

# What Makes People Join Hate Groups?

Unhappy childhood experiences can drive people to join white supremacist groups, studies have found.

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What Makes People Hate? (US NEWS AND WORLD REPORT)



Tony McAleer attends the Fight Supremacy! Boston Counter-Protest & Resistance Rally on Boston Common on Aug. 19, 2017. (MELISSA BAILEY/KHN)

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**CRIES OF "NAZIS GO home!"** and "Shame! Shame!" filled the air as Angela King and Tony McAleer stood with other counter protesters at the "free speech" rally in Boston last weekend. They didn't join the shouting. Their sign spoke for them: "There is life after hate."



..Hate groups in the U.S. number 917 and have been on the rise for two years, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center. It attributes the trend partly to the attention given to extremist views during the 2016 presidential campaign.

.....Those who study human behavior attribute hate speech more to deep personality issues than a diagnosable mental illness. But they're also intrigued by how the white supremacy movement is rebranding itself for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The well-known racist symbols of white robes and hoods or shaved heads and torches have given

way to a clean-cut subtlety for the millennial generation. With heightened tensions on all sides, there's a renewed interest in explaining how minds turn to hate.

*"I felt power where I felt powerless. I felt a sense of belonging where I felt invisible," McAleer, 49, said of the pull of the white nationalism that lured him to spend 15 years as a skinhead recruiter and an organizer for the White Aryan Resistance.*

*"I was beaten at an all-boys Catholic school on a regular basis at 10 or 11," said McAleer, a middle-class kid from Canada, which left him with "an unhealthy sense of identity."*

King, 42, who grew up in rural South Florida, said she turned to white nationalism as a child, first learning racial slurs from her parents. Growing up, she questioned her sexual identity and didn't fit in. At 12, she said, a school bully ripped her shirt open, exposing her bra and humiliating her in front of her classmates.

*"At that point, I decided if I became the bully, no one could do that to me,"* King said. She became a neo-Nazi skinhead at 15, and at 23 went to prison for three years for a hate crime. King had a tattoo of a swastika on her right hand; she has since covered it up with the likeness of a cat.

Young people with a troubled past are especially vulnerable, said psychologist Ervin Staub, of Holyoke, Massachusetts, a professor emeritus at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst who studies social processes that lead to violence.

"Why would people join groups like that? It usually involves them finding no other socially acceptable and meaningful ways to fulfill important needs — the need for identity; the need for a feeling of effectiveness; the need for a feeling of connection," Staub said. "Often, these are people who don't feel like they've succeeded or had a chance to succeed across normal channels of success in society. They may come from families that are problematic or families where they're exposed to this kind of extreme views of white superiority and nationalism. If you don't feel you have much influence and power in the world, you get a sense of power from being part of a community and especially a rather militant community."