

Disaster Backlash: Bias Crimes & Mitigation

TIP SHEET

05

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 you can do as a religious leader both to help promote tolerance and to work with affected populations.

TERMS

Disaster Backlash: Crimes and discrimination against those perceived to be associated with the cause of a natural disaster or public health emergency, or perpetrators of terrorist crimes because of ethnicity, religion, country of origin, or other factors.

Bias (or Hate) Crime: Harassment, hate speech or violence (including 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 and throughout the years since the September 11 terrorist attacks, innocent people in the United States associated with the Middle East or South Asia have been targets of bias, discrimination, and/or violence. In 2001, Department of Justice statistics showed a 1,600% increase in anti-Muslim hate crime incidents in the United States – 481 incidents reported to the FBI, compared to 28 reported the year before. Due to limitations on the collection of data, this 16-fold increase nevertheless vastly understates the problem; more than half of all hate crimes are never reported or are incorrectly categorized. In 2010, the incidence spiked again, with a 10% increase following the “Ground Zero mosque” controversy. Advocacy groups report even greater increases in crime and harassment than these figures.

• Who were the targets of 9/11 and global terrorism backlash?

Arabs, Muslims, those perceived to be Arab or Muslim (including Sikhs and South Asians perceived to be Muslim), 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; “No Fly” lists of individuals with Muslim or “Muslim-sounding” names
- Closing of bank accounts of Muslims, or those with “Muslim-sounding” names
- Denial of service, housing, or job access
- Exclusionary immigration policies.

• Climate of fear

Detainment, other law enforcement and security initiatives, and specific laws aimed at containing/stopping potential 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 toward certain groups of people. Some political and religious leaders use “terror” as a platform to increase the fear and isolation of many people.

• The emotional and psychosocial toll

The NYC Commission on Human Rights found that nearly 80% of 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 therefore 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. According to the report, 83% of respondents 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 whom to contact, or did not believe the incident warranted reporting.

DISCRIMINATION AND BACKLASH AGAINST MEXICANS FOLLOWING THE 2009 H1N1 OUTBREAK

The H1N1 strain of influenza became a cause for global concern in late April 2009, when the virus spread through Mexico and virtually shut down Mexico City. Soon after, foreign tourists who had recently returned from Mexico began to show symptoms of the deadly virus. Around the same time, the World Health Organization declared a public health emergency, and fears of cross-border contamination became more common. While Latinos represented just 18% of the total coverage of H1N1 during those six months of “emergency status,” anti-Mexican rhetoric and speech increased within days of the outbreak, as a result of widespread anti-immigrant, anti-“undocumented” media programming. Some television and radio commentators even began blaming settled Mexican immigrants for importing the disease and instigating economic ruin.

DEVELOP A CONTINUITY OF OPERATIONS PLAN FOR PROTECTING VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

Make a plan for what you will do if your facility, staff and communications systems are not accessible.

- **Define** crisis management and backlash mitigation procedures and individual responsibilities in advance.
- **Talk** with your staff or co-workers and frequently review and practice what you intend to do during and after an event.
- **Develop a plan** for how to communicate with key government and mental health official about communicating with members of your congregation and public about backlash mitigation and risk communication.

PREPAREDNESS - WHAT CAN YOU DO BEFORE AN INCIDENT OCCURS IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

- **Incorporate** the message of mutual understanding and religious tolerance into your sermons, curricula and programs.
- **Ensure** your interfaith networks regularly involve all ethnic and religious minorities represented in your community in a meaningful way. Encourage their participation on community and school 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 likely to be affected 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 these activities help curtail violence.

Stay informed through interfaith and other networks about what is happening.

Listen to victimized communities, and promote dialogue regarding problems and solutions within interfaith networks.

Reach out to and support those communities and individuals which may be or have been victimized.

Encourage reporting of hate crimes and bias incidents. Walk the victims through the process and advocate for them.

Identify and refer victims to appropriate resources, including support for emotional, mental spiritual health.

OTHER RESOURCES

- Anti-Defamation League (ADL): www.adl.org
- Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF): www.aaldef.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
- H1N1 “Blame Game” — Markel: http://ww2.isid.org/Downloads/IMED2011_Presentations/IMED2011_Markel.pdf
- The Sikh Coalition Educational Resources: www.sikhcoalition.org/InfoEducators.asp
- Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience (STAR-NYC): www.emu.edu/star
- Tanenbaum Center — Park51 Curriculum Guide and Fact Sheets: www.tanenbaum.org
- REPORT — Human Rights Watch “We are not the Enemy”: Hate Crimes against Arabs, Muslims, and Those Perceived to Be Arab or Muslim after September 11th”
- STUDY — “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