

## **Intimate Partner Violence in Same-Sex Relationships**

Original conceptualizations of domestic violence did not take into account violence that occurs in same-sex relationships.<sup>1</sup>

The term "domestic violence" has been replaced, in many quarters, by the term "intimate partner violence," in part, in recognition of violence in same-sex relationships.

Gay and lesbian intimate partner violence is similar to that experienced by heterosexual women.

- Psychological abuse is most common.<sup>2, 3</sup>
- Physical and sexual abuse co-occur.<sup>2, 4</sup>
- Violence that is on-going becomes more frequent and more severe.<sup>5, 6</sup>
- Physical violence can lead to a range of injuries including bruises, cuts, and broken bones.<sup>7-9</sup>
- More commonly occurs among younger persons (under 40 years of age).<sup>2, 3, 10</sup>
- No race, ethnicity, class, or socioeconomic status is immune.<sup>2, 6, 10</sup>

However, there are also important differences.

- The percentage of women who experience IPV in their lifetime appears to be higher for lesbian women than for heterosexual women.<sup>4</sup>
  - However, this is because lesbians (vs. heterosexual women) are more likely to have experienced IPV at the hands of female and male partners. Many lesbian have had intimate relationships with men prior to coming out as lesbians.<sup>11</sup> One study on same-sex IPV found that about half of the 79 women in the sample had had relationships with men as well as with women.<sup>4</sup> Their findings indicate that male partners may pose a greater risk for IPV than female partners: of the total sample, about 39.2% reported being raped and/or physically abused by a partner in their lifetime (30.4% by male partner and 11.4% by a female partner).<sup>4</sup>
- Rates of physical partner violence victimization are higher among gay men than heterosexual men.<sup>2, 4</sup>
- Due to societal homophobia, gay men and lesbians victims of IPV may experience situations that are not experienced by heterosexual victims of IPV.
  - An abusive partner may threaten to "out" his or her partner's sexuality to family, friends, or co-workers as a tactic to get that person to stay in the relationship or to coerce the victim in order to get what he or she wants.<sup>5, 6</sup>
  - Lesbians and gay men whose families and friends are unsupportive of their sexuality have fewer sources of support, thereby increasing isolation and making it more difficult to end abusive relationships.<sup>12</sup> Abusive partners may use this situation to their advantage to keep a relationship going; they may continuously remind the victim how alone he or she will be if he or she tries to leave.

- Victims who are not “out” publicly may be reluctant or unwilling to seek help from the police, the courts, and other services because it would require them to reveal their sexuality and possibly face embarrassment, ridicule, or even harassment.<sup>12, 13</sup>
- Gay male and lesbian victims appear to be less likely than victims in opposite-sex couples to call the police for help.<sup>14</sup>
  - This may be due, in part, to concern that the responding officers would consider the incident to be "mutual combat" and not take the time to determine the primary aggressor, which could result in both the victim and the assailant being arrested.<sup>6, 13, 15</sup>
  - Gay men are less likely than lesbian women to report IPV to the police.<sup>16</sup>
  - However, a recent study indicates that when gay men and lesbians do contact the police about IPV, the police response they receive is similar to that received by opposite-sex couples.<sup>14</sup>

Responses to intimate partner violence among gays and lesbians can be described as neglectful

- Although all 50 U.S. states issue protection from abuse orders (aka restraining orders, stay-away orders, etc.), some do not make this legal remedy available to gay men and lesbians.<sup>17</sup>
- Domestic violence shelters are typically not available to gay male victims because few shelters admit men.<sup>18</sup>
- Domestic violence shelter services appear to be increasingly responsive to the needs of lesbian victims.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, more work is needed to address heterosexist attitudes and shelters' general focus on IPV as a male-on-female problem.<sup>7, 19</sup> Such issues may discourage lesbian victims from seeking shelter and can contribute to negative experiences for those who do.<sup>6, 7</sup>
- There are few agencies specifically for lesbians and gay male victims of IPV, and most DV services do not have programs that address the unique issues of these women and men.<sup>13, 15, 19</sup>

Views toward same-sex IPV indicate that more work is needed, but there is hope for change

- The general public wants heterosexual couples to "work it out" when there is intimate partner violence. By contrast, they want same-sex couples to break up.<sup>20</sup>
- When deciding whether abusive behavior is wrong and what actions should be taken, the general public appears to judge incidents involving same- and opposite-sex couples similarly. The biggest consideration for them is the severity of the violence and whether a weapon was present.<sup>21</sup>

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