



Disaster Backlash: Bias Crimes & Mitigation

Disasters are felt most deeply by the impoverished and marginalized. Following a disaster, it is the responsibility of religious leaders to ensure the effects of disaster are not exacerbated in traditionally marginalized communities. There are many things one can do as a religious leader to both help promote tolerance and to work with affected populations.

Terms

Disaster Backlash - Crimes and discrimination against those perceived to be associated with perpetrators of terrorist crimes (by ethnicity, religion, country of origin, etc.).

Bias (or Hate) Crimes - Violent crimes, hate speech, or vandalism that is, motivated by prejudice against or intolerance of an identifiable social group.

Mitigation - The action of preventing the severity or intensity of the disaster's impact on your facility and community.

The Scope and Complexity of the Issue: A 9/11 Case Study

From the Iran Hostage Crisis to the first Persian Gulf War to 9/11, terrorism or war associated with the Middle East has resulted in bias and/or discrimination against innocent people in the United States. The backlash after September 11, 2001 is one of the dramatic examples in recent history. The FBI reported a 17-fold increase in anti-Muslim crimes between 2000 and 2001. Reports from advocacy groups indicate even higher increases in crime and harassment.

- **Who were the targets of 9/11 backlash?**
Arabs, Muslims, those perceived to be Arab or Muslim (including Sikhs and South Asians), and institutions easily identified as being Muslim (such as Mosques).
- **Types of backlash**
Backlash incidents ranged from murder, physical assault, and vandalism to death threats and public harassment. Incidents happened in homes, workplaces, schools, and public areas. The majority of incidents happened during the first six months following 9/11, but many forms of backlash persist, including the following:
 - Discriminatory removal of airline passengers, and lists of individuals with Muslim or "Muslim-sounding" names being put on "No-fly lists"
 - Having bank accounts of Muslims, or those with "Muslim-sounding" names, closed
 - Denial of service, housing, or job access
 - Exclusionary immigration policies
- **Climate of Fear**
Detainment, other law enforcement and security initiatives, and laws aimed at containing/stopping acts of violence have a severely negative impact on affected populations. They create a climate of fear as well as implying an almost tacit acceptance of discriminatory practices towards certain groups of people. Other political and religious leaders using "terror" as a platform contribute to the fear and isolation of many people.
- **The emotional and psychosocial toll**
The Commission Report found that nearly 80% of the respondents felt their lives were negatively affected by 9/11, regardless of whether or not they believed they had directly experienced discrimination. They felt more afraid and minimized their contact with the general public, or made their religion and ethnicity less evident.
- **Difficulty in defining scope**
Official federal statistics on hate crimes do not tell the full story of backlash incidents for many reasons, including:
 - Reporting by localities is voluntary
 - Those localities that do report on bias crimes often under report the number.
 - Many crimes and various forms of harassment go unreported by those that are affected. 83% of respondents in a NYC Commission on Human Rights Report indicated that they did not report a bias incident or ask for help because they were afraid, or believed that nothing would be done, or did not know who to contact, or did not believe the incident warranted reporting.
 - Language barriers also contribute to the lack of reporting.

Continued on reverse

Preparedness - What can you do before an incident occurs in your community?

- **Incorporate** the message of mutual understanding and tolerance in your ministries and programs.
- **Ensure** your interfaith networks regularly involve all ethnic and religious minorities in a meaningful way. Encourage their participation on neighborhood precinct councils, community boards, etc.
- **Develop and Promote** educational programs for your congregation and the community on cultural and religious practices and the issue of disaster backlash. Develop material (or adapt existing materials) that can be used before and after a disaster to create a climate of tolerance.
- **Engage** local politicians and law enforcement in positive dialogue about disaster backlash.
- **Engage** at-risk communities in dialogue about the challenges they face. Share tools.
- **Advocate** for legislation that promotes more accurate reporting of hate crimes.
- **Advocate** for community-wide backlash mitigation strategies. Strategies can include:
 - Issuance of immediate public statements from government officials condemning violence.
 - Pre-prepared public service messages urging tolerance that can be used right after an event takes place.
 - Pre-identification of communities that are likely to be effected by backlash, so that law enforcement can be deployed rapidly.

Recovery - What can you do after an incident?

- **Use your voice** to promote tolerance, peace, and justice in your community. Promote messages of peace and understanding as soon as possible after an incident has occurred. Encourage local politicians and law enforcement to take a pro-active approach as well. Anecdotal evidence shows this works in curtailing violence.
- **Stay informed** through interfaith and other networks about what's happening.
- **Listen** to victimized communities, and promote dialogue regarding problems and solutions within interfaith networks.
- **Reach out** to and support those communities who that have been victimized.
- **Encourage reporting** of hate crimes and bias incidents.
- **Identify and refer** victims to appropriate resources, including emotional, mental health, and spiritual support.
- **Include** materials/plans for mitigating backlash in your long-term recovery strategy.

Related articles and reports that served as sources for the 9/11 Case Study

- NYC Commission on Human Rights-Report on Discrimination after 9/11
- Human Rights Watch (HRW): ***“WE ARE NOT THE ENEMY: Hate Crimes against Arabs, Muslims, and Those Perceived to be Arab or Muslim after September 11th”***
- ***“Backlash Mitigation Plan: Protecting Ethnic and Religious Minorities Following a Terrorist Attack,”*** by Lori A. Peek, Department of Sociology and Natural Hazards Research and Applications Information Center, University of Colorado at Boulder

OTHER RESOURCES

- Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience (STAR-NYC): www.emu.edu/star
- Episcopal Relief and Development: The Interfaith Education Initiative: www.interfaitheducationinitiative.org
- American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU): www.aclu.org
- American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. Go to “Education” to find the Introduction to the Arab-American Community Curriculum for educators: www.adc.org
- The Sikh Coalition Educational Resources: www.sikhcoalition.org/InfoEducators.asp
- Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF): www.aaldef.org
- Anti-Defamation League (ADL): www.adl.org

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