

Supporting and Empowering Victims



This is an extract from an Institute for Strategic Dialogue publication.

Read the full text:

[On the Front Line: A guide to countering far-right extremism](#)

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Introduction

Support for victims is instrumental not only to dealing with the aftermath of violent cases, but in preventing future incidences. Victims of far-right extremist violence and hate crime often face specific challenges:

- They often struggle to explain or understand why the violence took place, as opposed to victims of robbery and other types of crime
- They are often confronted with blame for the events that took place – for example, LGBT victims being told that they ‘brought it on’ themselves
- Victims of hate suddenly find themselves *representing* something (a minority identity); they may struggle with their sense of individuality
- They are unsure of whether police or local authorities will help them, due to institutional racism and discrimination, or may fear deportation or arrest
- There are significant challenges to re-integrating hate crime victims back into society: fear, risk of perpetuating cycles of prejudice

- Hate crimes are not just committed against the immediate victim, but against a community, so the impacts are felt far and wide. Entire communities may be traumatised following an attack on a single person.

European countries struggle with encouraging victims to report hate crime. The most common reasons that victims do not report hate crime include the belief that nothing will change as a result of reporting incidences, that these cases are everyday occurrences, and that they do not trust the police. Not only do victims support professionals assist victims, they also work with law enforcement (and prosecutors) to ensure that these relationships can be repaired.

Key approaches

1. Rehabilitation and reintegration

Ensures that victims and their families receive the care and support they need to regain health and stability and re-build a life for themselves. This includes support reporting cases to the police, navigating social services and legal advice, as well as longer-term counselling and psychological support.

2. Empowering victims and their communities

Aims to empower communities to report crimes and speak out against them. This includes providing communities with information about their rights and the legal frameworks on hate crime.

CASE STUDY

Project name/Country:

Hungarian Civil Liberties Union (HCLU), Roma Programme, Hungary

Aims/Objectives:

To enable and empower Roma communities, raise intra-community awareness of fundamental human rights, and shape public opinion to reduce discrimination against Roma people.

Description/Activities:

Established in 1994, the HCLU is a human rights watchdog working to strengthen civil society and the rule of law in Hungary. HCLU runs a project dedicated to supporting the Roma population in north-eastern Hungary. The programme aims to empower Roma communities and activists by: reversing the process of criminalisation of poverty; utilising effective communication and campaigning to shift opinions against prejudices and discrimination; and drawing attention to 'double standards' within law enforcement, administrative authorities and the judiciary.

HCLU conducts training sessions to provide Roma communities and activists with the tools to understand their fundamental human rights and victims' rights, and the capacity to enforce these rights. They have set up over 20 legal support stations in Roma communities across the region, and offer free legal aid to vulnerable, isolated people living in extreme poverty remotely via Skype.

HCLU have used video testimony from the victims of racist attacks to raise awareness of hate crime and improve societal understanding of the problem. They also use video testimony as material for the judiciary to use as evidence during legal proceedings.

3. Training for the justice system

Aims to prepare the justice system for handling hate crime and far-right violence with sensitivity and appropriate action. This includes raising awareness among police, prosecutors and judges of hate crime and far-right extremism, and promoting human rights awareness and sensitivity to working with vulnerable communities.

CASE STUDY

Project name/Country:

Lambda Warszawa, Poland

Aims/Objectives:

To create a space to build a positive identity for the LGBT community in Poland and bring independent, professional and expert assistance in cases of emergency and crisis.

Description/Activities:

Lambda Warszawa is the oldest LGBT rights group in Poland. The organisation serves as a centre of information for Polish LGBT members on legal, professional, and personal advice; maintains a hotline to respond to acts of discrimination and violence; and communicates with local authorities when necessary. The organisation carries out training with Polish police on working with vulnerable communities, particularly LGBT communities. They work closely with the Human Rights Adviser to the Commander in Chief of the Polish Police.

Getting it right

Approach

A non-judgemental approach is critical. Victims support professionals should listen without any pre-conceived expectations, and without commentary. Victims may not realise that what they have experienced is not hate crime, but discrimination or simply a different form of crime. It is important nonetheless to listen to those you cannot help. Suggest ways in which the individual can approach the relevant service they should contact, whether it is the police, an ombudsman, or other social services.

Building trust

Particular groups, for different reasons, often lack the victims' support they require. These include young people, male victims and groups that don't have a strong relationship with the police due to discrimination or prejudice (including Muslim and LGBT communities). Victims support professionals may need to partner with organisations and institutions that are trusted in the community in order to ensure they are known and trusted. Victims support organisations can offer special training for staff on how to support victims from ethnic minority backgrounds. Offering support to victims in key languages may also be important.

Profile

In some contexts, depending on the organisation, smaller legal advice centres may not need to advertise the service because they risk having more clients approach them than they can handle. Those victims support organisations that advertise do so via the usual channels – in hospitals, police stations and online for example.

Some are increasingly using social media and online tools to reach communities. Even police have set up a presence online (via dedicated websites or Facebook pages) for people to report hate crime. In the UK, organisations like Tell MAMA (Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks) are testing the use of social media as a method of collecting information on harassment, intimidation and violence against particular communities. Gathering data on hate crime and hate speech via Twitter and social media comes with its challenges, including a need to be rigorous (but sensitive) with fact checking and following up, but it is an area worth exploring.

Encouraging reporting of crimes

In some countries, there is a real need for campaigns to encourage minorities to report hate crime, and raise awareness of where they can go if they are uncomfortable going straight to the police. Some of the most successful examples include use of shocking images to draw attention to the issue. It is essential to raise awareness within communities of what hate crimes are, and victims' rights. Organisations like the HCLU in Hungary or the Association for Legal Intervention in Poland provide training for

minority communities about hate crime, with the aim of empowering them to act when they see or are a victim of a crime.

Shaping the justice system

Victims support professionals are increasingly delivering training sessions for police, prosecutors and judges on three key issues: recognising hate crimes and far-right extremist crimes; ability to engage with victims of hate crime and extremism; and broader diversity, tolerance and human rights education. The most successful training programmes for police are delivered by front-line professionals, but done in partnership with the police. Even organisations externally funded to deliver training have specifically asked police to work with them to design the curricula together, to promote institutional buy-in and ownership of it.

The most effective training sessions involve humanising hate crime by bringing minority community representatives or survivors to the table. For example, trainers in Denmark have brought the organisation LGBT Denmark or family members of a victim of racial violence in to speak to police officers during a training session on hate crime. Some organisations are also using film to deliver these personal testimonies.

Communicating personal testimonies

Though recounting experiences can be a difficult and sensitive process for a survivor, for some people at the right time, telling one's story can be a meaningful process. It can be part of the healing process. In some cases it is a powerful method of pushing back at injustices that led to the events, and of appealing to government or the general public for change. This should be done with care, and when the time is right for the individual.

Supporting yourself and staff

Supporting victims of hate crime and extremist violence can be emotionally taxing. It is important that victims support professionals have a system in place to support staff working on these issues, and to offer a space where staff can speak about their work and how it is affecting them. In some cases, organisations have lined up external support, or have a trained therapist or counsellor in-house.

The problem of far-right extremism will not go away in the near future. This is no easy challenge, however this project aims to offer a platform for the good work that is being done across Europe to prevent, intervene and respond to this challenge. Cross-border exchange at the European level encourages innovation, will allow us to learn faster, and means that those with less experience can learn from those with more. This is the first set of resources in the FREE Initiative, which will grow over time as new methods are tried and tested and new lessons learned. Visit www.theFREEinitiative.com for inspirational films, testimonies and case studies on tackling far-right extremism across Europe.

About the author

Vidhya Ramalingam is Research and Policy Manager at ISD, leading a programme of work on far-right extremism and intolerance. She regularly briefs governments and NGOs on far-right extremism across Europe, and methods for response and intervention. Her work on the far right has been featured in the Guardian, the Telegraph, Huffington Post, the New Statesman, and international press. Vidhya holds an MPhil in Migration Studies from the University of Oxford, and a BA in Anthropology and Inequality Studies from Cornell University.

