

*Homophobia, Hate
and Violence
against Lesbians
and Gays in NSW:
An Overview of Some
Studies*

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Violence against lesbians and gays is a world-wide phenomenon. Its source is based in heterosexism, an ideological system that denies, denigrates or stigmatises any non-heterosexual form of behaviour, identity, relationship or community. Heterosexism exists at the level of the individual's attitudes and beliefs and at the level of social structures and practices.

There have been three successive reports on violence against gays and lesbians in NSW over the period 1990-94. The Streetwatch report, produced in 1990, by the Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby; the Off Our Backs report in 1992, specifically looking at violence against lesbians; and the Counter and Counter Report produced in 1994, both of the latter produced by the Lesbian and Gay Anti Violence Project (AVP).

Overall, the studies indicate that between eight and 30 per cent of lesbians and gays report being survivors of physical violence at some time in their life, where that violence is seen to be based on their sexuality. The variation reflects the different populations, locales and methods of sampling of the studies.

The majority of those reporting violence are gay men aged 25-39 years of age. In part, the preponderance of gay men in the sample may be an artefact of the observed

phenomenon that violence against lesbians is often on the basis that they are women, and so may not be turning up as frequently in the data collected on specifically lesbian and gay assaults.

It is interesting to note that the AVP has begun to have a higher rate of recording of violence against lesbians since having an identified position for a lesbian violence prevention officer and conducting a specific campaign targeting violence against lesbians (*Lesbians Do Have Rights*. 1994 Campaign funded by the Commonwealth of Australia Office for the Status of Women). Where bisexuals have been included in the studies, they attribute the motive for attacks on them to their perceived gayness. Similarly, there are a handful of incidents reported in the studies where heterosexual men and women attribute attacks on them to a perception that they are lesbian or gay.

The majority of those attacked were alone when attacked. In about half the attacks, witnesses were present but in only half of those did the witnesses give any assistance. Over 80 per cent of the assailants were unknown to the survivor. Assailants of lesbians were more likely to be known to them. The majority of attacks against gay men occurred on the street near identified gay venues and were single instances of violence. Less than 20 per cent occurred at beats, public areas where men go to have sex. Lesbians were more likely to be assaulted in the neighbourhood or home, and the attack was likely to be one of a number over a period of time. Street violence was more likely to happen late at night or in the early hours of the morning on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights. Most assaults did not involve weapons, and few involved robbery. Bruising and contusions were the most common kinds of injury. Survivors reported the majority of assaults were clearly hate-related, and this was corroborated by the verbal taunts that often accompany the attacks.

The majority of assailants were male (80–90 per cent). The majority were reported to be between 15 and 25 years (50–80 per cent); 20–39 per cent were aged between 15 and 18. Lesbians were more likely to be attacked by older males. The majority of incidents involved between three and five assailants. The larger the number of assailants, the younger they were likely to be. There was little evidence that assailants were from organised gangs. Most often they were described by survivors to be a group of friends. The majority of assailants were identified by survivors as heterosexual. The assailant being drunk or drugged was not considered by survivors to be a major factor in the attack.

Most reports in Australia of violence to lesbian and gay anti violence projects or the police are of circumstantial street based violence where the assailants are unknown and most usually are not able to be arrested and charged. So there is little Australian material available on the motivation of assailants as reported by the assailants. What Australian information we do have comes from testimony from trials, from interviews assailants have given to the press from time to time, from reportage by participants in education sessions, and from other largely anecdotal sources. There is some material from the United States from the same kinds of sources, and also from small studies like that conducted by Weissman (1978).

The first thing that must be said about motivation is that at one level it appears to be part of the general motivation behind violent attacks on a range of targets by adolescent and young adult males. The profile of an assailant of lesbians and gays is very similar to the profile of assailants of women, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

Violence against lesbians and gays is in part a result of the social construction of masculinity and about the behaviours sanctioned or encouraged in that construction. That this is so is borne out by studies into youth violence or by reports from young assailants. Violence and aggressive behaviour is part and parcel of the way many young men describe masculinity and what it means to be a man. Often, this predisposition to violent behaviour is found to be, or reported by the assailants to be synergistically linked with boredom, restlessness, mild intoxication and peer or group pressure.

Some commentators and researchers have sought to link violence to socioeconomic co-factors such as substance abuse, poverty, unemployment and homelessness. Others dispute this connection. For example, Bessant and Watts (1993) say:

a reading of Australian history demonstrates very clearly that the phenomenon of teenage gangs and violence is not new, nor that it is driven by urban poverty or high levels of unemployment. From at least the 1870's in Australia we have seen recurrent expressions of adolescent gangs and high level of violence manifested.

While it is probably too early to make a definitive claim on this from the data so far collected on lesbian and gay violence in the studies researched for this paper, there does not appear to be any correlation between socioeconomic factors and the likelihood of violence.

Some studies and anecdotal information link violence to the assailants own unacknowledged homosexuality (Goddard 1991a & 1991b). However, there is no evidence that this a significant part of the motivation of the majority of assailants. So, if, as appears likely, violence and aggression perpetrated by young men is part of how masculinity is constructed, why is this violence directed against lesbians and gays?

Physical violence against lesbians and gays is often accompanied by verbal harassment. The epithets used are invariably abusive and involve some reference to the person's sexuality. It is clear to the survivors that they are the subject of an attack based in homophobia. Homophobia has been defined as the unreasonable fear and loathing of homosexuality and homosexual people, be they lesbian or gay. Homophobia is manifested by individuals and by social groupings.

The ideological underpinning for homophobia is heterosexism. Heterosexism has been described by Herek et al. (1992) as an ideological system that denies, denigrates or stigmatises any non-heterosexual form of behaviour, identity, relationship or community.

Herek categorises two kinds of heterosexism. Psychological heterosexism is a manifestation of an individual's attitudes and actions. Cultural heterosexism is that manifested in social customs and institutions such as religion and the legal system.

It is the interplay of both these forms of heterosexism which provide the context and often the excuse for violence against lesbians and gays.

References

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EDITORS' NOTE:

This paper has been abridged owing to space restrictions.

