
Brief Report

Lesbians' and Gay Men's Experiences of Discrimination and Harassment in a University Community¹

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A survey of 125 lesbians and gay men in a university community was conducted to determine the incidence of discrimination, harassment, and violence. Nearly three fourths had experienced verbal abuse; 26% were threatened with violence; and 17% had personal property damaged. Students and roommates were most often those responsible. Most incidents were not reported to authorities, and many made changes in their daily routines to avoid harm. Over half of the sample feared for their personal safety; their fear was related to the amount of harassment and previous property damage. Men were more often victimized than women.

The unusual life challenges faced by lesbians and gay men have become the focus of increasing empirical research. Earlier work focused on discrimination and prejudice based on negative attitudes and irrational fears of lesbians and gay men (see Herek, 1984). More recent studies have examined verbal and behavioral hostility and violence directed at lesbians and gay men. Despite widespread acknowledgment of discrimination against gay and lesbian peo-

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ple, little has appeared in the professional literature documenting the scope and nature of these events (see Bohn, 1983/1984; Levine & Leonard, 1984). A recent report commissioned by the U.S. Department of Justice on bias crime (Finn & McNeil, 1987) concluded that lesbians and gay men were the most-often victimized groups in the nation. Much of the data supporting this conclusion had been collected by lesbian and gay groups. Earlier studies were summarized in a report on anti-gay/lesbian violence of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF, 1986). More recent reports were done by the National Lesbian and Gay Health Foundation (1987) and by the Philadelphia Lesbian and Gay Task Force (Gross, Aurand, & Addressa, 1988).³ These reports show that lesbians and gay men routinely experience verbal abuse, physical threats, and, to a lesser degree, physical violence. This report examines such patterns of victimization of lesbians and gay men in a university community.

METHOD

Responses for this study were obtained using a questionnaire used in a study of discrimination at Yale University in 1985-1986 (Herek, 1986). Leaders of the Lesbian and Gay Student Alliance (LGSA) of Pennsylvania State University distributed the measure to lesbians and gay men attending lectures, films, social events, and organizational meetings. Respondents were asked if they had ever taken the measure before, and duplicates were discarded. A total of 160 questionnaires were returned for analysis. There were 103 lesbian and gay male respondents; 16 defined themselves as heterosexual; 22 were bisexual and predominantly lesbian or gay; 5 were bisexual and predominantly heterosexual; and 14 did not provide their affectional status. Only the 125 who described themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (mostly lesbian/gay) were retained for analyses. Of the sample, 69% (86) were men and 31% (39) were women. Sixty-one percent were undergraduates, 22% were graduate students, 1% were faculty, 3% staff, and 12% were in the "other" category. The average age of the sample was 24 ($SD = 5.8$); the range was from 17 through 42 years old, with 80% of the sample between 17 and 24 years old.

³These reports can be obtained from the respective groups at these addresses: National Lesbian and Gay Health Foundation, P.O. Box 88035, Atlanta, GA 30356-8035; The National Lesbian and Gay Task Force, 1517 U Street, NW, Washington, DC 20009; and The Philadelphia Lesbian and Gay Task Force, 1501 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102.

RESULTS

Harassment and Violence

Over a quarter (26%) had been verbally insulted once, and 50% had experienced verbal comments twice or more; 26% had been threatened with physical violence at least once (10% had been threatened twice or more). Property damage was reported by 17%, objects were thrown at 12%, 22% reported being chased or followed, 5% were spat upon, and 4% were punched. Extreme violence occurred in six cases: five respondents had been punched and one was assaulted with a weapon. Gay men suffered more verbal insults, $\chi^2(2) = 9.45, p < .05$, with 58% of the men reporting two or more compared to 31% of the lesbians. Only 8% of the women had been threatened with violence, compared to 35% of the men, $\chi^2(2) = 9.22, p < .01$. More men (23%) than women (5%) had property damaged, $\chi^2(2) = 6.76, p < .05$. Specific others who were frequently named as harassers were roommates (men 27%, women 8%), other undergraduate students (men 34%, women 18%), and faculty (men 10%, women 8%). Knowledge of harassment was common, with far more harassment of gay men than of lesbians known; 62% knew of no harassment of lesbians; only 34% knew of no gay male victims. Respondents knew of four or more incidents of harassment of women at a 9% rate, whereas 28% knew of high levels (four or more incidents) of gay male friends. Men were more aware of harassment of gay men than were lesbians, $\chi^2(4) = 15.56, p < .01$; there was no sex difference in knowledge of lesbians' harassment. Expectation of future victimization was high. Only 6% of the respondents felt that a lesbian or gay man would *not* be harassed on campus, with 48% considering harassment fairly or very likely. Discrimination was expected by 91%, with 52% seeing it as fairly or very likely.

Responses to Harassment and Discrimination

Most respondents were fearful about disclosing their sexual orientation to others. Almost half (45%) were not at all comfortable disclosing their orientation, with an additional 34% only somewhat comfortable. Only 4% were very comfortable. Thus, the finding that most concealed their sexual orientation is not surprising. Most reported hiding their gay/lesbian status from roommates (80%), other undergraduates (89%), faculty (65%), and job supervisors (70%). In addition to concealment, many respondents made specific life changes to avoid discrimination or harassment. Nearly one half

(42%) had made such changes. These changes included avoidance of locations in which lesbians or gay men congregated, presenting oneself as heterosexual, and refraining from associating with known lesbians or gay men. Despite changes, fear for personal safety was experienced occasionally by 64% of the sample. Fear was also central to the substantial proportion (94%) of those who had been victimized who did not report the incident to appropriate university officials. Fear of further harassment was a common reason for nonreporting, as was concern that no action would ensue. Fear for personal safety was significantly higher if the participant had been threatened with physical harm in the past ($r = .27, p < .01$), had been verbally insulted ($r = .21, p < .05$), had property destroyed ($r = .33, p < .01$), and had been chased ($r = .24, p < .01$).

DISCUSSION

This research discovered pervasive experiences of discrimination and harassment among lesbians and gay men surveyed on this campus, consistent with national reports. There is predictable discrimination and abuse when one is identified as lesbian or gay, whether this characteristic is disclosed, discovered, or presumed. In addition, incidents are seldom reported to authorities; the victims fear the consequences of seeking help and expect no effective action. Fear is commonplace among this group of women and men. More than half fear for their physical safety; many have been threatened with physical violence at least once; and smaller numbers have been chased or actually harmed. Most can readily report on other people's victimization. Few assumed that the "average" lesbian or gay man in this study would not be harassed, mistreated, or harmed.

These results illuminate the coping strategies lesbians and gay men develop. The high frequencies of verbal abuse and derogatory comments, the most "benign" attacks, pose continuing difficulties in daily living. Because of abusive comments and the fear they cause, few disclose their status and expose themselves to more direct abuse. It is difficult to know if these patterns apply to local lesbians and gay men not sampled in this study. Study participants attended gay-affiliated social functions, and thus were comfortable with some public disclosure. This degree of public acknowledgment may lead to higher levels of victimization. The experiences of the larger group of students, faculty, and staff who do not disclose their status remains unknown. No doubt there is a high level of fear and worry among the thousands of such women and men in this community.

The number of men and women who now experience mistreatment and those who will in the future should they disclose their status is substantial. There are direct implications for community psychologists in reducing cur-

rent victimization rates and in the preventing future incidents. Support for victims of harassment and violence must be provided through outreach programs staffed by lesbian- and gay-affirming personnel. Encouragement of help-seeking and of incident-reporting can be facilitated by anonymous crisis systems. Training of local law enforcement personnel in lesbian/gay issues would also help by giving victims ready access to helping resources. Institutional actions must occur to protect lesbians and gay men from discrimination, harassment, and violence. Unequivocal statements that publicly affirm the unacceptability of discrimination based on sexual orientation must be incorporated into institutional policies. Local community ordinances need to be amended to ban discrimination based on affectional status. Mechanisms for implementing this commitment – by promoting increased understanding and acceptance of lesbians and gay men, by acting on incidents of bias, and by creating formal protection – are urgently needed. Documenting patterns of victimization within a specific setting is a critical first step in promoting such essential community changes.

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