

When hate and terror collide

June 14 2016, by Jason Kornwitz



The attack at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, on Sunday morning marked the worst mass shooting in U.S. history, with 49 people killed and at least 53 others injured. The gunman was reportedly homophobic and called 911 during the attack to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State, prompting some to label the massacre a hate crime as well as an act of

terrorism.

Gordana Rabrenovic, associate professor of sociology and director of Northeastern's Brudnick Center on Violence and Conflict, characterized the massacre as a "[mass shooting](#) that singled out a particular group of people." Here, she weighs in on the shooting.

President Barack Obama called the shooting "an act of terror and an act of hate." But others, such as counterterrorism expert Sebastian Gorka, described the mass murder as "part of a military assault," saying that "this is not a hate crime." First of all, what is the difference between a hate crime and an act of terrorism? Second, how do you characterize what happened?

Acts of terrorism and hate crimes may differ based on intent: Using the FBI definition, the intent of a terrorist act is to "intimidate or coerce a government or the civilian population in furtherance of political or social goals." Also, such an act aims to produce "a climate of fear and anxiety" throughout an entire society. According to experts Jack Levin and Jack McDevitt, a [hate crime](#) is an act "motivated entirely or in part by bias against a particular group" with the intent to punish or hurt a particular group of people because of hostility toward that group. Thus, it is a crime against the perceived "other." When we have multiple victims at the same location, the FBI defines such acts as a [mass murder](#) or mass shooting. The perpetrator intends to kill as many people as possible but the killing is often indiscriminate and victimization, as a consequence, tends to be more random.

I will characterize the Orlando attack as a mass shooting that singled out

a particular group of people, which carries with it the clear element of a hate crime. The shooter's identification with ISIL points out terrorist motivations because the Orlando attack may have been at least partially "inspired" by ISIL's political ideology.

Pundits and politicians alike have noted that the gunman's underlying motive would likely renew discussion and debate over terrorism, gay rights, and gun control. How might a shooting that touches on so many issues affect the public's response?

Our country is diverse, which gives us a unique vitality among nations of the world. However, this diversity can sometimes be misrepresented as a weakness or threat. This is why it is important that we maintain a vibrant civil society that supports open discussion and political discourse. But our current political situation is ripe with polarized discourse that is not respectful of our differences. For example, the debate about [gay rights](#) is often based on moral judgments and not on [civil rights](#). Similarly, fear of terrorism may be used to justify curtailing civil rights of people who are perceived as a potential threat to us. Such potential manipulations of fear can prevent us from resolving the complex problems that we face.

In your book *Why We Hate*, which you wrote in the wake of 9/11, you offer practical methods for creating a more peaceable society. Following the Orlando shooting, what steps can lawmakers, civil rights advocates, religious leaders, and concerned citizens take to improve cooperation with an eye toward transcending hate?

Both hate and terrorist-motivated incidents are provocations that test the ability of a community to respond to them in an effective way, and thus such incidents can undermine the trust people have in a society. For a community to protect itself it needs to be resilient to the threat of hate, and the trust citizens have in each other and in society is a critical resource in dealing with such hate-motivated provocations. Trust is a key part of our civic society: It is a resource that develops over time and requires ongoing involvement of people with each other and with the society. We build trust by engaging in activities with others based on principals that have made us a strong nation: our belief in justice, inclusion and opportunity for all. Adhering to these principals makes us a stronger and safer nation.

Provided by Northeastern University

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