

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AMONG HOMOSEXUAL PARTNERS¹

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Summary.—Is domestic violence more frequent in homosexual partnerships? The 1996 National Household Survey of Drug Abuse, based upon a random sample of 12,381 adults aged 18 to 59 years, estimated that 828,900 men and 828,678 women engaged in homosexuality in the prior 12 months. Random surveys indicated that at any given time, 29% of homosexual men and 32% of homosexual women are in same-sex partnerships. The National Criminal Victimization Survey for 1993 to 1999 reported that 0.24% of married women and 0.035% of married men were victims of domestic violence annually *versus* 4.6% of the men and 5.8% of the women reporting same-sex partnerships. Domestic violence appears to be more frequently reported in same-sex partnerships than among the married.

As compared to the married, who appear to have the lowest rates of domestic violence, a number of studies have reported what appear to be higher rates of domestic violence among same-sex couples (e.g., Island & Letellier, 1991; Lie & Gentlewarrier, 1991). The volunteer nature of the samples in these studies, however, makes the apparent difference hard to credit. A number of recent population-based studies bear upon the issue.

The 1996 National Household Survey of Drug Abuse² reported on a nationally representative sample of 12,381 respondents aged 18 to 59 years. A weighted 1.2% (1.1% of women [weighted $n = 828,678$] and 1.3% of men [weighted $n = 828,900$]) reported having had same-sex sex in the prior 12 months. In 2001 the Kaiser Family Foundation³ reported that of 405 homosexuals obtained from a random urban phone sample of 15 metropolitan areas in 2000, in response to "Are you now married, living with a partner as married, divorced, separated, widowed, or have you never been married?" 28% reported "living as married," 3% "married," 6% "divorced or separated," 1% "widowed," and 59% "never been married" (on 11/21/01, a Kaiser spokeswoman said that "living as married" included 29% of the 265 men, 27% of the 140 women, 17% of those under the age of 30 years, and 33% of those 30 years or older). The general population sample in the Kaiser sample broke down into 51% married, 4% living as married, 14% divorced or separated, 7% widowed, and 23% never married.

Black, Gates, Sanders, and Taylor (2000) combined the findings from the General Social Survey and National Health and Social Life Survey for

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²www/icpsr.umich.edu/sambda.

³Kaiser Family Foundation (www.kff.org).

those who reported same-sex sexual activity in the last year and reported that 28% of the 102 men and 44% of the 59 women were currently homosexually partnered. The agreement between the Black, *et al.* and Kaiser Family Foundation male samples suggests that, at any given time, about 29% of homosexual men are in male-male sexual partnerships. The discrepancy between the Black, *et al.* and Kaiser Family Foundation estimates for women makes it likely that combining their two estimates would generate a better estimate of how many lesbians were partnered—these two samples yielded 199 lesbians of whom 64 or 32% were partnered.

Applying these estimates of how many homosexuals are partnered to National Household Survey of Drug Abuse estimates of the number of homosexuals yields 240,381 male-male (i.e., 29% of 828,900) and 266,834 female-female (32% of 828,678) couples. Both of these estimates are somewhat lower than the U.S. Census Bureau enumeration of 301,026 male-male and 293,365 female-female couples in the 2000 census (Keen, 2001). The difference between the census enumeration and the National Household Survey of Drug Abuse estimate may be partially accounted for by the National Household Survey of Drug Abuse survey ending with age 59 years, although relatively few older homosexuals have been recorded in a number of datasets (Cameron, Cameron, & Playfair, 1998; Cameron, 2002 [e.g., in the Kaiser Family Foundation study, 35% of those in the general population sample vs 11% of those in the homosexual sample were aged 50 yr. or older, 15% of the general population sample vs 3% of the homosexual sample were aged 65+]). In addition, census officials have stated on the Census Bureau website as well as by phone that they are relatively sure that the same-sex partners are not all sexual partners.

A random phone survey of 8,000 men and 8,000 women over the age of 17 years in 1996 reported that 35 men and 32 women said they were currently living "as a couple" with a same-sex person (65 men and 79 women said that at some point in their lives they had lived with a same-sex partner "as a couple") (Tjaden, Thoennes, & Allison, 1999). The Tjaden, *et al.* study yields a point estimate that 390,000 men and 403,000 women were living with a member of the same sex "as a couple" at that time. This is higher than either the estimate derived from the National Household Survey of Drug Abuse or the census finding. The small numbers of those currently living "as a couple" (e.g., 35 men and 32 women) yields a large standard error for the estimate. Further, the ambiguity of what has been asked may have elevated the numbers (e.g., "as a couple" might be used by some of those "cohabiting" as friends, but not having sex with each other).

Intimate Partner Violence and Age of Victim 1993–99

A Bureau of Justice Statistics report (Rennison, 2001), is based upon

the U.S. Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics' ongoing nationwide National Criminal Victimization Survey. It plausibly yields the most authoritative estimates. Each member of about 43,000 households with about 80,000 respondents aged 12 years or older in residence is interviewed about a host of crimes possibly committed against them in the prior six months. Domestic violence was defined as reporting "murder, rape, sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault" (p. 2) committed by "current or former spouses, boyfriends, or girlfriends" (p. 2) against the respondent. The sampled households comprise a panel that is in place for 3 years, during which time every 6 months each member of the household is reinterviewed as to crimes they had experienced. On a rotating basis, households are replaced with new randomly obtained households each 6-mo. period to keep 'freshening' the sample and keep it at about the same size. Thus, over the 7-yr. period of the study about a quarter of a million respondents were interviewed.

Findings in the National Criminal Victimization Survey were weighted to accord with census-estimated numbers of those aged 12 yr. or older in the U.S. population in 1999 (Rennison, 2001). Only an annualized average for the 7 years in question was reported for same-sex relationships, men, married women, and separated women. On average, each year 142,290 males reported themselves as "victims of domestic violence," of whom 13,740 (9.7%) had been in male-male relationships. Likewise, of the average of 902,240 female victims of domestic violence, 16,900 (1.9%) had been in same-sex relationships. Of 55,918,930 married women, 352,070 or 0.24%; of 2,980,450 separated women, 219,680 or 7.4%; and combined 0.60% (352,070) of the 58,899,380 married and separated women reported having been the victim of at least one episode of domestic violence in the past year. For all women, 33.4% of victimizations were attributed to a spouse, 13.5% to an ex-spouse, and 53.1% to a current or former girlfriend or boyfriend.

Domestic Violence in Same-sex Partnerships

Males who engage in homosexuality accounted for 13,740 of 142,290 male victims (i.e., 9.7% of male victims) and lesbians for 16,900 of 902,240 (i.e., 1.9% of female victims). This would suggest that 1.3% of male homosexuals in the National Household Study of Drug Abuse collected 9.7% of the victimizations, a rate seven times higher than that for nonhomosexual men; and the 1.1% of female homosexuals collected 1.9% of the victimizations, almost double the rate of nonhomosexual women. Homosexual partners accounted for 30,640 of 1,044,530 victims, or 2.9% of the total victimizations—about three times their 1.2% representation in the population. If the estimates from the Kaiser Family Foundation survey are applied to the 1996 National Household Survey of Drug Abuse, then 5.7% of the 240,381

male homosexual partnerships experienced at least one victimization per year. If the statistic about same-sex partnerships from the 2000 Census is employed, then of the 301,026 male-male partnerships, 4.6% experienced at least one victimization each year. Likewise, the 266,509 female-female couples from the Kaiser/Black, *et al.* samples generated 16,900 victims, or 6.3% of them generated a victim of domestic violence per year. If the statistic about same-sex partnerships from the 2000 Census is employed, then 16,900 (5.8%) of the 293,365 female-female partnerships experienced at least one victimization per year. Given that homosexuals often have sex with someone other than the person with whom they live, whether all of the 'domestic violence' occurs between the homosexual participants in the 'couple' is uncertain.

Assessment of Relative Frequency of Domestic Violence Within Homosexual Partnerships and Heterosexual Marriage

While the above findings are based upon large samples and total enumerations in the case of the U.S. Census, when samples are employed, no matter how large or well done the samples, they are associated with various kinds of uncertainty, including differences in the years that the samplings were done. Further, 'to keep the relationship alive' or perhaps to keep a partner from being arrested, both married and unmarried partners may not report domestic violence. Whether this happens more or less frequently among the married as opposed to homosexuals or men as opposed to women is unknown. Also, sex with those outside the partnership (who may be counted as 'partners')—an apparently fairly frequent event for male homosexuals (McWhirter & Mattison, 1984)—adds another layer of uncertainty, e.g., was the perpetrator the live-with partner or a 'pick-up'—and is the individual in such an encounter considered a 'partner' by respondents? But even with these uncertainties in mind, it appears likely that homosexual couples reported higher rates of domestic violence than reported by those within conventional marriages.

Under assumptions that include either considering the National Household Survey of Drug Abuse as informed by the Kaiser Family Foundation/Black, *et al.* surveys under which 5.7% of male-male and 6.3% of female-female partnerships experienced domestic violence, or considering the U.S. Census enumeration under which 4.6% of those in male-male and 5.8% of those in female-female partnerships experienced domestic violence per year, the rate of reported domestic violence within homosexual partnerships is considerably higher than the 0.24% rate for married women (married women accounted for 132,390 [14.7%] of victims but comprised 47.7% of women over the age of 11 years).

Even if one argued that those separated are still married and ought to

be included in the rate for married women, the rate rises only to 0.6%. Thus, for women, the rate of reported domestic violence within homosexual couplings is at least 5.8%/0.6% or nine times higher under the assumptions most favorable to same-sex partnerships. Under the least favorable assumptions, if the 6.3% is divided by the 0.2% reported by married women, then the rate of domestic violence within female homosexual couplings is 26 times higher. Domestic violence among men is only globally addressed in the Renison (2001) report, but if the ratio of domestic violence reported by married women is about 7.4 times less among married men as it is in general (i.e., of the 1,044,530 reported of domestic violence, 142,290 were among men), then male-male domestic violence at the most favorable to same-sex partnerships at 4.6% per year exceeds the 0.874/58,899,380 or 0.04% among married males. To date, the comparative empirical analysis suggests that homosexual partnerships, particularly those formed by men, are more violent than heterosexual marriages.

Two other large, random-sample surveys bear on the issue. In the Tjaden, *et al.* study, respondents were asked if they had *ever* been raped or physically assaulted by a male or female partner. Analysis showed 15.4% of the 65 male and 10.8% of the 79 female respondents who had lived as a “couple” with a member of their sex replied in the affirmative. For a subset of 300 who had never lived as a “couple” with a same-sex partner, 7.7% of the men and 20.3% of the women replied in the affirmative for an opposite-sex partner (but 10.8% of the men and 30.4% of the women who had had same-sex partners replied in the affirmative for an opposite-sex partner—and these figures should apparently be doubled since only about half of each sex reported an opposite-sex partner). Oddly, Tjaden, *et al.* chose not to report the findings for the database of 16,000 respondents, but for what they did report, about twice as many men with same-sex as opposite-sex partners reported having been victims of domestic violence, while the relationship was reversed for women. This ‘all or none’ method of indexing domestic violence, coupled with a curious analysis of only a small subset of respondents, makes interpreting their analysis difficult. But for Tjaden, *et al.*, if ~22% of the men and ~61% of the women with both same-sex and opposite-sex partners reported having been victimized by an opposite-sex partner, a component of “victimization posturing” as well as straight reportage by these respondents may be involved.

Greenwood, Relf, Huang, Pollack, Canchola, and Catania (2002) randomly phone interviewed 2,881 men with a history of same-sex sex living in ‘gay ghettos’ in San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago. Respondents were asked whether a “boyfriend or same-gender partner during the past 5 years” had physically assaulted or raped them—22% reported physical violence and 5.1% rape. No comparison group was employed and 5

years is a metric that the other investigators of domestic violence did not employ. It is unlikely that these percentages can simply be added together and divided by 5 for a yearly estimate, but if this is done, we arrive at 5.4% of respondents reporting such victimization per year—in between the 5.7% derived utilizing the National Household Study of Drug Abuse and the 4.6% derived utilizing the U.S. Census report. “Boyfriend” or “partner” may mean something like ‘cohabitant’. Then again, the referents for these words may include someone with whom the respondent had sex at a park or in a restroom. If so, it is possible that the amount of violence within homosexual live-together relationships is similar to that encountered when having sex with pick-ups. The stories and statistics provided by Island and Letellier (1991) and Lie and Gentlewarrier (1991) suggest that violence within homosexual partnerships may be higher than that experienced outside the relationship. Sexual relationships between partnered males is associated with more frequent HIV infection (Cameron, 2002); perhaps violence is also higher among partnered homosexuals.

Further Research

Those who engage in homosexuality often live with a person with whom they are having sex. But they also may live as companions, having little or no sex with each other, and reserving their sexual encounters for ‘partners’ outside the companionate relationship. Others live in separate domiciles, but visit their partner for sex for a night or so, then some time later, the partner comes to stay and have sex for a night or two. Some are married to a member of the opposite sex who either tolerates or endorses sex outside their marriage, and some homosexuals marry each other to provide social cover for their homosexual activities (Rafkin, 1990). Many of those with whom homosexuals have sex, particularly for men, are physically engaged at public restrooms or rest areas. Are these considered ‘partners’ when they respond to questionnaires? A population-based study that only asked about the preceding 12 months and mapped out the living and sexual arrangements of those who engage in homosexuality versus those who never do should determine the total set of individuals with whom respondents had sex, and under what circumstances violence occurred, e.g., from their sexual partner with whom they lived (or to whom they were married), from their companionate partner with whom they lived, from ‘partners’ they met in restrooms or parks irrespective of where they lived, etc. Findings from such a study would go a long way toward solving the ambiguities attendant in the current published literature and whether the magnitude of violence varies whether a homosexual has a partner or not.

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Accepted July 24, 2003.