

## **A NEED FOR SHELTER HAVENS ELUDE MANY VICTIMS OF GAY DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

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Curt Rogers's boyfriend searched for him all over Boston in a desperate, murderous rage. Yet every domestic violence shelter in the state told Rogers the same thing: women only. Gay Domestic violence? Even mental health experts, he recalled, had no clue how to help him.

"I felt very alone," said Rogers, recalling the experience eight years ago. This month, researchers released a groundbreaking study indicating Rogers was far from alone: Gay men living in cities are as likely to be battered as heterosexual women, found the report, in this month's American Journal of Public Health. Two in five urban gay men were abused by a partner sometime in the last five years, the study found.

Other studies have hinted that the problem is widespread, but the new study, by researchers in San Francisco and Washington, is the first to survey a randomly selected group of gay men around the country, making it the most authoritative national account of the problem to date.

"Many believe that in same-sex male relationships, that the potential for violence to occur is less because both males are able to defend themselves," said Michael V. Relf, an assistant professor at the Georgetown University school of nursing and an author of the paper. "It's an issue that unfortunately is not on anyone's radar screen."

This lack of public understanding, said experts, can have calamitous results for victims: Shelters turn them away; police officers discount their stories; doctors fail to ask questions that uncover abuse.

However, experts said that Boston, perhaps more than any US city, has openly grappled with the problem, thanks mostly to Rogers, now 40.

Rogers, after a desperate search, finally found shelter with his boss's parents. He stopped working and stayed indoors for six weeks. Then he rented another apartment, on the other side of town, bought a new car, and began arriving and leaving work erratically to avoid his violent boyfriend.

But true freedom came only with tragedy: Months later, the boyfriend hanged himself. "There was a sense of sadness more than relief. Acute sadness," said Rogers.

Angered by his experience, Rogers began inquiring about gay domestic violence assistance programs. It didn't take long; there were none in the state.

The documentary filmmaker persuaded several Boston-area social service groups to give him grant money, but not without some struggle.

"I was told by some gay groups that they didn't want to portray gays as victims anymore," he said.

Today, he runs the nation's only gay domestic violence safe house program, matching victims with volunteers who open their homes. Last year, he placed 17 victims, those with nowhere to go and in danger of serious harm or death.

His group, the Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project, also helped 244 other abuse victims with less dire situations, up 20 percent from 2000. In fact, their caseload has increased about 20 percent annually since 1998.

Gay domestic violence is little-studied because most domestic violence research focuses on women, who account for the majority of battered victims. The seven previous surveys of gay men that the authors of the new study reviewed suffered from the "convenient sample" problem: They used street interviews at gay parades and gay bars, biasing the sample with men who were relatively open about their orientation, a group less likely to suffer from social pathologies, including abusive relationships and risky sexual behavior. Prior studies all were based on small samples, as well.

The researchers used subscriber lists for gay magazines and US census data to locate 3,700 gay men in four cities - Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and San Francisco - and 2,881 completed the phone survey asking about abuse over the last five years.

"I think it's fair to extend our results to other urban areas, like Boston and Philadelphia and Miami and others," said Relf.

Relf and colleagues found 34 percent of those surveyed suffered verbal abuse over the last five years; 22 percent, physical abuse; and 5 percent, sexual abuse. Younger men were likely to be abused. And those with HIV were slightly more likely to face abuse.

The researchers then compared the results with data on heterosexual battering, a well-publicized, well-studied crime. More than 11 percent of women living with men reported domestic physical violence in the last year, according to two recent national studies. Thirty percent of women reported abuse - hitting, kicking, slapping, pushing, or armed threats - sometime in their lives. These studies were close enough in method to the gay male abuse study to warrant side by side comparison, according to the authors.

Heterosexual women and homosexual men, they concluded, face comparable levels of physical abuse.

"The issues of power and control seem to be a constant," said Lieutenant Detective Margo Hill, commander of the Boston Police department's domestic violence unit. "We have to get people to see that the issues are the same."

Hill has been leading a departmental effort to improve evidence-gathering at domestic violence scenes, straight and gay alike. It can be especially confusing in the latter cases: Officers arrive after a 911 call only to see two bloodied men, each accusing the other. And in cases involving gay abuse, the injuries are often more severe, said Hill.

"We have to look more closely to figure out who has the offensive and defensive wound. We have to do better with hard evidence. We have to figure out who the aggressor is," she said. "If you arrest the victim, the message that you're sending to him is: Don't call again."

Hill said all new police recruits are being given "dominant aggressor" training, which stresses physical evidence over witness statements, which can be unreliable because fear often keeps victims from detailing abuse.

And though the Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project remains the only safe house program in the United States, local hospitals have, in the past few years, begun to take gay domestic violence more seriously, said local social workers.

"There's still an attitude among some doctors and police that men should fight back, should take it like a man," said Lisa Tieszen, co-director of Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital's domestic and sexual violence department. "But the system has changed."

For instance, Beth Israel's domestic violence pamphlets and posters are now all gender neutral.

"But we still deal with homophobia," said Tieszen, citing as an example the failure of many doctors and court officials even to inquire about sexual orientation when examining an injured man, resulting in missed cases.

Meanwhile, Rogers's safe house work - conducted from a secret location in Cambridge - continues. The first question he asks callers: Are you safe right now? Then he tries to find them a safe home, a task that is becoming increasingly difficult as more gay men realize they have options.

"We need more people to volunteer their houses," said Rogers. "There is a high burnout rate for volunteers. I mean, this is intense, draining violence."

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