



MPAC Comments to the US Commission on Civil Rights

OVERVIEW

The Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) is honored to submit comments to the US Commission on Civil Rights on the topic of hate crimes. Founded in 1988, MPAC is a national nonprofit organization working to promote and strengthen American pluralism by increasing understanding and improving policies that impact American Muslims.

As the Commission continues its important work and prepares a final report, we urge you to address the rising threat of violent bigotry towards our communities, and the deficiencies within the federal government that keep it from adequately protecting us. While the administration has devoted incredible resources to targeting American Muslims with suspicion and fear, it has largely ignored the expansion of white supremacist hate groups, leading to an unprecedented climate of tolerance and acceptance of bigotry and a direct increase in hate crimes whose scope we cannot fully know without proper data collection and reporting.

The data that is available tells a clear story: Islamophobia, xenophobia, and other forms of hate are experiencing a virtual renaissance. After nearly a decade of consistent decline, hate crime statistics suddenly spiked in 2015 and have been increasing every year since. According to the FBI, 2015 saw a staggering 67% increase in hate crimes against American Muslims, followed by [an additional 20% increase in 2016](#). These include high-profile cases like the May 2017 deaths of two good Samaritans defending women in hijab from [a stabbing attack in Portland](#), and attacks as recently as earlier this Ramadan when Egyptian students [were attacked by a man with a stun gun](#) yelling “you don’t deserve American food!”

Beyond the cases that sporadically make the national news, attacks against American Muslim families, our houses of worship, and our businesses are a [disturbingly regular occurrence](#). Because all bigotry tends to flow from the same source, and because the American Muslim community is as diverse as our nation itself, many individuals and families must deal with hate towards multiple angles of their identity. Take, for instance, a young Somali-American woman named Aisha Osman who [wrote to President Obama](#) at the height of the 2016 campaign season to share her experiences of classmates calling her the n-word while trying to rip off her hijab. That intersectional impact of hate crimes and bias incidents is an aspect that often goes overlooked in conversations about the epidemic.

IMPROVING DATA COLLECTION

As useful as hate crime data collected by the FBI through the Hate Crimes Statistics Act has been in identifying the upward trend of incidents, the full picture remains woefully incomplete. Hundreds of major cities continue to report zero incidents or refuse to participate in the collection process altogether. We have consistently advocated for the Department of Justice to improve this system both by incentivizing

the participation of cities and requiring relevant federal agencies to dedicate special attention to non-participating jurisdictions.

In September 2017, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights -of which MPAC recently became a member- sent a letter to the Department of Justice outlining a number of additional steps the federal government should take to address gaps in data collection. We fully endorse the recommendations contained therein.

HELPING VICTIMS REPORT & CREATING A CENTRALIZED RESOURCE

Reporting of hate crimes by the victims themselves also continues to be a perennial issue. Many factors often lead to non-reporting, including cultural inhibitions, fear of retribution from perpetrators, and general lack of knowledge on how the reporting and prosecution of hate crimes work. On these points, MPAC has urged the federal government to improve its relationships, conduct trainings, and provide easily accessible resources so that communities can better navigate the complex web of federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies that all have different approaches to addressing hate crimes.

The federal government offers a wide variety of resources for addressing these concerns across dozens of agencies, but public access to this information is scattershot and labyrinthine to navigate. If a child is bullied by a teacher at school, their parent may not intuitively know that the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights would be the best office to contact, or that OCR has regional offices across the country, or that OCR even exists. Similarly, most houses of worship remain unaware of DHS's Protective Security Advisor Program, beleaguered travelers are intimidated by the TSA redress process, and communities do not proactively establish relationships with regional Community Relations Services offices. Of course, all these scenarios are in addition to the most basic and pervasive question: how do I report a hate crime and who do I report it to?

Creating a centralized online resource, with a top-level domain (i.e. StopHate.gov), is one of the easiest and most impactful actions the federal government can take to support all Americans in need. At its most basic level, a StopHate site could simply collect existing resources across agencies and serve as a portal for individuals and communities to access the services most relevant to their specific needs. Yet this simple action, in concurrence with a robust public roll-out led by DOJ with support across agencies, will dramatically improve our ability as organizations to help our communities. No longer will we have to pass out flyers to congregations with a laundry list of acronyms, agency contacts, and convoluted URLs. Instead, we should be able to say with confidence: if your family or your community experiences any form of hate in any setting, go to StopHate.gov and you'll be guided right to the help you need.

BUILDING TRUST & ENDING DISCRIMINATORY POLICIES

Of course, one of the most enduring reasons why communities fail to report hate crimes is due to a fundamental distrust of law enforcement, the federal government, and this presidential administration in particular. When one of the White House's first acts was to attempt fulfilling candidate Trump's promise of a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims," countering violent extremism programs were explicitly halted from addressing white nationalists in order [to focus exclusively on Muslims](#), and a steady flow of senior officials with clear Islamophobic ties continue to be appointed, it should come as no surprise that American Muslims are wary of partnering with the federal government even to protect their own

communities. No discussion of the rise in hate crimes against our communities can be complete without an acknowledgement of the anti-Muslim rhetoric, actions, and damage that have come out of our national political climate.

American Muslims (along with many other marginalized communities) have similarly grown distrustful in working with law enforcement on hate crime issues. The persistent perception that law enforcement may leverage any engagement into an opportunity to securitize, profile, or [even surveil](#) people is prevalent in cities across the country. This is only exacerbated by a disturbing trend of vehement Islamophobes [continuing to conduct police trainings](#) in major cities nationwide. If law enforcement agencies at the federal, state, and local level are serious in their commitment to safeguard our communities from hate crimes, they must a) clearly divorce engagement on counterterrorism issues from conversations on community protection, and b) ban all clearly bigoted training materials and individuals while developing replacement curriculum in close coordination with communities themselves.

CONCLUSION

MPAC applauds the US Commission on Civil Rights for leveraging its standing as an independent federal agency to facilitate frank conversations on the rising threat of hate crimes. It is our hope that the May 2018 briefing, this period of public comment, and the Commissions forthcoming report will accurately convey the concerns that we share with the vast majority of national community and civil rights organizations. As dire as the growing dangers to our communities may seem, we are confident that these clear steps and recommendations can lead to a brighter future where hate is pushed more to the sidelines than ever.

Thank you for your partnership and support.