

SOCIOLOGISTS IN ACTION

JACK LEVIN

Three Times the Violence

A few years ago, I was asked to serve as a speaker in England, on the topic of what the British call *disablist violence*—hate crimes committed against people with emotional, intellectual, and physical disabilities. For decades, I had studied hate crimes based on race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation, but it never occurred to me that people with disabilities might be victimized by widespread and sometimes extraordinary levels of violence. According to anonymous victim accounts from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, each year, the 54 million Americans with disabilities experience serious violence at a rate nearly 3 times that of the general population. Their rate for sexual assault is almost 4 times that of Americans who are considered to be able-bodied.

After returning from England, I decided not to just drop my newly acquired information about the plight of people with disabilities. As someone who regards himself as a public sociologist, I was eager to communicate my findings as widely as possible. First, I wrote an article titled “The Invisible Hate Crime” for an issue of *Pacific Standard* magazine (www.psmag.com/politics-and-law/the-invisible-hate-crime-27984). Then, I authored an article about the topic for the reader *Disability, Hate Crime and Violence*, edited by Roulstone and Mason-Bish.

Finally, I teamed up with producer Bill Lancaster (a colleague at Northeastern University who, years earlier, had asked me to appear on several episodes of Geraldo Rivera’s then-popular talk show). We decided to produce a documentary that would help give some public visibility to what seems to be an unacknowledged hate crime.

After a couple of years gathering interviews and incidents, we put together a 15-minute film that was designed to stimulate debate and conversation among students and practitioners—especially those in or going into careers in criminal justice and social work.

The main purpose of our film, titled *Three Times the Violence* (http://original.livestream.com/webshare/video?clipId=pla_af5ee04c-ee39-4617-bbdd-48059fc22684), was to increase public and professional awareness that people with disabilities have a special vulnerability to extraordinary violence. We were intent on helping to remove disablist violence from the shadows and bring it into the spotlight. After all, the first step in combating these shameful incidents is an acknowledgment that they exist.

We don’t have to change the law on hate crimes against people with disabilities—that has already happened at the federal level—but we must change the thinking of ordinary people who consider only race, religion, or sexual orientation as grounds for bigotry. Many people with disabilities are harmed more by the way others treat them than by their intellectual, psychiatric, or physical disadvantage. This unfortunate fact has been widely ignored by otherwise decent Americans, who, when they think of hate crimes, tend to focus only on people wearing sheets, armbands, steel toe boots, or Nazi tattoos.

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