Study shows enrollment of Black students at HBCUs rose in states with increased hate crime reports
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Enrollment of African American first-time college students climbed at historically Black colleges and universities in states where hate crime reports increased, a new study has found.

The authors, SMU’s Dominique Baker and UC Berkeley’s Tolani Britton, drew on federal enrollment data, campus crime statistics, and hate crime information from 1999 to 2017. In the study, they looked at hate crimes specifically targeting African-Americans as well as other racial, religious and gender groups.

Before this research, little was known about the relationship between reports of hate crimes and college enrollment patterns among people of color.

"It's useful to understand how macro-level intolerance and oppression is related to institutional enrollment decisions," Baker said. "Knowing this is a first step to higher education institutions working to actively create welcoming campus environments where all students can thrive while feeling safe."

However, she notes a key limitation to the study:

"The number of reported hate crimes is almost assuredly an undercount of the actual number of incidents," Baker said. "Even so, this study helps fill in the gap by exploring the association between Black students' college enrollment and the number of reports of hate crimes at two levels: the state and the institution."

Baker is an assistant professor of education policy in SMU's Annette Caldwell Simmons School of Education and Human Development. Her co-author, Britton, is an assistant professor in the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Berkeley. Their working paper is available from Stanford University's Center for Education Policy Analysis.

Baker and Britton began their research to explore Black students' enrollment in light of rhetoric used by former President Donald Trump in referencing immigrants and persons of color. Hate crimes in the U.S. rose to the highest level in more than a decade in 2019, according to the most-recent FBI report.

A hate crime is defined as an occurrence in which perpetrators act based on a bias against the victim's race, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability.

The researchers used a variety of sources for federal data such as the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Systems (IPEDS), FBI hate crime data, and campus crime statistics tracked by the federal Clery Act of 1990. IPEDS tracks enrollment
for all universities that receive Title IV funds (such as Pell Grants) from the government, including historically Black colleges and universities.

The researchers primarily examined those states that had at least one historically Black college or university (HBCU). The study excluded for-profit institutions due to a large number of online learners at these institutions.

"We found that an increase in total statewide reports of hate crimes—those specifically targeting African Americans and/or hate crimes against any race—predicts an increase of Black student first-time enrollment at HBCUs," Britton said. Specifically, an increase in the number of reported state-level hate crimes was associated with a 20 percent rise in first-time enrollment in Black colleges, regardless of the reason for the hate crimes.

It was more difficult to interpret information drawn at the institutional level at specific colleges because of scarcity of this data, the researchers said. This was also made difficult because it was unclear what institutions did in response to reports of hate crimes.

They speculated that the link between college enrollment and hate crimes at the state level could be for a few different reasons.

"It could be that students coming from more racially similar home communities seek to replicate these spaces in a college community due to prior experiences of an increased likelihood of student safety in predominantly Black spaces," Britton said.

Potential college students and their parents who hear about reports of hate crimes could also choose to enroll in college partially in response to a desire for spaces with fewer racial incidents. And Black students could intentionally seek out campuses with a clear, welcoming, and positive racial climate for Black students in order to avoid the psychological stressors related to racial animus as well as physical instances of hate and aggression, the study noted.

Britton and Baker chose to focus on Black students in the study because Black individuals have been shown to be the most frequent target of reported racial hate crimes, Britton said. They also made African American students their focus because historically Black colleges and universities are explicitly focused on helping these students.

Baker encouraged future research on the relationship between hate crimes and college enrollments for other groups of color as well.

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