

Online Hate and Harassment: The American Experience

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SURVEY REPORT

Executive Summary

The American public has become increasingly aware of online hate and harassment in recent years. The scale and complexity of online hate has reached unprecedented levels as seen in sustained online harassment campaigns that violently threaten journalists to organized racist attacks launched against an African-American student leader by a far-right online community. High-profile targets of coordinated online harassment – such as Jewish journalists and African-American actress and comedian Leslie Jones – have drawn the attention of technologists, policy makers, and the public to the problem of online hate.

This report is based on a nationally representative survey of Americans conducted from December 17, 2018 to December 27, 2018, and sheds light on these issues.



This figure is substantially higher than the 18% reported to a comparable question in a 2017 survey by the Pew Research Center. Approximately one-third of online harassment appears to be a result of the target's protected characteristic, such as race or ethnicity, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation or disability. LGBTQ+ individuals, Muslims, Hispanics and African-Americans face especially high rates of identity-based discrimination.

Online harassment impacts the target in a variety of ways. The most common response is to stop, reduce or change online behavior, which 38% of those who have been harassed have done.

This can include steps like posting less often, avoiding certain sites, changing privacy setting, deleting apps, or increasing filtering of content or users. Many go further, with 18% of harassment targets contacting the technology platform to ask for help or report harassing content.

Fifteen percent take steps to reduce risks to their physical safety, such as moving locations, changing their commute, taking a self-defense class, avoiding being alone, or avoiding certain locations.

Finally, 6% have contacted the police to ask for help or report the online hate or harassment.

People are concerned about the impact that online hate has on society.

More than half of Americans (59%) believe that online hate and harassment are making hate crimes more common.

Significant swaths of the population also feel less safe in their community (22%) as a result of online hate.

ACTIONS TO ADDRESS ONLINE HATE AND HARASSMENT

Americans overwhelmingly want to see concrete steps taken to address online hate and harassment. The survey shows that across political ideologies, the vast majority of Americans believe that private technology companies and government need to take action against online hate and harassment.

Over 80% of Americans want government to act by strengthening laws as well as improving training and resources for police on online hate and harassment. Americans also want platforms to take more action to counter or mitigate the problem.

67% of Americans want companies to make it easier to report hateful content and behavior.

81% want companies to provide more options for people to filter hateful or harassing content. In addition, an overwhelming percentage of survey respondents want companies to label comments and posts that appear to come from automated “bots” rather than people.

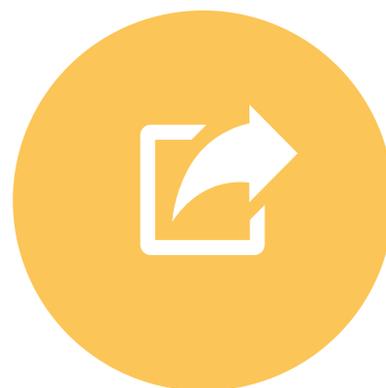
Take Action



Use ADL's Cyber
Safety Action Guide
to report hate
online



Stay in touch with
the Center for
Technology and
Society



Share your
Cyberhate story
with us

Methodology

A survey of 1,134 individuals was conducted by YouGov, a leading public opinion and data analytics firm, on behalf of ADL examining Americans' experiences with and views of online hate and harassment. Eight hundred surveys were collected to form a nationally representative base of respondents with additional oversamples from individuals who identified as Jewish, Muslim, African-American, Asian-American or LGBTQ+. For the oversampled target groups, responses were

collected until at least 100 Americans were represented from each of those groups. Data was weighted on the basis of age, gender identity, race, census region and education to adjust for national representation. YouGov surveys are taken independently online by a prescreened set of panelists representing many demographic categories. Panelists are weighted for statistical relevance to national demographics. Participants are rewarded for general participation in YouGov surveys but were not directly rewarded by ADL for their participation in this survey. Surveys were conducted from December 17, 2018 to December 27, 2018 and took on average 5 minutes to complete. The margin of sampling error for the full sample of respondents is plus or minus 3 percentage points.

Results

Prevalence and Nature of Online Hate and Harassment

This nationally representative survey finds that harassment is a common aspect of many Americans' online lives, and appears to be increasing. Over half (53%) of Americans experienced some type of online harassment. This is higher than the 41% reported to a comparable question asked in 2017 by the Pew Research Center. Most prevalent are forms of harassment that are generally isolated offensive incidents: some 41% of Americans were subjected to offensive name calling and 33% had someone try to purposefully embarrass them. More severe forms of harassment were also commonly experienced – with 37% of American adults reporting such an experience, up from 18% in 2017. We defined “severe harassment” consistent with Pew Research Center as including physical threats, sexual harassment, stalking and sustained harassment.

Chart 1: Percentage of U.S. Adults Who Have Experienced Harassment Online



More than one-in-five Americans (22%) reported being subjected to physical threats online and nearly one-in-five experienced sexual harassment (18%), stalking (18%), or sustained harassment (17%).

Online harassment can occur for a variety of reasons, and the survey asked specifically about perceived causes. Around one-third (32%) of Americans who

had been harassed reported that the harassment was a result of their sexual orientation, religion, race or ethnicity, gender identity, or disability. One-in-five (20%) respondents who had experienced online harassment believe it was a result of their gender identity and some 15% because of their race or ethnicity. Roughly one-in-ten had been targeted as a result of their sexual orientation (11%), religion (11%), occupation (9%), or disability (8%).⁶ In addition, 21% of those who were harassed reported that physical appearance and political views drove at least part of the harassment. One consequence of widespread online hate and harassment is that it leaves people worried about being targeted in the future: 27% of those who had experienced harassment and an additional 14% of Americans who had not experienced harassment reported worrying about future harassment.

Chart 2: Reasons for Online Hate



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The survey also sheds light on the relative rate of harassment of different groups. Identity-based harassment was most common against LGBTQ+ individuals, with 63% of LGBTQ+ respondents experiencing harassment because of their sexual orientation. Religious-based harassment was very common against Muslims (35%) and, to a lesser extent, Jewish (16%) respondents. Harassment was also common among other minority groups, with race-based harassment affecting 30% of Hispanics or Latinos, 27% of African-Americans, and 20% of Asian-Americans.⁷ Finally, women also experienced harassment disproportionately, with gender identity-based harassment affecting 24% of female-identified respondents, compared to 15% of male-identified.

Chart 3: Percentage of Respondents Who Were Targeted Because of Their Membership in a Protected Class



While online hate and harassment is prevalent across all age groups, younger Americans report higher rates than older Americans. The majority of 18–29 year olds (65%) experienced some form of hate or harassment, with 49% reporting severe harassment. Online harassment is also common among older age groups. Among 30–49 year olds, 60% were targeted (42% severely). For Americans 50 and over, 39% were targeted (25% severely).

Chart 4: Online Hate and Harassment by Age



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The survey also asked about where hate and harassment had occurred online. Of those respondents who were harassed online, over half (56%) reported that at least some of their harassment occurred on Facebook. Smaller shares experienced harassment or hate on Twitter (19%), YouTube (17%), Instagram (16%), WhatsApp (13%), Reddit (11%), Snapchat (10%), Twitch (8%) and Discord (7%).

Chart 5: Location of Online Hate and Harassment



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This analysis sheds light on the absolute amount of online harassment occurring on platforms. In order to explore the rate of hate and harassment on each platform, the survey asked about the respondent's use of different platforms. Chart 6 depicts the proportion of regular users (defined as using the platform at least once a day) who experienced harassment on that platform. The results suggest higher rates of harassment of regular users of Twitch, Reddit, Facebook and Discord. Note that the results may underestimate the amount of harassment on the platforms because some targets may have since stopped using a platform for reasons either related or unrelated to the harassment.

Chart 6: Harassment of Daily Users of Platforms



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Many people who have been targeted or fear being targeted took action as a result of online harassment. Some 38% stopped, reduced or changed their activities online, such as posting less often, avoiding certain sites, changing privacy setting, deleting apps, or increasing filtering of content or users. Some 15% took steps to reduce risk to their physical safety, such as moving locations, changing their commute, taking a self-defense class, avoiding being alone, or avoiding certain locations. Some attempted to get help, either from companies or law enforcement: 18% contacted the platform and 6% contacted the police to ask for help or report online hate or harassment.

Chart 7: Impact of Online Hate and Harassment



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In addition to impacting individuals' behavior, online hate and harassment is impacting how people see society. More than half of Americans (59%) believe that online hate and harassment are making hate crimes more common, and half believe that they are increasing the use of derogatory language. More than one-third (39%) think that online hate and harassment are making young Americans lose faith in the country, and 30% believe that they are making it harder to stand up to hate. Some feel less comfortable in their more immediate environments: Approximately 22% of Americans report that online hate and harassment makes them feel less safe in their community while 18% feel that it makes family members trust each other less.

Chart 8: Societal Impact of Online Hate and Harassment



Americans overwhelmingly want platforms, law enforcement agencies and policymakers to address the problem of online hate and harassment. Over 80% of Americans want government to act by strengthening laws and improving training and resources for police on cyberhate.

Strong support exists for these changes regardless of whether an individual has previously experienced online hate and harassment. Those who were targeted held similar views as those who had not experienced harassment.

Support also exists for these recommendations across the political spectrum. Although respondents identifying as liberal reported even greater agreement with the actions, those identifying as conservatives overwhelmingly supported all the actions as well.

Chart 9a: Government and Societal Actions



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Chart 9b: Government and Societal Actions



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Americans also want to see private technology companies take action to counter or mitigate online hate and harassment, with 84% saying that platforms should do more. They want platforms to make it easier for users to filter (81%) and report (76%) hateful and harassing content. In addition, Americans want companies to label comments and posts that appear to come from automated “bots” rather than people. Finally, a large percentage of respondents were in favor of platforms removing problematic users as well as having outside experts independently assess the amount of hate on a platform. As with the government and societal recommendations, comparable support existed for these recommendations regardless of whether a respondent had previously experienced harassment.

Like with the government and societal recommendations, support is strong for these recommendations across the political ideological spectrum. Although liberals especially support platform recommendations, with a majority of conservatives also supporting all recommendations.

Chart 10a: Platform Actions



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Chart 10b: Platform Actions



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1. Fingas, J. (2019, January 26). Trolls threaten laid off reporters in coordinated online campaign. Retrieved from <https://www.engadget.com/2019/01/26/trolls-threaten-laid-off-reporters>
2. Larimer, S. (2018, December 21). Man who harassed black student online must deliver 'sincere' apology, renounce white supremacy. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2018/12/21/man-who-harassed-black-student-online-must-deliver-sincere-apology-renounce-white-supremacy/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.3f649d68ee15
3. ADL (2016, October 19). ADL Task Force Issues Report Detailing Widespread Anti-Semitic Harassment of Journalists on Twitter During 2016 Campaign. Retrieved from <https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/adl-task-force-issues-report-detailing-widespread-anti-semitic-harassment-of>
4. Rogers, K. (2016, July 19). Leslie Jones, Star of 'Ghostbusters,' Becomes a Target of Online Trolls Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/20/movies/leslie-jones-star-of-ghostbusters-becomes-a-target-of-online-trolls.html>
5. Duggan, M. (2018, January 03). Online Harassment 2017. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/2017/07/11/online-harassment-2017/>
6. Respondents could select multiple characteristics that they have been harassed over or are worried about being harassed over.
7. Survey respondents were asked which racial or ethnic group best describes them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This report's findings show that the vast majority of the American public – across demographics, political ideology, and past experience with online harassment – want both government and private technology companies to take action against online hate and harassment. To that end, ADL recommends the following actions:

For Government

1. Strengthen laws against perpetrators of online hate

Hate and harassment have moved from on the ground to online, but our laws have not kept up. Many forms of severe online misconduct are not consistently covered by cybercrime, harassment, stalking, and hate crime law. State legislators have an opportunity, consistent with the First Amendment, to create laws that hold perpetrators of severe online hate and harassment more accountable for their offenses, including:

- Legislators should ensure hate crime laws cover online hate. Apart from Illinois, which mentions “cyberstalking,” no state hate crime statute expressly includes online conduct within its scope. These laws can and should be updated to explicitly cover online hate incidents.
- States should close the gaps that often prevent stalking and harassment laws from punishing online misconduct. Many states have intent, threat, harm or “directed at” requirements that prevent prosecution of online behavior that would otherwise easily fit the definitions of stalking or harassment statutes. Improved laws can allow for more cyberstalking and cyber-harassment prosecutions without creating constitutional complications. States like Connecticut, Maine, and New Jersey provide examples of broad but constitutionally sound stalking laws that address problematic online behavior.
- Legislators should increase liability and remedies for information-sharing cybercrimes such as doxing , swatting , non-consensual pornography, and deepfakes. Many statutes require the perpetrator to harbor an intent “to place another person in reasonable fear for his or her safety,” which applies to some but not all perpetrators of doxing. Additionally, eight states lack non-consensual pornography prohibitions and should pass laws to ban these actions. Finally, legislators must address newer forms of online harassment, such as deepfakes. While tort laws such as intentional infliction of emotional distress, false light (as well as other privacy torts), defamation, and copyright might allow claims against creators of deepfakes, comprehensive legislation can and should address gaps in cybercrime liability and remedies.

In addition, Congress has an opportunity to lead the fight against cyberhate by increasing protections for targets as well as penalties for perpetrators of online misconduct. Some actions Congress can take include revising Federal law to allow

for penalty enhancements based on cyber-related conduct; updating federal stalking and harassment statutes' intent requirement to account for online behavior; and legislating specifically on cybercrimes such as doxing, swatting, non-consensual pornography, and deepfakes.

2. Urge social media platforms to institute robust governance

Government officials have an important role to play in encouraging social media platforms to institute robust and verifiable industry-wide self-governance. This could take many forms, including Congressional oversight or passing laws that require certain levels of transparency and auditing. The internet plays a vital role in allowing for innovation and democratizing trends, and that should be preserved. At the same time the ability to use it for hateful and severely harmful conduct needs to be effectively addressed.

3. Improve training of law enforcement

Law enforcement is a key responder to online hate, especially in cases when users feels they are in imminent danger. Increasing resources and training for these departments is critical to ensure they can effectively investigate and prosecute cyber cases and that targets know they will be supported if they contact law enforcement.

For Private Technology Companies

1. Ensure strong policies against hate

Every social media platform must have clear terms of service that address hateful content and harassing behavior, and clearly define consequences for violations. These policies should include, but should not be limited to:

- Making clear that the platform will not tolerate hateful content or behavior on the basis of protected characteristics.
- Prohibiting abusive tactics such as harassment, doxing and swatting.

- Establishing an appeal process for users who feel their content was flagged as hateful or abusive in error.

2. Strengthen enforcement of policies

Social media platforms should assume greater responsibility to enforce their policies and to do so accurately at scale. This means:

- Improving the complaint process so that it provides a more consistent and speedy resolution for targets. We know from research that content moderators regularly make mistakes when it comes to adjudicating hateful content.
- Relying less on complaints from individual users, and instead proactively, swiftly, and continuously addressing hateful content using a mix of artificial intelligence and humans who are fluent in the relevant language and knowledgeable in the social and cultural context of the relevant community.

3. Designing to reduce influence and impact of hateful content

Social media companies should design their platforms and algorithms in a way that reduces the influence of hateful content and harassing behavior. Steps should include:

- Making hateful content more difficult to find in search and algorithmic recommendations. This means, for example, never recommending hatemongers' tweets, suggesting them as friends, or auto-playing their videos.
- Removing advertisements from hateful content.
- Not allowing hateful content to be monetized for profit.
- Labeling content suspected to be from automated "bot" accounts, given the use of bots for spreading hate. For example, ADL previously found that [over 30% of anti-Semitic tweets](#) seem to come from bots.

4. Expand tools and services for targets

Given the prevalence of online hate and harassment, platforms should offer far

more services and tools for individuals facing or fearing online attack. This includes:

- Greater filtering options that allow individuals to decide for themselves how much they want to see likely hateful comments.
- Protections for individuals who are being harassed in a coordinated way.
- User-friendly tools to help targets preserve evidence and report problems to law enforcement and companies.

5. Increase accountability and transparency

Platforms should adopt robust governance. This should include regularly scheduled external, independent audits so that the public knows the extent of hate and harassment on a given platform. Audits also allow the public to verify that the company followed through on its stated actions and to assess the effectiveness of company efforts across time. Companies should provide information from the audit and elsewhere through more robust transparency reports. Finally, companies should create independent groups of experts from relevant stakeholders, including civil society, academia and journalism, to help provide guidance and oversight of platform policies.

8. Doxing is the search for and publishing of private or identifying information about a person on the internet, typically with malicious intent.

9. Swatting is the action or practice of making a prank call to emergency services in an attempt to bring about the dispatch of a large number of armed police officers to a particular address.

10. Deepfake is an artificial intelligence-based technique that can create fake content, including images and videos that look real but are fabricated and inauthentic.

11. Koebler, J., & Cox, J. (2018, August 23). Here's How Facebook Is Trying to Moderate Its Two Billion Users. Retrieved from https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/xwk9zd/how-facebook-content-moderation-works