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*“The Surprises About Anti-Religious Crime in America”*

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The FBI collects statistics about hate crimes in the United States. These are crimes that were motivated by hatred against the victims -- whether a hatred of their race, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation. A look at the information from 2016, the most recent year available, reveals a number of surprises, especially about hate crime directed at religions and religious people.

The first surprise is that there are so few crimes motivated by hatred of a particular religion. For 2016, only 1,273 such crimes were reported to the FBI by police departments around the nation. For a country of 323 million people, that is quite low.

Let's put that number in perspective. Crime is reported as a rate per 100,000 people. In 2016, the national violent crime rate was 386 crimes per 100,000 people, while the national property crime rate was 2,450 per 100,000 people. Anti-religious crime of all types was only 0.39 per 100,000 people.

Now, it is known that hate crime figures are underreported. But, even if they were underreported by 1,000 percent, the crime rate would be only about 4 per 100,000 people. When compared to the property crime rate of 2,450 per 100,000 individuals, it is clear that there is no epidemic of anti-religious crime; however, such individual incidents may be featured in the media.

The second surprise is that anti-religious crime does not make a large percentage of hate crimes. Anti-religious hate crimes represent only 21 percent of all hate crimes in the USA. Most hate crimes are inspired by racial or ethnic hatred.

The third surprise is that, despite regular media reports about the vandalism of synagogues, mosques and even churches (especially black churches), religious institutions are not the most frequent target of anti-religious crimes. People are the most common target. Individuals and their family homes were assaulted in 51 percent of the 1,273 anti-religious crimes reported. Businesses were the second-highest target at 11 percent, while religious institutions comprised just 9 percent of the crimes.

The fourth surprise is that, despite the claims we hear in the media about Christians suffering anti-Christian bias, Christians are not frequently the targets of anti-religious hate crimes. Of the 1,584 victims of anti-religious attacks, Jews and Jewish institutions constitute more than half of the victims, 54 percent. And, despite all the anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric, in 2016, Muslims were the victims of only 24 percent of anti-religious crimes. Christians and their churches were victims of anti-religious hate crimes in only 11 percent of the incidents.

The focus on Jews and Jewish institutions as targets indicates the continued presence of Christian-based anti-Semitism within our country. The fewer anti-Muslim crimes suggest that the anti-Muslim fervor has not caught on as thoroughly at this point. The few anti-Christian crimes are most likely Christian-on-Christian crimes: Think white Christians against black Christians and their churches, or attacks on Mormon or Jehovah Witness missionaries going door to door.

The fifth surprise is that anti-religious crimes usually aim to intimidate rather than injure. Most crimes against individuals do not even rise to the level of violent crimes; 87 percent of them are simple assault or (verbal) intimidation. With regard to crimes against property, most (86 percent) are vandalism, property damage and occasional destruction -- again, intimidation rather than theft.

The one exception to this characterization is that 13 percent of anti-Muslim crime is aggravated assault, far more than against victims of any other religion.

The take-away point is that anti-religious crime is quite uncommon in the United States, despite sensationalist media reports. Individuals and their homes are the most common victims of these crimes, and the vast majority of the victims are Jewish or Muslims. Christians make up a small minority of the victims of anti-religious attacks.

Note: Thanks to Cameron Walker, of the Laramie Boomerang, whose recent column on hate crimes inspired this analysis.