

GAY AND LESBIAN VICTIMIZATION

Reporting Factors in Domestic Violence and Bias Incidents

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This article investigated various aspects of victimization, including reporting practices. Bias incidents and domestic violence historically have been underreported to the police. Few studies have examined the factors related to reporting practices of gay and lesbian victims of either bias crimes or same-sex battering. This exploratory study investigated the reporting practices of gay and lesbian victims of these types of incidents. It also examined whether there was variation by sexual orientation. The findings suggest there may be a relationship between bias and domestic incidents in terms of offenses, medical care, and reporting to the police. Further examination by sexual orientation suggests differences that warrant additional investigation.

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A frequently examined aspect of victimization is the reporting of crimes to the police. Although crime reporting is relatively independent of the demographic characteristics of victims (Block & Block, 1980; Green, 1981; Skogan, 1984), crimes committed by rela-

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tives, friends, and lovers are less likely to be reported to the police. Whether an offense is completed or only attempted and whether there is injury or financial loss are also strong determinants of victim reporting (Block & Block, 1980; Green, 1981; Skogan, 1976, 1984). Specifically, violent crimes involving injury or weapons are most likely to be reported to the police.

Although the research extensively investigates various aspects of victimization, few studies have examined the factors related to the reporting practices of gay and lesbian victims of either bias crimes or same-sex battering. This research brings together available information on same-sex victimization to gain an understanding about the reporting practices of victims and the factors related to reporting practices.

BIAS CRIMES

Research on antigay victimization has found that gay men experience more extreme levels of physical violence than do lesbians. Gay men are also more likely to be victimized in public, including in gay-identified areas, whereas lesbians are more often victimized in or near their homes (Aurand, Addessa, & Bush, 1985; Comstock, 1989; Gross, Aurand, & Addessa, 1988; LeBlanc, 1991). In addition, gay men as well as African American and Latina lesbians experience higher rates of antigay violence than do Whites.

Bias crimes historically have been underreported in the United States and elsewhere (Bowling, 1994; Christopher et al., 1991; Garofalo, 1997; Martin, 1995). Bowling (1994) found that only 5% of the bias crime victims in his London victimization survey reported the incidents to the police. Christopher et al. (1991) observed that given the history, insensitivity, and discrimination exhibited by law enforcement, victims of racially motivated bias crimes may be hesitant to report these incidents to the police. This may also be true for gay and lesbian victims. Several studies have found that lesbians and gay men are reluctant to report bias crimes to the police (Berrill & Herek, 1992; Comstock, 1989; Finn & McNeil, 1987; Gross et al., 1988). Many gay men and lesbians believe that the police will treat them with indifference and insensitivity if they report bias crimes. Hence, many do not

report bias crimes to the police for fear of unsympathetic or even hostile responses (Berrill & Herek, 1992).

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Research on same-sex battering has tended to focus on one segment of the population, such as on lesbians, rather than on the entire gay community. The few studies that have been conducted indicate that domestic violence occurs within same-sex relationships with the same degree of frequency as in heterosexual relationships (Coleman, 1996; Elliot, 1996; Letellier, 1994; Renzetti, 1992). For example, it was found that between 22% and 46% of lesbians had been in abusive same-sex relationships (Elliot, 1996; Renzetti & Wiley, 1996).

Furthermore, it appears that the types of abuse experienced by lesbians and gay men are similar to the abuse suffered by heterosexuals. Like heterosexuals, lesbians and gay men experience physical abuse and neglect, psychological abuse, sexual abuse, economic control, and property damage. Letellier (1994) found that gay men are more likely to be killed by their partners than by strangers. Nevertheless, victims of same-sex battering receive fewer protections and services. For example, a number of states define domestic violence in a way that excludes same-sex relationships (Lundy, 1993). Likewise, many domestic violence shelters do not provide services to victims of same-sex battering.

Domestic violence, as with bias incidents, has a history of underreporting. Law enforcement and the legal system have viewed and treated domestic violence as a private matter (Langan & Innes, 1986). Consequently, victims of domestic violence have been treated with indifference and insensitivity by the criminal justice system (Buzawa & Buzawa, 1996; Gelles & Strauss, 1988). Similarly, these victims often experience victim blaming—that is, the victim “asked for it”—by police and other criminal justice practitioners.

In general, heterosexual victims do not report the abuse to the police for various reasons: (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). Victims of same-sex battering face additional obstacles to reporting. For example, there is the added threat of “outing” or making the gay

and lesbian victims' sexual orientation public. This may then deter "closeted" gay and lesbian victims from reporting incidents of domestic violence to the police. In addition, often the gay community distrusts the police (Kirby, 1994; Letellier, 1994, Reed, 1989). Reed (1989) reported that gay victims of same-sex battering were both physically and verbally revictimized by the police.

Moreover, the gay community itself has failed to acknowledge abuse in same-sex relationships (Coleman, 1996; Island & Letellier, 1991; Jackson, 1998). As a result, victims of same-sex battering may be hesitant to report domestic violence incidents to the police because they fear ostracism by the gay community.

This exploratory research sought to increase our understanding of the reporting practices of same-sex victims of domestic violence and bias crimes. Bias incidents and domestic violence historically have been underreported. This research explored whether one type of incident was more likely to be reported to the police. Bias and same-sex battering incidents were compared, looking specifically at the differences in medical care and seriousness of offenses. In addition, this research examined whether there was variation in reporting practices, medical care, and in seriousness of offenses between gay men and lesbians.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Because underreporting often occurs with arrest records, victim reports were used for this exploratory analysis. Self-reports of victimization present methodological problems; however, they can provide insight into certain types of crime. This nonprobability convenience sample consisted of self-reported incidents to a victim assistance program in a large northeast city during 1999.

The victim assistance program was established in 1986 and provides a range of services to predominantly gay and lesbian individuals who experienced victimization or perceived to have experienced victimization. Referrals to the program come from several sources, including victims, friends or relatives, witnesses, health care provid-

ers, or officials who are aware of the incidents. Besides hotline accessibility, the agency provides counseling services and, if requested, court advocacy, law enforcement advocacy, and referral to appropriate legal, health, and social service agencies. The agency does not report incidents to the police; however, intake workers inform victims of their legal rights and encourage them to file incident reports.

SAMPLE

The sample consisted of self-reported incidents during 1999. There were a total of 119 self-reported incidents of same-sex battering and a total of 143 self-reported bias incidents. Of the domestic incidents, 45 (37.8%) were reported by lesbian victims and 74 (62.2%) were reported by gay victims. Of the bias incidents, 25 (17.5%) were reported by lesbians and 118 (82.5%) involved gay victims.

PROCEDURE

When victims report incidents, the agency obtains information about the victims, the offenders, the incidents, reporting to the police, and referral services. Intake workers record these data on standardized forms during phone or face-to-face interviews with the victims. In addition, intake workers write a narrative of the incidents. The first author reviewed the report narratives to ensure accuracy in scoring the responses for this exploratory analysis.

For self-reported incidents to be included in the analysis, they had to have either a bias motive or a domestic violence motive and victims had to be 18 years of age or older at the time of the incidents. In addition, the victims' sexual orientation was either gay or lesbian or victims were perceived to be gay or lesbian.

ANALYSIS

The variables were categorical and either nominal or ordinal. A chi-square analysis was conducted to determine whether there were any statistically significant relationships. When there was statistical significance, two symmetric measures of association were used, either phi or Cramer's V (J. Fox, Levin, & Shively, 1999; W. Fox, 1998).

Several research questions were addressed in this analysis. First, is there a relationship between bias incidents and domestic violence incidents and three factors, namely, offense, medical attention, and reporting practices? When considering sexual orientation, is there variation in offense, medical attention, and police reporting for bias incidents and for domestic violence incidents? For example, is a gay victim more likely to report a bias incident than to report an incident of domestic violence?

VARIABLES

Bias incidents. Sexual orientation is a protected category in the state's bias crime laws, and any crimes motivated in part by sexual orientation prejudice constitute bias crimes. Consequently, bias incidents in this analysis included incidents motivated by victims' reports of sexual orientation. Motives were established by indicators such as graffiti, verbal slurs, and property damage targeting gay and lesbian symbols.

Domestic violence incidents. The state's legal definition of domestic violence is gender neutral, recognizing abuse in same-sex relationships. Victims of same-sex battering possess the same legal rights as do heterosexual victims of domestic violence. Incidents of domestic violence included incidents between gay, lesbian, and bisexual female and male victims and their lovers, partners, ex-lovers, ex-spouses, roommates, and family members.

Sexual orientation. Sexual orientation was separated into two categories, gay and lesbian. Gay included gay men, bisexual men, and heterosexual men perceived to be gay. Lesbian included lesbians, bisexual women, and women perceived to be lesbians.

Offenses. The types of offenses were based on victims' reports about behaviors as well as about the presence of weapons. Those incidents involving assaults with weapons, sexual assaults, and robberies were combined into the category of assault with a weapon. Those incidents that involved assaults without weapons and attempted assaults

without weapons were combined into the category of assault without weapons. Incidents involving phone harassment, mail harassment, and intimidation were included in the harassment category. Incidents involving vandalism and property damage were included in the vandalism category.

Medical care. When victims had either no injuries or minor injuries and received no medical care, they were included in the category of not received. When victims had either minor injuries and outpatient care or serious injuries and outpatient care, they were categorized as outpatient care. Victims with serious injuries that required inpatient care were included in the hospitalization category.

Police reporting. Reporting to the police was composed of several types of police responses, namely, incidents in which police responded and offenders were or were not arrested, incidents in which police responded and refused to take complaints, and incidents in which victims were arrested. Incidents categorized as not reported included those that were not reported to the police at the time of the intake and those in which victims said they would be reported.

RESULTS

COMPARISONS BETWEEN TYPE OF INCIDENT

The type of reported offenses in domestic incidents tended to be more serious and personal, namely, assault with and without weapons. A greater percentage of domestic violence incidents (67.3%) were reported as assaults with or without weapons compared with the bias incidents (40%). Half of the bias incidents involved intimidation and harassment in comparison with less than one third of domestic incidents. Vandalism occurred more frequently in bias incidents (7.6%) than in domestic violence incidents (less than 1%). The differences between type of incident and type of offense were statistically significant, $\chi^2 (N = 249) = 20.95, p < .001$, with the relationship between incident and offense approaching the moderate range, $V = .29$

Medical care differed between the two types of victimization. Some type of medical care was received more frequently in domestic violence incidents. Domestic incidents (30.7%) required either outpatient or hospitalization compared with bias incidents (13.4%). When comparing hospitalization in both types of victimization, more of the bias incidents (3.7%) than domestic incidents (2%) required hospitalization. These findings were statistically significant, $\chi^2 (N = 135) = 10.64, p < .01$, with a weak relationship, $V = .21$.

Reporting, particularly of bias incidents, was higher for this sample than in previous research findings. In terms of reporting practices, more of the bias incidents (63.6%) were reported to the police in comparison with domestic violence incidents (48.6%). Although the findings were statistically significant, $\chi^2 (N = 145) = 5.51, p < .05$, the relationship between type of incident and likelihood to report was weak, $\phi = .15$.

DIFFERENCES WITHIN SEXUAL ORIENTATION

The next analysis focused on differences between domestic violence and bias incidents and the offense, medical care, and reporting practices within sexual orientation. When comparing lesbian victimization and offense, there was a statistically significant moderate relationship between type of incident and offense, $\chi^2 (N = 66) = 12.98, p < .001, V = .44$. In domestic violence incidents, the offenses were often assaults with or without weapons (74.4%), whereas with bias incidents, lesbians reported harassment and intimidation more frequently (70.4%). The relationship was also statistically significant for gay victims, but it was not as strong, $\chi^2 (N = 182) = 9.73, p < .05, V = .23$. In gay victimizations, assaults with weapons and without weapons occurred more frequently in domestic incidents (63.1%), whereas harassment was more frequent in bias incidents (48.7%). In addition, vandalism occurred with gays, whereas it did not occur with lesbians.

There was a moderate, statistically significant relationship between type of incident and medical care for lesbian victims, $\chi^2 (N = 65) = 7.37, p < .01, \phi = .34$. More than 90% of the lesbian victims of bias incidents did not receive medical care compared with a significantly lower percentage of lesbian victims of domestic incidents (63.2%). In contrast to lesbians, gay victims required hospitalization in 3.2% of

domestic incidents and in 4.7% of bias incidents. Gay victims did not receive medical attention in approximately 80% of bias incidents and in nearly 70% of domestic violence incidents. They did receive outpatient care in 15% of bias incidents and 27% of domestic violence incidents. These differences between bias incidents and domestic violence incidents were not statistically significant for gay victims.

Gay and lesbian victims exhibited similar patterns in their reporting to the police. Lesbians were equally likely to report bias crimes and slightly more likely to report (60%) than to not report (40%) domestic incidents, although the relationship between reporting practices and types of incident for lesbian victims was not statistically significant, $\chi^2 (N = 70) = .70, p < .05$. More than two thirds of gay victims involved in bias incidents reported them to the police, whereas less than half of gay victims of domestic incidents reported them to the police. This relationship for gay victims, although weak, was statistically significant, $\chi^2 (N = 153) = 11.09, p < .001, \phi = .25$.

DISCUSSION

These results, although preliminary, provide a basis for further study of the reporting practices by gay and lesbian victims of domestic violence and bias incidents. There are methodological difficulties with self-reported victimization, such as validity and reliability of reports; however, these findings suggest the need for further investigation. Differences were found between domestic violence and bias incidents that were significant in several areas. The relationships were not strong, suggesting that other factors may be involved in addition to those presently addressed.

Recognizing the limitations of this analysis, the results provide support for past research. Domestic violence incidents tended to involve more serious offenses, such as assault with and without weapons (Letellier, 1994). Possibly as a result, domestic violence victims were more likely to suffer injuries requiring medical care than were victims of bias crimes. Differences from prior research were also found. Specifically, this study found that more than 60% of bias incidents were reported to the police compared with 48% of domestic incidents.

This analysis also examined differences in crime severity, that is, the type of offense, the need for medical care, and the reporting practices of gay and lesbian victims of domestic violence and bias incidents. The types of offense varied for lesbian victims. In domestic violence incidents, lesbian victims reported assaults, whereas in bias incidents, they were more likely to report harassment. A greater percentage of lesbian victims of domestic violence required outpatient medical care compared with lesbian victims of bias crimes, perhaps because more domestic incidents were reported as assaults. Some of these domestic incidents involved former husbands of lesbian victims, thus increasing the likelihood of physical injuries (Kuehnle & Sullivan, 1999).

Similar patterns emerged with gay victims in that more domestic incidents were reported as assaults, whereas bias incidents were more likely to be reported as intimidation. However, gay victims of bias incidents did report assaults more frequently than did lesbian victims. This pattern is consistent with previous research indicating that gay men experience more extreme levels of physical violence in bias incidents than do lesbians (Aurand et al., 1985; Comstock, 1989; Gross et al., 1988).

Although few men required medical attention, there was a greater range of medical treatment received by men. A small percentage of men required hospitalization in both bias and domestic incidents compared with women. In bias incidents, the need for hospitalization is similar to prior research, which has stated that gays suffer more vicious levels of physical violence than do lesbians.

Prior research on heterosexual victims has shown that decisions to report crimes are influenced by a myriad of factors, including crime severity, fear of retaliation, and police response (Block & Block, 1980; Green, 1981; Skogan, 1976, 1984). This study found that half of lesbian victims of bias incidents contacted the police compared with 60% of lesbian victims of domestic violence. These differences were not statistically significant. However, gay victims were far less inclined to report domestic violence incidents than they were to report bias incident, which differs from previous research on heterosexual victims (Singer, 1988).

In conclusion, the results suggest there may be a relationship, although weak, between bias or domestic incidents and the offense,

the medical care, and the reporting to police. Although a combination of these variables may better explain this relationship, this analysis did not address this issue. Future studies should focus on which variables may have a greater role.

The differences in police reporting warrant further investigation. Although lesbian victims were more consistent in reporting to the police, gay victims were less likely to report domestic incidents. These findings raise questions regarding the factors that influence the decision of same-sex victims to report incidents to the police. Future studies should address the question of why gay and lesbian victims chose to report or not report incidents to the police. 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.

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