



LGBT¹ Domestic Violence Fact Sheet

Introduction

Law enforcement, government agencies, and the general population acknowledge that domestic violence is a serious public health problem. The most commonly understood type of abuse involves partners of the opposite gender engaging in behavior that is both physically and mentally harmful, with the victim typically being the female. Less universally recognized is the occurrence of domestic violence among partners of the same sex.

Research indicates that domestic violence among same-sex couples occurs at similar rates as domestic violence among straight couples. Unfortunately, domestic violence victims in same-sex relationships are not receiving the help they need. This is due to the lack of legal recognition of same-sex relationships, law enforcement's failure to identify and properly handle domestic violence cases involving people of the same sex, and the shortage of resources available to victims of same-sex partner domestic abuse.

Lawmakers and social service providers should reconfigure the traditional model of domestic violence prevention and treatment to include individuals involved in same-sex relationships.

Rate of domestic violence in same-sex couples

The majority of gay and lesbian families are happy, healthy, and well-functioning, similar to that of healthy heterosexual families. Domestic violence in same-sex families does occur, however. Studies have found that domestic violence occurs among same-sex couples at comparable rates to straight couples:

- One out of four to one out of three same-sex relationships has experienced domestic violence.
- By comparison, one in every four heterosexual women experiences domestic violence in her lifetime.

¹ Disclaimer: This fact sheet focuses on domestic violence among gay and lesbian couples, but many issues overlap for bisexual and transgender survivors of domestic violence as well.

Comparing domestic violence in straight and same-sex couples

Both straight and gay victims of domestic violence experience a similar pattern of abuse, albeit with some notable distinctions.

Straight and same-sex domestic violence share many common characteristics:

- The pattern of abuse includes a vicious cycle of physical, emotional, and psychological mistreatment, leaving the victim with feelings of isolation, fear, and guilt.
- Abusers often have severe mental illnesses and were themselves abused as children.
- Psychological abuse is the most common form of abuse and physical batterers often blackmail their partners into silence.
- Physical and sexual abuses often co-occur.
- No race, ethnicity, or socio-economic status is exempt.

But domestic violence in same-sex relationships is distinctive in many ways from domestic violence in heterosexual relationships:

- Gay or lesbian batterers will threaten “outing” their victims to work colleagues, family, and friends. This threat is amplified by the sense of extreme isolation among gay and lesbian victims since some are still closeted from friends and family, have fewer civil rights protections, and lack access to the legal system.
- Lesbian and gay victims are more reluctant to report abuse to legal authorities. Survivors may not contact law enforcement agencies because doing so would force them to reveal their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Gay and lesbian victims are also reluctant to seek help out of fear of showing a lack of solidarity among the gay and lesbian community. Similarly, many gay men and women hide their abuse out of a heightened fear that society will perceive same-sex relationships as inherently dysfunctional.
- Gay and lesbian victims are more likely to fight back than are heterosexual women. This can lead law enforcement to conclude that the fighting was mutual, overlooking the larger context of domestic violence and the history of power and control in the relationship.
- Abusers can threaten to take away the children from the victim. In some states, adoption laws do not allow same-sex parents to adopt each other’s children. This can leave the victim with no legal rights should the couple separate. The abuser can easily use the children as leverage to prevent the victim from leaving or seeking help. Even when the victim is the legally recognized parent an abuser may threaten to out the victim to social workers hostile to gays and lesbians, which may result in a loss of custody. In the worst cases the children can even end up in the custody of the abuser.

Challenges to addressing same-sex domestic violence

The generally accepted model of a male aggressor and female survivor cannot be easily applied when dealing with victims in same-sex relationships. Same-sex couples therefore face certain impediments to having their domestic violence issues recognized and addressed that straight couples do not:

- **Authorities often lack the knowledge of how to handle domestic violence cases involving people of the same gender.** An officer may mistake two males living together for roommates, for example. And officers may fail to report an incident of domestic violence since the two parties involved may be unwilling to divulge their relationship status. In some cases the victim will be detained instead of the aggressor because the latter was physically smaller.
- **Same-sex partners lack the resources needed to help them get out of abusive relationships.** While domestic violence shelters appear to be increasingly responsive to the needs of lesbian victims, gay male victims are rarely admitted. Services for gay men are practically nonexistent.
- **Survivors of same-sex domestic violence lack the same legal recognition and protection as straight survivors.** Currently, a patchwork of state laws exist that offer some protections to gay and lesbian victims of domestic violence. Some laws cover gay and lesbian victims explicitly in their anti-domestic violence laws, while others cover gay and lesbian victims through gender-neutral language. A federal law is needed, however, to provide uniform and comprehensive protections for all same-sex couples.

Policy solutions for addressing same-sex domestic violence

A number of policy solutions would address the challenges that both victims and survivors of same-sex domestic violence face. They include:

- New legal interpretation of existing domestic violence laws at all levels of government that incorporates same-sex couples within the definitions of domestic violence and related parties.
- Providing local, state, and federal funding to educate law enforcement and social service providers about LGBT people, establish same-sex domestic violence prevention programs, and support organizations that specifically address same-sex domestic violence.
- Mandated cultural competency training for organizations receiving federal dollars to implement domestic violence prevention or treatment programs.

Conclusion

Domestic violence among same-sex couples is a serious public health concern. Victims of same-sex domestic violence face added challenges when attempting to receive help, as outlined above. More gay and lesbian victims of abuse are reporting their experiences as the general public has become increasingly more accepting of same-sex relationships. Still, barriers to equal treatment for same-sex couples remain. Survivors of same-sex domestic violence can receive the recognition and help they need with further research, better training for law enforcement officials, and more funding for relevant programs.