New South Wales Police Service Crime Prevention Program on Anti-Gay/Lesbian Violence

Sue Thompson
Gay & Lesbian Client Group Consultant
New South Wales Police Service

For sixteen months the New South Wales Police Service has been involved in developing a multi-focussed program aimed at lessening and preventing the increasing number of prejudice motivated crimes committed against gay and lesbian members of the community. The program is based on looking at the problem of anti-gay/lesbian violence in its widest possible context and approaching it from as many angles as possible. Prevention of anti-gay/lesbian crimes (as with any crime prevention program) requires strategies for the commitment and involvement of:

- politicians-as voices of authority in the community who can condemn the violence against people purely because of their sexuality;
- senior police-as the voices of law and order who, in condemning the violence, can influence community perceptions and willingness to give information to police;
- operational police-as those directly involved where the crimes happen who can develop policing strategies and work closely at fostering cooperation in communities;
- the media-who can heighten awareness and educate the community in the abhorrence of these targeted crimes of violence;
the community-who must take responsibility and say no to violence and crime (rather than showing an ambiguous attitude and justifying violence in some circumstances) and take ownership of its problems rather than being disassociated from them;
- gay/lesbian community leaders-who can shape attitudes and foster greater liaison with police and the reporting of crimes to police;
- gay/lesbian business owners-whose restaurants, hotels and shops are constants in areas of passing populations and can play a unique role in policing and community initiatives;
- residents-who are important gatherers and observers of useful information for police intelligence;
- the education system-where young people’s values are shaped, whether directly or indirectly, and who must be given accurate information about sexuality so that their bizarre beliefs about homosexuality do not foster increasing amounts of targeted violence; and
- local government-who may have access to necessary local facilities/resources to aid the community or police in their programs.

**Background**

Prejudice is an entrenched reality in society with prejudice on the grounds of someone’s homosexuality ranging from mild misunderstanding to wild homophobia that has often resulted in the bashing and murder of innocent people. For centuries fanciful myths and beliefs have abounded regarding homosexuality and homosexual lifestyles, and many who have absorbed these myths have then justified their vicious attacks, thinking their victims to be somehow different and sub-human, and thinking of themselves as ‘moral ambassadors’.

Up until 1984 in New South Wales, and even more recently in some other Australian states, homosexuality was a criminal offence with the result that police viewed homosexual men, and by association women, as being criminals and deviants. This meant that these people were perceived as ‘criminals’ and were easy prey for bashings and assaults with little likelihood that attacks would be reported to police-who were viewed as the enemy, likely to lock up the victim and not the assailant.

**The Current Situation in Police-Gay/Lesbian Liaison**

For six years the New South Wales Police Service has been actively involved in building links and bridging gaps with gays and lesbians via a formal Police-Gay/Lesbian Liaison Program which has the support of the Commissioner and senior police, and lists many achievements.
Only as gays and lesbians have begun to trust the new era of police cooperation and commitment to professionalism has the extent of anti-gay/lesbian violence come slowly to light. This has been further evidenced via a community study of the violence and has now resulted in a concerted crime prevention program within the New South Wales Police Service which encompasses a wide range of strategies in the Service.

**The Program**

The Anti-Gay/Lesbian Violence Crime Prevention Package has been developed in consultation with Police and Gay/Lesbian Groups and is based on some basic premises from which strategies are developed:

*The need to remind the whole community of the unacceptability of this violence*

- Issue of media releases under the names of senior police officers condemning the violence and making a public police commitment to tackling it as a serious problem.

*The need to set up systems which show police commitment and identify police officers as contacts (overcoming years of wariness by putting police forward and improving access):*

- Establish Police Gay/Lesbian Liaison Officers as Key Patrols in consultation with community representatives and advertise their names and phone numbers in gay/lesbian media.
- The need to interrupt the sense of powerlessness and resignation in the targeted community and raise the level of expectation for things to be better:
- Advertising/Marketing Campaign in gay/lesbian newspapers and magazines focussing on stopping the violence and reporting bashings or attempted bashings to police.
- Extensive media campaign in print, radio and television with regular stories of police operations, arrests and the nature of the problem.
- Police Poster Campaign within gay/lesbian community:
  - * shops in relevant areas
  - * hand bills in gay newspapers
  - * colour advertisements in magazines.
• General Community Awareness Campaign via state wide poster distribution with covering letter by the Police Commissioner.
• Uniformed police involvement in gay/lesbian community forums on violence and homophobia.

The need to encourage reporting to police to enable appropriate allocation of resources in problem areas:

• Marketing, media and advertising campaign as above.

The need for police to work with the community to solve the problems; joint ownership of a mutual problem (break down the 'I can't do anything' into 'what can I do'); and development of joint strategies:

• Surry Hills Police and Community Street Violence Committee involving police gay/lesbian businesses and venues, residents, community leaders, bordering police patrols.
• Gay community street patrols working closely with police.

The need to develop and trial policing methods tailored to the problem:

• Beat police and foot patrols-geographic ownership of particular areas within patrols, recognising problems and initiating strategies to overcome them at local level.
• Mobile Police Van launched by Police Commissioner to provide extra services for worst trouble spots at peak problem times.
• Operation Taskforce Assault with twenty-two undercover police for eight weeks as an intensive operation to arrest bashers and compile intelligence.
• Homicide Police coordination of hate-related gay murders with proper analysis of patterns and trends.

The need to shock people out of silence by abruptly heightening the greater community awareness of the vicious extent of the problem and to enlist their support in coming forward:

• Homicide media strategy reminding people that the issues of life and death overpower those of prejudice.
The need to ensure prevention strategies are also being implemented in educational institutions with young people:

- Police Minister’s announcement of an Inter-Departmental Advisory Committee to advise on Gay Community recommendations to combat gay/lesbian violence-Streetwatch Implementation Advisory Committee.
- Ongoing discussions with Department of Education management and assistance to schools, training courses and so on.
- Liaison with youth workers.