

Highlights of GAO-20-6, a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

On average, 205,000 U.S. residents report being victims of hate crimes every year, according to DOJ officials. Hate crimes, including those motivated by bias against an actual or perceived religion, can have a broader effect than other kinds of violent crimes because they target both the victim and the group the victim represents. GAO was asked to review religious-based hate crimes on college campuses.

This report reviews 1) the prevalence of religious-based hate crimes and bias incidents on college campuses; 2) what steps colleges are taking to address them; and 3) the extent to which Education and DOJ help colleges, campus law enforcement, and other stakeholders monitor and address these crimes and bias incidents.

GAO analyzed DOJ and Education hate crime data from 2009 through 2017, the years for which all relevant data are available. GAO reviewed studies to identify college practices to address this issue as well as Education and DOJ policies, programs, and resources that could help colleges, campus law enforcement, and other stakeholders monitor and address these crimes and bias incidents, and how the information is shared. GAO also interviewed representatives of 16 stakeholder groups, including college associations, campus and public safety organizations, and religious groups.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOJ update, centralize, and share more information about its resources to help address religious-based hate crimes on college campuses. DOJ agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View GAO-20-6. For more information, contact Melissa Emrey-Arras at (617) 788-0534 or emreyarrasm@gao.gov.

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RELIGIOUS-BASED HATE CRIMES

DOJ Needs to Improve Support to Colleges Given Increasing Reports on Campuses

What GAO Found

Data from the Departments of Education (Education) and Justice (DOJ) show an increasing number of reported religious-based hate crimes on college campuses during the past decade. While these agencies collect slightly different data, crimes reported to Education have increased from 103 in 2009 to 189 in 2017, and crimes reported to DOJ increased from 24 to 59. These trends were largely driven by increased reports of anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim crimes, according to DOJ data. However, DOJ officials and some stakeholders GAO interviewed said DOJ data likely undercount these crimes due to underreporting. Although no federal agencies collect data on the frequency of religious bias incidents—non-criminal acts motivated by bias against a religious group—representatives of eight of the sixteen stakeholder groups GAO interviewed said the prevalence of these incidents on college campuses is also increasing.

Incident Reported to Education and DOJ as a Religious-based Hate Crime



Source: Rya Inman, Columbia Daily Spectator (photo). | GAO-20-6

In 2018, swastikas were found on the office walls of a Jewish professor who is a Holocaust scholar, according to several news outlets. The incident was reported as a religious-based hate crime to the Department of Education (Education), according to a senior college official, and to the Department of Justice (DOJ), according to a local law enforcement agent.

To prevent and respond to religious-based hate crimes and bias incidents on campuses, stakeholders GAO interviewed said some colleges have encouraged reporting, implemented new policies, and educated students and staff about their effects. Such efforts must be informed by First Amendment considerations at public colleges. Some colleges have also worked to promote religious tolerance, communicate publicly about crimes, and build relationships with religious groups.

Education and DOJ provide information and other resources to help colleges, campus law enforcement, and other stakeholders monitor and address religious-based hate crimes and bias incidents, but key DOJ information does not reflect new trends—such as changes in technology—and is difficult to find. For example, DOJ's publication most relevant to religious-based hate crimes and bias incidents on campuses and college practices to combat them was published in 2001 and does not reflect new trends or evolving college practices to address them. Further, colleges wishing to learn about DOJ resources must review almost 80 linked webpages or be routed to the homepages of five DOJ offices. DOJ officials said they share information about agency resources with colleges via newsletters, presentations, or the agency's website, but 10 out of 16 stakeholder groups GAO interviewed said they or their college members were unaware of DOJ's resources. Until DOJ makes up-to-date information easy to find and shares this information with colleges, campus law enforcement, and other stakeholders, these groups may miss opportunities to effectively use the resources to address these crimes and bias incidents.