

Digital Policy Hub – Working Paper

Improving Canada's Hate Crime Data Collection: A Comparative Study

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Key Points

- Hate crime data collection varies significantly across jurisdictions, with differences in definitions, reporting practices and institutional frameworks affecting the accuracy and comparability of data. Canada primarily relies on police-reported data through the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Survey, which may under-represent the true extent of hate-motivated incidents.
- Under-reporting remains a critical barrier to effective data collection, influenced by factors such as fear of retaliation, lack of trust in law enforcement, cultural and language barriers, and uncertainty about legal outcomes. Many victims, particularly from marginalized communities, do not engage with official reporting channels.
- Digital and technological innovations offer promising tools to enhance hate crime data systems. Online reporting platforms, artificial intelligence for monitoring online hate speech and blockchain-based secure reporting can improve data accessibility, accuracy and early intervention strategies.
- Community partnerships play a vital role in building trust, improving reporting rates and shaping responsive policies. Collaborating with civil society organizations (CSOs) ensures digital tools are user-centred, culturally appropriate and accessible to those most affected by hate crimes.
- Policy improvements should focus on integration and equity, including the harmonization of police and self-reported data, data privacy protections and consistent training for law enforcement to improve hate crime recognition and response.

Introduction

Hate crimes, driven by prejudice against individuals or groups based on characteristics such as race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability and other identity markers, pose a serious threat to both individual safety and social cohesion. Robust and inclusive data collection is essential for understanding the prevalence and nature of hate crimes, informing effective policy and ensuring responsive justice systems. Nevertheless, hate crime data remains inconsistent across jurisdictions due to variations in definitions, legal frameworks and reporting practices.

In Canada, hate crime statistics are primarily drawn from police-reported data via the UCR Survey, supplemented by periodic victimization surveys. However, this system is hindered by under-reporting and definitional inconsistencies, as well as public mistrust of law enforcement among communities most affected by hate. These challenges are mirrored globally, although jurisdictions such as the United States and the United Kingdom have introduced various innovations — including national online reporting platforms and partnerships with CSOs — to improve data quality, accessibility and inclusiveness.

This working paper compares Canada's hate crime data collection framework with those of the United States and the United Kingdom, with particular attention to the role of digital platforms and community partnerships. It examines how these emerging approaches can address persistent barriers to reporting and contribute to more reliable, equitable and actionable hate crime data.

Traditional Methods of Hate Crime Data Collection

Police-Reported Data

Canada

Canada monitors hate crime primarily through the UCR Survey, managed by Statistics Canada in collaboration with the Canadian Centre for Justice and Community Safety Statistics and the broader policing community.¹ The UCR captures only police-reported hate crime data, meaning that incidents must first be recognized by victims and then reported and classified by police as hate motivated. However, police recognition of hate crimes is shaped by their personal understanding of what constitutes hate and their broader assumptions about race and racism (Bryan 2022).

Evidence of this variation can be seen in how different police services define and categorize hate crimes, revealing inconsistencies in data collection practices across the country. For instance, the Vancouver Police Department defines a hate crime as “a criminal offence against a person or property that is based upon the victim’s race, national or ethnic origin, language, colour, religion, sex, age, mental or physical disability, sexual orientation, or gender identity or expression, or any other similar factor.”² Meanwhile, the Toronto Police Service defines it as “a criminal offence committed against a person or property motivated in whole or in part by the offender’s (real or perceived) bias, prejudice or hate against an identifiable group. An identifiable group may be distinguished by race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age, language, mental or physical disability, sexual orientation, or gender identity or expression, or on any other similar factor.”³

These definitional differences reflect more than just semantic variation — they shape how hate crimes are identified, recorded and ultimately counted. As a result, inconsistencies in local-level definitions and practices contribute to a fragmented national data set, making it difficult to draw reliable comparisons or fully understand the scope of hate-motivated crime in Canada.

One reason for this variation is that there is currently no definition of a hate crime in the Canadian Criminal Code. Instead, hate is treated as an aggravating factor when an offence is “motivated by bias, prejudice or hate based on race, national or ethnic origin, language, colour, religion, sex, age, mental or physical disability, sexual orientation, or gender identity or expression, or on any other similar factor,” as stated in section 718.2 (a)(i) of the Criminal Code. Section 318 of the Criminal Code criminalizes advocating or promoting genocide, while section 319 prohibits public incitement and the willful

1 See www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p2SV.pl?Function=assembleDESURV&DECID=245522&RepClass=591&Id=1553137&DFId=244073.

2 See <https://vpd.ca/report-a-crime/report-a-hate-crime/>.

3 See www.tps.ca/hate-motivated-crime/.

promotion of hatred against an identifiable group.⁴ Section 430 (4.1) criminalizes mischief targeting religious property and educational institutions.

In terms of data collection, Statistics Canada defines a hate crime as a criminal offence motivated by hatred toward identifiable characteristics, including “race, national or ethnic origin, language, colour, religion, sex, age, mental or physical disability, sexual orientation, or any other similar factor, such as profession or political beliefs.”⁵

While the UCR system enables national data collection, its focus on police-reported incidents has led to concerns about under-reporting, particularly among communities with historical distrust of law enforcement. Moreover, hate incidents that do not meet the threshold of a criminal offence — such as verbal harassment or micro-aggressions — are excluded, further limiting visibility into the lived experiences of targeted groups. Compounding these issues are the absence of a standardized definition of hate crimes and the variation in how police officers understand and interpret concepts such as hate, bias and prejudice. As a result, the data collected across jurisdictions lacks consistency and comparability.

United States

The first federal agency in the United States to collect hate crime data was the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), following the implementation of the Hate Crime Act in 1990. The FBI does so by incorporating hate crime data into their already existing UCR program (Pezzella and Fetzer 2021).

The UCR program collects hate crime data from official police records, which reflect only crimes reported to law enforcement agencies. Participating law enforcement agencies report directly to the FBI or through their state UCR programs either monthly or quarterly. Starting in 2021, the National Incident-Based Reporting System has been adopted by all law enforcement agencies nationwide (FBI 2019a).

For the UCR program, hate crime is defined as “criminal offenses that were motivated, in whole or in part, by the offender’s bias against the victim’s race/ethnicity/ancestry, gender, gender identity, religion, disability, or sexual orientation, and were committed against persons, property, or society” (FBI 2019b, 1). Law enforcement reports incidents of hate crime “only if investigation reveals sufficient objective facts to lead a reasonable and prudent person to conclude that the offender’s actions were motivated, in whole or in part, by bias” (FBI 2015, 4).

Each hate crime incident record allows for different units of analysis to be measured, including types of incidents, offences, and victims and offenders.⁶ For types of incidents, the bias motivation categories and specific bias types are identified for the incident type. Bias motivation categories include race/ethnicity/ancestry, religion, sexual orientation, disability, gender and gender identity (Pezzella and Fetzer 2021). The types of criminal offences include crimes against persons and crimes against property (ibid.).

4 An identifiable group is defined in the provision as “any section of the public distinguished by colour, race, religion, national or ethnic origin, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or mental or physical disability.”

5 See www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p2SV.pl?Function=assembleDESurv&DECId=245522&RepClass=591&Id=1553137&DFId=244073.

6 See www.fbi.gov/how-we-can-help-you/more-fbi-services-and-information/ucr/hate-crime.

United Kingdom

In England and Wales, hate crime is prohibited under several statutes: the Crime and Disorder Act 1998; the Public Order Act 1986; and the Criminal Justice Act 2003 (Barker and Jurasz 2019). Hate crime is defined by UK authorities as: “Any criminal offence which is perceived, by the victim or any other person, to be motivated by hostility or prejudice towards someone based on a personal characteristic.” This definition was jointly agreed upon by police, the Crown Prosecution Service and other criminal justice partners in 2007 (Home Office 2024). There are five centrally monitored strands of hate crime: race or ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability and transgender identity.

Despite gender not being officially listed as one of the protected characteristics of victims, guidance from the College of Policing states that the five currently protected characteristics represent the minimum categories.⁷ This allows some police forces to record gender-based hate crimes on an ad hoc basis (Gagliardi, Valverde-Cano and Rice 2023).

All 43 territorial police forces in England and Wales (plus British Transport Police) are responsible for recording hate crimes. These are either reported directly to the police or identified during investigations. A hate crime “flag” is added to an offence if it is perceived to be motivated by hostility or prejudice related to one or more monitored strands (Home Office 2024).

Data is submitted either monthly via the Home Office Data Hub, which includes detailed, record-level data, or annually via a manual return, which includes total offences and motivation strands. Each offence can be tagged with multiple strands, so the count of motivating factors often exceeds the number of offences recorded (ibid.).

The Home Office conducts an annual quality assurance process, checking year-over-year changes, outliers and consistency across strands and totals. Police services are then asked to confirm or correct their submissions. Inconsistencies — such as misapplied or missing hate crime flags — are recognized to be common due to system or training limitations (ibid.).

Since 2021, police have begun collecting victim ethnicity data for racially or religiously aggravated crimes (ibid.). Police and the Home Office are shifting from officer-defined to self-defined ethnicity categories to improve data accuracy (ibid.). The College of Policing’s authorized professional practice guidance outlines best practices in hate crime identification and recording.⁸

Victimization Surveys

Canada

According to a footnote in a Government of Canada article on hate crimes, the Victim Services Survey (VSS) was previously conducted by Statistics Canada on behalf of Justice Canada every two years over five cycles (Ndegwa and McDonald 2023, p. 11). It was eventually discontinued for several reasons, including the response burden on

⁷ See www.college.police.uk/app/major-investigation-and-public-protection/hate-crime/responding-hate.

⁸ See www.college.police.uk/app/major-investigation-and-public-protection/hate-crime.

participants. The survey was distributed to all victim services organizations funded by ministries of justice and/or public safety. These organizations completed the VSS using aggregated data on clients served during a given fiscal year, the services provided, and information on funding and training. Additionally, the Canadian Centre for Justice and Community Safety Statistics designated a specific “snapshot day” during which organizations collected detailed data on the clients they served (ibid.).

United States

The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) is responsible for the self-reported hate crime data collection in the United States, using the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) (Farrell and Lockwood 2023). Since 1973, the NCVS has collected data on self-reported victimizations from a nationally representative sample of households on an annual basis (Langton, Planty and Lynch 2017). Each year, the NCVS obtains data from a nationally representative sample of about 240,000 persons in about 150,000 households.⁹

Two questionnaires are used at each interview period for the determination and measurement of victimizations. The first questionnaire is a screener that determines if any victimizations occurred in the prior six-month period (ibid.). If a victimization did occur, the crime incident report is then administered to collect detailed information about that victimization (ibid.).

The actual language determining if the respondent was victimized by hate crimes is: “Hate crimes or crimes of prejudice or bigotry occur when (an offender/offenders) target(s) people because of one or more of their characteristics or religious beliefs. Do you have any reason to suspect the incident just discussed was a hate crime or crime of prejudice or bigotry?” (BJS, n.d., 33).

Respondents are then asked whether they think the victimization was motivated by hate and the kind of evidence they have. In contrast to police-reported data, the NCVS represents a remarkable effort in capturing self-reported crime data, offering valuable insight into incidents that may never come to the attention of law enforcement.

United Kingdom

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) is an annual victimization survey that measures crime by asking members of the public about their experiences over the past 12 months.¹⁰ The CSEW captures data on hate crimes by including specific questions that allow respondents to identify if they believe the crimes they experienced were motivated by hostility or prejudice based on personal characteristics such as race, religion, sexual orientation, disability or transgender identity.

Sampling includes approximately 75,000 households across England and Wales that are invited to participate annually. For data collection, participants are interviewed about their experiences with crime, including hate crimes, regardless of whether these incidents were reported to the police. This approach helps to uncover the “dark figure” of crime — incidents not captured in police records.

⁹ See <https://bjs.ojp.gov/data-collection/ncvs>.

¹⁰ See www.crimesurvey.co.uk/en/index.html.

Responses are confidential, encouraging honest reporting of sensitive incidents such as hate crimes. The survey records all types of crimes experienced by people. Conducted since 1981, the CSEW provides valuable data for tracking long-term trends in hate crime victimization.

Emerging Approaches to Hate Crime Data Collection

User-Centred Platforms

Innovative digital platforms have been introduced across several countries to address the under-reporting of hate crimes and make the reporting process more accessible.

Canada

While some Canadian police services — such as the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in certain provinces — offer web-based hate crime reporting, the availability of these platforms is highly inconsistent across jurisdictions, resulting in uneven access to justice and barriers to reporting for many victims. This fragmented approach highlights the lack of a coordinated national digital reporting system and contributes to disparities in hate crime data collection (Canadian Race Relations Foundation 2024; Roberts 1995).

United Kingdom

The United Kingdom leads with its True Vision platform, a national online system allowing victims to report hate crimes without direct police contact. It is widely recognized for increasing accessibility, particularly for communities with a historical distrust of law enforcement.¹¹

Community Partnerships

An essential but often overlooked innovation in hate crime data collection is the collaborative development of digital platforms with input from CSOs and community groups. These partnerships help ensure that technology-based reporting tools are culturally responsive, accessible and trusted by the communities most affected by hate crime.

Community-based organizations frequently act as first responders to hate incidents, especially for populations with low trust in police — such as racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, LGBTQ+ individuals and people with disabilities. By involving these groups in the design, implementation and outreach efforts of reporting platforms, governments and institutions can significantly improve reporting rates and the relevance of collected data (Wemmers 2010; Williams, Burnap and Sloan 2017).

For example:

- In Canada, organizations such as project 1907, the National Council of Canadian Muslims and B'nai Brith Canada have implemented hate crime reporting projects to actively document and respond to hate crimes and incidents, often providing alternative reporting channels and support services, especially for those hesitant to engage with law enforcement.¹²

¹¹ See www.report-it.org.uk.

¹² See <https://nccm.ca/report-an-incident/>; www.bnaibrith.ca/anti-hate-hotline/; www.project1907.org.

- In the United States, initiatives such as Stop AAPI Hate and the Anti-Defamation League’s reporting hubs serve both as data-gathering tools and as advocacy platforms rooted in affected communities (Anti-Defamation League 2022; Stop AAPI Hate 2021).
- In the United Kingdom, the national True Vision platform is supported by a network of CSOs that help users file reports, access support services, and understand their rights (Home Office 2023).¹³
- The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) compiles hate crime data and information submitted by participating states, as well as incidents and data provided by CSOs and international organizations. The OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights publishes this data annually on November 16 — International Tolerance Day.¹⁴

These models demonstrate how community engagement strengthens digital trust, supports under-represented voices, and improves both the reach and credibility of hate crime data systems. Integrating user-centred design and community co-ownership into digital innovations ensures that reporting mechanisms are not only technically effective, but also socially legitimate and inclusive (Williams, Burnap and Sloan 2017).

Challenges in Hate Crime Data Collection

Under-Reporting and Trust Deficit

Under-reporting remains a pervasive challenge in hate crime data collection. Victims often refrain from reporting due to the fear of retaliation, stigma or a lack of trust in law enforcement (Harold and Fong 2018; McCarthy, Hagan and Herda 2020; Liu 2025; Perry 2010; Scheitle et al. 2023). Research highlights additional factors associated with under-reporting, including cultural differences between the home country and host society, language barriers, fear of deportation among immigrants and perceptions of police bias or indifference (Baumer 2002; Dunbar 2006; Lantz and Wenger 2022; Meyer 2010; Myers and Lantz 2020; Schnebly 2008; Xie and Baumer 2019; Zaykowski 2010).

Digital platforms offering anonymous and accessible alternatives can help mitigate these barriers and broaden participation — especially for marginalized groups with low institutional trust (McGhin et al. 2019). These platforms may reduce friction in the reporting process and allow victims to document incidents without engaging directly with law enforcement. Questions remain, however, about how such reports would be integrated into formal case investigations. This approach may require the involvement of third-party organizations to help facilitate collaboration between police and victims, acting as intermediaries to build trust and ensure that reported incidents are properly followed up.

¹³ See www.report-it.org.uk.

¹⁴ See <https://hatecrime.osce.org>.

Compilation and Interpretation of Data

A core challenge in hate crime data collection lies in the inconsistencies surrounding how data is compiled and interpreted across jurisdictions. Police services in different parts of Canada currently apply varying definitions of what constitutes a hate crime, and even within a single service, individual officers may differ in how they interpret and apply those definitions (Bryan 2022; Grattet and Jenness 2005; Jenness and Grattet 2005; Phillips and Grattet 2000). This subjectivity creates uncertainty around the comparability and reliability of the data — to what extent the numbers collected across jurisdictions reflect the same phenomenon remains unclear.

In addition to official police data, community organizations have been independently documenting hate crime incidents, often capturing cases that never reach law enforcement. These third-party sources can provide crucial context and help fill gaps left by under-reporting to police, particularly among marginalized groups. However, uncertainty persists around whether, and how, such data should be integrated with police-reported statistics.

These issues raise critical questions about how to interpret trends in hate crime data. Apparent increases in reported incidents may reflect real-world changes, but they might also result from improved police practices in identifying and recording hate-motivated offences, or an increased public willingness to report. Since the data primarily measures hate crime-related demand on police services — rather than the full scope of hate-motivated incidents — its utility for understanding the broader prevalence of hate in society is limited. This leads to an important consideration: if under-reporting is so widespread and definitional inconsistencies persist, what exactly is the purpose of collecting this data? Without clarity on this point, there is a risk of misinterpreting the statistics or overlooking the very communities most affected by hate.

Data Privacy and Security

Digitalized hate crime reporting introduces privacy and data protection risks. Victims may be reluctant to use online systems if concerned about how their information will be stored, used or potentially exposed. Ensuring victim confidentiality is essential for building trust in digital systems.

Legal frameworks such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation place strict limits on data collection, storage and retention, which may conflict with some technological innovations. Platforms must therefore strike a careful balance between security, anonymity, user control and legal compliance to ensure the ethical and effective use of hate crime data.

Recommendations

- **Recommendation 1: Establish a national definition and legal framework for hate crime.** Canada should develop a consistent, legislatively grounded definition of hate crime, aligned with international human rights standards. This would guide police services across jurisdictions, ensuring that hate crime is identified and recorded uniformly. Integrating a clear legal definition into the Criminal Code would address inconsistencies in how hate-motivated crimes are understood and applied across the country, enabling more reliable national data collection and comparison.

- **Recommendation 2: Expand and standardize digital reporting platforms.** Jurisdictions should invest in national, multilingual online reporting tools that allow for anonymous submissions. These platforms should be co-designed with community organizations to ensure cultural relevance, ease of use and accessibility for vulnerable populations — including migrants, LGBTQ+ individuals and people with disabilities.
- **Recommendation 3: Integrate community-based data collection into national frameworks.** Develop protocols to responsibly integrate third-party data — collected by community organizations — into official hate crime statistics. This includes establishing partnerships between police services, CSOs and statisticians to standardize classification criteria, validate trends and ensure that non-police-reported incidents are not systematically excluded from national understanding.
- **Recommendation 4: Improve training and capacity building for police and data personnel.** Invest in specialized training for front-line officers and data analysts on the identification, classification and reporting of hate crimes. Training should include components on cultural competence, anti-bias practices and community engagement. Clear, consistent guidance will help reduce subjective variation in how incidents are flagged and categorized across jurisdictions.
- **Recommendation 5: Clarify the purpose and use of hate crime data.** Policy makers must articulate the intended use of hate crime statistics — whether for measuring the operational burden on police services, tracking social trends in hate or informing resource allocation. A clear data strategy would improve public trust in statistics, reduce the risk of misinterpretation and help focus efforts on addressing the root causes of hate rather than just its criminal manifestations.
- **Recommendation 6: Enhance data privacy and victim protection measures.** All hate crime reporting systems — especially digital ones — must uphold the highest standards of data privacy and victim confidentiality. Platforms should offer users control over how their information is shared, and ensure compliance with relevant data protection laws. Transparency around data-use policies and robust cybersecurity measures are essential for building and maintaining user trust.

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About the Author

Sophie Xiaoyi Liu is a former Digital Policy Hub doctoral fellow and a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at the University of British Columbia, specializing in law and society, race and migration. Her dissertation focuses on Canadian society's response to hate, including online hate expression. Her particular areas of interest include digital platform regulation, pathways to justice for individuals impacted by hate and the role of hate-crime and hate-incident data in policy making. She employs diverse methodologies to explore these issues, including survey experiments, in-depth interviews and content analysis.

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