

# Post-referendum racism and xenophobia:

The role of social media activism in challenging  
the normalisation of xeno-racist narratives

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## Abstract

Social media has played a critical role in documenting post-referendum racism and xenophobia (PRRX), in particular the three platforms around which this report is based: PostRefRacism, Worrying Signs and iStreetWatch. The data collected is in the form of stories offered and shared within the growing public-sphere of social media, by victims and witnesses of racist and xenophobic abuse. This report unifies and analyses data from the three platforms, presenting a single dataset that offers an insight into the nature, the location and the victim-groups of such abuse. It finds that the PRRX abuse targeted anyone perceived to be 'foreign' and was anti-immigrant rather than anti-European in its rhetoric. Nonetheless, a large proportion of abuse reported specifically referred to the referendum. The themes that emerge are placed within the context of an increasing normalisation of xeno-racist narratives and the manifestation of the 'hostile environment principle'. It aims to also comment on the opportunities and challenges presented by social media activism as a force for affecting positive change and challenging xeno-racist narratives.




# Introduction

## Surge in Racism and Xenophobia Following the EU Referendum

The surge in racist and xenophobic hate crime reported across the UK, following the announcement of the EU Referendum result on the 24th June has been widely reported. Initial reports by the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC), four days after the referendum, indicated a 57% rise in the reporting of hate crime compared to the same period in 2015.<sup>1</sup> A number of high profile incidents of racist abuse, directed at MPs and journalists, undoubtedly increased coverage of the rise. On the 22nd of July, four weeks after the referendum, the NPCC announced that over 6000 hate crimes had been reported across the United Kingdom. While reported hate crimes started to decrease steadily in the first two weeks of July, they were still 20% higher compared to the same period the year before.<sup>2</sup>

Racism and xeno-racist<sup>3</sup> hate crime are not new issues in the UK. However, the rapid rise and the nature of hate crime following the referendum is an expression of the 'insiders' vs 'outsiders' rhetoric increasingly prevalent in mainstream politics and the media.<sup>4</sup> As Liz Fekete, Director of the Institute of Race Relations succinctly puts it: 'one of the things that has become clear is that the hostile environment that has been an official aim of policy for the last few years is 'coming home'. If a 'hostile environment' is embedded politically, it can't be a surprise that it takes root culturally.'

## Social Media and the Online Response to PRRX

 @PostRefRacism Yday morning a woman called me a "dirty p\*\*\*\*", "scum" and said "p\*\*\*\*s need to be rounded up and shot" among other insults'

26 June 2016

*Submitted to PostRefRacism*


Social media activism, sometimes known as 'slacktivism' or 'clicktivism', has come under scrutiny for a number of years. While social media is a powerful tool for getting information to people quickly and also for crowdsourcing information – it has recently been praised for its pivotal role in movements such as #BlackLivesMatter – there remain legitimate concerns that it does not always translate into everyday action. As Alex Krasodonski-Jones, a researcher at Demos has pointed out, 'the digital commons provides, on the one hand, an unprecedented window into the electorate, on the other, it is a chaotic, raw source of data that is hard to understand and even harder to act on.'<sup>5</sup>

 Someone said she will 'set our house on fire'

11 July 2016


*Submitted to iStreetWatch*

Social media has played a critical role in reporting and raising awareness of post-referendum racism and xenophobia (PRRX), in particular the three platforms around which this report is based: PostRefRacism, Worrying Signs and iStreetWatch. Online social media campaigns were the first to document and highlight the rapid rise in xeno-racist aggressions following the referendum result. In this capacity, they were crucial in bringing them to the attention of the wider public, media (both national and international) and political establishment. PostRefRacism's rate of submission reflects a similar pattern of hate crime reports as reported by the police, with a higher rate in the first week immediately after the referendum results.

 [@PostRefRacism](#) Last night a Sikh radiographer colleague of mine was told by a patient "shouldn't you be on a plane back to Pakistan? we voted you out"

26 June 2016  
*Submitted to PostRefRacism*

A recent study by the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media at Demos has highlighted the potential of social media in raising awareness, challenging racism and expressing solidarity. It found that between the 25th of June and the 4th of July, 98,948 tweets were sent using either #PostRefRacism or #SafetyPin<sup>6</sup>. Over 80% of these were tweets generally raising awareness of hate crime, while around 20% provided specific accounts of it. Accounts of hate crime were at their highest between the 26th and 28th of June, and were followed by an 'explosion of tweets expressing concern' between the 28th of June and 1st of July.<sup>7</sup>

 'I was on a bus yesterday and saw an EDL type man heckle and mock girls wearing hijab'

25 June 2016  
*Submitted to Worrying Signs*

Do these platforms amount to tangible action? In many ways they do. A mutually reinforcing approach between online and offline action is central to social media activism. For example, PostRefRacism and Worrying Signs have encouraged submitters to report their experiences to the police and shared resources to equip people with how to support those who've faced abuse and provided guidance and positive examples of bystander support. The rapid and exponential sharing of incidents across the platforms however, demonstrate the need for spaces where victims and witnesses of hate crime can publicly and loudly challenge the normalization of racism and xenophobia.

## The Platforms

The three platforms, whose data is analysed in this report, were created in the days following the referendum. The Twitter handle, @PostRefRacism and #PostRefRacism documented the surge in racist and xenophobic incidents through allowing people to publicly share stories and raise awareness about hate crime, reporting and bystander support. It has gained nearly 10,000 followers and ca. 130,000 tweets used the hashtag in the first two weeks after the referendum.<sup>8</sup>

Worrying Signs began as a Facebook album of screen shots and anecdotal accounts and has become an online community of over 19,000 members sharing incidents of hate crime and

supporting each other. The aim is to expose and talk openly about the reality of hate crime in Britain today, to signpost support services and methods of reporting and work with local communities, and national bodies to raise awareness and develop a social plan to cope with the visible tensions that the bitter and divisive referendum campaign has brought to the fore.

iStreetWatch is an online mapping tool that tracks racist and xenophobic harassment in public spaces. It aims to make these increasingly everyday incidents visible to a wider community and collect data over time to help monitor the correlation between these incidents and inflammatory speech from the media and politicians.

## Method

### Data Collection

We recognise that data collected via social media has a range of weaknesses. Not all people use social media, and some use it with greater fluency than others. However, the volume of stories collected across the three platforms demand our attention. We note that data collected by these platforms has been intentionally shared in an online public space and is therefore intrinsically public in nature. This contrasts with data collected by organisations monitoring racism and xenophobia (e.g. NGOs and the police), where information has been submitted by the affected person confidentially and without the explicit intention of reaching a wider audience. Potential limitations of the data as a result of this lie in the lack of verification of submitted data, as well as a higher rate of desirability bias. Further, the public nature of submission may also have dissuaded people from submitting their experiences.

The motives for submitting information and, by extension, the type of information submitted may be different for social media/online platforms compared with institutional report mechanisms, due to factors such as the perceived effort of reporting or severity of the incident. These considerations make the combined data of the three platforms of particular interest. We hope that the themes that emerge from the analysis of this data will shed light on the long and short term causes of this rise in xeno-racist hate, and contribute to the process of tackling it.

### Period and Scope

We created a database of xeno-racist hate crime incidents shared on our platforms in the four weeks following the referendum result (25th June- 24th July) and analysed it to examine the nature of Post Referendum xeno-racism. It must be noted that the analysis is purely statistical and there is no

statistical significance testing. Incidents were submitted to PostRefRacism using the hashtag or handle, or sent to us via Facebook message or post. Worrying Signs received stories through posts in their Facebook group, as well as through an online submission form (stories received through the form were later published in the group). iStreetWatch collected stories through a submission form that had a focus on location and recording bystander support. The incidents were then plotted on a map. While the submissions could be anonymous, they were still publicly visible online. Our analysis is based on a total of 636 individual reports of incidents of racist and xenophobic hate crime. Online abuse was only recorded in the database if it was specifically/ personally sent to the victim. We did not include the substantial submissions of screenshots of generally racist/ xenophobic statuses/ rants. The incidents collated in our database primarily relate to offline abuse reported online. The huge surge of online xenophobic/anti-immigrant sentiment is beyond the scope of this report, but is aptly highlighted in a study by Demos, which identified 13,236 tweets sent in the UK between 24 June-1 July expressing xenophobic or anti-immigrant attitudes.<sup>9</sup>

## Classification of Data

When entering the incidents into the database, we recorded, where possible, the source (i.e. first-hand account, witness account, second-hand story, and news piece), location, ethnicity of the victim and type of abuse. We also recorded if incidents included one or more of the following characteristics: affecting children, islamophobia, anti-semitism, sexism, LGBTQ-phobia, or if the perpetrators referred specifically to the Referendum in their abuse. In incidents describing general 'racist propaganda', for instance general derogatory remarks not aimed at a specific person (i.e. 'immigrants' in general), or general racist graffiti/stickers, Ethnicity is recorded as 'unspecific'. Where the general racist propaganda was aimed specifically at an ethnic group, the ethnicity of this group has been recorded.

This gave us a more nuanced picture of the reported incidents and allowed us to have a greater insight into the nature of reporting on social media and the common themes emerging in post- referendum xeno-racist abuse. (see annex for further methodology)

## Analysis and Discussion

Over half the incidents reported by witnesses or as second-hand stories

Abuse targeted anyone perceived to be 'foreign'; anti-immigrant rather than anti-European

### Source of Account

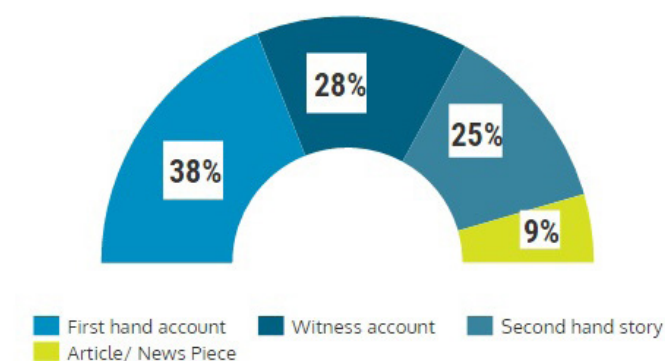


Figure 2: Source of Account

The largest group of people (40%) reporting incidents did not specify the ethnicity of the victim (see figure 1). This is perhaps because a large proportion (38%) of the reports were first-hand accounts (see figure 2), where the victim might have felt their ethnicity was evident from their social media profile, or did not feel that stating their ethnicity was necessary. Witness accounts and second hand stories tended to state the ethnicity of the victim, and news pieces always did. The fact that over half of the submitted reports were either witness accounts or 'second hand stories' demonstrate importance of social media for bystander action and awareness raising. However, over a third of the reports were first-hand stories, which also shows that victims feel comfortable sharing their stories through online platforms (see figure 2).

It is important to note that the recording of the 'ethnicity of the victim' can be influenced by the victims' self-identification, a witnesses assumption or understanding, or even by the nature of the abuse. Despite this, it is clear that post-referendum racism and xenophobia was aimed at anyone who was perceived to be 'foreign'/ 'other'- and driven by a general anti-immigrant rhetoric.

Nearly a third of incidents were aimed at people of BAME backgrounds, specifically South Asians

Taken together, abuse aimed at people of non-European BAME backgrounds made up the largest group of reported incidents, nearly a third of the total (31%). Furthermore, the single ethnic group that reported the most incidents was South Asian (16% of total). Around a fifth of the abuse aimed at this group was also islamophobic.

### Ethnicity of victim(s)

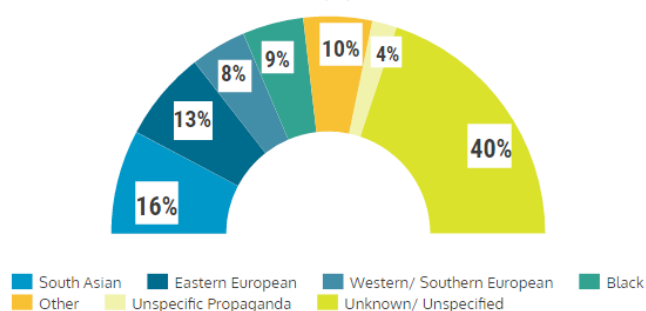


Figure 1: Ethnicity of Victim(s)

## Polish people made up 40% of ‘European’ victims

Eastern Europeans and Western/ Southern Europeans make up the second most affected group, with 21% of incidents. The largest nationality, most often specifically recorded within this group was Polish, making up 40% of all ‘European’ victims.

While abuse aimed at Eastern/ Western/ Southern Europeans often followed the victim speaking a different language, or speaking with an accent, almost all abuse aimed at BAME victims was race-related.

## Verbal abuse most frequently reported

### Type of Abuse

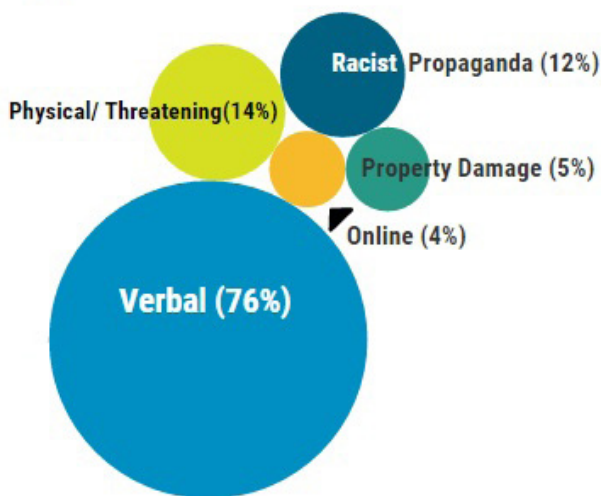


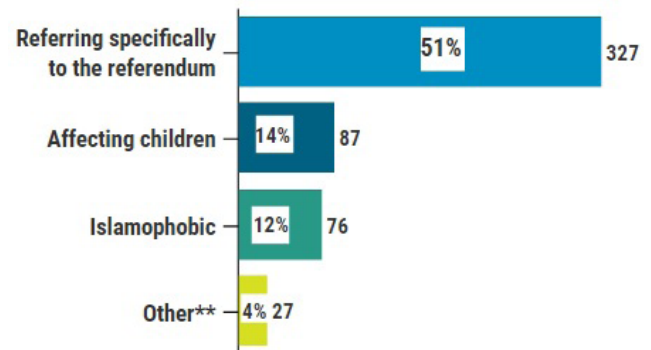
Figure 3: Type of Abuse

The vast majority of the incidents involved verbal abuse (76%). This might reflect both the prevalence of hate speech, as well as a preference for using social media to report verbal abuse. Nonetheless, incidents involving physical violence or threatening physical violence accounted for 14% of reports and the second most common type of abuse (see figure 3). Many of the reports of violent

physical attacks were in the form of news pieces, as these tended to receive the most media attention.

## Nearly all abuse reported occurred ‘offline’

### Character of Abuse\*



\* 51% of incidents mentioned none of the above categories


\*\* includes LGBT-phobic, anti-semitic, sexist. 31% of incidents included more than one type of abuse

Figure 4: Notable Character of Abuse

12% of the reported incidents involved photographic or descriptive submissions of unspecific racist propaganda, for instance white supremacy stickers, racist graffiti and rants in the street (see figure 3). This demonstrates how social media lends itself well to witness accounts and reporting through images. Capturing and reporting racist propaganda generally requires far less involvement with either the perpetrators or the victims. Perhaps surprisingly, only a small proportion (4%) of the reported incidents occurred online, which demonstrates that victims and witnesses were primarily using online platforms to report and share offline aggression. Specifically, one in ten reported incidents (67) mention abuse on or waiting for public transport.



## 'Go Home' 'We voted you out': over half of abuse explicitly refers to referendum

 @PostRefRacism Middle aged white man at a bar said : "We've voted to leave Europe today but we should have voted to kick all you lot out. You'll never be real British"

26 June 2016  
Submitted to PostRefRacism

Most strikingly, in 51% of the incidents, perpetrators referred specifically to the referendum in their abuse (see figure 4). These most commonly involved the phrases 'Go Home' (74 stories), 'Leave' (80 stories), 'f\*\*\* off' (45 stories). These were followed up by statements such as 'we voted you out', 'we're out of the EU now, we can get rid of 'your lot'', 'when are you going home?', 'shouldn't you be packing your bags?' This is perhaps most indicative of just how intimately the rise in xeno-racist hate crimes was linked to the referendum and pervasive anti-immigrant narratives used by the Leave campaign (see further discussion below).

## Incidents frequently involved/affected children; islamophobic abuse was prevalent

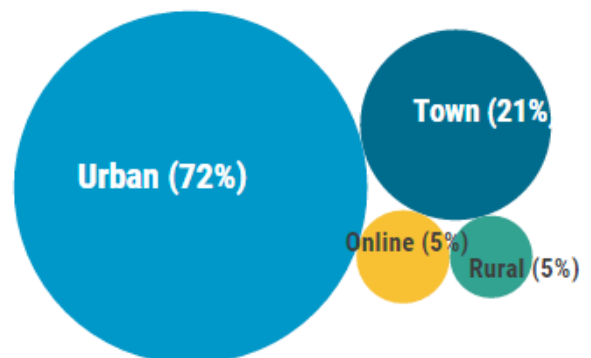
Over a tenth (14%) of the incidents reported affected children, which is perhaps one of the most alarming and least expected trends. This included adults abusing children as well

as children abusing other children, and, in some cases, children abusing adults. Several of the reported incidents were specifically islamophobic in nature (12%). Half of reports did not fall into the categories listed, but were generally racist or xenophobic.

## Majority of Reports in Urban areas, especially London

Nearly 3/4 (454; 71%) of the reports include a specified location. The submission of reports roughly mirrors the population density of the UK. The majority of reports were submitted from urban areas (72 %) and towns (21%) especially London (44% of all incidents with a specified location). 21 % of incidents were reported from the South of England (excluding London), followed by 17% in the North (primarily Manchester) and the Midlands 11% (see figure 6). This is also indicative of the submission bias of social media- people are more likely to use social media and internet platforms more frequently in urban areas.

## Geography of Abuse\*

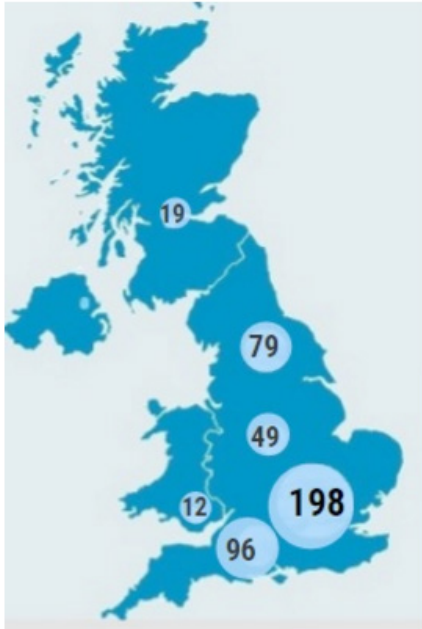


\*Based on 454 named locations. 47% of total incidents did not name a location

Figure 5: Geography of Incidents

# Locations of reported incidents

## Regional Distribution\*



\*Based on 454 named locations. 47% of total incidents did not name a location

Figure 5: Regional Distribution of Incidents



Figure 7: Locations of Reported Incidents

## Background and further observations: the 'hostile environment principle' and xeno-racist rhetoric

Discussing her immigration policy in an interview with The Telegraph in 2012, Theresa May explained that '[Her] aim is to create here in Britain a really hostile environment for illegal immigration'.<sup>11</sup> This was brought to fruition in July 2013 when the Home Office deployed mobile vans in six London boroughs telling people to 'GO HOME or face arrest' in its 'Operation Vaken'. Around a quarter of the incidents recorded in our database specifically use the words 'Go Home' or 'Leave'.

IRR observes: 'If a 'hostile environment' is embedded politically, it can't be a surprise that it takes root culturally'.

It is not unreasonable to see the Vote Leave campaign, with its central focus on immigration, as a continuation of this politically mainstream, hostile stance towards immigration and xeno-racist narratives. Three key elements of the Leave campaign highlight its relationship with the racial and xenophobic hatred following the referendum:

**GO HOME** **LEAVE**  
PACK YOUR BAGS  
**F\*\*\* OFF BRITISH**  
**MUSLIM** **Common phrases reported**

A 2015 IRR discussion paper argued that 'the extension of this 'hostile environment' principle will lead to deterioration in the quality of life for BAME communities. A climate of suspicion and mistrust will develop as those from BAME communities are forced to prove immigration status before receiving services.'<sup>12</sup> As Liz Fekete, Director of the

(i) an anti-immigration rhetoric, with a focus on poor, unskilled countries, (ii) a media-supported exclusive nationalism and (iii) islamophobic scaremongering citing anti-refugee sentiment.

The phrase 'take back control of immigration' was at the heart of the Leave campaign. This involved stirring panic about 'vast numbers'

of migrants and demonising them. Boris Johnson, for instance, made the claim that ‘since 2004, 1.25 million people have been added to the population due to EU migration. That is bigger than the city of Birmingham.’<sup>13</sup> Michael Gove’s suggestion that Turkey’s potential accession to the EU would put Britain at higher risk of crime just days before the referendum is a blatant example of the Leave Campaign’s demonisation of migrants.<sup>14</sup> With the opening of migration opportunities to EU2 citizens (from Bulgaria and Romania) in January 2014, right wing political organisations such as UKIP have gained increasing traction and coverage in the media and, ironically, the European Parliament, allowing them to be a big part of the Leave Campaign.<sup>15</sup>

The de-humanisation of migrants, and particularly Muslim refugees was most evident in UKIPs ‘Breaking Point’ poster. Dr James Morrison points out that ‘it simultaneously suggested a threefold untruth: that the inward migration encouraged by our EU membership is a non-white phenomenon; that it principally involves young, able-bodied males who can only be coming to steal our jobs and livelihoods; and that it is a Trojan horse for importing Islamist (ergo ‘Middle Eastern-looking’) terrorists.’<sup>16</sup>

It must be noted here that the key figures in the Remain campaign failed to robustly challenge this anti immigration stance. The ‘Stronger In Campaign’ opted to focus on the ‘deadly economic risks’ of leaving the EU and remained largely silent on the issue of immigration. This also meant an unwillingness to tackle the xeno-racist narrative of the Leave campaign. Cameron especially, was reluctant to directly attack Gove and Johnson.<sup>17</sup>

While islamophobic scaremongering was central to the Leave Campaign, it has been increasingly normalised in the mainstream media and politics in the UK since 9/11. The attacks in Paris in January and November 2015, the continuing rise of ISIL and the refugee crisis have caused a further spike in Islamophobia<sup>18</sup>, with TellMAMA reporting a three-fold increase in anti-Muslim abuse in the UK in 2015.<sup>19</sup> Zac Goldsmith’s recent controversial mayoral campaign and his attempt to paint Sadiq Khan as a ‘closet extremist’ are indicative of the patent islamophobia in mainstream politics.<sup>20</sup>

Vote Leave also touted an exclusive-nationalism that placed Britain in an embattled state, tapping into a collective identity as the victor in two world wars. Evidence of this can be seen in Boris Johnsons likening of the European Union agenda to the aims of Hitler.<sup>21</sup> ‘Memories of World War Two are central to many Britons’ self-image as an indomitable island people.’ This spirit of difference, specifically in relation to other EU countries, was played on throughout the campaign.<sup>22</sup>

This exclusive nationalism has no doubt encouraged a sort of post-referendum xenoracism centered on an idea of ‘Englishness that is exclusively white and Christian, targeting “anyone who is different”.’<sup>23</sup> The demonisation of immigrants as undesirable, sometimes even criminal combined with ongoing Islamophobic scaremongering created an oppositional enemy for Leave voters. The retroactive nationalism employed by the Vote Leave campaign further broadened the scope for those who could be considered in opposition to British nationalism.

## Concluding remarks

The platforms are not intended to replace existing hate crime reporting and monitoring mechanisms. Instead they seek to harness the potential of the online commons to raise awareness for the spike in racist and xenophobic hate crimes following the referendum, as well as encourage reporting, speaking out and bystander support. Racism and xenophobia are by no means new issues in the UK, but the explosion of blatant hate post-referendum has brought them out into a very public and visible sphere.

We hope that this report will bring the nature and extent of hate crime to the attention of a wider public and will continue to inspire a renewed vigour in seriously tackling racism and xenophobia. We also hope that our platforms will continue to raise awareness for hate crime, provide a public space for sharing stories and support and encourage reporting and bystander support in the future.

## Annex

### *Further notes on methodology*

- Each distinct incident was recorded in a separate entry. If a submission included more than one incident, these were recorded as separate entries.
- In incidents describing general ‘racist propaganda’, for instance general derogatory remarks not aimed at a specific person (i.e. ‘immigrants’ in general), or general racist graffiti/stickers, Ethnicity is recorded as ‘unspecific’. Where the general racist propaganda is aimed specifically at an ethnic group, the ethnicity of this group has been recorded.
- Online abuse was online recorded in the database if it was specifically/ personally sent to the victim (i.e. we did not include the substantial submissions of screenshots of generally racist/ xenophobic statuses/ rants).
- Geography was classified based on the following population criteria: urban >200,000; town <200,000; rural <20,000.

# Notes

1. NPCC, 'Hate crime is unacceptable in any circumstances say police', 27.06.2016, <http://news.npcc.police.uk/releases/hate-crime-is-unacceptable-in-any-circumstances-say-police> [Accessed 23.07.2016].
2. NPCC, 'Hate crime incidents reported to the police have reduced following a spike after the EU referendum', 22.07.2016, <http://news.npcc.police.uk/releases/hate-crime-incidents-reported-to-police-have-reduced-following-a-spike-after-the-eu-referendum> [Accessed 23.07.2016].
3. Xenophobia was first identified by A. Sivanandan as a new form of non-colour coded racism that is distinguishable from xenophobia ('fear of strangers') in that it is structured into domestic immigration and asylum policy, thereby providing the ideological space in which racism towards those deemed foreign becomes culturally acceptable. See A. Sivanandan, 'Poverty is the new Black', in *The Three Faces of British racism, Race & Class*, October-December, 2001, Volume 43, Number 2.
4. Interview with Liz Fekete, 25.07.2016.
5. Alex Krasodonski-Jones, The Centre for the Analysis of Social Media, Demos, 'MP dashboard: making sense of social media big data' <http://www.demos.co.uk/research-area/centre-for-analysis-of-social-media/> [Accessed 23.07.2016].
6. #SafetyPin was used to express solidarity with migrants and those experiencing PRRX. The initiative that spawned the hashtag suggested people wear actual safety pins to demonstrate their solidarity.
7. Centre for Analysis of Social Media, Demos, 'Research conducted for Channel4 Dispatches: Racist Britain', 11.07.2016, <http://www.demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Dispatches-Brexit-Demos.pdf>.
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10. 31% BAME/ POC made up of South Asian (16%-98), Black(9%- 57), Middle Eastern/North African (3%-19), East Asian(3%- 16)
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12. Jon Burnett, 'Entitlement and belonging: social restructuring and multicultural Britain', Institute of Race Relations, 2015.
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14. The Guardian, 'Vote Leave embroiled in race row over Turkey security threat claims', 22.05.2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/may/21/vote-leave-prejudice-turkey-eu-security-threat>, [Accessed 25.07.2016].
15. This reality was borne out in the outcome of the 2014 European elections which saw the UKIP winning the largest share of seats (26.7%) ahead of the Labour and Conservative parties.
16. Dr James Morrison, 'Break-point for Brexit? How UKIP's image of 'hate' set race discourse reeling back decades', in Daniel Jackson, Einar Thorsen, Dominic Wring (eds), 'EU Referendum Analysis 2016: Media, Voters and the Campaign: Early reflections from leading UK academics', The Centre for the Study of Journalism, Culture and Community, June 2016, p.66.
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18. Arzu Merali, 'Islamophobia in United Kingdom, National Report, 2015' in Enes Bayrakli, Farid Hafez (eds.), 'European Islamophobia Report 2015, SETA, Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research, 2016, [online], p. 552, [Accessed 23.07.2016]. [http://www.islamophobiaeurope.com/reports/2015/en/EIR\\_2015.pdf](http://www.islamophobiaeurope.com/reports/2015/en/EIR_2015.pdf),
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