

Two percent of gay men bashed per year: study

GAYBASHINGS / Youth most vulnerable to homophobic violence

Patty Comeau / Xtra West / Wednesday, May 07, 2008

Dr Thomas Lampinen says the results of a new nine-year study on gaybashings show the youngest members of the queer community run the highest risk of being attacked for their sexual orientation.

According to the study, entitled "Incidence of and Risk Factors for Sexual Orientation-Related Physical Assault Among Young Men Who Have Sex With Men," queers aged 23 and younger were bashed three times more frequently than the other study participants.

"We all know that kids who are thought or perceived to be gay, whether or not they really are, are picked on," says Dr Steffanie Strathdee, senior author of the report, which was released Apr 29.

"Our study shows that the younger somebody is when they come out, the greater at risk they are of being gaybashed."

The data shows those who left the closet before turning 16 were about three times more likely to be bashed than those who came out in their 20s.

This is the first time the rate at which young queer men experience homophobic assault has been measured, Lampinen believes.

The report comes out of the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS and is an offshoot of the Vanguard Project, which measured rates and risk factors for HIV infection among men who have sex with men who were 15-30 years old at the beginning of the study.

In addition to answering questions related to their sexual practices, participants reported whether or not they had been assaulted in the past year for what they perceived to be anti-gay or anti-trans reasons.

Published last week in the American Journal of Public Health, the study reveals that the yearly assault rate was about 2 percent. Over a six-year period, the risk of being bashed for a man in this group rose higher than one in 10.

Strathdee, who specializes in international health and cross-cultural medicine at the University of California, San Diego, says that the results are "pretty alarming" — especially for data collected in Vancouver, which she considers fairly tolerant of sexual minorities compared to many other urban centres.

Helen Kennedy, executive director of Egale Canada, isn't surprised that adolescent and teenage queers are at higher risk for violence. She says some of the stories she hears from young Egale volunteers about their school lives are "horrendous".

"The gym teacher laughing at how you run, wooden dildos being left on your desk, all kinds of stuff" happens, she says, including physical and sexual assault.

"We know that there's this whole culture of silence around homophobia and transphobia in schools," she says, but "nobody really wants to take it on and do anything about it."

Of the new report, Lampinen says "the value of these data are that they provide a solid evidence base with which to discuss the need for things like school-based anti-bullying initiatives and school safety."

Leave Out Violence British Columbia (LOVE BC), an organization that works to prevent youth violence through community arts and leadership initiatives, runs about 100 workshops in BC schools each year. Camyar Chai, LOVE BC's executive director, says that anti-homophobia education is a "key component"

of their outreach.

Participants in the group's photojournalism program are encouraged to use photography and writing to document their experiences of violence and its foundations. "We too often find that homophobia is one of those causes," says Chai.

Strathdee speaks of the social attitudes that have historically discouraged victims of sexual assault from reporting and says that "we've got even farther to go" when it comes to curbing anti-queer violence.

She feels that Canada "really has the opportunity to set a precedent" because of the unique protections extended to its queer citizens. Making sure homophobia is regarded as socially unacceptable, she says, is the responsibility of both regulatory and community agencies.

Egale is currently conducting the first-ever nationwide survey about the school experiences of queer students in Canada as part of its larger Safe Schools initiative.

"The Vancouver school board has been fantastic," says Kennedy, noting that the online survey has been introduced to local Grade 10 students over the past few months.

Approximately 1,000 responses to Egale's survey have already been gathered. Kennedy says the results are being analyzed and expects them to be released in the next few weeks. She predicts Egale will be in a position to make specific recommendations to the public in six to eight months.

"Fundamentally," says Lampinen, gaybashing "is a human rights issue."

The study identified a number of social factors, including sex-trade involvement, injection drug use, previous forced or coerced sex, and unstable housing situations, that are linked to higher incidences of homophobic violence. First Nations men also reported significantly higher rates of assault than did other respondents.

According to Strathdee, the importance of the new data "cannot be overstated" when it comes to developing more comprehensive research and support for those who have been bashed.

"It's a very good example of why our stories need [to be] told," she says. "Even if you think that you're just one voice, it matters."