



Photo illustration by Clint Steib

Gay domestic violence is underreported, experts say

by Wendy Johnson

The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs gathered numbers from six anti-violence organizations throughout the U.S. and found that four cities logged more reports of same-sex domestic violence than of anti-Gay bias crimes.

"The unacknowledged truth is that we are more likely to be injured by a lover than a stranger — the same as heterosexuals in this country," said Bea Hanson of the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project, in reaction to the report.

Based on the Coalition's statistics and on other regional studies that have focused on Gay male and Lesbian couples, Hanson said, many anti-violence workers now believe that domestic violence is as common among Gay couples as it is among heterosexuals. Therefore, she said, domestic violence can occur in 25 to 33 percent of all Gay relationships — the same rate at which the American Medical Association says domestic violence occurs in heterosexual relationships.

The Coalition's statistics mark the first time that anti-violence organizations have collectively tracked same-sex domestic violence. The report found 1,566 cases of same-sex domestic violence and 1,490 cases of "bias" incidents in the six cities in 1995. The Coalition defines "bias crimes" as including incidents of verbal harassment and physical violence that were reported to the six anti-violence organizations last year, said Hanson.

The FBI last year recorded 1,002 anti-Gay "hate crimes" throughout the nation, but experts believe both the Coalition's number and the FBI's number represent an undercount. The types of anti-Gay "hate crimes" included in the FBI's annual report are intimidation (when an assailant acts in such a menacing way that the victim feels he or she is in danger), aggravated assault (which often results in serious bodily injury), simple assault (such as punching or kicking), murder, forcible rape, arson, and destruction of property. Verbal harassment, by itself, does not constitute a "hate crime," according to the FBI's definition. The FBI's 1995 statistics were obtained from 45 states and the District of Columbia.

And while the Coalition's figures come from only six cities, many believe those those numbers, too, are underreported.

"The actual magnitude of the problem is much greater since most domestic violence in our communities goes unreported," said Jerri Lynn Fields, of Horizon's Anti-Violence Project in Chicago.

Gay activists have long contended that Gay people often do not even report incidents of homophobic harassment or physical assaults because they fear being re-victimized by a homophobic police officer.

So while there is currently no way to determine

whether same-sex domestic violence is more common in the Gay community than Gay bashing, one thing is certain: Both crimes are commonplace.

In San Francisco, the CUAV recorded 347 reports of same-sex domestic violence, and 324 reports of anti-Gay bias incidents. The San Diego Lesbian and Gay Men's Community Center logged 330 reports of Gay-related domestic violence, and just 59 reports of anti-Gay bias incidents. In Chicago, Horizons Anti-Violence Project recorded 129 incidents of same-sex domestic violence, and 83 reports of anti-Gay bias incidents. The Minneapolis Gay and Lesbian Community Action Council logged 243 reports of same-sex domestic violence and 218 reported anti-Gay bias incidents.

Conversely, organizations in Columbus, Ohio, and New York City logged a larger number of anti-Gay crime reports. The Columbus group logged just 63 reports of same-sex domestic violence and 181 anti-Gay bias incidents. The New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project recorded 454 reports of same-sex abuse, and 625 reports of anti-Gay bias crimes.

'Hard to believe'

If domestic violence is prevalent within the Gay community, why, as some experts wonder, isn't it being sufficiently addressed?

"People are still very reluctant to believe that it happens in our community or that it can happen to them," said Kerry Lobel, executive director designate of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and author of the 1986 book *Naming the Violence: Speaking Out Against Lesbian Battering*. "To admit that violence is being perpetrated means our community is not the safe haven we think it to be."

Misconceptions about what constitutes same-sex abuse also contribute to the silence, said Elise Young, a clinical social worker who worked with battered Lesbians when she headed up Whitman-Walker Clinic's mental health and addiction services last year. One of the most widely perpetuated myths is the belief by many Gay men and Lesbians that such violence does not occur in same-sex relationships.

"It's hard for people to believe," said Nancy Turner, a formerly battered Lesbian who runs the transitional housing program for the Arlington Community Temporary Shelter Safehouse.

"People are affected by the myth that two women couldn't really hurt one another," she said.

A similar belief exists that Gay men cannot be abused because they are strong enough to fight back, said Joe Izzo, a social worker at the Whitman-Walker Clinic.

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