

What drives young people to commit hate crimes

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It happened again over the weekend: another mass shooting and alleged hate crime, this time in Buffalo, New York, that left 10 dead and three injured. Most of the victims were Black. The 18-year-old accused

shooter said he picked up his beliefs from internet forums and cited the "great replacement"—the theory that Jews and elites are intentionally replacing white people with people of color and immigrants—as one of the reasons for his alleged killing spree.

We asked Louis Kraus, MD, division director of child and [adolescent psychiatry](#) and director of forensic psychiatry at Rush University Medical Center, to explain why [teens](#) may be susceptible to racist rhetoric and offer advice for people of color suffering from the trauma of witnessing [hate crimes](#) in person or in the media.

Are teens like the alleged shooter especially susceptible to the great replacement theory and other racist, anti-Semitic rhetoric?

The simple answer is yes, and that's because their brains are still developing. Human brains don't fully develop until we are about 25 years old. That's why terrorist groups target teens because that's when they are most vulnerable and they can "convert" them, for lack of a better term.

Right now, we have talk show hosts like Tucker Carlson who routinely discuss replacement theory. Unfortunately, teens are much more susceptible to believe in this rhetoric wherever they hear it or read it. The alleged shooter in Buffalo says he got most of his information from online forums. Yet there are many teens and adults who can look at these types of websites and social media and not be motivated to kill people. We don't really know why some are more affected by these websites than others.

Teens and [young adults](#) also have a proclivity for impulsive behaviors like hate crimes without understanding the short- and long-term ramifications of their behaviors. Not all these kids are innately bad. But

something happens in their growth and development that turns them into racists.

Do you think some of these theories have become more popular in recent years, in part because of the pandemic?

It's possible. Data shows there's been a rise in hate crimes in recent years. And during the pandemic, we know that acts of violence have increased against Asians and Blacks, and anti-Semitic acts have remained high.

The American Psychological Association describes hate crimes as "an extreme form of prejudice, made more likely in the context of social and political change." That certainly describes the past two years. Since the pandemic, we have also had periods of increased unemployment and tremendous political strife. But one big difference now compared with a few decades ago is the internet.

What do you make of the fact that the alleged shooter live-streamed the shootings?

He may be like other perpetrators of hate crimes who feel that what they're doing is of such importance that everyone should see it. People who commit these types of crimes also want to make sure they get credit.

Is mental illness a precursor to hate crimes and mass shootings?

No. Although the Virginia Tech shooter is an example of someone with

significant untreated mental health problems, research shows that appropriately treated individuals with [mental health issues](#) have no more risk for violence than the general population.

With most hate crimes, the driving force is not a mental health problem but rather racism and prejudice. People who commit hate crimes have a bias against certain people, whether that is based on race, religion, sexual orientation, disability, gender or gender identity. For them, the bias becomes so great that they somehow lose their humanity.

White supremacists like the alleged shooter in Buffalo have a predilection to believe false narratives as truths and then act on their beliefs as though they are going to save the world or save their "white nation." Many of these individuals hold their beliefs because of how they were raised.

What happens to people of color when they witness hate crimes? How can they heal?

People who survive or witness racially motivated hate crimes have a higher risk for post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as depression and anxiety. To heal from racial trauma, I recommend they find solace in their friends and family. That's where the healing begins. But there may be a limit to what friends and family can do, so seeking out [mental health services](#) also can be helpful for many people.

What can people of color do if they are distraught from watching hate crimes in the media?

Watching the aftermath of hate crimes on television or in the media can also have an impact on your mental health. For some people, it may be better to keep the television off or avoid social media for a while, but

that can be very difficult to do. Talking with a friend or counselor can help.

Any advice for parents right now?

As a parent, you want to make it easy for your kids to ask any questions they might have. How you do this depends on the age and maturity of your child. For very [young kids](#), keep it as simple as possible and just reassure them that they are safe.

For older kids, you can help them open up by asking simple questions, such as, "Did you hear anything from your friends or see anything on [social media](#) about what happened in Buffalo? Do you have any questions or want to talk about it?"

Whatever your child's age, encourage kids to express what they feel and let them know that they can [help create a better world](#).

Provided by Rush University Medical Center

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