



Islamophobic hate crime

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Summary of report 2021:3

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Summary

The aims of the report

The Swedish National for Crime Prevention (Brå) has been instructed by the government to investigate the characteristics of Islamophobic hate crime. This includes describing the nature of the offences, the people who have been subjected to them, who the perpetrators are (when possible), and the consequences of the crimes. The aim is to provide improved knowledge that will strengthen the work to prevent racism, and Islamophobia in particular.

The results are based on interviews and police investigations

Brå's commission from the government concerns describing the nature of Islamophobic hate crime on the basis of a broad perspective, rather than describing or attempting to identify its extent. For this reason, the study mainly employs a qualitative approach, and two primary data sources have been used to address the study's research questions. The first consists of 500 cases that have been reported to the police. These data include police reports and investigations from the years 2016 and 2018, which have been identified in Brå's hate crime statistics as featuring Islamophobic content. The second consists of more than 50 interviews that have been conducted with private individuals, representatives of Muslim congregations, associations and organisations, researchers and key informants working in the justice system. Almost four-fifths of those interviewed had themselves experienced exposure to Islamophobic hate crime.

Definitions and assumptions

According to Swedish law, the concept of hate crime is based on three different legal provisions: agitation against a population group, unlawful discrimination, and a penalty enhancement provision, which states that any form of crime may be regarded as a hate crime if a motive for the offence was to insult a person or a population group on grounds of

race, colour, national or ethnic origin, religious belief, sexual orientation, transgender identity or expression, or another similar circumstance.

Hate crimes can be committed in situations that also feature other types of abusive treatment or discrimination, and the experience of exposure to hate crime is also affected by these acts or prejudices. It is therefore important to bear this in mind in order to be able to understand the kinds of consequences hate crimes can have for different groups. In addition to studying criminal offences, Brå has therefore decided to also include and describe potential non-criminal expressions of Islamophobia. Further reasons for this approach include previous research, which has shown that many people who live in Sweden have stereotypical and negative perceptions about Muslims, and that these perceptions and ideas help to provide a breeding ground for hate crime and discrimination. Not everybody who has negative attitudes towards Muslims is guilty of Islamophobic acts, but it is reasonable to assume that the majority of perpetrators have such attitudes. There are also situations in which it may be difficult to identify a specific act as a hate crime – both for individual victims and for the justice system.

Islamophobic hate crime takes many forms

The main conclusion of the study is that Islamophobic hate crimes take many forms and are not restricted to any particular type of place, time or person. Among the police reports examined in the study, threats and molestation represent the largest crime category, followed by agitation against a population group, defamation, violent offences and graffiti.

Some of these expressions of Islamophobia are more common than others in the events described in both the police reports and in the interviews conducted in the study, such as abusive language, pushing, and “veil-pulling” (which primarily affects Muslim women in public places). Other recurring examples include neighbours who are guilty of repeated threats and harassment, agitation against the Muslim minority on social media, and crimes of varying degrees of severity aimed at mosques. Unlawful discrimination is relatively uncommon among the police reports, but the interviews reveal several experiences of various kinds of discriminatory behaviour. Prejudicial behaviour and microaggression constitute other

forms of abusive treatment found in the narratives of those interviewed.

Anti-Muslim comments frequent among perpetrators

Muslims in Sweden comprise a diverse collective of individuals who identify themselves as Muslim for cultural, traditional, historical, religious or other reasons. They have a background in many different parts of the world, many are born in Sweden, and a large proportion can be considered secular. Brå's interviews reveal a perception that today's political and media discourse is contributing to the reinforcement of an 'us and them' perspective, whereby Muslims are assigned certain characteristics based on the assumption that all Muslims share the same traits.

The experiences described in Brå's data reflect the prejudices found in the field of Islamophobic thought, and there are clear links to events in the wider world and to discussions associated with so-called anti-establishment politics. Examples include the word 'Muslim' being used together with swearwords, Muslims being talked about using various dehumanising terms, such as rats or parasites, and also the frequent use of war-related references. In addition, the material also includes many examples of misogynous comments about Muslim women. References to conspiracy theories also feature among the statements made by perpetrators.

Visibility can trigger Islamophobia

The results provide support for findings reported in previous research – namely, that there is no particular 'type' of Muslim who is subjected to hate crime. There are variations in gender, age, occupation and life circumstances in general. However, a number of risk situations have been identified, which are directly related to different forms of visibility. This may, for example, involve wearing various forms of religious apparel in public places, or media exposure (regardless of context).

Non-Muslims are also subjected to Islamophobia when they are perceived to have had contacts or been associated with people who are regarded as having a Muslim identity, or with issues that concern Muslims. This group includes religious representatives, researchers, journalists and politicians.

Some Muslims are more exposed than others

The frequency with which people are subjected to Islamophobia, and the nature of this exposure, varies depending on other perceived characteristics, such as a person's gender, skin colour, social class and ethnicity, etc. This means that certain Muslims experience particularly high levels of exposure, and for certain Muslim women Islamophobic expressions of varying degrees of severity are perceived as being part of everyday life. The occurrence of 'overlapping' exposure makes the study of these types of hate crime more difficult. It is hard to isolate the significance of a person's Muslim status, for example, when the perpetrator has also made negative comments about the person's skin colour or their assumed ethnic origin.

Perpetrators are found in all groups, but older people and men are over-represented

It is generally difficult to produce a representative picture of the perpetrators of Islamophobic hate crime – not least because of the tendency for such crimes to remain unreported. Even among those cases that do come to the attention of the justice system, it is far from always the case that information about the perpetrator can be recorded. The descriptions of perpetrators found in the study, however, are consistent with previous research showing that anti-Muslim conceptions are found in broad segments of the population, that intolerance towards Muslims is associated with intolerance towards other minority groups, and that men and older people are over-represented.

In Brå's quantitative data, seven of ten perpetrators were men, and one in five were aged between 50 and 59 years. Some of the cases in the police data contain indications of social and economic vulnerability, with the occurrence of mental illness and alcohol abuse. However, both police reports and interviews reveal that perpetrators are found in all segments of society, although the expressions of Islamophobia found in these different segments may vary.

The results show that the occurrence of Islamophobic hate crime is far from being an extremist problem. It is common, however, that perpetrators express various kinds of right-wing populist and anti-establishment sympathies – for example with regard to immigration. There is thus a clear connection

between these issues and the occurrence of Islamophobia.

Adverse consequences for the individual and society

There are several dimensions that need to be considered regarding the consequences of both hate crime and other expressions of Islamophobia. For the individual, there are both direct consequences, such as shock, anxiety and fear, and more long-term consequences, such as depression and having to take sick leave, and also a tendency to avoid certain places or to conceal one's religious affiliation. For some, repeated exposure to Islamophobia acts as an attritional mechanism, resulting in resignation and exclusion. This applies to both women and men. Brå's material also shows that those subjected to Islamophobia may experience a form of identity crisis due to conceptions of Swedishness being confined to the white majority population, even though they themselves may have been born and lived their entire lives in Sweden.

Islamophobia also involves a risk for serious negative consequences for society as a whole. Exposure to crime and discrimination results in a deterioration of living conditions for Muslims, and, in the long term, the feeling of exclusion may lead to a democratic deficit. Brå's interviews show, for example, that the risk of being subjected to hate crime, or even having one's views and opinions called into question, may lead to Muslims choosing to avoid political engagement.

Islamophobia can also lead to restrictions in religious freedom for Muslims. For example, mosques may find it difficult to obtain insurance due to a perceived risk of crime, and may therefore be forced to close. A further example is found in decisions to prohibit religious expressions (such as wearing a veil in schools, or praying during work breaks). In these ways, Islamophobia represents a threat to fundamental human rights.

Brå's assessment

The conclusion drawn on the basis of these findings is that Islamophobic hate crime, other forms of abusive behaviour, and negative attitudes and prejudice against Muslims can affect both Muslims' daily lives and the condition of their lives in general. It is therefore important to take various forms of preventive action, not only to stem the occurrence of Islamophobic hate crime, but also to reduce the occurrence of negative, stereotypical perceptions and

conceptions of Islam and of Muslims in general.

With the support of previous research, it is Brå's assessment that the subject of Islamophobia remains under-researched. Not least, there is a lack of evidence-based methods for the prevention of Islamophobia, and future initiatives should therefore to a greater extent be focused on measures that can be evaluated and followed up. Another problem is that all the of the grounds for hate crime are currently often lumped together – with regard to both research and prevention initiatives. This means that the features that are distinctive for hate crime against Muslims, and the significance of overlaps in exposure (intersectional perspectives), are not being identified in a satisfactory way.

Brå has not been instructed to propose measures to combat Islamophobic hate crime, but the final chapter of the report nonetheless presents a number of suggestions, based on the study's findings, for measures to combat Islamophobic hate crime. In this regard, improving online prevention work would appear to be particularly important, along with a continuation and intensification of the effective and valued collaborations between the police (and other actors) and Muslim congregations that are currently in operation in certain areas.

With regard to the work of the justice system, the offence types that are reported as hate crime are often of a kind that generally have low clearance rates. Although general improvements to investigative work might lead to an increase in the number of offences that result in prosecution, Brå's assessment is that the greatest potential for development lies in various measures to improve the treatment of victims, and to increase their confidence in the justice system, not least in order to encourage more people to report exposure to hate crime. This would involve increasing the extent to which victims are given realistic expectations regarding the likely outcome of a police investigation, and a better understanding of the reasons for which investigations may be discontinued. A more uniform approach to dealing with reported hate crime in different parts of the country, and improving the extent to which hate crime motives are identified at an early stage of the

investigation, would also contribute to more hate crimes resulting in prosecution. There is a risk of perceptions that society at large is sending mixed messages when the legislation signals that hate crime is particularly serious, while at the same time previous studies have shown that the number of court judgements that invoke the penalty enhancement provision is very small. The lack of court judgements in which the perpetrator is confirmed to have had a hate crime motive means that the legal system and the courts may ultimately be contributing to Sweden's hate crime legislation being perceived as being no more than symbolic.