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[Blog article](#) by Kathryn Barr, Senior Policy Officer, Equality Commission NI

Urgent action needed to tackle hate crime

Over the last months, we have seen some disgraceful examples of hate crime in Northern Ireland. A striking finding from [recent Equality Commission research was that racism was a normal part of everyday life](#) (*pdf*). The researchers heard from members of minority and ethnic groups living in Northern Ireland. Many spoke of experiencing racism, including some incidents that would meet the definition of hate crimes.

Although the number of reported hate crimes have fallen slightly in the last year, many go unreported. [PSNI statistics show that in the 12 months from July 2022-June 2023](#), there were:

- 876 hate crimes based on race
- 271 hate crimes based on sexual orientation
- 913 hate crimes based on sectarianism

Hate crimes were also carried out on the basis of disability, faith/ religion and transgender identity.

Challenging prejudice in society

There needs to be action to challenge prejudice and hate. We would like to see;

- prejudicial attitudes, behaviour and hate crime addressed in the NI Executive's Programme for Government.
- public bodies and persons in positions of influence providing strong and visible leadership.
- a co-ordinated, and collaborative approach across different agencies and organisations.

Legal reform and the justice system

The existing legislation has led to operational and procedural difficulties, and it seems to be under-used. [We have called for strengthened legislation](#). We welcome that [the Department has indicated it accepts in principle](#) several recommendations in line with the Commission's position on improving the legislation. This includes adoption of a statutory aggravation model. This approach will ensure the hate crime element is considered and addressed throughout the criminal justice process, not just at the point of sentencing.

We welcome the progress to reform hate crime legislation with [Judge Marrinan independent review findings in 2020](#) and an initial consultation held by the Department of Justice in Spring 2022. We continue to engage with officials for stronger protections to benefit all victims of hate crimes.

We are also calling for protection to be expanded to a wider range for equality groups. Hate crimes based on gender, age, gender identity and intersex characteristics must be addressed.

Yet, strengthened legislation is not possible in the current political impasse. It is vital that any restored Assembly and Executive prioritise reform of the hate crime legislation.

Under-reporting of hate crime

We need to see action to address the under-reporting of hate crime. This can be achieved through awareness raising and building trust in the justice system. It is important there is partnership working with equality groups. Efforts should be made to ensure any victim reporting a hate crime:

- has an accessible way to report
- is offered appropriate support
- has any concerns about anonymity addressed.

Tackling the root causes of hate crime

Societal change is needed to prevent hate in the first place. Prejudicial attitudes and negative stereotypes need to be tackled from a young age and throughout society, including in schools, training, work and in the family. Specific action is needed to confront online hate speech and abuse.

We have made a range of recommendations to [address prejudice-based bullying in schools](#), and to promote [shared and safe housing](#). These would help prevent the harmful attitudes that can lead to hate incidents and crimes.

Taking action to secure progress

Political leaders, the Department of Justice, criminal justice agencies and others in positions of influence must take further action to tackle hate , and strengthen protections for those subjected to hate crimes.

However, each of us as a member of society also has a duty to do all we can to bring an end to hate. We must all work together to challenge hate crime, racism and discrimination. We need to promote positive attitudes and good relations in our community.

We would welcome any steps you can take to help end hate in Northern Ireland. One way you can do this is by engaging with decision-makers to raise awareness of our positions and secure adoption of our recommendations.

You can read more about the [Commission's recommendations relating to hate crime in Northern Ireland](#)