

Domestic violence hits gays more than homophobic assault

But most abuse goes unreported

By Vicki Haddock
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SAN FRANCISCO — Homosexuals are more likely to be victims of domestic violence than anti-homosexual violence, a survey by the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs suggests.

Yet the findings indicate that most homosexuals injured by a lover never report the abuse, much less see their batterers brought to justice. The survey, released Tuesday, seeks to document that little-acknowledged truth that homosexual relationships can be ravaged by abuse just as heterosexual relationships sometimes are.

It comes as the San Francisco District Attorney's Office is launching a campaign to heighten awareness of the crime in homosexual relationships, and as local activists are on the verge of creating a hotel voucher program to shelter male victims.

Last year, San Francisco's Community United Against Violence (CUAV), which participated in the survey, logged reports from 347 people who called its hot line seeking help from same-sex domestic violence. At the same time, CUAV reported 324 incidents of anti-homosexual harassment — from insults to violence — motivated in part by the victim's sexual orientation.

The survey, which bills itself as the first national set of statistics on homosexual domestic violence, is really an unscientific tabulation by community activists in six American cities: Chicago, Columbus, Minneapolis, New York City, San Diego and San Francisco. Combined, they documented 1,566 incidents.

Activists in four of the six cities logged more cases of domestic violence than anti-homosexual hate violence.

Yet the homosexual community has been slower to rally around the cause of domestic violence, in part fearing it would feed into prejudices about the nature of gay relationships.

"The time has come for us to confront domestic violence as bravely as we have hate violence," said Constance Potter of the Gay and Lesbian Community Action Council in Minneapolis.

Indeed, CUAV insists that the number of domestic-violence re-

ports logged last year in San Francisco represents only a tiny fraction of the actual incidents of abusive relationships among homosexual, bisexual and transgender victims.

The District Attorney's Office reported handling at most a dozen cases.

"If a case makes it to the [police department's] domestic violence unit, it's handled very well," said Greg Merrill, CUAV's director of client services. "And the prosecuting DAs are excellent. The problem is people don't report that they're victims . . . and if they do, it's a crapshoot whether they get a responding police officer who handles the case appropriately."

Researchers only recently have begun to explore same-sex domestic violence. A study presented at the Fourth International Family Violence Research Conference found that abusive homosexual men held many of the same psychological traits as abusive straight men: poor self-esteem and an inability to sustain intimate relationships.

Other studies of abusive lesbian relationships report that batterers tend to be overly dependent, using violence to squelch their partners' independence, and that alcohol and drugs often figure into the abuse.

The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs estimates from its review of the scanty research that domestic violence occurs in a quarter to a third of same-sex relationships.

One 50-year-old artist, identified in a CUAV testimonial as Ben Abraham, said that after enduring 18 years of abuse at the hands of his lover — who he said beat him and regularly pointed loaded guns to threaten him — he walked out for good, moved and got counseling.

"I never called the police," he said. "I did not believe anyone would believe me or help me."

Homosexuals who do report abuse sometimes confront police at a loss for how to handle the case.

"For years in gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender situations, police didn't ask the right questions," said Susan Breall, managing attorney for the DA's Domestic Violence Unit. "A lot of situations were chalked up to mutual combat and police reports were just filed away."

CULTURE, et cetera