

SOCIETAL HOSTILITY

Union of Saints

A Proposed Scale for Understanding Hate, Bullying, Abuse, and Social Conflict

Prepared October 2026

Purpose

This document outlines a practical way to describe societal hostility and examine whether hatred, bullying, abuse, and social conflict are increasing over time. It introduces a proposed five-level scale and identifies existing measures that can help assess the social climate in the United States.

The proposed scale is a discussion and assessment tool, not a scientifically validated index. A reliable assessment must consider multiple indicators, historical context, and documented evidence rather than relying solely on personal impressions or media coverage.

1. Defining the Terms

Hostility: Persistent antagonism, contempt, or ill will directed toward an individual or group.

Bullying: Repeated aggressive behavior involving a real or perceived power imbalance. Bullying can occur in schools, workplaces, communities, and online environments.

Harassment and abuse: Conduct that intimidates, degrades, threatens, or repeatedly targets another person. Legal definitions vary depending on the circumstances and jurisdiction.

Hate crime: A criminal offense motivated in whole or in part by bias against a protected or targeted characteristic, as defined by applicable law.

Political hostility: Intense dislike, distrust, or contempt directed toward individuals because of their political identity or affiliation.

Societal hostility: The prevalence, intensity, and reach of antagonism, intimidation, dehumanization, and aggression within a community or society.

2. A Proposed Five-Level Societal Hostility Scale

This proposed scale describes observable conditions. It is not an established scientific measurement instrument, and the levels do not currently have validated numerical thresholds.

Level 1 — Low Hostility

Respectful disagreement is common. Hostile incidents are relatively isolated, individuals can express differing opinions without substantial fear of retaliation, and inappropriate conduct is generally addressed.

Level 2 — Elevated Hostility

Social tension and antagonism are increasingly visible. Insults, ridicule, and recurring interpersonal conflicts occur, but most interactions remain non-threatening and peaceful.

Level 3 — High Hostility

Harassment, humiliation, intimidation, and dehumanizing rhetoric become frequent. Certain individuals or groups may be repeatedly targeted, and respectful disagreement becomes increasingly difficult.

Level 4 — Severe Hostility

Threats, persistent intimidation, and targeted abuse become widespread in affected settings. Hostility may escalate into physical confrontations, and individuals may fear expressing their opinions or participating in public life.

Level 5 — Critical Hostility

Systematic persecution, organized violence, or widespread political terror substantially threatens public safety and the ability of individuals or groups to participate freely in society.

Important distinction: These levels describe conditions, not the inherent character of a population. A society may experience high levels of political hostility without experiencing equivalent levels of physical violence. Conversely, severe persecution can occur even when public rhetoric appears relatively restrained.

3. Existing Measures of Hostility and Abuse

Several established research tools measure different dimensions of aggression and social conflict.

Buss–Perry Aggression Questionnaire: Measures individual differences in physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility.

Olweus Bullying Questionnaire: Assesses bullying and victimization, particularly in school settings.

American National Election Studies: Measures political attitudes, partisan identification, and feelings toward political groups, providing information that can help researchers study political polarization.

FBI Hate Crime Statistics: Tracks reported hate crimes in the United States, providing information about offenses motivated by bias.

National crime statistics: Measure offenses such as homicide, robbery, aggravated assault, and other forms of violence.

These measures cannot simply be combined without careful methodology. They examine different phenomena, use different definitions, and have different limitations.

4. What Historical U.S. Evidence Shows

Political Hostility

Research from Pew Research Center documents a substantial increase in intense negative feelings toward opposing political parties over recent decades.

In 1994, approximately 17% of Republicans and 16% of Democrats held very unfavorable views of the opposing party. By 2016, those figures had risen to 58% of Republicans and 55% of Democrats.

In 2022, 62% of Republicans and 54% of Democrats reported very unfavorable views of the opposing party.

These findings indicate a significant increase in partisan animosity. However, disliking a political party is not the same as engaging in bullying, harassment, threats, or violence.

Reported Hate Crimes

Reported hate-crime statistics provide another indicator, although the numbers depend on reporting coverage and law-enforcement participation.

The U.S. Department of Justice's summary of FBI data lists 11,862 reported hate-crime incidents in 2023 and 11,679 in 2024. The FBI's comparable trend dataset, which uses agencies meeting specific reporting criteria, reported a 1.5% decrease from 11,041 incidents in 2023 to 10,873 in 2024.

These figures illustrate why the source and methodology matter. Different reporting systems can produce different totals, and reported incidents do not represent every incident that occurs.

Violent Crime

The FBI estimated that national violent crime decreased by 4.5% in 2024 compared with 2023. Murder and non-negligent manslaughter decreased by an estimated 14.9%.

This is an important counterpoint when assessing claims that every form of hostility is increasing. Violent crime statistics do not measure all forms of discrimination, bullying, political antagonism, or emotional abuse, but they demonstrate that different indicators can move in different directions.

5. Is Hatred Worse Today Than at Any Other Time in History?

The available evidence does not establish that hatred, bullying, and abuse are worse today than at every other point in history.

There is evidence that intense partisan dislike has increased substantially since the 1990s. There are also legitimate concerns about online harassment, threats against public officials, political intimidation, and the rapid circulation of dehumanizing rhetoric.

However, historical comparisons are complicated by changes in laws, reporting practices, survey methods, population size, technology, and the willingness of victims to report abuse.

Earlier generations experienced slavery, genocide, racial persecution, religious violence, political repression, and devastating wars. These historical realities must be considered when making claims about whether the present is uniquely hostile.

Modern communication introduces another important factor. Social media can distribute hostile content to enormous audiences within minutes, while continuous news exposure can make conflict feel omnipresent. Increased visibility does not automatically establish an increase in the underlying frequency of hostile behavior.

The most defensible conclusion is that some forms of hostility have demonstrably increased, while other indicators vary by period and category. More comprehensive evidence is needed to determine whether overall societal hostility has increased across all dimensions.

6. How to Measure Societal Hostility Responsibly

A meaningful societal assessment should consider the following indicators:

1. **Frequency:** How often do bullying, harassment, threats, and violent incidents occur?
2. **Severity:** Are incidents primarily verbal, or do they involve credible threats, physical injury, or organized violence?
3. **Reach:** Are incidents isolated, or are they affecting large numbers of people across multiple settings?
4. **Targeting:** Are individuals or groups repeatedly singled out because of their identity, beliefs, or affiliations?
5. **Normalization:** Are hostile behaviors increasingly accepted, encouraged, or rewarded by influential people or institutions?
6. **Consequences:** Are people becoming afraid to speak, participate in public life, attend community events, or express lawful opinions?
7. **Historical change:** Do reliable data demonstrate an increase over time, accounting for changes in population, reporting, and measurement methods?

A scientifically useful index would define these indicators, assign transparent weights, establish consistent measurement procedures, and test whether the resulting score accurately reflects societal conditions.

It should also distinguish documented facts from perceptions, online rhetoric from real-world conduct, and isolated incidents from sustained patterns.

7. Preventing the Normalization of Hostility

Regardless of whether hostility has reached a historical peak, communities can take practical steps to reduce it.

- Criticize ideas and conduct without dehumanizing people.
- Apply standards against bullying, threats, and abuse consistently, regardless of political affiliation.
- Distinguish documented facts from assumptions, rumors, and stereotypes.
- Encourage respectful disagreement without demanding ideological conformity.
- Hold individuals accountable for harmful conduct using consistent standards and appropriate procedures.
- Avoid rewarding cruelty simply because it attracts attention or benefits a political cause.
- Protect the ability of people to participate peacefully in public life without intimidation or retaliation.

A healthy society does not require agreement on every issue. It requires the ability to disagree without abandoning basic standards of dignity, accountability, fairness, and personal safety.

Conclusion

Hatred, bullying, abuse, and hostility are related but distinct phenomena. No single accepted scale currently establishes whether society as a whole is more hateful than at every previous point in history.

Available research demonstrates a substantial rise in intense partisan dislike over recent decades, while reported hate crimes and violent crime must be evaluated separately and in context.

A responsible assessment should use multiple indicators, examine historical trends, and distinguish between the visibility of hostility and its actual prevalence.

The central question is not only whether hostility is increasing, but also whether it is becoming normalized, whether people are being harmed, and whether institutions and communities are responding consistently and effectively.

The goal should be to understand the evidence accurately while preventing hatred, intimidation, bullying, and abuse from becoming accepted features of public life.

Selected Sources

1. **Pew Research Center.** *Political Polarization in the American Public*. 2014.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>
2. **Pew Research Center.** *Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016*. 2016.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2016/06/22/partisanship-and-political-animosity-in-2016/>
3. **Pew Research Center.** Research on rising partisan antipathy and political attitudes. 2022.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/08/09/rising-partisan-antipathy-widening-party-gap-in-presidential-job-approval/>
4. **U.S. Department of Justice.** *2024 Hate Crimes Statistics*.
<https://www.justice.gov/archives/hatecrimes/2024-hate-crimes-statistics>
5. **Federal Bureau of Investigation.** *FBI Releases 2024 Reported Crimes in the Nation Statistics*.
<https://www.fbi.gov/news/press-releases/fbi-releases-2024-reported-crimes-in-the-nation-statistics>