

THE "DOTBUSTER" ATTACKS: HATE CRIME AGAINST ASIAN INDIANS IN JERSEY CITY, NEW JERSEY

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ABSTRACT: *Within a nine-month period from June 1987 to February 1988, over 15 Asian Indian people were brutally attacked in or around Jersey City, New Jersey. All of the incidents took place after a local newspaper published a letter from the "Dotbusters," an organization vowing to rid the community of Indians. This study illustrates how growing resentment and conflict between ethnic groups can manifest itself in physical violence that can be classified as hate crime. It also raises the possibility that the spatial clustering of ethnic groups may contribute to increased visibility and therefore, vulnerability to such attacks.*

INTRODUCTION

On September 27, 1987 Navroze Mody, an Asian-Indian resident of Jersey City, New Jersey went for a drink with a friend at a café in the nearby town of Hoboken. As they left the café that evening, Mr. Mody was assaulted and beaten into a coma by a group of ten youths. Four days later, he died. His friend, who was white, was not injured. Earlier in the month, Bhered Patel was beaten with a metal pipe while he slept in his Jersey City home. On June 8, 1988, Jakariya Kirit of Jersey City Heights was followed by a group of teenagers who beat him after calling him a "dirty Hindu." On June 11, two Indians were beaten by youths after being verbally assaulted with similar ethnic slurs. And, on June 17, New York City taxi driver Malkiat Singh was shot to death while in Jersey City.

These, and twelve other crimes within the six month period from June to December of 1987, have frightening similarities. Every victim was an Asian Indian residing in or around the city of Jersey City, New Jersey. Without exception, each of the attacks was brutal and caused injury or death to the victims. All of the incidents took place after a local newspaper published a letter from an organization vowing to rid the community of Indians.

This rash of attacks in Jersey City, in late 1988 and early 1987 is the focus of this study. A

fundamental question regarding crimes of this nature is what is the motivation behind them? Is it simply ethnic hatred, jealousy, or greed, or can these attacks be explained as mischievous pranks that got out of hand? The attacks on Asian Indians in Jersey City raise some of the same questions. While residents believed (Borsellino, 1988) these were ethnically motivated assaults, local officials initially claimed they were simple street fights. This study shows how these "fights" can indeed be classified as ethnically motivated according to the central concepts of hate crime in the literature. In addition, some people in the community were shocked by the violence, while others saw it as a way of life. This study illustrates how growing resentment and conflict can manifest itself in physical violence. Likewise, other factors that may have contributed to the tragic events are examined, such as the spatial clustering of like-groups contributing to their visibility as minorities and therefore, vulnerability to attack. Some people in the Jersey City community believed the clustering pattern of the Indian community made them more visible as an immigrant group. This is an especially important area for further research because many immigrant communities across the country exhibit a similar spatial pattern of ethnic "enclave" formation (Muller, 1993).

METHODS

This research is exploratory in nature and is intended to develop more information about the characteristics of ethnically motivated crimes, based on the Jersey City case study. The scope of the research is limited to Jersey City, New Jersey from approximately August 1987 to August 1988. The primary source for information collected regarding the attacks on Asian Indians is newspaper reports. Through a literature review, drawing from the fields of psychology, sociology and criminology, select components of hate crime and violent behavior are identified. The Jersey City case study is then analyzed based on these components.

JERSEY CITY BACKGROUND

Jersey City

Jersey City's mostly blue collar, working class population grew from successive waves of immigrants. The city's proximity to New York and relatively lower housing costs made it a desirable place for newcomers to settle (see Figure 1). At the time of the attacks, the population of Jersey City was approximately 223,000 (Marriott, 1987, B1). The Indian population numbered between 9,000 and 10,000 (Narvaez, 1987, B3). Significant numbers of Indians began arriving some 25 years ago and settled primarily in two areas of the city. The first is the area surrounding Journal Square

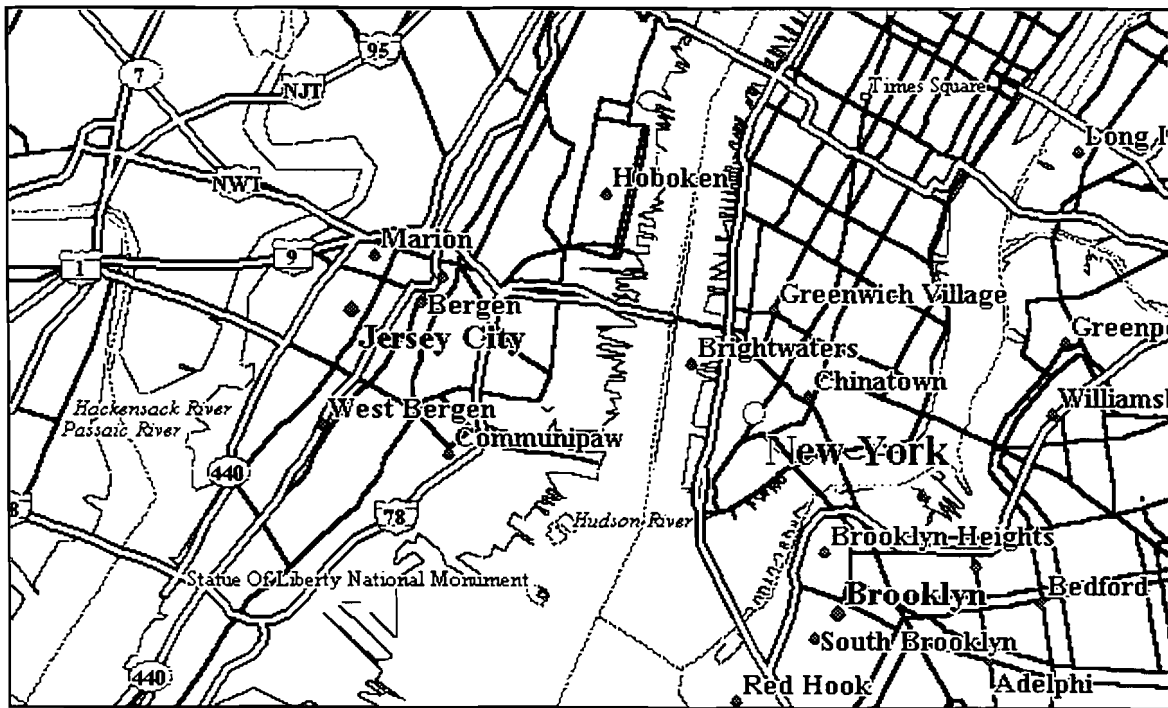


Figure 1 Jersey City's relative position to New York (Map courtesy of Delorme Mapping, Freeport, Maine).

and the second along Central Avenue to the north (see Figure 2). Sizable Indian groups also reside in nearby Hoboken and Passaic.

Ethnic tension was always present to some degree in Jersey City's diverse community. The city's proximity to Lower Manhattan led to expansion and gentrification in some of the older neighborhoods over the years (Marriott, 1987). This created a general feeling of caution and resentfulness toward wealthier newcomers, possibly exacerbating already tense conditions. As the Indian immigrants moved in, they bought older residences and businesses along Newark and Central Avenues and fixed them up. As they prospered, resentment grew among more established residents. One Indian resident said he believed this clustering contributed to the Indians becoming the target of attacks. "When you congregate in one area, you become more visible," he said (Borsellino, 1988, 12:1).

Furthermore, some residents believe that immigrants receive special treatment. "These people come over here and get \$10,000 to start a business," said a frustrated Jersey City resident

after the attacks. "That's not right. And we have to work and fight all our life" (Marriott, 1987, B2). Jersey City Mayor Anthony Cucci said at the time of the attacks that this resentment could have precipitated the violence, calling it "an animalistic approach to territorial domain. Maybe it's a form of jealousy," he added (Marriott, 1987, B1).

Others said that anti-Indian violence was a way of life in Jersey City, and that it would not change easily. The conflict, they said came from nothing more than ethnically based hatred. "It's the white people against the Hindus," joked one teenager who also referred to Indian people as the "dotheads," which is in reference to the *tilak* or *bindi*, a small dot worn on the foreheads of some Indian men and women. "I can't stand them," said another (Marriott, 1987, B2).

The "Dotbusters"

In August of 1987, the *Jersey Journal*, a local newspaper, published a letter that may have precipitated the attacks. The author claimed to be a member of the "Dotbusters." The letter

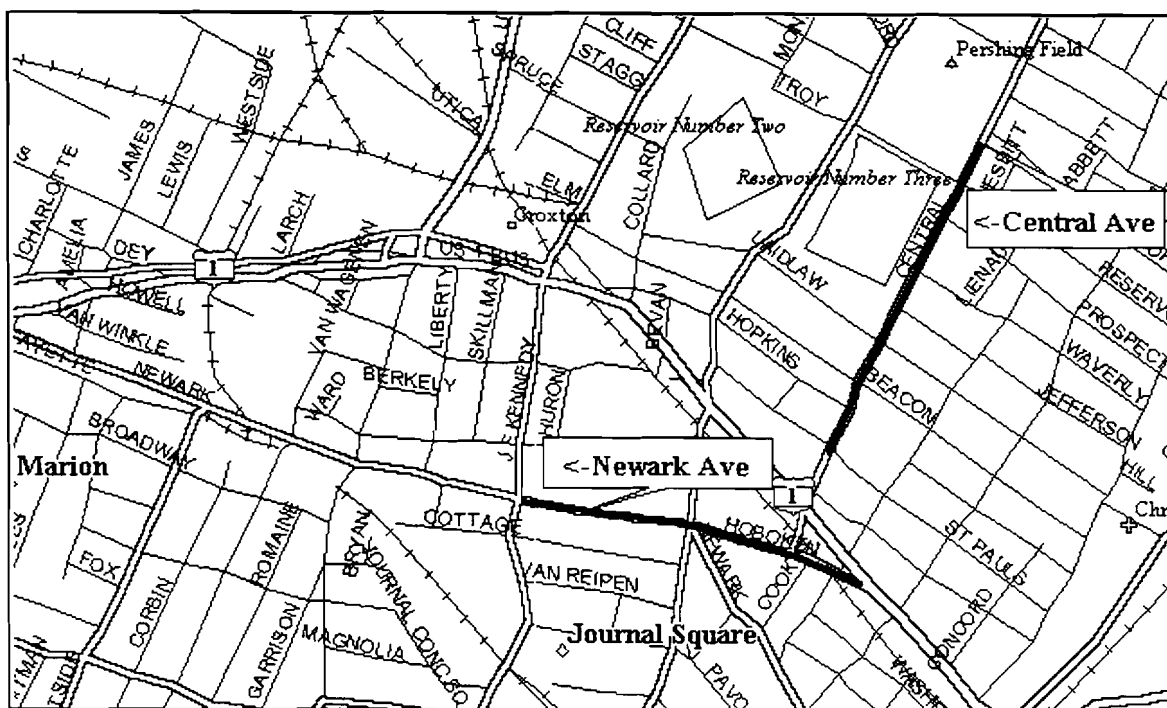


Figure 2 Indian clustering in Jersey City during the late 1980s along Newark and Central Avenues (Map courtesy of Delorme Mapping, Freeport, Maine).

outlined the groups' intentions to force Indians out of the community by violent means, if necessary. "If I'm walking down the street and I see a Hindu and the setting is right, I will just hit him or her," the letter said (Borsellino, 1988, 12:1). The author explained the groups' technique of searching the local telephone directory for common Indian surnames. The letter claimed that three "Patel attacks" would take place that evening. A few days later, a 21-year-old, who claimed to be the author of the "Dotbuster" letter, was arrested in connection with the attack on Bhered Patel (Borsellino, 1988, 12:13).

For the next six months, the attacks continued and the Indian community was left disabled with fright. "We are paralyzed and petrified with fear," exclaimed a Jersey City female gynecologist and 21-year resident (Marriott, 1987 B1). She had to abandon wearing her *sari*, a traditional Indian dress, and her *bindi*, because both would call attention to her ethnicity. Another Indian resident said that especially people who work at night were afraid to go out, and that some were skipping evening work. Another long-time resident said he was the victim of attacks when youths threw eggs and pieces of metal at his house while shouting racial slurs (Narvaez, 1987). He did not confront the youths, he said, because he was afraid one of them might have a gun. The next evening they returned to hurl more ethnic slander his way. He also complained of the authorities' slow response to his call. Many other unreported attacks took place, he claimed, such as Indian women being spat upon, and the smashing of an Indian man's car windshield. His wife tearfully asks, "Why they kill us? We are Americans, too" (Marriott, 1987, B2).

Most Indians interviewed in the months following the attacks believed the crimes were ethnically motivated. Mr. Mody's parents are certain their son was killed because of his nationality. They point to the fact that neither Navroze or his white coworker were robbed, and the coworker was not assaulted at all. In addition, two suspects arrested in the death of Mr. Mody confessed to having previously assaulted other Indians (Borsellino, 1988). Local Assemblyman Robert Charles agreed with the residents. Based on reports of the crimes he read, he said, "I'd have to conclude that there is ethnic motivation.

[The evidence] suggest[s] strongly that they are motivated by antipathy and hostility toward the Indian community" (Borsellino, 1988, 12:13).

The Hudson County District Attorney admitted that the suspects probably "didn't like Asian Indians" (Borsellino, 1988, 12:1), but denied that the attacks were ethnically motivated. He went on to say that the "Dotbusters" were probably started as a joke between a group of very loosely associated people. The attacks, he suggested, were by a few that chose to take the hostility in the letter to the next level. After numerous public protests by the Indian community, the Justice Department was called in to investigate ("Protesters", 1987; Marriott, 1987; Narvaez, 1987). Only then, did city officials being to take a more aggressive approach toward the crimes.

While most people agreed that the attacks on Asian Indians in Jersey City were horrific, it is clear that not all agreed they were ethnically motivated. To many, this seemed astounding given the fact that only Indians were attacked and that ethnic and racial slurs often accompanied the physical violence. In addition, there were divisions over the reasons for resentment. Some believed it was jealousy over the Indians' prosperity, others said it was simply ethnic hatred. One man attributed Indian residential and business clustering to their troubles, because it made the community more visible and therefore vulnerable to attack. In order to determine the motivations behind these acts, it is necessary to review the literature on hate crime, violent behavior and the immigrant experience in the USA.

HATE CRIME

Victimization in the United States

Conflict between individuals and groups is not a new concept to this nation of immigrants. From the earliest years of the existence of the United States, established groups resisted newcomers, touting their differences as strange, foreign and undesirable. Numerous studies recount the experiences of these rejected groups (Bach, 1993; Daniels, 1981; Muller, 1993). The first people

to fall victim to ethnically based hatred were the Native Americans. In this case, the established residents succumbed to the oppression of the newcomers. Some have argued that the Native American people represent the most victimized group in the United States (Flowers, 1988). The plight of African-Americans, whose history in America began with their enslavement, soon followed. In the last two centuries, Hispanic, Chinese and Japanese groups have also been the victims of racism, the latter two having laws enacted to ensure their exclusion¹. And today, problems of illegal immigrants, jobs exported overseas, and "English only" controversies illustrate the continued trend of blaming outsiders for the U.S.A.'s difficulties. Recent political campaign rhetoric charges "job-stealing aliens" for the ills of American society, including social and economic woes (Wright, 1995, 35).

From Rhetoric to Violence

How does rhetoric turn into violence? In his classic *The Nature of Prejudice*, Allport (1954) describes the path that begins with talking about prejudices and ends with acting upon them. He asserts there is always some milder form of hatred or animosity on which violent tendencies are based. He outlines a number of major steps that have usually occurred once violence breaks out. First, there is a lengthy period of categorical prejudgement. During this time, stereotypes are created about members of the judged group. This allows people to no longer look at individuals, but think of the despised group collectively. Second, stereotypes lead to verbal blaming. Again, stereotypes are firmly rooted at this point, and certain negatives can be automatically blamed on the victim group. Third, detrimental action toward the disliked group begins. This can be direct discrimination, or indirect such as in exclusionary behavior. Fourth, organized movements that center around dislike for a group begin to attract discontented individuals. People begin to find legitimacy for their feelings through other like-minded individuals. Finally, any suppressed impulses to violence are now justified in the minds of some because of the support they garner from their organized groups. In addition to moral

support, these groups can provide financial, informational and other kinds of support to facilitate violent action.

Hate Crime Vs Non-Hate Crime

Not all violence, however is considered hate crime. While many violent actions may involve the emotion of hate, hate crimes have a very specific definition. In very broad terms, any illegal activity that is motivated by the victim's difference can be considered a hate crime (Levin and McDevitt, 1993). This difference can be anything from race, ethnicity, gender to sexual orientation or religion. Hate crimes are not directed against individuals but "against members of a particular group simply because of their membership in that group" (Levin and McDevitt, 1993, 4). To the perpetrator, the victim's individual characteristics are irrelevant. The only thing that matters is that the person represents some group, whether it be Asian, Jewish or gay, for example.

Hate crime, unfortunately is not always easily distinguishable. Take for example, the 1982 beating death of a Chinese-American outside a bar in Detroit, Michigan. The perpetrator, an unemployed auto worker, allegedly accused Asians of causing the decay of the auto industry (2d 1987, B15). Mr. Vincent Chin died four days after sustaining injuries from a beating with a baseball bat. Defense attorneys claimed the fight was an "ordinary barroom fight that began between two intoxicated patrons" (Wilkerson, 1987, A20). There is no argument that the attacker killed the victim, but in order to qualify as a hate crime certain requirements apply. The attack must have been motivated by the perpetrator's overall dislike for Asians, not for Mr. Chin in particular. Mr. Chin's identity, except for the mere fact that he was Asian, should not have mattered to his assailant. The literature reveals countless other cases where the crime is not easily identifiable as a hate crime (Colbert, 1988; Iverem, 1987; Lyall, 1987).

In contrast, some crimes are clearly hate crimes. The well publicized Howard Beach, New York, incident is a clear cut example of hate crime. Three young African-American men had the misfortune of their car breaking down in a largely

Italian-American, working-class neighborhood. A young high-school student from Howard Beach spotted them and became angry that there were "niggers on the boulevard" (Levin and McDevitt, 1993, 5). After discovering later in the evening that the young men still had not left his community, the youth rounded up a group of friends with the intent of driving the men out of town. They found the men and chased one of them, twenty-three-year-old Michael Griffith, and beat him brutally. In a frantic attempt to escape, Michael dashed across the busy road and was struck and killed by an oncoming car. The youths then found Michael's stepfather nearby and assaulted him with bats, a tire iron and a tree stump until, feigning death, his body dropped to the ground. In the case of Vincent Chin, some may argue, as defense attorneys did, that the violence was circumstance-motivated, not hatefully-inspired. In Michael Griffith's case, however, the maliciousness of his attackers is blatantly hate-inspired.

A 1991 federal report shows that hate crimes are on the rise in the United States. The reports states:

With renewed increase in hate violence activities by white supremacist groups, racial tensions have escalated across the country. Such groups use the latest in today's technology, such as cable television and computer bulletin boards, to spread their message of hate to anyone who will listen. And, just as these organized terrorist groups practice hate violence daily, individuals or small groups have also contributed to the increase in these types of crimes (Clarke, 1991, 15).

It is these "individuals" and "small groups" that make up the vast majority of hate crimes. Surprisingly, most crimes of this nature are not committed by large organized groups (Gest, 1985). Most are committed by people like Vincent Chin's perpetrator or the youths from Howard Beach. These people are usually complete strangers.

In addition, hate crimes are usually excessively brutal. Seventy-five percent of hate crime assaults result in some kind of injury to the victim, even if they begin only with intimidating words. Conversely, only twenty-nine percent of non-hate crime assaults result in physical injury (Levin and McDevitt, 1993). Additionally, hate crimes have a higher percentage of assaults than non-hate crimes. The remaining crimes usually involve destruction of property.

Finally, most hate crimes are committed by strangers. They are usually random acts committed by people who are completely unknown to the victims. A 1990 Boston study found that eighty-five percent of hate crimes committed in that city were committed by people the victims had never met before. This contrasts sharply with the National Crime Survey which reports that sixty-one percent of all violent crimes are committed by strangers (Levin and McDevitt, 1993). There are no clear safeguarding measures to take when the acts are completely random, unprovoked, and committed by people completely unknown to the victims. In addition, if a perpetrator is caught and convicted, the victim's fears may not necessarily be relieved since he or she did nothing to incite the attack and was chosen exclusively at random. There are no dark alleys or seedy bars to avoid in hate crime, because an attack could take place anywhere, at anytime, by anyone.

Separatism

Another important concept in the literature is separatism. Allport (1954) contends that human beings' tendency to separate into like-groups is common and does not necessarily point to prejudice. He believes that this grouping behavior may often be a matter of convenience. For example, people may choose to be with others who speak their own language, eat similar food, dress in the same fashion or share similar cultural values. In addition, scholars see conflict between groups as relatively normal as well. "Anthropologists have long noted that because social life inevitably entails frustrations and incompatibilities between individuals and groups, conflict is a basic form of human interaction that occurs in all social systems" (Sluka, 1992, 19).

Separateness can however, lead to the exaggeration of difference between groups because there is less communication when there are spatial boundaries. The less interaction, the less familiarity there will be between groups, which could lead to greater misunderstanding. Daniels and Kitano (1970) point to spatial boundaries as being key to race relations in the United States. They liken human behavior to that of animals protecting their territories with violent aggression. They refer to the "Two-Category Model" or the development of

boundaries, as illustrative of this behavior, and contributing to reasons why "normal" human conflict can turn into excessive violence. "The built-up feeling of what is considered one's own territory, of what are considered one's rights and prerogatives...can lead to a defensive position that results in extreme solutions" (Daniels and Kitano, 1970, 9).

Spatial boundary protection is exacerbated during troublesome economic times. As times get tough, in-group division is strengthened and outsiders are excluded and distrusted (Allport, 1954). This is especially true in times of rapid change, such as in recession, or in times of escalating immigration. Separatism increases the visibility of groups, and therefore makes it easier to blame outsiders. The immigration literature is replete with the notion that when the economy is struggling, Americans blame newcomers. Conversely, in good economic times, they are seen as valuable assets to the country's economic well-being (Muller, 1993; Briggs and Moore, 1994; Wright, 1995). As early as 1954, when immigration levels were significantly lower than they are today, Allport (1954, 18) alluded to this process and added that when newcomers begin to establish themselves and become successful, they "arouse fear and jealousy in the majority group." In their study of American racism, Daniels and Kitano (1970,24) explain how segregation can contribute to violence; "Segregation increases the social visibility of the group as well as marking off its boundaries so that problems of conflict and social control arise. Ethnic riots often occur along the 'boundary' or when one group begins to move in on the other."

JERSEY CITY REVISITED

The rash of violent attacks on Asian Indians in Jersey City in the late 1980s can be categorized as hate crimes despite the local leaders' denial that these were ethnically motivated attacks. Conforming with the description of hate crimes in the literature, all of the attacks were directed at individuals because of their membership in a particular group; in this case Indian ethnicity. Indian residents' abandonment of cultural

identification markers, such as the *sari* and the *bindi*, support the notion that they were trying to distance themselves as much as possible from identification with this group. None of the victims were singled out as individuals, rather they were attacked because they could be identified as Indian. The "Dotbuster" method of perusing the telephone book for Indian surnames speaks to the randomness of these acts. The randomness of the assaults is also evident in the fact that none of the victims knew their perpetrators. All of the attacks were committed by strangers.

Every attack in Jersey City was excessively brutal. All of them caused injury or death to the victims, even if they were initiated by verbal abuse only. There were many unreported attacks that did not cause physical injury to victims, however. These crimes consisted of verbal abuse, destruction of property and vandalism. The fact that some residents claimed that simple abuses, such as name-calling, were a "way of life" in Jersey City, illustrates Stage 2 of Allport's (1954) process of rhetoric to violence. In Jersey City, there was a long period of categorical prejudgement of Asian Indians, probably for 25 years (Marriott, 1987). By the time of the attacks resentment was already present, and had been growing as hard economic times fell on the community. This is evidenced by the quotes from various residents and the mayor (see above).

Though the "Dotbusters" proclaimed their goal of ridding the city of Indians, they only took responsibility for one of the attacks, that on Mr. Patel. None of the other arrested people claimed to have any association with the group. The attacks that followed the publication of the letter were not necessarily by "Dotbuster" members, but by people who used this letter as justification for their anger. The letter sparked hostility that was already present, but not yet acted upon. These processes directly coincide with Allport's (1954) fourth and fifth stages of violence, where organized movements attract discontented people that use the group to assert long-harbored impulses to violence. The Hudson County District Attorney was probably correct in his assumptions that the "Dotbusters" were a small group of very loosely associated people.

Hate Crimes Against Asian Indians in Jersey City, NJ

Finally, the Indian community's tendency to spatially cluster in small areas of the city may have contributed to the visibility as an easy target for violence. This grouping increased the separatism in the community which may have led to the exaggeration of differences and misunderstanding among community residents. This is evidenced in one of the newspaper quotes that Indian people receive special treatment when they come to this country. In addition, as previously stated, as the Indian immigrants moved in, they invested in older, dilapidated real estate and worked hard to make their businesses successful. As has been reviewed in the literature, the occupational and social achievement of immigrant groups can lead to jealousy and fear among established residents. This does not imply, however that the victim group is responsible for the attacks upon them.

CONCLUSIONS

Navroze Mody, Bhered Patel, Jakariya Kirit, Malkiat Singh, and the numerous other Asian Indians who were attacked during the late 1980s were all victims of hate crime. While the seriousness of their attacks ranged from verbal abuse to murder, all can be explained according to primary concepts of hate crime in the literature. They were all chosen as victims for the same reason; they were all members of the Indian ethnic group. All the attacks were brutal and committed by complete strangers to the victims. Though the "Dotbusters" may have precipitated the attacks by publicizing their goal of ridding the city of Indians, resentment of the Indian community was already strong in Jersey City. The letter sparked anger within individuals that harbored this resentment, and they chose to act upon those feelings violently and randomly. The "Dotbusters" can only be connected to Mr. Patel's attack.

One of the most important findings of this study is the notion of the spatial clustering of minority groups contributing to their visibility. Most early immigrants tended to cluster in this manner, as evidenced in many major cities with "Chinatowns," or "Little Italy" areas, for example

(Muller, 1993). The demographics of more recent immigrants however, departs from this trend significantly. Rather than clustering in older, central city areas, newer immigrants are settling in suburban areas and mixing with other ethnic groups at much higher levels than earlier groups. Still, there is segregation, especially with regard to commercial business. This phenomenon provides us with an opportunity to compare levels of separatism with levels of violence against newcomers. Do those groups that cluster less also experience less abuse? At what point does the clustered group become "visible" to established residents, i.e. how many newcomers does it take in one area to constitute a "visible minority"? Finally, since the 1960s the rise in immigration from Third World countries has contributed to the "darkening" of the United States' racial groups. Many Asian Indians have dark skin. Is it possible that this physical feature contributes to their visibility as a minority group much more than their spatial clustering? These questions must be considered for further research.

ENDNOTES

1. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act passed which restricted Chinese entry into this country. In 1924 the Oriental Exclusion Act effectively halted all other Asian immigration (Flowers, 1988). During World War II, in 1942 the US government assembled over 112,000 Japanese Americans and shipped them off to concentration camps (Daniels, 1981).

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