

Gay Men as Victims of Nonconsensual Sex

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Incidents of nonconsensual sexual activity among 930 homosexually active men living in England and Wales are analyzed. Of these men, 27.6% said they had been sexually assaulted or had sex against their will at some point in their lives; one third had been forced into sexual activity (usually anal intercourse) by men with whom they had previously had, or were currently having, consensual sexual activity. The contention that male rape is usually committed by heterosexually identified men, primarily as an expression of power and control, is not supported. Recognition that gay men rape other gay men is needed, both by the gay community and support services for victims.

KEY WORDS: sexual assault; male rape; gay men; sexual behavior.

INTRODUCTION

That sexual assaults of men by other men occur has gained increasing recognition in recent years. However, accounts of the nature of these assaults are made in the absence of prevalence data for the United Kingdom. Reported statistics for sexual assaults of women are widely regarded as conservative estimates, and for a variety of reasons, reports of assaults on men may be considered to represent an even smaller proportion of actual assaults (Kaufman *et al*, 1980). Difficulties in assessing the size of the prob-

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lem are compounded by the fact that there exists no legal recognition of males as victims of rape in the U.K. The wording of the Sexual Offences Act 1956 requires that for rape to be proved, the assailant must be male, the victim must be female, and that penile-vaginal penetration must occur. Forced anal penetration of men is categorized with all other nonconsensual sexual acts as indecent assault. This only applies, of course, to those men over the age of 21. Currently the homosexual activity of any men below the age of 21 is a criminal offense. Prosecution for nonconsensual buggery of men under 21 has been, under the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, punishable by a greater sentence. Rape of men between 16 and 21 is a crime against the state, not a crime against the person.

The majority of research literature on male sexual assaults focuses on prisons (Fisher, 1934; Davies, 1968; Buffman, 1972; Scacco, 1975; Sagarin, 1976; Moss *et al.*, 1979; Lockwood, 1980; Wooden and Parker, 1982) and correctional institutions (e.g., Gibbens, 1963). Of those that treat the issue more broadly, some (e.g., Goyer and Eddleman, 1984) look at other institutions such as the military, where interpersonal dynamics are similar to prisons. Other literature includes psychotherapy papers on the effects of sexual assaults on men (Anderson, 1982; Mezey and King, 1989); in which the immediate and long-term psychological and behavioral responses of men are described as similar to those of female victims. Amnesia as a consequence of one man's rape has been described (Kaszniak *et al.*, 1988). Where the assailant is the father of the victim, incidences have been treated as incest case studies, concentrating on family dynamics (Langsley *et al.*, 1968; Awad, 1976).

The presumed sexual orientation and motivation of men who sexually assault other men has been the subject of some debate. Early commentators on sexual assault assumed that because the act was sexualized, it was primarily sexual, and because it involved two men, it was, necessarily (and by definition), homosexual. Here we have a problem in terminology, whereby the term "homosexual rape," while accurate in terms of the sex of the people involved, confuses their sex with their sexual orientation. While not addressing the issue directly, Burgess and Holstrom (1979) reported a 13-year-old victim saying "I was raped by a homosexual" (p. 365) and that an assailant "was known to be a homosexual" (p. 368). The lack of qualification of these comments leave the impression that all male sexual assault assailants are homosexually orientated.

More recently, and drawing on feminist analyses of rape of women by men, the sexual motivation of male-on-male assault has been criticized. In this understanding, men rape other men for the same reasons they rape women: to assert power, release aggression, and control feelings of helplessness. This interpretation of male rape is supported by the few papers

that deal with noninstitutional assault. Kaufman *et al.* (1980) described 14 male sexual assaults, and concluded that the victims, compared to female victims they studied, sustained more physical trauma, were more likely to have been victims of multiple assailants, and were held captive longer. In each of the three cases they described in detail, the assailants were complete strangers to their victims, extensive violence was used, and all three victims were anally penetrated. Again in the 22 cases analyzed by Groth and Burgess (1980), the majority of assailants (75%) were total strangers, the most common type of sexual act was anal intercourse, and the styles of attack consist mainly of threats of physical violence or a sudden strike and physical overpowering. They stated that "the assault is an act of retaliation, an expression of power and an assertion of their strength or manhood" (p. 809).

In contrast to these two American studies, only 18% of Mezey and King's (1989) group of British victims had been sexually assaulted by strangers. Other assailants included lovers and exlovers, acquaintances, casual sexual partners, and family members. The major difference between Mezey and King's (1989) group and those of Kaufman *et al.* (1980) and Groth and Burgess (1980) is that the former included a large proportion of self-identified homosexual and bisexual men. Recruitment for this study included advertisements in the gay press, whereas the American studies recruited from police and hospital departments.

Despite some criticism of the idea that the rape of women is not sexually motivated (Palmer, 1988), the orthodox view of male rape has been one of power, aggression, control, and domination. This understanding of rape has been taken directly from feminist theory and applied unmodified to male rape. Consequently, writers such as McMullen (1990), from working with victims of male rape in a counseling and support setting, have asserted that the vast majority of men who rape or sexually assault other men have a heterosexual identity coupled with a strong desire to overpower and dominate men. That the act is sexualized is a means to an end, and not the motivation for the attack. Within the heterosexual rapist's world view, to be used by another man sexually is an ultimate humiliation, and consequently this technique is used to exert power over the victim. In the words of one rapist: "I didn't have an erection. I wasn't really interested in sex. I felt powerful, and hurting him excited me. Making him suck me was more to degrade him than for my physical satisfaction" (Groth and Burgess, 1980, p. 808).

McMullen (1990, p. 14) stated "Male rape is *rarely, if ever*, a homosexual problem" [emphasis in original]. However, this viewpoint is not upheld by Mezey and King's (1989) respondents who claimed that at least

64% of their assailants were homosexually active men. It appears that the profile of male sexual assault varies depending upon the population studied.

McMullen (1990) proposed that gay men, or those perceived to be gay, are more likely to be sexually assaulted than men perceived as heterosexual. Part of the reason for this, he suggested, is that some men who assault other men are themselves victims of sexual assault, assume that their assailant was gay, and actively seek gay men for revenge. Also, there is the possibility that gay men are perceived as easier targets, less likely to report the assault, and that the police will not take an assault against a gay man seriously. This follows West's (1985) assertion that gay men and women are more vulnerable to personal victimization of all kinds. Conversely, the emergence of HIV, and its associations with gay men, may have made that group "off limits" as potential targets for attack. What McMullen (1990) failed to point out, however, is that gay men, on average, are more often in positions of possible sexual assault not least because they have male sexual partners. This increases their vulnerability. As Mezey and King (1989, p. 208) stated "in some cases homosexual victims had placed themselves at risk by seeking casual sexual partners (cruising)." However, the perceived stigma of being identified as gay when sexually assaulted by another man could be expected not to have a dampening effect on reporting in interviews with gay men, as they have identified as such already, thus probably giving more accurate frequency estimates.

The relative inattention given to sexual assault of gay men by other gay men may have a variety of explanations. First, the dominant understanding of male rape is that it is *not* sexually motivated, and therefore forced sexual activity within a sexual encounter does not fit this model, and its recognition may damage the model. Second, folk wisdom tells us that it is easy for gay men to find casual sexual partners, so they have no need to force themselves on other men, and, conversely, that gay men are weak and effeminate and could not force themselves on another man. Third, given that a woman's sexual history is a notorious defense plea in the case of female rape, gay men have little faith in the police and judicial system in dealing with a casual sexual partner who uses force or threats of violence to elicit particular sexual acts during a sexual encounter that was, up to that point, consensual. Finally, the gay community itself is reluctant to acknowledge that gay men intimidate, exploit, and sexually assault other gay men; it is politically embarrassing to the gay movement (in the same way as pedophilia is embarrassing), and it is dangerous ammunition for an oppressive majority. Together, these factors could result in gay men being assaulted more frequently, and even less likely to report the incident, than their heterosexual counterparts. All these points should be borne in mind

when extrapolating the experiences of the current group of gay men to the whole male population.

Within gay male relationships, little work has been done on nonconsensual or coercive sex. Waterman *et al.* (1989) reported that 4 (12%) of the 34 gay men they interviewed reported being victims of coercive sex by their current or most recent partner. As in the case of rape of women within marriage (Russell, 1982), sexual assault within gay relationships may prove even harder to get recognized than assaults by strangers. That the assault occurs in domestic circumstances, and that the assailant and victim have, presumably, had sexual relations in the past, could both be seen as reducing the seriousness of the event and its impact on the victim.

The current paper reports on the prevalence of nonconsensual sex among a large group of homosexually active men and identifies some characteristics of those assaults.

METHOD

Project SIGMA is a five-wave 6-year longitudinal study of a non-clinic-based cohort of homosexually active men. Respondents were recruited by a variety of means including (i) response to a postal questionnaire in the gay press, (ii) recruitment in gay pubs, clubs, and social and political organizations, and (iii) contacts of the above. These respondents lived in and around 10 main sites across England and Wales: London, Cardiff, Newcastle, Teesside, Portsmouth, Leeds, Norwich, Birmingham, Liverpool, and Bristol.

In the first wave of interviewing, 930 men were interviewed, one third of whom lived in London. The median age of the cohort at the time of interview was 29 years and 50% between 23 and 39 years; 42% reported currently having one regular male sexual partner, 32% having one regular male sexual partner and others (either regular or casual), and the remaining 26% having no regular male sexual partner. In general the cohort are gay-identified and happy with this identity and are from a predominately white, well-educated background.

As part of a large questionnaire, men were asked questions relating to nonconsensual sexual activity. The initial question was "How old were you when you were first sexually molested or raped, that is subjected to sex without your consent?" The question was asked in this manner to facilitate honest answers and make it easier for people to relate their experiences by assuming many men have been sexually molested. This method of question phrasing may, however, overinflate reporting. For a fuller discussion of sexual behavior questionnaire design see Coxon *et al.* (1992).

If the respondent answered positively to this initial question, he was asked to describe the circumstances of the assault. Specific pieces of information prompted for, if not supplied in the free description, were the type of sexual activity involved; the relationship between the assailant and victim; where it took place; the time of day; and whether alcohol had been consumed prior to the assault, by both the victim and the assailant.

To categorize the relationship of the assailant to the victim, two researchers independently generated categories of relationships from the data supplied by respondents. On comparison it was found that the two topologies differed in only two respects. One researcher had divided family members into contemporary family members and those a generation above, and strangers into those that were traceable and those that were not. The contemporary/older distinction in family members was dropped as all family members were older than their victims, while the traceable/untraceable distinction was maintained as it was felt this may have a bearing on the type of sexual activity that took place. The headings of the final categories were (i) lovers and regular sexual partners; (ii) casual sexual partners; (iii) friends; (iv) family members; (v) school and work colleagues, acquaintances (and friends of friends); (vi) authority figures; (vii) traceable strangers; and (viii) untraceable strangers.

RESULTS

Of the 930 men interviewed, 257 (27.6%) said they had been subjected to nonconsensual sex at some point in their lives. Ten (3.9%) involved women assailants. These 10 along with 15 respondents who declined to elaborate on the event and 13 respondents who claimed they could not remember the incident in any detail, have been excluded from further analysis. The remaining 219 occurrences are examined below.

Type of Sex Acts

Of the 219 cases, in 7 (3.2%) no sexual contact actually occurred; either the offender progressed no further than exposing himself, or was unsuccessful in his approaches. The victim was forcibly anally penetrated in 99 cases (45.2%), and in a further 11 (5.0%) an unsuccessful attempt at penetration was made. This was by far the most common sexual act. Penetration of the mouth but not the anus occurred in a further 13 (5.9%) cases.

In 8 (3.7%) cases the victims was forced to masturbate his assailant, and in 5 (2.3%) the assailant rubbed himself against the victims body or performed interfemoral intercourse on him. In 3 (1.4%) cases the assailant

masturbated himself, ejaculating over the victim. In the remaining 73 cases (33.3%) the acts took the form of stimulation of the victim. Ten victims (4.7%) had fellatio performed on them, 26 (11.9%) were masturbated, and 29 (13.2%) were touched and felt over or through their clothing. In 8 (3.7%) cases mutual masturbation occurred.

Relationship of Assailants of Victims

Of the 212 cases where some specific sex act occurred and the data are available, in 62 (29.2%) some prior consensual sexual activity had taken place. In some cases this was immediately before the violation, as with the 52 (24.5%) respondents who were forced to perform a sexual act by one or more casual sexual partners. The mean age of victim assaulted by a casual sexual partner was 22.9 (Mdn 20, range 14–57). In others, sex had occurred between the assailant and victim several times previously, as with the 10 (4.7%) respondents molested by their regular sexual partner. Here, the average age of victim at time of assault was 21.3 (Mdn 21, range 15–37). In the remaining 150 (70.8%) cases, no previous sexual activity had taken place between the assailant and victim. The relationships in these cases vary over a range of interpersonal knowledge and kinship.

The group “family members” included kin of the family (e.g., uncles), as well as blood relatives. In total, they account for 29 of the reports (12.5%). Of these, 8 were friends of the family, 8 uncles, 4 fathers, 4 cousins, 2 brothers, and 1 each of foster brother, stepfather, and grandfather. The mean age of the victim when the assailant was a family member was 11 (Mdn 12, range 4–16). This was the youngest group of victims.

Fifteen of the reported cases (6.%) involved a friend already known to the victim. The average age of the victim was 13.5 (Mdn 20, range 7–23). In all but one of the reports the assailant was older than the victim.

School and work colleagues, acquaintances, and friends of friends accounted for 44 of the reported cases (19.0%). The average age of the victim in these cases was 16.8 (Mdn 15.5, range 7–49). Six of the incidents occurred at school, and 5 at work.

Twenty-three cases (9.9%) involved sexual assault by someone in a position of authority over the victim. The mean age of the victim in these cases was 13.5 (Mdn 13, range 7–24). A wide range of people are represented in the group, the majority being in positions of power and authority over children; for example, teachers (9 cases), a cub-master, father of a friend, and a choirmaster. Three of the assailants held economic power: an employer, a manager, and a landlord, and 2, a psychologist and a psychiatrist, were in positions of trust and emotional power.

Traceable strangers were those assailants who were previously unknown to the victim, but who it was felt could be located fairly easily by the victims should they wish to do so, either through mutual acquaintances or through the assailants' home or place of work. Eighteen assailants (7.8%) were classified as traceable strangers. Six assaults occurred at private house parties, six were identifiable via their place of work which was known to the victim, two occurred at holiday residences where both assailant and victim were staying, three happened at the assailants' homes, and one when both the victim and two assailants were in youth custody. The mean age of victim was 16.2 (Mdn 16, range 7–23).

Thirty-six of the assaults (15.5%) were carried out by people who were unknown to the victim at the time, and about whom the victim had little or no information afterwards. Eight occurred in public lavatories, four in cinemas, six on the street, five in parks or on wasteland, two in the assailants' cars, and others on trains, buses, beaches, etc. Mean age of victim was 13.9 years (Mdn 13, range 6–24).

Although within the whole group of men who had been assaulted, it was more common (70.8%) for no sexual activity to have occurred prior to assault, among those men over 21 years old when the assault took place 65.4% (52 cases) of them were assaulted by regular or casual sexual partners.

Relationship of Assailants to Victims and Sex Acts

In terms of sexual activity, the major distinction that appears among types of assailant is between those who had had previous consensual sex of some kind with their victims and those who had not (see Table I).

Considering those assaults in which no previous consensual sexual contact had taken place, anal penetration of the victim occurred in 34.7% of the incidents. In a further 26.6% of these cases, sexual activity took the form of sexual manipulation of the assailants' genitals through forced fellation, masturbation, interfemoral intercourse, or attempted anal intercourse. In the remaining 38.7%, masturbation, attempted masturbation (groping), or fellation of the victim only took place.

In contrast to this pattern, in 75.8% of cases where the assailant was a regular or casual sexual partner of the victim, anal penetration of the victim took place. Anal penetration is significantly more common in assaults where prior consent had been given to some other sexual act, $\chi^2(1) = 29.83, p < 0.001$. Among those who identified their assailants as not being sexual partners, anal intercourse is most common with identifiable strangers. This may be a result of ambiguous reporting by some respondents when

Table I. Continued

	Relationship to victim							
	Regulars	Casuals	Friends	Family	Acquaintance	Authority	Identified stranger	Stranger
AW								
<i>n</i>			3	1			1	3
%			20.0	4.5			6.7	8.6
PW								
<i>n</i>	1	2	2	2	2	9	2	6
%	10.0	3.8	13.3	9.1	4.9	40.9	13.3	17.1
PThF								
<i>n</i>				2	1	1	1	
%				9.1	2.4	4.5	6.7	
PGro								
<i>n</i>			3	3	8	4		11
%			20.0	13.6	19.5	18.2		31.4
HWO								
<i>n</i>			1		1			1
%			6.7		2.4			2.9

^aIncidents of sexual assault by relationship of assailant to victim (columns) and by type of sexual activity that took place (rows). The top number in each cell is the number of assaults of that type that occurred, the bottom number is the percentage of all assaults where sex took place accounted for by that type.

^b*N* = 212 incidents of sexual assault.

PF = Anal penetration of victim by assailant; AIPF = Attempted anal penetration of victim by assailant; AS = Oral penetration of victim by assailant; PS = Fellation of victim by assailant; MW = Mutual masturbation; AW = Masturbation of assailant by victim; PW = Masturbation of victim by assailant; PThF = Interfemoral penetration or body rubbing of victim by assailant; PGro = Gropping, touching-up over clothes of victim by assailant; HWO = Self-masturbation by assailant over victim.

asked who their assailant was, that is, by labeling casual partners as strangers.

Multiple Assailants

Twenty-four of the 212 cases (11.3%) of sexual assault involved more than one assailant. This figure is lower than that of 50% found by Kaufman *et al.* (1980) and 23% by Lacey and Roberts (1991). Multiple assailants occurred in cases involving all types of assailant to victim relationships except family members. One incidence of forced sex by a lover involved the lover's friend also being present, and who also anally penetrated the victim.

Five incidents of nonconsensual sex with casuals involved more than one person. Four involved two male assailants, in two cases the victim meeting and negotiating consensual sex with both assailants, and in the other two the victim meeting and negotiating with only one assailant, the other being at the location used for sex. All four of these assaults involved anal intercourse against the victims' wishes, either by one or both of the assailants. One case involved the victim in consensual group sex with a man and a woman in which the man anally penetrated the victim without his consent.

In eight of the assaults by acquaintances, there were more than one assailant. Three occurred with school colleagues, 2 with more than one boy masturbating or touching the victims' genitals, the other with 3 assailants attempting to force anal intercourse. One case occurred at the victims' workplace, involving 6 work colleagues forcing anal intercourse on the victim after finding out he was gay. The victim was subsequently sacked from his job. Another case involved the victim out drinking with two men he perceived to be heterosexual, who held him down and masturbated him after finding out he was gay, and then physically assaulted him. One case of assault by a games master involved 4 other school boys. Here the police were called and the man was arrested.

In the cases involving traceable strangers, five were carried out by more than one man. Three were at parties, one with 6 men pinning the victim to a bed and fellating him, and the other two incidents involved 2 men attempting to anally penetrate the victim. The final case with traceable strangers occurred while both the victim and two assailants were in youth custody, where they tied him down, beat him, and both anally penetrated him.

Four untraceable stranger assaults involved more than one assailant. One happened under a bridge, where 2 men assaulted the victim, one holding him down while the other anally penetrated him before both fled. One involved 2 older boys in a public lavatory touching the victim. In one in-

cident the victim was snatched into a car by 4 men who assaulted, bit, tied him to a tree, and attempted anal penetration before the victim fainted.

Recurrent Assault

Twenty-nine respondents (3.1% of all respondents, or 11.3% of those ever assaulted) said that they had been assaulted by the same person more than once. Eleven of these cases occurred with family members (38% of assaults by family members were recurrent). Assault by family members reoccurred over various periods of time, ranging from 5 months to 6 years. The assailants in these cases were 3 brothers, 3 uncles, and 1 each of father, stepfather, grandfather, cousin, and friend of the family.

In two of the cases where the victim was assaulted by a friend, it reoccurred over a period of time. One was by a much older friend when the respondent was 14, and the other by a 16-year-old boy in an institutional home for abused children when the respondent was 7. Seven repeated assaults were carried out by acquaintances, three by lovers or regular partners, and six by authority figures.

DISCUSSION

The range of relationships of assailants to victims in this study is more similar to that of Mezey and King's (1989) than to any other study. Apart from both being U.K. samples, a more important factor in their similarity to each other, and their dissimilarity to other groups studied, is that both samples include large proportions of homosexually active men. As mentioned above, the characteristics of the population studied drastically alters both the frequency and types of assault reported. These data support this assertion.

Among this group of homosexually active men, all previous characterizations of sexual assault of men and boys by other males are found, confirming that these types of incident are not isolated events. Older men "molesting" or "touching up" younger boys was not uncommon. Assault by heterosexually identified men is in evidence. This is clearest in the cases where the victim considered his assailant(s) as heterosexual, and where the assault followed his identification as gay, and included antigay verbal abuse. These types of assault often involved more than one assailant. Violent sexual assault is also evident, as in the case of the man who was dragged into a car, beaten, and sexually molested by an older man. However, what this

study highlights is the large number of assaults that occur in which both the victim and assailant are homosexually active.

This paper looks at the first time these men were assaulted sexually. Consequently it overrepresents childhood and adolescent experiences. We do not take account of those assaults in later life if the man was also assaulted in childhood. Despite this, in almost one third of first assaults, consensual sexual activity of some sort had already taken place between the assailant and victim before the assault occurred. This points to the assailant being homosexually active, if not gay-identified. It also suggests that the assaults were sexually motivated, the assailant disregarding the victim's wishes after wanting to perform a particular sexual act (which in three quarters of these cases was anal intercourse).

Characterizing male rape as a crime of violence, power, and control may trivialize the emotional trauma suffered by men who are raped by casual sexual partners. It may also place them in a similar position as many women who have been raped. Typical responses to reporting could be "you were asking for it," "what did you expect," "you wanted it or you wouldn't have gone with him in the first place," "you enjoyed it really." Fantasies of the sexually forceful man, the pleasure of "being taken," and the excitement of power-driven sex are very common in gay culture and pornography. All these collective sexual fantasies normalize sexual abuse and rape of gay men by gay men, providing motivation, justification, and normalization for the assault. It is difficult to see how a climate of intolerance towards sexual aggression can be achieved when sexual aggression is one of the mainstays of collective sexual fantasies.

To conclude, the emergence of HIV among the gay community has further problematized anal intercourse for the majority of gay men (Davies *et al.*, 1993). This provides additional trauma for the male rape victim, especially if the assailant does not use a condom. It may be possible that anal intercourse does not have, and never has had, the same salience in the sexual repertoire of gay men as vaginal intercourse has in that of heterosexuals. It is also possible that women experience rape so traumatically because sexual intercourse is still a major index of their social position (for example, virginity and marriage are defined by it). If this were the case, gay men would experience rape less traumatically than women, and much less so than heterosexual men, as the implications for sexual identity and orientation are not so great. However, anal intercourse is usually loaded with interpersonal meaning for gay men (Davies *et al.*, 1993). Additionally, HIV has brought the question of whether to engage in anal intercourse to the forefront of gay sexual life-styles. As such, having the power to make that decision taken away may make rape for gay men now an even more traumatic experience than it has been in the past.

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