

Chapter 7

Conclusions

The Local Findings in a National Context

Figure 3 summarises the incidence of homophobia locally and nationally.

Figure 3: Summary of Incidence of Homophobia Locally and Nationally

	Berkshire Anti-Homophobia Group Study (%)	Other British Studies (1) (%)
Verbal Abuse	65	65
Physical Abuse	30	35
Harassment	23	47
Sexual Abuse	26	

Note: (1) Mean figure of thirteen studies in Britain between 1980-97, see pages 8-10.

Figure 4 summarises the levels of reporting of homophobic crime to the police.

Figure 4: Summary of Levels of Reporting of Homophobic Crime

	Berkshire Anti-Homophobia Group Study (%)	Other British Studies (2) (%)
Level of Reporting to the Police	12	27

Note: (2) See note (1) above.

The findings of the Berkshire Anti-Homophobia Group Study, summarised in Figures 3 and 4, generally reflect what other studies in other areas have found: that is that homophobia and homophobic crime are serious and widespread problems. In this study, two out of three respondents had experienced verbal abuse; one in three had experienced physical abuse; one in four had experienced harassment; and one in four had experienced sexual abuse. However, only one in ten of these respondents had reported incidents to the police. This is the one important difference between the findings of this study and others, namely that the level of reporting to the police is significantly lower in Berkshire than in other areas: twice as low in fact.

The Local Findings – Comparisons across the County

Figure 5 compares the levels of homophobic incidents and reporting across the county.

Figure 5: Comparisons of Homophobia and Reporting across the County

	Bracknell (%)	Newbury (%)	Reading (%)	Slough (%)	Windsor/Maidenhead (%)	Wokingham (%)
Verbal Abuse	50	60	66	64	77	45
Physical Abuse	10	0	29	45	38	15
Harassment	20	0	26	17	15	55
Sexual Abuse	10	20	26	38	15	36
Level of Reporting to the Police	0	0	13	12	0	18

Meaningful comparison between the different towns in the county, in terms of the level of homophobia and reporting, is not possible given that there is not equivalent weighting between each area (in terms of the numbers of respondents), and the fact that the samples in some areas were so low. Numerous hypotheses could be advanced, but given the limitations of the data, any attempts would be difficult to substantiate. It seems clear that there are some significant differences between the levels of homophobia and reporting in the different areas. Are these differences due to the size of the town? Are these differences affected by whether there is a gay commercial venue or gay community organisation in the town? These and other hypotheses could only be tested after further research and larger sampling. This is beyond the scope of this study.

Verbal Abuse

Two out of three participants in this study had been verbally abused: over half had been called names; one in four had been threatened; and a third had been shouted at. Verbal abuse was experienced more or less equally by men and women.

Most respondents had been verbally abused by a gang or stranger, although family, friends and partners were also responsible for a significant number of incidents. Most respondents had been verbally abused because of their sexuality, although some respondents were verbally abused because of their gender (both men and women) and ethnicity. It should be noted that bisexual, gay, lesbian and trans-gendered people are also Asian, Black, women, etc. and can therefore be subject to discrimination and prejudice on these bases too. Most verbal abuse had occurred on the street, although respondents had also been verbally abused at school/college, work and on the 'scene'.

Only one in ten cases of verbal abuse were reported. Many respondents seemed resigned to the fact that bisexual, gay, lesbian and trans-gendered people are verbally abused, as summed up by one respondent, "It's part of being gay".

Physical Abuse

Almost one third of respondents had been physically abused: almost one in five had been beaten up; one in eight had been hit and similar numbers of people had been kicked, pushed and had had things thrown at them. Physical abuse was experienced more or less equally by men and women.

Most respondents had been physically abused by a gang or stranger. One in eight respondents were the victims of domestic violence, either within their family or from a partner. Most respondents had been physically abused because of their sexuality, especially men. Most respondents had been physically abused on the street, although significant numbers had been physically abused at school/college and even at work.

Only one in ten cases of physical abuse were reported. Again, respondents were either resigned to the fact, or were too frightened to act.

Harassment

One in four respondents had been harassed, men and women equally.

Most respondents had been harassed by a gang or stranger, most because of their sexuality, and most of this harassment occurred at home or work.

Only one in four cases of harassment were reported.

Sexual Abuse

One in five respondents had been sexually abused, significantly more women than men. One in ten respondents had been raped.

Most respondents had been sexually abused by a stranger, although family, friends and partners were also responsible for a significant number of incidents. This study also found evidence of child abuse, and organised paedophilia. Most sexual abuse occurred at home and on the street, although ten men had been sexually abused on the 'scene'.

Only one in five cases of sexual abuse were reported. Respondents generally felt either too ashamed, fearful or sceptical to report.

Reporting Incidents to the Police

When asked about the police response to their reporting, most respondents stated that the police were supportive. Only in a minority of cases did respondents state they received a hostile response. When asked about who they would report any future incidents to, most said the police. However, when those respondents who did not report were asked why, several obviously perceived that the response of the police would be hostile. There was a perception that the police would be hostile and unsympathetic. As this was confirmed in a minority of cases, it is easy to see how this becomes the prevailing view.

Reporting Incidents Elsewhere

Several respondents stated that they would report any future incidents to bisexual, gay and lesbian community organisations rather than the police.

Requested Support

Several respondents requested specific support services in the form of counselling, one-to-one support, and an anonymous reporting line. Three respondents requested more support from schools.

Fear of Crime

A majority of respondents were fearful of crime on the streets or on transport at night. A significant number were also fearful when leaving bisexual, gay and lesbian commercial venues. There was therefore a general fear of crime, a fear of crime in a specific context (i.e. leaving venues) and there was evidence of a fear of crime as a result of being targeted because of sexuality.

General Comments

Evidence from this study and others suggests that bisexual, gay, lesbian and trans-gendered victims of homophobia and homophobic crime are often reluctant to report incidents to the police, or other agencies. This is plainly reflected in the low reporting rate.

Several factors seem to be at play: the victims of homophobia and homophobic crime often seem to lack confidence and trust in the police, perceiving them as homophobic; they often seem to fear the consequences of 'coming out' as gay, etc. when reporting incidents; they often seem to fear the consequences of being 'outed' to others; and they seem to worry about what will

happen to the information they disclose when they do report incidents. This study found evidence to support all these assertions. Reporting, and reluctance to report, are obviously central issues to beginning to tackle the problems of homophobia and homophobic crime – which can be categorised as ‘hidden crime’ given the widespread silence of victims. When crime is not reported, homophobia and homophobic crime go unchallenged. Under-reporting also creates the myth that they are non-issues, a view that is plainly contradicted by the evidence.

It should be noted that homophobia and homophobic crime are not ‘male’ issues; this study (and others) found an equal number of women who are victims too.

It should also be noted that bisexual, gay, lesbian and trans-gendered people are not just the victims of crime, they are also the perpetrators. This study found several cases of same-sex domestic violence and a number of incidents of abuse occurred on the ‘scene’. In this sense, it is not helpful to see the bisexual, gay, lesbian and trans-gendered community one dimensionally: that is, cast in the role of victim.

Tackling homophobic abuse, bullying, harassment, intimidation and violence – which are hate crimes – is not just a matter of social justice. It is also a quality-of-service issue. Bisexual, gay, lesbian and trans-gendered people should be able to live without fear, and should be able to expect the same quality of service from the police (and other agencies charged with their individual and community safety) as other sections of society expect.

Homophobia and homophobic crime create a climate of fear, for individuals and the bisexual, gay, lesbian and trans-gendered community as a whole. This fear encourages silence. This silence reinforces invisibility. Invisibility reinforces assumptions, myths and negative attitudes. They legitimise abuse, harassment and violence. This is a vicious circle that needs to be broken.

Recommendations

- (1) A Homophobic Incidents Forum should be established. This forum should have an open membership; open to interested individuals and representatives from statutory and voluntary sector agencies. Members should include representatives from the bisexual, gay, lesbian and trans-gendered community; local authorities (community safety, housing, social services, youth service, etc); Thames Valley Police (from each police area, homophobia liaison officers, etc); and the voluntary sector (Victim Support, etc). Its aim would be to facilitate and promote dialogue and improve local services. It would act as a point-of-contact between the bisexual, gay, lesbian and trans-gendered community – often hard-to-reach and socially excluded – and statutory and voluntary sector agencies.
- (2) A Homophobia Reporting Service should be established. This service would compliment those provided by statutory organisations by encouraging people to report incidents, using community-based organisations known and trusted by the bisexual, gay, lesbian and trans-gendered community. This service would offer the victims of homophobia and homophobic crime the opportunity to *anonymously* and *confidentially* register incidents. Those staffing this service would monitor and record incidents, and offer victims appropriate and sensitive support services.
- (3) The bisexual, gay, lesbian and trans-gendered community and statutory and voluntary agencies should be made aware of the Homophobic Incidents Forum and the Homophobia Reporting Service. They should also be encouraged to promote these services. Particular attention should be paid to the county's police service, probation service, prison service, secondary schools, social services (including those in care), and youth services. In addition to targeted publicity, universal media should also be employed.
- (4) Each police area in Berkshire should nominate a homophobia liaison officer. These officers would then be responsible for collating and interpreting information from the Homophobia Reporting Service. They would then disseminate this information to the relevant sections of their police area. These officers would also liaise with the Berkshire Anti-Homophobia Group concerning police response, both in terms of operations and policy.
- (5) Existing and new police officers (and other statutory and voluntary sector workers) should be made aware of this study and its findings, and their implications for practice, both in terms of service provision and workplace conduct and policy.

- (6) Training on issues around homophobia, homophobic violence and sexuality should be provided for existing and new police officers (and other statutory and voluntary sector workers) as part of their core training. This training should particularly focus on attitudes, myths, stereotyping, and good practice.
- (7) The Thames Valley Police document, *Homophobia: A Guide for Police Officers*, should be adopted and distributed throughout the Force, to existing and new police officers.
- (8) All secondary schools in Berkshire should ensure that their schools are safe environments for bisexuals, gays and lesbians. Sexuality should be covered in the school's bullying policy; governors and teachers should receive training on homophobia and other sexuality issues; and information about bisexual, gay and lesbian helping organisations should be made available to all students.
- (9) Statutory and voluntary sector agencies should review their policies, procedures and training provision to ensure that homophobia, homophobic crime and sexuality issues are acknowledged and included. *Resources and staff permitting*, the Berkshire Anti-Homophobia Group could be used for advice, consultation, information, and the provision of training.
- (10) The policing of public sex environments (cottages and cruising areas) should be conducted in an appropriate and sensitive manner by experienced officers with input from sexual health outreach workers and other interested parties (for example, youth workers). Criminalisation should be avoided as it does not address the issue³. Alternative solutions need to be found, in full consultation with the Berkshire Anti-Homophobia Group. Windsor and Maidenhead Police Area's 'Policy on Policing Public Sex Areas: A Phased Problem-Solving Multi-Agency Approach' offers a model in this respect.
- (11) The Berkshire Anti-Homophobia Group should develop and maintain links with other local fora concerned with other forms of hate crime and hidden crime. Examples include the Domestic Violence Forum and Racial Attacks Forum in Reading.
- (12) Local authorities' and police areas' crime and disorder audits and strategies should make full use of this study's findings, and consult with the Berkshire Anti-Homophobia Group when appropriate.

³ Indeed the Home Office announced in February 1999 that it is conducting a review of sexual offences legislation which may lead to the abolition of gross indecency. "For years these laws have been used to persecute gay men". In 1997, the number of men in England and Wales charged with gross indecency – which usually related to consenting gay sex in cottages or cruising areas – totalled 551. This was a 24 per cent fall on the previous year (Northmore,1999).

- (13) The Berkshire Anti-Homophobia Group should obtain funding for a development project, employing a full-time development worker with administrative support, to further the work of the Group.