to the relative size of the group in Poland, their religion, or the colour of their skin.

Find out more about the methodology behind this survey, its results [7] and how you can implement a similar study in your country [8].

The definition of hate crime used in this study comes from the Polish Criminal Code. This includes incidents of hate speech and insults, which fall outside the OSCE's definition of hate crime. For clarity, the term "hate incidents" will be used throughout this article.

What was the survey?
The survey contained two parts: a qualitative study and a respondent-driven sampling (RDS) survey. For the qualitative study, Ipsos conducted in-depth individual and group interviews among members of the communities selected for the study and among the leaders of organizations that support those communities. The findings of this qualitative research were used to develop questionnaires, design the methodology and organize research for the RDS survey, which relies on respondents to recruit subsequent participants in the study.

During fieldwork conducted between 5 February and 6 June 2018, 273 Ukrainians were surveyed in Krakow (Lesser Poland region), while 194 Muslims and 176 sub-Saharan Africans were surveyed in Warsaw (Mazovian region).

The proportion of individuals experiencing violence and hate incidents was compared to the size of populations included in the study, inhabitants of the Mazovian region for Muslims and for sub-Saharan Africans, and of those of the Lesser Poland region for Ukrainians. The surveyed groups’ experience of hate incidents in Poland was disaggregated by type of incident as defined by law, including insults, threats, violations of physical integrity, damage to property, the use of violence and sexual assault. Researchers classified these offences as hate incidents when the respondents stated that the attack was motivated by bias based on the victim’s nationality, language, religion or the colour of their skin.

What did the survey show?

Our study found that sub-Saharan Africans were the most vulnerable to hate incidents, with more than 40% of respondents from this group having experienced a hate incident between 2016 and 2017. Of these, 17% of respondents were victims of physical attacks, the highest proportion for any of the surveyed groups (see image below). Sub-Saharan Africans interviewed during the study expressed a strong conviction that the majority of crimes against them, including thefts, were motivated by bias. Skin colour was the most frequently cited motivation.

While physical assaults were the main type of incidents affecting sub-Saharan Africans, insults were the most common type of incident targeting Muslims. Muslim respondents often cited both their skin colour and religion as motivating factors for the hate incidents.

Finally, Ukrainians who said they were victims of hate incidents frequently cited speaking in the
What is the scale of the problem?

While the study gathered data from a fraction of all the people living in the Mazovian and Lesser Poland regions, the method used in the survey enables the calculation of the estimated number of migrants who were victims of hate incidents in 2016 and 2017, as well as the estimated number of incidents each studied group experienced. This allows us a much better understand the scale of the problem.

To calculate the estimated total number of hate incidents experienced by each of the surveyed groups, the total size of the population was multiplied by the average hate incident rate reported by survey respondents. We used the total size of the population of each surveyed group: sub-Saharan Africans (4,863), Muslims (27,946) and Ukrainians (536,949) with the percentage of survey respondents who experienced hate incidents in order to calculate the estimated number of victims from the surveyed population in these two regions.

Confronting underreporting
The vast majority of respondents who told us of hate incidents they had experienced within the framework of the survey did not report them to the police, although many had experienced multiple offences.

These research results confirm that hate crimes are underreported in Poland, a reality that reflects the results that are found in other states that conduct victimization surveys.

Respondents had a number of reasons for not reporting these incidents to the police, including fear of victimization and mistrust towards the local police. These will be explored in more detail in an upcoming article.

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