

# **Center for Public Safety Initiatives**

**Rochester Institute of Technology**

**John M. Klofas, Ph.D, Director**

**Chris Delaney, Deputy Director**

[John.klofas@rit.edu](mailto:John.klofas@rit.edu)

**(585) 475-2423**

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## **Domestic Violence in Gay Communities**

**Laura Gottermeier**

Crime reporting remains relatively independent of demographic characteristics of victims, except when the violence involves relatives, friends or lovers (Kuehnle & Sullivan, 2003). While the criminal justice system has long acknowledged theoretical and political concerns relative to domestic violence among intimate-relationship couples, it was only in the mid 1980's when the issue came to the forefront for same-sex partners (Lobel, 1986). The professed cyclical nature of abuse (Coleman, 1994), its eventual escalation over time (Island & Letellier, 1991; Renzetti, 1992), and the behavioral characteristics of batterers (Coleman, 1994) has been shown to be the same in both heterosexual relationships and same-sex battering situations. However, in heterosexual relationships, the emphasis has focused on social learning theory, cultural violence

theories, and gender-power imbalances whereas the literature on lesbian and gay violence has focused on the number of occurrences (Giorgio, 2002). Giorgio (2002) also adds, in heterosexual relationships the blame tends to be on males due to physical qualities and gender dynamics.

Although accurate data is difficult to obtain, trends suggest that as many as half of lesbian relationships experience some form of abuse (Brand & Kidd, 1986; Nadoff, 1987; Renzetti, 1992, 1996; Taylor & Chandler, 1995). Greenwood et al. (2002) reported on a sample of 2,881 male cohabitants during the past five years and found a higher rate of violence than in cases of heterosexual relationships. Letellier (1994) found that gay men are more likely to be killed by their partners than a stranger. Few studies have actually measured psychological, emotional and verbal abuse in same-sex couples so measurement variables may influence reported trends and outcomes (Pattavina, Hirschel, Buzawa, Faggiani, & Bentley, 2007).

Typically, heterosexual victims do not report abuse to the police because: (a) they do not believe the police will help; (b) they fear retaliation; (c) they do not want to get abusers in trouble; and (d) they think it is a private matter (Greenfield & Rand, 1998). Same-sex battering victims face additional obstacles to reporting with the threat of “outing” or making the lesbian and gay victims’ sexual orientation known to the public (Kuehnle & Sullivan, 2003). In addition, the gay community distrusts the police (Kirby, 1994; Letellier, 1994, Reed, 1989). Reed (1989) reported that victims of same-sex battering were both physically and verbally re-victimized by the police. Simultaneously, victims of same-sex battering may confront ostracism by the gay community which has

failed to acknowledge domestic violence and abuse (Coleman, 1996; Island & Letellier, 1991; Jackson, 1998).

Same-sex batterers not only use physical, economic, and psychological threats and injury as strategies to control victims but may also use unique tactics such as threats of exposure to family, friends, and/or employers, and threats to infect them with HIV (Giorgio, 2002; Knauer, 2001; Letellier, 1996). According to follow-up studies of lesbian and gay victims, police have minimized the potential seriousness of the incident (Comstock, 1991; Vickers, 1996); failed to arrest the perpetrator or even intervene (Comstock, 1991); and/or ignored standard domestic violence procedures concerning the identification and arrest of the “primary aggressor” regardless of sexual-orientation of the victim (Peterman & Dixon, 2003).

- Issues Specific to Lesbian Battering:

Lesbian battering victims were likely to need medical attention but were unlikely to seek it (Taylor & Chandler, 1995). Because victims of same-sex battering are offered fewer legal protections, services or shelters than their heterosexual counterparts (Lundy, 2003), only the most serious and violent crimes involving assault with or without weapons are most likely to reported to police by gay individuals (Kuehnle & Sullivan, 2003). To counteract misunderstandings and misinterpretation, Gregorio (2002) suggests “Listening for lesbians’ definitional dialogues can assist us in overriding our assumptions about sex roles in violent intimate relationships” (p.1251). Specifically, Gregorio (2002) the “listening” must explore who instigates the abuse as lesbians victims often downplay the violence and instead self-blame.

- Issues Specific to Gay Battering:

After reviewing in depth 119 cases, Kuehnle & Sullivan (2003) found that more than 60% of bias incidents were reported to the police as compared with 48% of domestic incidents among gay individuals. Often police misclassify domestic abuse battering among same-sex couples as “mutual fights,” placing both in the same jail cell showing a lack of understanding of the nature of such violence (Knauer, 2001). Kuehnle & Sullivan (2003) conclude that “Researchers should also examine the link between police response and the reporting practices of same-sex victims by assessing their perceptions of how they were treated by law enforcement” (p. 95). Bernstein and Kostelac (2002) found that officers held more negative attitudes toward gay men than toward lesbians with over 25% of police self-reporting “gay bashing.”

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