

An Examination of Intimate Partner Violence and Sexual Violence among Individuals Who Identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, and/or Transgender (LBGTQ)

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Abstract: A systematic review of literature published from 2006 to 2017 was conducted in order to examine intimate partner violence and sexual violence perpetrated against those individuals who identified as lesbian, bi-sexual, gay, and/or transgender (LBGT) and the challenges they faced from identifying as an LBGT individual. Results of the literature findings indicated that LBGT individuals are exposed to childhood sexual abuse, adult sexual assaults, intimate partner violence and hate crimes at significantly higher rates when compared to the general population. The examination of the literature revealed disproportionate rates of harassment, physical assaults, sexual assaults and intimate partner violence when compared to the general population. In addition, individuals who identify as LBGT are substantially prone to internalization of their feelings, making them prone to post-traumatic stress (PTS), depression, anxiety, substance abuse and suicide. The lack of available support for the LBGT community leaves them feeling vulnerable and underserved. This research advocates for effective collaboration with social services with the aim of ensuring justice and equitable treatment for LBGT individuals.

Keywords: Lesbian; Bi-sexual; Gay; Transsexual; LBGT Sexual Victimization; LBGT Violence

OBJECTIVE: The purpose of this systematic review was to explore the published literature between the years of 2006 – 2017 in order to examine intimate partner violence and sexual violence perpetrated against those individuals who identified as lesbian, bi-sexual, gay, and/or transgender (LBGT) and the challenges they faced from identifying as an LBGT individual.

METHODS: A systematic review of 25 peer-reviewed journal articles was conducted and analyzed for a correlation between intimate partner violence and sexual assault victimization among LBGTQ individuals. Data sources searched included Medline, PsychInfo, and the Web of Knowledge.

RESULTS: Results of the literature findings indicated that LBGT individuals are exposed to childhood sexual abuse, adult sexual assaults and hate crimes at significantly higher rates when compared to the general population. The examination of the literature revealed disproportionate rates of harassment, physical assaults, sexual assaults and intimate partner violence when compared to the general population. In addition, individuals who identify as LBGT are substantially prone to internalization of their feelings, making them prone to post-traumatic stress (PTS), depression, anxiety, substance abuse and suicide

CONCLUSION: The lack of available support for the LBGT community leaves them feeling vulnerable and underserved. This research advocates for effective collaboration with social services with the aim of ensuring justice and equitable treatment for LBGT individuals.

1. Introduction

1.1 Text

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Individuals who identify as lesbians, gay, bi-sexual and/or transgender (LGBT) and makes recommendations for future research. In order to examine intimate partner violence and sexual assault against those individuals who identified as LGBT and the challenges they faced from identifying as an LGBT individual; the researchers conducted a systematic review of 25 peer-reviewed research articles from 2006 to 2017. The researchers concluded that intimate partner violence and sexual victimization among LGBT individuals is a vital concern that can transcend into post-traumatic stress (PTSD), depression, anxiety, substance abuse and increased rates of suicide^[8,37]. Correlations between intimate partner violence and sexual assault victimization among LGBT individuals found that 98% of victims reported being verbally abused by either an ex or current intimate partner; while 78% reported having been physically abused by an intimate partner^[20,29].

1.2 Intimate Partner Violence among LGBT Individuals: Definitions

For purposes of clarification the following terms were used for interpretation of vocabulary within the researched articles:

Lesbian- A lesbian is a female attraction between females.

Gay – A term that primarily refers to a homosexual person or the trait of being homosexual.

Bi-sexual- A romantic or sexual attraction to males or females.

Transsexual- Used here is understood as a person desiring a physical transition from one gender to the other through medical and surgical intervention. FtM (female to male) or MtF (male to female). Transgender- Refers to people who have a gender identity or gender expression that differs from their assigned sex.

Queer- An umbrella term that really implies “not straight”, it has a derogatory history. Also, refers to “questioning” if LBGTQ.

Pansexual- Omnisexuality, is the sexual, romantic or emotional attraction towards people regardless of their sex or gender identity.

Cisgender- A term used for people whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth.

1.3 Intimate Partner Violence among LGBT Individuals: The Facts

The numbers of LGBT individuals who are physically assaulted by their intimate partners are staggering. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention^[12], 4,774,000 heterosexual women experience some type of physical violence by an intimate partner every year. If intimate partner violence occurs within LGBT relationships at the same rate as in heterosexual relationships, then some 25-33% of LGBT households will be a victim of intimate partner violence^[12].

Although these numbers appear significant, the truth of the matter is they may indeed be even more substantial than originally thought. Establishing the truth of intimate partner violence among LGBT individuals may be difficult because of the number of individuals who are unlikely to admit they are in a LGBT relationship.

Many LGBT couples live in solidarity and only their close friends and families are aware of their sexual orientation or gender identities. Therefore, involving law enforcement in an intimate partner violence situation would only amplify the circumstances by having to expose their sexual orientation or gender identity. In addition, many LGBT couples who have children may be reluctant to involve law enforcement. Gentlewarrior & Fountain^[20] examined multiple research papers on LBGTQ people published in the 1990s and 2000s regarding sexual violence-in the form of hate or bias-motivated crimes, intimate partner violence, childhood sexual abuse, and adult sexual assault-against victims who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LBGTQ). Their article highlighted disproportionate rates of sexual assault against individuals who identify as LBGTQ and stresses the importance of LBGTQ-affirming, culturally competent services for sexual assault survivors.

Depending upon the state, some states do not recognize same sex marriage and the custody of children may heighten the fear of losing them if the couple is “outed” to society. Furthermore, if the child/children were birthed by one of the partners, then issues of custody and visitation rights are paramount if the state does not recognize same sex marriage. Knowing this, LGBT partners may use the children to exert power and control over their partner forcing them to stay in an unhealthy relationship.

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1.4 Intimate Partner Sexual Abuse among LBGT Individuals: Results

Intimate partner sexual abuse occurs in every facet of relationships whether heterosexual or LBGT. Studies conducted by the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Project^[43] revealed that 44% of lesbian women and 61% of bi-sexual women were victims of rape, physical abuse and/or stalking by an intimate partner; compared to 35% of heterosexual women. Of the men who had experienced rape, physical abuse, and/or stalking by an intimate partner, 26% were gay, 37% were bi-sexual and 29% were heterosexual.

Heintz and Melendez^[27] conducted a study of 58 individuals identifying as LBGT who had experienced both sexual and intimate partner violence. Results of the survey found that 98% of the respondents had experienced some type of verbal abuse from their partners and 71% had experienced actual physical abuse. In comparison, a review of 75 studies on sexual victimization of LBGT individuals by Rothman, Exner & Baughman^[50] further established and affirmed the disproportionate rates of LBGT sexual victimization compared to the heterosexual population.

Due to societal oppression of individuals and communities who identify as LGBTQ, some may be reluctant to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity to service providers and researchers, making accurate statistics on the LBGTQ community challenging to obtain.

Sexual violence against LGBTQ persons has been perceived to be violent attempts to oppress those challenging gender norms and sexuality. Fineran's (2002) research suggests a correlation between sexual harassment victimization and increased rates of suicide attempts and missed school among LGBTQ students. A few studies reported higher rates of childhood sexual abuse among LGBTQ persons. This in turn has been correlated with psychological distress, mood disorders, substance abuse & high-risk sexual behaviors. It does not influence sexual orientation though. Several studies indicate sexual violence can be a dimension of hate or bias-motivated crimes against adults who identify as LBGTQ^[17].

These authors recommended culturally-competent LBGTQ affirming services are crucial to promote safety and community reconnection for survivors of sexual assault that identify as LBGTQ.

Heintz & Melendez's^[27] study examined the relationship between intimate partner violence (including sexual violence) among individuals who identified as LBGTQ and safe sex practices using surveys of 58 adult clients from a community-based organization that served victims of partner violence who identify as LBGTQ (72% identified as gay or bisexual; 19% identified as lesbians; 9% as transgender). Nearly all respondents (98%) had experienced verbal abuse by a partner. Results of Heintz & Melendez's^[27] survey revealed:

71% had experienced physical abuse by a partner.

41% (nearly half) experienced forced sex by a partner.

10% had been forced to have sex with another person.

Only half of respondents reported that they used safer sex measures with their partner.

This study can be used to alert service providers (DV advocates, sexual & LBGTQ community organizations) to the dimensions of intimate partner violence in abusive LBGTQ relationships, encouraging extended outreach to the LBGTQ community.

2. Discussion

Domestic Violence: gained momentum in the 1970's when women advocacy groups began to highlight abuse perpetrated by husbands upon their wives^[16].

Intimate partner violence emerged around 2000 and focused on violence in relationships however; the abuser role was not clearly defined^[48]. Intimate partner violence has been commonly recognized as any act of violence within an intimate interpersonal relationship consisting of husband and wife, girlfriend and boyfriend and in same-sex relationships of lesbian, bi-sexual, gay, and transsexual partners. Additionally, domestic violence can encompass family dynamics of parents and children, step-children and step-parents, siblings, and grandparents. Domestic violence can be used to intimidate, have authoritative control and power over and to manipulate a person within an intimate or domestic relationship. This power and control can include battery (physical abuse) upon another individual, or verbal and financial (psychological abuse) or sexual abuse^[35]. Research indicates that LBGTQ couples are subjected to domestic violence at a higher rate than heterosexual couples^[33,25].

Unfortunately LBGTQ individuals may not be afforded the same options to leave an abusive domestic relationship

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as heterosexual individuals. Many heterosexual individuals are supported by peers, family, friends, colleagues and legal assistance.

When heterosexual individuals become embroiled in an abusive domestic relationship they can often turn to one or more of these groups for support. Regrettably, many LBGTQ individuals finding themselves in an abusive domestic partner relationship may not find the same support groups available in which to turn in times of need or be able to articulate their situation. Some LBGTQ individuals may not have revealed their sexuality to their family, friends or colleagues in fear of not being accepted. In addition, some LBGTQ individuals may not have reconciled within themselves their own individuality of who they are. The options available to the LBGTQ community are to stay and endure the abuse, speak to a professional before making any decisions or leave the abuser for safety as soon as possible.

The social factors that contribute to the decision and may prevent the LBGTQ individual from seeking help can be:

- Legal
- Isolation
- Dependence

2.1 Legality

Depending upon the state in which the LBGTQ couple resides LBGTQ intimate partner relationships may not have the same legal recourse as heterosexual relationships (Murray & Mobley, 2009). ⁴⁰ LBGTQ individuals may fear the legal system may not treat their domestic violence situation the same as same-sex relationships. The uncertainty of whether law enforcement will perceive the violence as domestic related, whether the court system will comprehend the gravity of the situation as domestic violence and whether there are any legal protections from the abuser may keep the LBGTQ individual from seeking assistance (NPR, 2016). ⁴⁵ If the LBGTQ couple have a child or children, they may fear losing them if they have not been legally adopted by the intimate partner or recognized as a legal parent; thus keeping the victim in the abusive relationship for fear of not being able to see the child/children.

2.2 Isolation

If the abused LBGTQ individual has not “come out” with their sexual identification to friends, family or colleagues, the fear of leaving the abuser could result in isolation. Additionally, the LBGTQ community of friends and peers is oftentimes very close and when forced to “take sides” or choose between an LBGTQ couple, the victim may feel as if their friends may blame them for the relationship failing. The victim may also face isolation from friends, family and colleagues if the abuser is aware that the victim has not revealed their sexual identity to anyone outside their relationship and may threaten to “out them” in order to embarrass or isolate them from friends, family or colleagues.

2.3 Dependence

Dependence on another individual can keep a domestic violence victim in an abusive relationship. The victim may be dependent on the abuser financially, emotionally or physically^[14,22,46]. Financially and economically the victim may be dependent upon the abuser for financial support, and thus may feel as if they would not be able to leave without monetary assistance. The couple may have combined mutual assets or the abuser may have the vehicle or home solely in their name which could restrict the financial ability of the abuser to leave. Emotionally the victim may have been verbally abused by their partner to the point of having no confidence or low self-esteem and facing the possibility of spending the rest of their life alone or unloved may keep them in an abusive relationship^[46,51].

Physically the abused victim may be disabled or unable to care for themselves and thus rely on the abuser for assistance which could contribute to an individual staying in an abusive relationship.

2.4 Implications

Throughout the course of the systematic review of the related research it is important to mention that researchers studying same-sex intimate partner violence (IPV) routinely point to the problems with sampling and definitions, both of which are magnified by the stigmatized nature of same-sex relationships^[3,17]. Most large IPV surveys do not ask about sexual orientation and gender of the relationship partner^[43], nor are those two questions synonymous. Also, not all

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individuals engaging in same-sex relationships identify as members of the LBGTQ community complicating research questions even further^[33]. Often fear of how the information may be used acts to prevent a likely number of potential respondents involved in same-sex partnerships from answering honestly, or even participating in research studies.

This leads to another frequently discussed limitation on research involving LBGTQ participants which is that of trust and access^[2,38]. LGBTQ individuals may not participate in activities. Where samples may be selected. The LBGTQ individual may fear that their identity may be traced back and used against them. This lack of openness may be linked to current examples of violence against LBGTQ individuals as was the well published case involving the hate crime directed toward Matthew Shepard^[32,33] reports that because of their historic experiences, current LBGT elders are less likely to be open about their sexual orientation. The theme of lacking trust and vulnerability to violence being perpetrated toward LBGTQ individuals, potentially biases results particularly in large research studies.

This historical lack of trust and increased violence adds to the lessons learned indicating that all experience is contextualized by time and culture. All research must consider the context of the times and culture in which the research is being conducted. Additionally, a recognition that all research is at best imperfect and may be distorted by potentially systematic issues related to the trust of the participants in the research process. Lastly, a better understanding of the intimate partner violence will be generated if we use gender as a way of identifying issues that require further study rather than as an explanation^[2].

2.5 Lessons Learned

Studies indicated that LBGTQ people appear to be at greater risk than heterosexual people of stressors leading to mental disorders and suicidal behavior^[34,38]. LBGTQ people are subject to institutional prejudice, social stress, social exclusion (even within families) and anti-homosexual hatred and violence and often internalize a sense of shame about their sexuality^[34,38]. Lifestyle factors such as alcohol and drugs misuse brought on by extra stress from stigmas and shame increase morbidity as well as suicidal attempts^[21,13]. These finding indicate that LBGTQ people have a higher risk than homosexual people of mental disorder, substance misuse and dependence, suicide, suicidal ideation, and intimate partner violence with less available supports^[2,41]. It cannot be surprising to learn that due to the societal pressures faced by LBGTQ individual that they potentially experience greater mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, suicide attempts, have physical health disparities such as cardiovascular disease in larger numbers that do heterosexuals and cisgender individuals^[7,36,39].

Researchers which have identified these key factors regarding the mental and physical health needs of individuals that self- identify as LBGTQ can now look to find positive ways to decrease the elevated mental health problems experienced by the LBGTQ community. The statistics demonstrated in this review suggest that sexual assault advocates should consider extending outreach and adapt services to survivors who may identify as gay, lesbian, and bisexual, given the high prevalence of sexual victimization among members of these communities. Also, sexual assault primary prevention programs in general should consider adding content on homophobia, transphobia, and sexual assault as a hate crime. Trauma-informed care should be considered for those in the LBGTQ community when deemed appropriate following careful screening. Additional research should utilize population-based and census methods to compare LBGTQ sexual victimization rates to those of the heterosexual and cisgender populations.

Appendix A

Helpful Resources:

- Center for Disease Control and Prevention: Intimate Partner Violence:
<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/index.html>
- Domestic Shelters <https://www.domesticshelters.org/contact>.
- Mathew Shepard Foundation: <https://www.matthewshepard.org/>.
- National Center for Transgender Equality: <https://transequality.org/>.
- National LBGT Task Force: <http://www.thetaskforce.org/>.
- SAGE Advocacy Services for LGBT Elders: <https://www.sageusa.org/index.cfm>

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