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ONLINE EXTREMISM

More Complete Information Needed about Hate Crimes that Occur on the Internet

Why GAO Did This Study

A hate crime occurs nearly every hour in the U.S., based on data reported to the FBI. Investigations of recent hate crimes have suggested that exposure to hate speech on the internet may have contributed to the attackers' biases against their victims. In 2021, the FBI placed hate crimes at the same national threat priority level as preventing domestic violent extremism.

GAO was asked to review information on hate crimes and hate speech on the internet. This report examines (1) the extent to which DOJ collects data on hate crimes that occur on the internet, (2) what company data indicate about steps selected companies have taken to remove hate speech and violent extremist speech from their internet platforms, and (3) what is known about users' experience with, or expression of, hate speech on the internet, and its relationship to hate crimes and domestic violent extremism.

GAO analyzed U.S. hate crime data and interviewed DOJ officials. GAO analyzed data and interviewed officials from six selected companies operating internet platforms with publicly available policies prohibiting hate and violent extremist speech. GAO assessed peer reviewed and nonprofit studies that described hate speech on the internet, hate crimes, and domestic violent extremist incidents.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that BJS explore options to measure bias-related criminal victimization that occurs on the internet through the National Crime Victimization Survey or in a supplemental survey, as appropriate. BJS agreed with this recommendation.

View GAO-24-105553. For more information, contact Triana McNeil at (202)-512-8777 or mcneilt@gao.gov
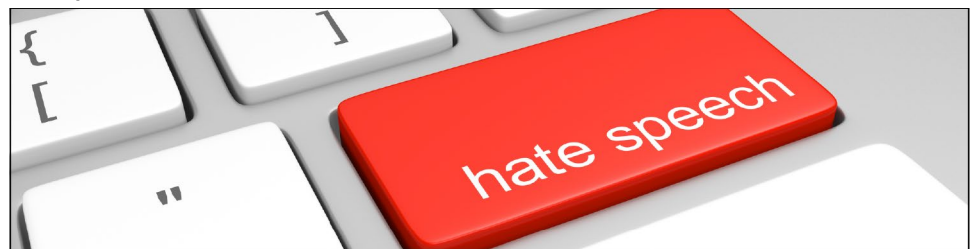
What GAO Found

The Department of Justice (DOJ) collects data about hate crimes (i.e., crimes that manifest evidence of prejudice based on race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, religion, disability, or sexual orientation) using two statistical programs:

- The Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Uniform Crime Reporting Program collects hate crime data, including hate crimes that occur on the internet, from law enforcement agencies.

- The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) uses a national annual household survey—the National Crime Victimization Survey—to produce estimates of the prevalence of hate crimes reported and not reported to law enforcement. BJS's survey does not collect data on hate crimes that occur on the internet.

The 2022 Better Cybercrime Metrics Act requires BJS to include questions relating to cybercrime victimization in its survey. BJS funded a study that examined one method to measure bias-motivated victimization on the internet. However, the study did not explore other methods, such as an approach similar to how the survey measures in-person hate crimes. Exploring other options to measure bias-related criminal victimization on the internet in the National Crime Victimization Survey or a supplemental survey would complement FBI's data and help DOJ identify and provide assistance to communities affected by hate.

GAO found that all six selected companies took some steps to remove content that their policies defined as hate speech or promoting violent extremism against people based on actual or perceived characteristics, such as race or religion. The companies' data show the amount of hateful content removed varied across platforms they operated from 2018 through 2022. This is due in part to the variation of the company definitions of hateful content and their related policies.

Hate Speech Occurs on the Internet

Source: David Carillet/stock.adobe.com. | GAO-24-105553

Research indicates that up to a third of internet users reported they experienced hate speech on the internet, and users who post hateful or extremist speech on the internet may do so because the internet helps spread hateful ideologies. In addition, research and government reports indicate an association between hate speech on the internet and hate crimes. For example, one peer-reviewed research study found an association between uncivil comments on the internet and hate crimes against Asians in selected U.S. cities. Also, the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI reported that the internet created opportunities for individuals to self-radicalize and conduct lone offender attacks without the support of a larger violent extremist organization.

—— **United States Government Accountability Office**