

The impact of hate crime against disabled people is far reaching: police responses need to be more consistent

The numbers of hate crimes against disabled people seem to be growing although such crimes often go unreported. [Sanah Sheikh](#) looks at how some police forces are committed to tackling these crimes and changing their procedures accordingly. But there is a lack of consistency across police forces and information and learning is therefore patchy. Hate crime against disabled people needs to be given more priority.



There have been a number of high profile cases of disability hate crime, such as the shocking murders of Brent Martin in Sunderland and Steven Hoskin in Cornwall, both of whom had a learning disability, and more recently the tragic deaths of Fiona Pilkington and her daughter in Leicestershire, as well as David Askew in Greater Manchester. Additionally, a recent [ComRes poll](#) commissioned by [Scope](#), revealed that more than half of disabled people in London (58 per cent) say they have experienced hostility, aggression or violence from a stranger because of their condition or impairment. According to the [Metropolitan Police](#), the number of disabled Londoners suffering hate crime has more than tripled in the past five years. A Freedom of Information (FOI) request showed that there were 130 reported cases in the last year compared with 40 in 2005.

The waves of harm created by hate crime have far-reaching implications beyond the victims, and fundamentally strike at social cohesion, citizenship, and even national productivity. [OPM's research report](#) on violence and hostility against disabled people found that hate crimes have powerful symbolic and concrete impacts that extend way beyond the physical and emotional harm experienced by the victims. Family members of disabled hate crime victims, who may not be disabled themselves, can similarly be victimised. Other disabled people who have never experienced hate crime also restructure their lives to avoid putting themselves at risk. Hate crimes degrade the communities in which they occur, members of which often feel a sense of shame and anger.

There is thus an urgent need for disability hate crime to become a greater priority, both at the national and local level. More specifically, police services across the UK should look critically at the way in which they tackle hate crime against disabled people. We were commissioned by the learning disability charity [Mencap](#) to conduct research exploring how police services in England handle hate crimes against those with learning disabilities. The [findings](#) indicate that police services face a number of challenges in tackling hate crime against this group, and that approaches vary widely. For example, we found little consistency in the structures of different police services to tackle hate crime and many don't have dedicated hate crime officers or units in place. Without these, hate crime is tackled by a variety of police officers and personnel, such as Community Liaison Officers, Diversity Officers and Police Community Support Officers. This suggests that there is a need to ensure that they work in a joined-up way and that there are clear lines of reporting and accountability so that incidents of hate crime don't slip through the cracks.

All police services agreed that the level of reported disability hate crime is much lower than that of actual disability hate crime. This can prevent police services from making properly informed decisions about effective resourcing. All police services felt that low prevalence figures were a result of under-reporting but only a small number felt that low prevalence figures were a result of non-identification and miscategorisation by police officers. On the other hand it is encouraging that the majority of police services are now recording hate incidents as well as hate crimes.

We also found that only one police service (out of fourteen consulted) recorded disability hate crime by type of impairment and only four services reported that they record the type of hate crime that has occurred. Most services suggested that their officers could be better at identifying and recording hate crime. On the other hand, some police services are doing innovative work to encourage people with learning disabilities to report hate crime. Such work often includes an element of interacting with and getting to know police officers and others who are involved in tackling these issues. Other police services are working with local partners to support individuals that want to report incidents at places they visit often or make it easier for them to access places other than the police station.

Almost all hate crime policies include guidance on investigating hate crime in general but there do not appear to be any disability-specific investigation and evidencing procedures in place. Additionally, fewer than

half of the police services we consulted reported having dedicated victim support officers or victim and/or witness support departments in place. On the other hand, the majority of police services recognised the importance of working with partners such as local authorities and local advocacy groups which implies that they recognise that there are other organisations that are better placed to identify the type of support needed by victims of hate crime.

Our consultation with people with learning disabilities found significant dissatisfaction with the way they have been handled by the police. Police officers were often felt to be 'patronising' or 'rude' and also did not know how to communicate with victims with a learning disability in an appropriate manner. The majority of police services we consulted with reported that police officers had only received general equality and diversity training with little specific focus on learning disability.

It is clear from our research that although police services face many challenges in tackling hate crime, there are also many police services that are seriously committed to improving the services they offer to those with learning difficulties. This has resulted in dramatically improved systems and procedures over the last few years and these forces have often put in place innovative practices. The tackling of hate crime could thus be vastly improved if police services got together to share their learning and coordinate their practices. Encouragingly, our report has also elicited a positive response from the [Association of Chief Police Officers](#) (ACPO). Amongst other things they are committed to ensuring that better data collection structures are in place and that victims are better supported. We are thus hopeful that tackling disability hate crime will become an important and appropriately resourced priority for police services across the UK.

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