

Reading: Anti-Semitism, Past & Present

Each year, thousands of people in the U.S. are victims of “hate crimes” – crimes that are motivated by hatred of a particular group of people.

Currently, the most common type of hate crime targets people based on their race, according to a recent [report](#) by the FBI. In 2018, nearly half of these race-based crimes were directed against African-Americans. 2018 saw a rise in hate crimes against people identified as LGBTQ and as Latinx. People are also targeted for their religion. Jewish people are the most frequent targets of this type of hate crime. Muslims, Sikhs, and others are also targeted.

Over the past several years, there has been a dramatic rise in the number and severity of anti-Semitic incidents in the United States, including several cases of high-profile violence.

Recent events

- On December 28, 2019, a man wielding a machete entered the home of Rabbi Chaim Rottenberg in Monsey NY, and attacked a party celebrating the festive Jewish holiday of Hanukkah. The attacker slashed five people, critically injuring one of them. (The attacker appears to have a history of serious mental illness.)
- On December 10, 2019, a man and a woman attacked a kosher market in Jersey City, NJ, killing three and wounding three.
- On April 27, 2019, a man armed with a semi-automatic rifle fired into a synagogue in Poway, CA, killing one and injuring three.
- On October 27, 2018, the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh was attacked by a lone gunman who killed eleven people and injured six more.

These incidents stand out as the most violent recent assaults upon American Jews, but hardly the only anti-Semitic incidents in the U.S. in the last few years. Between 2015 and 2017, the number of such incidents doubled (from 942 to 1986). Most of them did not involve violence; instead entailing vandalism, social media posts, speeches, street harassment, and verbal slurs. According to the Anti-Defamation League ([ADL](#)), the total number of anti-Semitic incidents dropped slightly in 2018, but the number of physical attacks more than doubled.

ADL defines anti-Semitism as:

The belief or behavior hostile toward Jews just because they are Jewish. It may take the form of religious teachings that proclaim the inferiority of Jews, for instance, or political efforts to isolate, oppress, or otherwise injure them. It may also include prejudiced or stereotyped views about Jews.

For centuries Jews around the world have been treated as outsiders; forced to convert to Christianity or other religions. Jews have been expelled from countries, forced to live in certain areas, subject to special laws, limited to specific jobs, denied civil rights and subjected to individual, mob, and state violence.

According to the organization [Jews for Racial and Economic Justice](#):

Like all oppressions, [anti-Semitism] has deep historical roots and uses exploitation, marginalization, discrimination and violence as its tools. Like all oppressions, the ideology contains elements of dehumanization and degradation via lies and stereotypes about Jews, as well as a mythology. The myth changes and adapts to different times and places, but fundamentally it says that Jews are to blame for society's problems. Since the emergence of Christianity as Europe's dominant religious, political and cultural force, Jews and Muslims have been targeted for violence—often extreme violence—isolated from the rest of society, and periodically purged from jobs, towns, countries and even continents.

While the history of anti-Semitic violence is long and terrible, some instances stand out as exceptionally savage.

- **The Spanish Inquisition:** In 1492, Spain's King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella (who also financed Christopher Columbus's journey to the New World), issued an edict that all Jews in Spain had to convert to Christianity or leave the country. Special court hearings were held to root out those who were defying the law. Tens of thousands of Jews were expelled, while several thousand others were tortured and killed after their trial. (It wasn't until 2015 that Spain-- which had one of the largest Jewish populations before the Inquisition—offered Spanish citizenship to Jews who can trace their family history to Spain.)
- **Pogroms in Russia:** The word "pogrom" refers to anti-Jewish riots mostly occurring in Russia and mostly in the years 1880-1920. During that period, there were thousands of instances where mobs massacred Jews, burning synagogues and businesses. In Ukraine alone there were over one thousand pogroms in the 1919-20 period. The number of victims varied from a few dozen to over ten thousand. ("Pogrom" is now applied also to earlier massacres of Jews and to mob murders of other ethnic/religious groups, including African-Americans in the U.S.).
- **The Holocaust:** During the 1930s and 1940s, the Nazi ideology made anti-Semitism one of its central themes. They used anti-Semitic stereotypes, myths, and conspiracies to perpetrate violence and brutality of a scale rarely seen before in history. Their goal was the total elimination of Jewry in Europe. They succeeded in the systematic extermination of some six million Jews—about a third of the world's Jewish population-- mostly in concentration camps designed for that purpose.

Anti-Semitism in America

While in the U.S., Jews haven't been subjected to slavery or pogroms, and lynchings were rare, individual and institutional anti-Semitism has been with us throughout American history. Some incidents stand out:

- General (later, President) Ulysses Grant, angry at war profiteering during the Civil War, ordered all Jews out of his military district in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Mississippi. His General Order 11 in 1862 stated that: "The Jews, as a class violating every regulation of trade established by the Treasury Department and also department orders, are hereby expelled ... within twenty-four hours from the receipt of this order." Abraham Lincoln nullified the order several weeks after it was given.

- In 1913, a prominent Atlanta Jewish businessman, Leo Frank, was convicted of murdering a 13-year-old girl in a trial rife with errors and incompetence. After a series of appeals failed to overturn the conviction, Georgia's governor found major inconsistencies in the prosecution's case. He commuted Frank's death sentence from the death penalty to life imprisonment. A group of outraged citizens, including some community leaders, broke into the jail and carried Frank away to be hung from a tree. The commutation was met with a wave of anti-Semitism that contributed to the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan.
- Henry Ford, in addition to his prominent role in the automobile industry, was a virulent anti-Semite. He wrote a regular column in the newspaper that he owned, and later published the columns in a book titled *The International Jew*. Chapters included "Jewish Degradation of American Baseball," "How Jews in the U.S. Conceal Their Strength," and "How the Jewish Song Trust Makes You Sing." Adolf Hitler presented Ford with the Grand Cross of the German Eagle Medal in 1938, displayed a large portrait of Ford in his office, and told an American reporter that "I regard Henry Ford as my inspiration."
- Father Coughlin—During the 1930s Father Charles Coughlin of Royal Oak, MI became a pioneer in field of radio ministry. Coughlin blamed Jews for most of the world's problems and his sermons were fiercely anti-Semitic. As fascists gained power in Europe and World War II approached, his views became increasingly pro-Nazi. His radio listeners were fiercely loyal, and his listeners numbered almost 30 million. World War II brought Coughlin's radio career to an end as the government took steps to silence him and his own Bishop forced him off the air.

Anti-Semitism in America has come in many forms. Sometimes it's the product of influential individuals like Henry Ford or Father Coughlin or Charles Lindbergh. Sometimes it's organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan or other neo-Nazi groups. And sometimes, lone individuals fed by anti-Jewish propaganda plan and execute attacks on the nearest Jewish targets.

Synagogues and Jewish community centers have been favorite targets:

- In October 1958, Atlanta's oldest synagogue was partially destroyed by 50 sticks of dynamite. A bomb failed to explode in a Gadsden, AL synagogue in 1960 and the attacker shot at congregants as they fled the building.
- In October 1977, people leaving a bar mitzvah (a coming of age ritual for Jewish boys) in St. Louis were fired upon, with one death and two injured.
- In August 1999, a man fired a submachine gun into a Jewish Community Center in Los Angeles, injuring five people. In July 2006, the Seattle Jewish Federation was attacked with six women shot with one killed.
- In June 2009, a man entered the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC and shot a security guard, before he himself was shot by other guards.
- In April 2014, a Jewish retirement home and a Jewish community center were attacked with three fatalities (all Christian).

Anti-Semitism also appeared in the form of discrimination that we typically associate with segregationist laws against people of color. Elite universities, especially in the first half of the 20th century, put a cap

on the number of Jews admitted. Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Columbia, Boston University, and other top schools instituted formal or informal quotas on Jewish students.

"Never admit more than five Jews, take only two Italian Catholics, and take no Blacks at all." – Dean Milton Winternitz, Yale Medical School

The application for Sarah Lawrence College asked: "Has your daughter been brought up to strict Sunday observance?" (Jews observe the Sabbath on Saturday.) Legacy admittance for family members and also "character" evaluations were used to limit the number of Jews. Many country clubs, private schools, fraternities, hotels, and restaurants excluded Jews altogether.

Julian Zelizer, in the Atlantic Magazine, cites a hotel advertisement as stating "No Hebrews or tubercular guests received." Another hotel announced "No Dogs. No Jews. No Consumptives." Even such venerable institutions as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York Public Library, and the New York Zoological Society excluded Jews from their boards of directors. And restrictive covenants, mostly used to ban Black people from certain neighborhoods were also used to forbid homeowners from selling their homes to Jews.

"None of the said lands, interests therein or improvements thereon shall be sold, resold, conveyed, leased, rented to or in any way used, occupied or acquired by any person of Negro blood or to any person of the Semitic race, blood or origin..." – Deed from Washington DC area

Anti-Semitism Today

Indicators point to a recent rise in the level of anti-Semitism in the United States—and not just in the number of hate incidents reported. A March 2019 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center concluded that 64 percent of Americans believe that Jews face some discrimination (up 20 points from 2016). The percentage who believed Jews face "a lot" of discrimination nearly doubled in the same time period.

Zionism and the founding of Israel in 1948 provided a new fault line in the discussion of anti-Semitism. Many strong supporters of Israel consider any criticism of Israel to be anti-Semitic. Critics of Israel, many of whom are Jewish themselves, insist that their condemnation of Israel's treatment of the Palestinians is not equivalent to being anti-Jewish.

Anti-Semitism in the United States has long had an association with right-wing ideology. Jews have often advocated for liberal or socialist causes, and against bigotry in all forms. During the Civil Rights Movement it was common for segregationists and white supremacists to denounce Jews and Communists as civil rights agitators:

"The Negro is not the enemy. The Jew is THE enemy of our White Race and the Jew is using the Negro in an effort to destroy the White Race that he so passionately hates." – J.B. Stoner, National States Rights Party

American Jews have also historically been advocates for immigrants, earning the wrath of today's anti-immigrant activists. According to the ADL, white nationalist comments on social media linking Jews to immigration are quite common. Their theory is that Jews are behind massive non-white immigration to the U.S. as part of a plot to make white race extinct. Many of those who have committed violence

against Jewish people, including the Pittsburgh synagogue shooter, have embraced this conspiracy theory.

Fortunately, there has been a long tradition of people in the U.S. and around the world to educate, organize, and speak out against anti-Semitism and in solidarity with those being targeted. After each of the recent anti-Semitic attacks, communities have organized extensive protests, vigils, marches, and educational programs.

In the aftermath of the 2018 attack on the Tree of Life Synagogue, there was a powerful response that included people from all walks of life, including non-Jewish religious leaders. Among them was a Christian pastor and an Islamic imam:

"My heart breaks for the Jewish community and really, there's no reason any man, woman, or child should feel threatened in their house of worship. Our response ought to be the same thing that it would be if it happened to Christians, if it happened to Jews, if it happened to Muslims, of any faith that it happens to, our response ought to be the same: What do you need? How can we serve you? How can we love you? How we can stand beside you?" – [Pastor Brandon Capuano](#), Rochester, NY

"The senseless act of violence ... is mourned by all people of conscience... We condemn such violence and pray that incidents like this may cease. Too many innocent lives have been taken and too many tears have been shed..... One remedy to this violence is to love and care for our neighbors. We stand with you in friendship and peace and offer our assistance in whatever way your community needs. Our hearts are broken over your loss." – [Shaykh Waleed Basyouni](#), imam and director of Clear Lake Islamic Center, Houston, TX

Discussion Questions

1. What stands out for you in the reading? Why?
2. How is anti-Semitism connected to other forms of hate?
3. How are stereotypes harmful?
4. What concerns do you have about anti-Semitism or other forms of hate in our country and/or locally?
5. Have you seen or heard any anti-Semitic remarks or symbols in our school, community, or online?
6. What are ways that we can counter anti-Semitism and other forms of hate that we experience in our personal lives?
7. What are ways we can counter it in the society at large?