MISQ Archivist

The Internet and Racial Hate Crime: Offline Spillovers from Online Access

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Abstract

This research note reports on an empirical investigation of the effect of the Internet on racial hate crimes in the United States from the period 2001–2008. We find evidence that, on average, broadband availability increases racial hate crimes. We also document that the Internet’s impact on these hate crimes is not uniform in that the positive effect is stronger in areas with higher levels of racism, which we identify as those with more segregation and a higher proportion of racially charged search terms, but not significant in areas with lower levels of racism. We analyze in depth whether Internet access will enhance hate group operations but find no support for the idea that this mechanism is driving the result. In contrast, we find that online access is increasing the incidence of racial hate crimes executed by lone-wolf perpetrators. We describe several other mechanisms that could be driving the results. Overall, our results shed light on one of the many offline societal challenges from increased online access.

Keywords: Internet, broadband, online-offline interaction, hate crime, hate groups, race, econometrics, panel models