



Combating Religious Discrimination

This document explains federal civil rights laws prohibiting religious discrimination and provides examples of conduct that may be a violation of your civil rights.

What can religious discrimination look like?

Religious discrimination includes:

- Treating someone unfavorably or differently or denying them an equal opportunity because of their actual or perceived religious belief, observance, or practice.
- Treating someone unfavorably or differently because that person is married to, or associated with, someone of a particular religion.
- Harassing or threatening someone because of their actual or perceived religious belief, observance, or practice.
- Retaliating against someone because they have complained of religious discrimination.

Examples of Religious Discrimination

Religious-Motivated Hate Crimes

We [prosecute criminal conduct that arises to a hate crime](#). That may include using force, attempting to use force, or threatening to use force against another person because of their actual or perceived religion. It also includes defacing, damaging, or destroying religious real property (or attempting to) because of the religious character of that property or because of the race, color, or ethnic characteristics of anyone associated with that religious property. The use of force or threats of force to interfere with a person's free exercise of religious beliefs may also violate federal law. Examples of religious-motivated hate crimes include:

- An individual attacks multiple Jewish attendees of a town sponsored menorah lighting on the first day of Hannukah.
- A man places swastika graffiti and "white power" on a Sikh gurdwara. A search of the man's residence uncovers multiple firearms and Nazi-inspired imagery.

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- A man threatens an African American woman, sending her a social media message that indicates he will go to her church on specific day with his gun and kill her and her family.

Religious Discrimination in Correctional Institutions and Similar Facilities

We [enforce the constitutional rights of people held in state or local government institutions](#), such as prisons, jails, pretrial detention centers, juvenile justice facilities, publicly operated nursing homes, and institutions for people with psychiatric or developmental disabilities. We also enforce the right to religious exercise in these settings. Examples of unlawful discrimination in institutions include:

- A prison denies Muslim individuals in their custody the ability to hold their own Friday prayer service, instead requiring them to join prayer services of religious groups that are of different faith traditions and do not meet their religious needs.
- A Sikh inmate was repeatedly disciplined because of his religiously based refusal to trim his beard.
- A prison policy prohibits the use of tobacco products and refuses to grant an accommodation for Native Americans seeking to use tobacco as part of their religious practice.

Religious Discrimination in Public Educational Institutions

We [enforce federal civil rights laws protecting students from religious discrimination in public schools at all educational levels](#), including elementary, secondary (middle and high schools), colleges and universities. Schools must take prompt and appropriate action to respond to complaints of discrimination, including harassment or bullying based on religion. Examples of unlawful religious discrimination in schools include:

- A public university professor bars Jewish students from his seminar on the Middle East on the belief that they have ties to Israel, which will polarize class discussion. A student complains to the dean, who affirms the decision and states his belief that Jewish students would feel uncomfortable in the class.
- A high school biology teacher refuses to grant a Jain student's request to not participate in a frog dissection lesson, though her participation would violate her religious beliefs.

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Religious Discrimination in Employment

We [enforce federal civil rights laws prohibiting religious discrimination in the workplace](#).

These laws require employers to make reasonable accommodations for employees' religious observances and practices, unless doing so would cause the employer undue hardship. Examples of unlawful religious discrimination in employment include:

- A newly hired Jewish physical therapist at a hospital asks for an adjusted schedule so that he can be home to observe Shabbat on Friday evenings. Coworkers begin to make antisemitic jokes and comments to him based on stereotypes about Jews and news events surrounding Israel. One day, he finds swastikas etched into his locker. When he complains to a supervisor, the supervisor says that everyone is entitled to their opinions, and the supervisor does not address the incidents. The supervisor also does not address the employee's request for an adjusted schedule.
- A transit bus system prohibits Sikh drivers from wearing turbans with their uniforms. and issued a disciplinary write-up each time a Sikh employee wore a turban with their uniform. The same employer allowed other workers to wear non-religious headgear such as baseball caps, without penalty.

Religious Discrimination in Federally Funded Programs

We [enforce laws that prohibit religious discrimination in programs and activities that receive federal funds, including state and local law enforcement](#). Examples of unlawful religious discrimination in federally funded programs include:

- A hospital refuses to provide vegetarian meals to individuals who request them for religious reasons, such as Buddhist and Hindu individuals.
- A local law enforcement agency requires a Muslim woman to remove her hijab when sitting for an arrest photograph, despite her protestation and request for an accommodation.
- A state court security guard informs a Sikh individual that they must remove their kirpan (curved blade worn by some Sikh individuals) courthouse. Though the individual informs the guard of the religious nature of the kirpan, they are still refused entrance to the courthouse.

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Religious Discrimination in Housing

We [enforce a law that prohibits religious discrimination in renting or buying a home, seeking housing assistance, obtaining necessary permits, zoning approvals or utilities, or engaging in other housing-related activities](#). Examples of unlawful religious discrimination in housing include:

- A condominium board intimidates and harasses a Jewish family and refuses to allow the family to place a small mezuzah on their doorframe but allows Christian residents to place a nativity scene on their lawn during Christmas holidays.
- A resident of a housing authority property harasses neighbors who are Rastafarian. When the Rastafarian residents complain to the housing authority, it fails to act to stop the harassment.

Religious Discrimination in Public Accommodations

We [enforce federal civil rights laws in places of public accommodation](#), including hotels, shops, restaurants, and places of entertainment. Examples of unlawful religious discrimination in public accommodations include:

- A public beach club advises its members that the club does not admit Jews and that members may not invite Jewish guests to use the club's facilities.
- A restaurant requires individuals to remove religious head coverings prior to entering.

Religious Discrimination in Land Use and Zoning

We [enforce provisions of a law that protect people's rights to buy, rent, and use land for worship and religious exercise](#). Land use regulations and zoning codes may be used to discriminate against religious assemblies, especially those from minority faiths. Examples of unlawful religious discrimination in land use and zoning include:

- A town denies a building permit application from an Orthodox Jewish congregation. This decision is based on a zoning code that treats religious assemblies and institutions on less than equal terms with nonreligious assemblies and institutions in several of its zoning districts.
- A city denies a Muslim association's application for permission to develop a religious cemetery. This denial comes after substantial public opposition, including discriminatory comments about Muslims, and the election of city officials who campaigned on a platform of opposing the cemetery.

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Religious Discrimination in Lending

We [enforce a law prohibiting religious discrimination in any aspect of a credit transaction](#).

Examples of unlawful religious discrimination in lending include:

- A lender denies a small business loan to a religious organization because it disagrees with the religious affiliation of the organization.
- A bank collects data on a credit applicants' religious affiliation to determine whether to apply more stringent loan approval standards.

How to report a violation

The Civil Rights Division enforces federal laws that protect the right of all people, regardless of race, color, sex, religion, national origin, disability, familial status, or citizenship status, to practice their faiths freely and without discrimination. For more information visit [justice.gov/crt](https://www.justice.gov/crt).

If you believe that you or someone else experienced religious discrimination, you can report a civil rights violation.

- Online at civilrights.justice.gov.
- By telephone at (202) 514-3847, toll free (855)-856-1247, or telephone device for the Deaf (TTY) at (202) 514-0716.
- By mail at the Civil Rights Division, U.S. Department of Justice, 950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C. 20530.

What happens if I report a violation?

The Civil Rights Division may, based on the information you provide, open an investigation. The Division may also share your information with other federal agencies that also enforce civil rights laws. Depending on the outcome of the investigation, the Division may file a criminal or lawsuit on behalf of victims of discrimination, work to secure financial relief for any discriminatory conduct, and/or take steps to ensure that the discrimination does not occur in the future.

If you require [language assistance services](#), including interpretation, translation, or auxiliary aids or services, please contact the Civil Rights Division at (202) 514-3847 or (TTY) (202) 514-0716.