



Research Brief

Family Violence and the LGBTIQ Community

Introduction

Gender-based violence, and specifically family violence, has been prioritized as a serious social issue in Victoria and nationally. The Royal Commission into Family Violence (2016) found limited support services and knowledge about types of family violence experienced by those within LGBTIQ communities. The Monash Review of the family violence risk assessment and risk management framework (CRAF) in Victoria noted the lack of inclusion of specific risk factors to identify family violence within LGBTIQ community groups (McCulloch et al, 2016). This research brief examines family violence experiences within the LGBTIQ community, with a focus on the Australian context.

Definitions

LGBTIQ: Acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersexual, and queer. It is commonly used in research as a broader term that encompasses communities of people with diverse gender or sexual identities, such as genderqueer, pansexual, asexual, and questioning (Dwyer et al. 2015).

Heterosexism: Discrimination or prejudice against homosexuals on the assumption that heterosexuality is the normal sexual orientation (Harvey et al 2014).

The Australian Context

LGBTIQ communities' experiences of family violence have only recently been examined by researchers internationally and within Australia. In the international context, the rates of family violence are understood to be increasing (McKenry et al 2006). Australian studies have suggested that LGBTIQ communities experience the same or higher rates of family violence as heterosexual couples (ACON, nd; ARCHS, 2006; 2008; McCulloch et al. 2016; Mulrone 2003). In a New South Wales study, researchers have suggested LGBTIQ couples experience family violence at similar rates as heterosexual couples: that is one in three (ACON, nd).

A study by the Australian Research Centre for Health and Sexuality (ARCHS, 2006) with over 5,700 participants across Australia found 41% of male-identifying respondents, and 28% of female-identifying respondents had experienced physical violence within a same-sex intimate relationship. A subsequent Victorian study that included psychological abuse, also conducted by ARCHS (2008), found about a third of respondents said they were subject to abuse and lesbian women were more likely than gay men to report having been in an abusive relationship. In a New Zealand study of lesbian and bisexual women in same-sex relationships, almost half of the women reported having been abused (McLeod 2001).

In 1996, the Australian Bureau of Statistics conducted a study with women that included questions about family violence as part of bigger study on gender-based violence and "women's safety". However, the Australian Bureau of Statistics Personal Safety Survey did not and still does not collect data on LGBTIQ identity (ABS, nd).

Intimate Partner Homicide

In regards to intimate partner homicide in Australia, in cases collected by the National Homicide Monitoring project, approximately two percent (32 cases) of homicides involved partners from same-sex relationships (Gannoni & Cussen, 2014). 88 percent of those killed were male and 13 percent were female. Gannoni & Cussen (2014) found that the key motives for homicide by perpetrator and the cause of death of those killed were similar to those in heterosexual relationship.

Teen Dating Violence

Teen dating violence has become a focus in intervention and prevention around gender-based violence. However, the attention to issues of violence in LGBTIQ teen relationships is scarce. In the US context, one of the only studies done on violence with teens who identify as LGBT, found that there were significantly higher rates of dating violence among this population, than in heterosexual teen relationships (Dank et al, 2014).

An equivalent study has not been conducted in the Australian context. A study by Hillier Jones et al. (2010) that interviewed LGBTIQ youth ages 14-21 found that the participants suffered high rates of violence in both public and private spaces due to gender identity and/or sexuality. A recent study by Roffee and Wailing (2016) found that within groups of LGBTIQ youth, there are experiences of microaggressions perpetrated by other members of the community. Although not strictly discussing dating relationships, the research encourages further study into violence within the community.

Additional Pressures and Differing Responses

Additional Pressures

While many of the experiences of family violence may be similar to that of heterosexual couples, there are also significant additional pressures for individuals due to heterosexism and homophobia. In a recent examination of risk assessment in Victoria (McCulloch et al 2016), participants from LGBTIQ communities noted additional family violence pressures:

- Threats to 'out' a person
- Use of gender to belittle and target
- Homophobia experienced in accessing social services/police/legal system
- Lack of support from other family members
- Homelessness

In an earlier review of the literature, Chan 2005 found additional pressures for these communities included:

- Threats regarding HIV/AIDS status/medication
- Loss of custody of children
- Fear that acknowledgement of family violence will contribute to homophobia

Heterosexual assumptions about gender and relationships create additional pressures for these communities. In a review of the literature, Knight and Wilson (2016) describe how who holds the power in a same-sex relationship is not obvious from the outside and family violence is judged through heterosexual stereotypes. In both gay and lesbian relationships, survivors may be identified

as perpetrators due to heterosexist ideas of power, such as physical prowess, size differences and presentations of masculinity or femininity (Donovan & Hester, 2014; Rohrbaugh, 2006). In the Welsh context, Harvey et al (2014) found a lack of availability of services for male survivors and female perpetrators.

An additional point of pressure is the affiliation between police and LGBTIQ community. Mistrust of the police by the LGBTIQ community in Australia is reflected in studies (Calton et al 2015; Chan 2005; Mulroney 2003; Russell, 2015.). As is the case for many minority groups, police relationships are strained and violent. LGBTIQ people who spoke to police officers in NSW stated a significant barrier to reporting was that there was "little they thought the police could do" to help them if there was an issue of family violence (Mulroney 2003).

In a study of lesbian survivors of family violence, most relied on disclosure to and help-seeking from friends and avoided mainstream agencies because they believed they wouldn't be taken seriously or accepted (McLeod 2001). Mistrust is a serious barrier to the reporting of family violence within the LGBTIQ community.

Differing Responses

Legal

At the most basic level, family violence laws rarely offer specific protection to communities (Chan 2005; Mulroney 2003). Traditional gender roles, heterosexism, and misconceptions by police and courts mean perpetrators may not be arrested or charged with family violence (Chan, 2005). These responses alienate those in the LGBTIQ community. Some of the misconceptions held by police and courts include:

- Gay violence is likely, but lesbian violence is not because women are not prone to violence
- Lesbian same-sex violence is not as severe as other forms of family violence
- Abuse must be mutual because partners are of the same gender
- Perpetrator must be man/butch and survivor must be woman/femme in emulation of stereotypical heterosexual relationships

These misconceptions lead to issues within the legal systems. Sometimes courts will deem abuse as mutual when one person is seeking a restraining order, making the order mutual (Chan 2005).

Services

Issues around support are also critical within the Australian context. Services can be inaccessible to gay men, lesbians, nonbinary people and transwomen (Chan, 2005; Harvey et al 2014). In a study by Harvey et al (2014) in Wales of survivors and clinicians, the researchers found the presumption of gender binary blocked access to support services for trans and non-binary victims of violence. Transwomen in particular had difficulty obtaining services and finding placement at refuges due to bias and needing "proof" surgery to affirm gender (Harvey et al

2014). It is also important to note that female perpetrators may have access to some shelters (Chan, 2005).

Another barrier to assistance are clinicians. In a 2017 study in the United States using databases searches, Sears found clinicians consider same-sex family violence to be less serious and less likely to worsen over time.

Conclusion

There is a lack of clear legislation in response to family violence in LGBTIQ communities in Australia. Their experiences of family violence are understudied. The lack of knowledge overall means that bi, transgender, intersex, and queer experiences are poorly understood (Acosta et al, 2014). Additional research centring LGBTIQ voices, especially for marginalised groups within these communities, is essential.

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