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Garda Research Unit

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Final report

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# **A review of research on victimisation of the gay and lesbian community in Ireland**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report examines overseas research dealing with hate crimes against the gay community and questions whether or not similar research should be conducted here.

The key issues surrounding the violence and harassment of gay men and lesbians are known, publicised and readily acknowledged. Missing, however, are the specifics that can only emerge from empirical research. We know little about experiences of victimisation and the profile of perpetrators of hate crimes in Ireland. It is unclear to what extent cultural and social differences might result in research findings in Ireland that are different from those found in other countries.

Designing reliable and valid research is a significant challenge. Accessing a representative sample of the gay community has posed an almost insurmountable obstacle for researchers in the past, with most studies resorting to convenience sampling through representative groups or gay-events. The extent to which experiences of victimisation among this highly visible and active section of the community differs from the gay community as a whole is unclear but poses concerns for researchers.

The report concludes that there is a strong case for additional research in Ireland, taking account of the inherent research design difficulties.

### **1. INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>**

Since the 1980s there has been a growing awareness of the social exclusion, discrimination and deprivation encountered by the Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual (GLB) community in Irish society. In the last decade progress has been made with the adoption of legislation (Employment Equality Act 1998 & Equal Status Act, 2000) that affords some protection against discrimination, and policy formulation that reflects the needs of the community in general.

The Advisory Committee on Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Issues has been at the coalface in these endeavours. Under the auspices of the Equality Authority, the committee examined the nature of discrimination faced by gay men and lesbians, and through examinations of best practices developed abroad, made recommendations for proactive responses by the Irish Government. Their first report, *Implementing Equality for Lesbians, Gays and Bisexuals* (The Equality Authority, 2002) examined issues relevant to the community in seven areas: empowerment; equality; partnership rights; health; education; youth services; employment and training; services and; violence and harassment. This report deals with the 'violence and harassment' aspect of the Equality Authority report.

Since the 1980s a plethora of studies conducted in the US (Herek, 1989), Australia (Cox, 1990 & 1994), and the UK (Mason and Palmer, 1996) have been published that examine the extent and nature of victimisation experienced by the gay, lesbian and bisexual (GLB) community. In the main the research focused on crimes perpetrated in response to the victim's perceived sexuality (i.e. hate or bias crimes) and found that more than seventy percent of gay men and lesbians experience verbal

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<sup>1</sup> This report is based on an earlier document published in the *Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies* (see Sarma, K. (2004). Chasing a rainbow: victimisation of the gay and lesbian community in Ireland. *Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies*).

harassment and a quarter physical violence (Herek, 1992; Berrill, 1992; Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995).

Also emerging from the research is the concept that the GLB community require a specialised policing response even when the victimisation experienced is unrelated to their perceived sexuality. Fear of being 'outed' or of suffering further victimisation or prejudice, either at the hands of investigating officers or the perpetrator, means that they require a particularly sensitive approach by police officers (Richardson, 1995).

Similar studies have been conducted in Ireland, although in the main they have focused almost solely on hate crimes and have lacked some of the academic rigour that has characterised the more credible research conducted elsewhere. As a result, we have only limited understanding of the GLB community's experience of victimisation here and have based our responses on international rather than Irish-specific research.

Yet the value of such research is considerable. Gay-hate crimes appear to be the most common form of hate crime perpetrated and seem to be on the increase (Tomsen, 1996; Jenness & Broad, 1997). When conducted on a rollover basis research permits an examination of trends over time and may identify particularly serious experiences that require direct and timely intervention by the police and other service providers. Results may serve as performance indicators in general, measure the success of specific initiatives and be used in promoting awareness of the experiences of the gay community.

This paper examines existing research on victimisation of the gay community, methodological barriers that have been encountered, and the possible form Irish research could take. Before proceeding it is important to note that the vast majority of the research conducted in this area has examined the phenomenon of 'gay hate-crime', and based on the prevalence with which members of the gay community report that they were targeted by an offender who was motivated by some form of anti-gay prejudice. Unless otherwise stated, therefore, victimisation figures presented in the studies reviewed below relate to hate-crime victimisation.

## **2. RESEARCH ON VICTIMISATION OF THE GAY AND LESBIAN COMMUNITY**

Successive studies from different countries have consistently reported that the GLB community experiences a high level of victimisation. Two of the most widely cited studies in the area were conducted in the US in the early 1990s and together provide an excellent overview of the levels of victimisation and intimidation reported by gay men and lesbians and the methodology traditionally employed in hate-crime research of this nature.

Herek, Gillis, Cogan and Glunt (1997) surveyed 150 gay men and lesbians attending a gay street-fair in Sacramento in 1993, and conducted follow-up interviews with 45 of this sample. Apparently the researchers were able to attract respondents through a booth rented by the research team. Each participant was given \$5 and offered a drink in return for participation. Interviewees received a further \$10.

Forty-one percent stated that they had suffered crime victimisation due to their sexual orientation at least once since the age of 16. Seven percent of gay and bisexual men had been assaulted with a weapon as a result of their sexuality, and similarly high

levels of victimisation were recorded for burglary (22%), vandalism (19%), sexual assault (14%), attempted sexual assault (15%) and robbery (8%). Fifteen percent of lesbians and bisexual women had been assaulted with a weapon. One in five (21%) had been sexually assaulted, 24 percent had been burgled and 15 percent had property vandalised. Perhaps most startling was the finding that seven percent of females and eight percent of males had witnessed the murder of a loved one that they believed was related to being gay.

In a subsequent study Herek, Gillis and Cogan (1999) recruited a sample of 1170 women and 1089 men living in Sacramento, California. Again convenience sampling was employed with subjects recruited through representative groups, at gay public venues (pubs and cafes), at gay-events, and through leaflets distributed throughout the community. Subjects employed in the earlier study were also used.

The questionnaire administered addressed victimisation experiences, psychological well-being and world-views that might be affected by victimisation. Nineteen percent of lesbians and 28 percent of gay men reported that they had been victimised at least once during their adult life as a result of their sexual orientation. Thirteen percent of gay men had suffered physical assault, 12 percent property crime and 4 percent sexual assault. Hate-related crimes against lesbians were less prevalent but nonetheless worryingly high. Three percent had been sexually assaulted, seven percent physically assaulted and nine percent had experienced property crime that they believed had been hate-motivated.

More than half (56%) of the respondents reported experiencing verbal harassment in the preceding 12 months, 17 percent were followed or chased, 19 percent were threatened with violence, 5 were spat at, and 12 percent had an object thrown at them. In each case, gay men were more likely to have been targeted than lesbians.

In an earlier review of available research on anti-gay crime in the US, Herek (1989) reported that studies consistently found that more than 23 percent of gay men experienced physical assaults due to their sexuality (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Anderson, 1982; Gross, Aurand & Addesa, 1988). More than 73 percent of all those surveyed reported being subjected to verbal harassment. In a similar review conducted three years later, Herek (1992) reported that approximately 80 percent of gay men and lesbians experienced verbal harassment, 44 percent verbal threats, 33 percent were chased or followed, 25 percent were pelted with objects and a quarter (25%) were physically assaulted (for additional reviews reporting concordant results, see Berrill (1992) and Pilkington & D'Augelli (1995)).

Similar research has been conducted in Australia. In 1988 the Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby in Sydney placed advertisements in the press and on State radio and television inviting members of the gay community who had been victimised to participate in hate-crimes research. Readers were asked to make contact with researchers through a free phone number and a victimisation questionnaire was administered over the telephone by 'experienced counsellors from the Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service and Lesbian Line' (Cox, 1990, p. 12).

Between November 1988 and April 1989 67 individuals completed the questionnaire. Seventy-three percent of these sustained some form of physical injury during the victimisation and 48 percent were verbally abused. Almost one fifth (17%) were attacked with a weapon, most commonly an implement of convenience such as a bottle, and 22 percent were robbed during the incident. Less than half (48%) reported the crime to the police. Similar research conducted in Australia reported comparable

results (see Schembri, 1992; Cox, 1994; Sandroussi and Thompson, 1995; Van Reyk, 1996).

The most authoritative study conducted in the UK involved the surveying of a large cohort (n=4216) of gay men, lesbians and bisexuals (Mason & Palmer, 1996), with questionnaires distributed through gay networks and the print media. Thirty-four percent of males and 24 percent of females had experienced violence related to their sexuality in the preceding 5 years. Nine percent of respondents stated that they had been raped and 32 percent had been subjected to harassment, including blackmail (12%), vandalism (6%) and hate mail (4%). Seventy-three percent of respondents had been verbally abused in the preceding 5 years.

Perhaps of greatest concern was evidence that it was those under 18 years of age that were most at risk. Almost half (48%) of this group had been the victim of physical violence and 61 percent had been harassed.

Just 31 percent of victims of violence reported the incident to the police with willingness to report increasing with increasing severity of attack. For example, just 25 percent of those who had an object thrown at them went to the police in contrast to 50 percent who were beaten up and 61 percent who needed medical attention.

Recent research conducted in Northern Ireland (Jarman & Tennant, 2003) reported higher levels of homophobic harassment and violence than recorded in other parts of the UK and Ireland. In a survey of 186 gay men and lesbians recruited through gay networks, 71 percent reported verbal abuse and 55 percent violence. Forms of violence experienced included being assaulted (18%), being targeted with a thrown missile (35%) and being spat at (18%).

The most widely cited research conducted in Ireland was published by the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN, 1995). Results were based on a sample of 150 gay men and lesbians who completed a detailed questionnaire relating to a number of different issues including violence and harassment and supplemented with interviews with key informants. A quarter of respondents had been the victim of physical assault due to their sexuality and 11 percent had been repeat victims (i.e. had experienced more than one such incident). Forty-one percent had been threatened with violence, 35 percent had been chased and 9 percent had been wounded with a weapon. Seventy-nine percent reported being subjected to verbal harassment because of their perceived sexuality.

In addition to examining the extent and nature of bias-crimes, many of the aforementioned studies have examined the perpetrators involved. The profile that emerges is that perpetrators of gay hate crimes tend to be male and aged between late teens and late 20s (Cox, 1990; Comstock, 1991; Schembri, 1992; Cox 1994; Herek, Gillis, Cogan & Glunt, 1997; Mauzos & Thompson, 2000). Some differences emerge when attacks on gay men and lesbians are examined in isolation. Lesbians are more likely to suffer victimisation in their private residence or place of work and at the hands of someone they know. Gay men, on the other hand, tend to be the victims of 'stranger crimes' involving multiple assailants that occur in public places (see in general Cox, 1990; Comstock 1991; Schembri, 1992; Cox 1994; Mason and Palmer, 1996; Herek, Gillis, Cogan & Glunt, 1997; Mauzos and Thompson, 2000; Mason, 2002).

Finally, researchers have noted that gay men and lesbians subjected to bias crimes can suffer quite serious psychological consequences. Such consequences include all the psychological trauma experienced by victims of non-bias crimes, but is often

more marked as the incident is inherently anchored in the personal identity of the victim leaving him/her feeling even more violated and insecure (see Garnets, Herek & Levy, 1992; Hershberger and D'Augelli, 1995; Herek et al, 1997; Franklin, 2000). In one study researchers compared psychological distress among gay men, lesbians and bisexuals who had experienced bias crimes, non-bias crimes and those who had not experienced victimisation (Herek, Gillis and Cogan, 1999). They found that victims of bias crimes that occurred in the preceding 5 years had significantly higher levels of psychological distress (depressive symptoms, traumatic stress symptoms, anxiety and anger) than those who had not experienced crime, those who had experienced bias crimes that occurred more than 5 years previously, and those who had experienced non-bias crimes within the 5 year period. Moreover, those who had experienced bias-crimes gave significantly lower ratings than other participants on a number of belief values including the benevolence of people and self-mastery.

The picture that emerges from these studies is that the level of gay-hate related violence and harassment being experienced by the GLB community is of great concern indeed. There appears to be some concordance across studies with approximately a quarter of those surveyed suffering a physical attack due to their perceived sexuality and between 73 and 79 percent experiencing verbal harassment. The GLEN research dealing with gay victimisation in Ireland used a relatively small sample size, but did generate results that were largely in line with similar studies conducted in the US, UK and Australia. However, and as discussed in some detail later, in the absence of additional research it is difficult to draw any definitive conclusions as to the true extent of the problem in Ireland.

Absent from the Irish research is any attempt to identify the core characteristics of those who perpetrate bias-crimes, or indeed to address the not insignificant psychological consequences that arise in the wake of being victimised. Again, whilst the international research has provided valuable information on both aspects of gay hate crimes, the extent to which we can draw inferences as to the situation here is unclear.

Finally, very few international studies and no Irish research has addressed the gay community's experiences of every-day crime and the extent to which their sexual orientation, and their fear that this will be exposed or lead to further victimisation or prejudice, influences their willingness to report incidences to the police. It is certainly obvious that they require specialised police responses, a fact that is illustrated in recent collaboration between the Gardaí and the gay community that led to the training and appointing of Gay Liaison Officers throughout the country.

### **3. CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL BARRIERS TO RESEARCH**

Before suggesting the form such research might take, it is pertinent to note the not insignificant conceptual and methodological problems likely to be encountered along the way. In addition to the barriers to research encountered by almost all crime researchers, studies attempting to understand the gay and lesbian community face obstacles specific to that target population. The primary problem is that it is almost impossible to recruit a representative sample. There are two principal difficulties here. First, a significant proportion of gay men and lesbians are 'hidden' from researchers due to their unwillingness to publicly disclose their sexuality (Herek, 1992; Berk, Boyd & Hamner, 1992; GLEN, 1995). Thus, studies such as those conducted by Herek et al (1997 & 1999), that have accessed subjects through gay events and representative groups, are based on responses from the most visible section of the gay community. This may introduce a skewing effect that inflates the

true level of victimisation and arising from the possibility that being openly gay is a predisposition for victimisation.

Second, even within the gay community itself, there are specific sample sub-populations that are difficult to incorporate into a wider sample design. For instance, some men who have sex with men may be 'non disclosers' who avoid large gay social networks and meet partners at public sex environments or venues (such as cruising areas, saunas etc). This section of the gay population is very visible and often the target of anti-gay assaults yet has been ignored in research to date that has relied almost completely on gay social and representative networks to generate their sample lists. As these individuals do not publicly identify as gay, and may be fearful of being 'outed', they may decline to participate in surveys. For the same reason they may be unwilling to report incidents to the police. Additional sub-groups that are often ignored in this research include young teenagers and members of refugee or asylum-seeking communities.

There are also concerns relating to the ability of the victim to accurately recall traumatic experiences in the past, their willingness to participate in the research in the first place and honestly answer questions when they do (Herek, 1989). Moreover, almost totally ignored in previous research is the fact that convenience sampling fails to capture those in society who are heterosexual but suffer victimisation because they were perceived to have been gay and thus by definition are hate-crimes (see for example, Van Reyk, 1996; Herek, 1989).

The second major source of statistics in the area derives from law enforcement records and again is of insufficient quality to permit genuinely reliable and valid conclusions to be drawn. Whilst useful in the examination of trends over time, it is generally accepted that police statistics significantly under-represent the true extent of crime incidents occurring (Herek, 1989; Berk, Boyd & Hamner, 1992; Moran & Sharpe, 2002). Herek, Gillis and Cogan (1999) found that victims were less likely to report bias crimes than non-bias crimes and may lack trust in the police or fear further victimisation resulting from reporting.

In conclusion thus far, despite the presence of a vast amount of international literature on the subject, beyond concluding that victimisation of the gay and lesbian community appears to be a serious problem in Ireland, it is difficult to make assertions with any great degree of confidence. The extent to which convenience sampling and other methodological considerations skew research findings is unclear as is the validity of drawing inferences across socio-political and cultural environments. The GLEN (1995) research, whilst useful in its own right as exploratory research in the area, has limitations in that it 'may not be statistically representative' (p. xii) of experiences of the gay and lesbian community in Ireland.

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

Based on this cursory examination of existing research and methodological difficulties surrounding studies of this nature, a number of observations can be offered. First, despite using a variety of different methodologies and sampling populations from different countries, there is a large degree of consistency in the research findings across studies. In terms of the Irish research, the GLEN study (1995) produced results that echoed those presented in the much larger UK study conducted by Mason and Palmer (1996). With this consistency in mind, it is tempting to conclude that there is little need for additional research in the area in Ireland.

There are problems with this assertion. Perhaps most obvious, the GLEN research was conducted eight years ago and according to gay-representative groups it is likely that victimisation experiences of the gay community have changed somewhat over that time. Indeed there is empirical evidence that suggests that anti-gay crime levels can increase dramatically with Herek (1989) reporting a 100 percent increase in the US between 1984 and 1987. Little is known of the evolution of such behaviours in Ireland.

Second, Ireland may have specific cultural and social characteristics that set it apart from other societies and that impact on the nature of victimisation experienced by gay men and lesbians here. Certainly the organised anti-gay movements so prevalent in the UK and US have failed to gain a foothold in Ireland and attacks against that community appear to be ones of opportunity rather than design. Prejudice, intolerance and conservatism also vary quite widely across societies.

Third, we simply do not know enough about the gay community's experiences of crime in Ireland. It is unwise to rely on the GLEN research for this information when reports from abroad stress that multiple studies are required that paint a detailed picture of the phenomenon. International experience is that this is a prerequisite to putting in place an effective and sophisticated response. For example, in *Hate Crimes: Confronting Violence Against Lesbians and Gay Men*, two of the most authoritative writers in the field, Gregory Herek and Kevin Berrill, recount early efforts to create public awareness of the seriousness of gay-related hate crimes in the US. Looking back at their achievements, they stress that 'official documentation of the problem of anti-gay violence was needed to foster an adequate government response' (Herek & Berrill, 1992, p. 5) which ultimately led to the lobbying of federal and State institutions to fund research and the formulation of the Hate Crimes Statistics Act 1990 – legislation that placed legal obligations on federal and State law enforcement agencies in the area of recording hate crimes. It could be argued that the relative absence of similar research in Ireland has hampered our response to the problem.

A fourth problem relates to the almost complete reliance on convenience sampling techniques in generating a sample of the gay community. As a result, we are unsure just how representative the reported experiences are of the gay community in general. The GLEN research is useful, but without additional studies it is unclear just how externally valid the results are.

There is also a need to look beyond the phenomenon of 'hate crimes' and examine the wider victimisation experiences of the gay community. Such research would prove invaluable to the Garda Síochána in its efforts to provide a more sophisticated service to the GLB community.

There are additional holes in our knowledge of related crimes. Victimisation of Ireland's transgender community, for instance, has been totally ignored to date, as has the extent to which those associated with gay people (friends, children and family) suffer victimisation as a result of this association.

Assuming that research on the victimisation of the gay community in Ireland is desired, therefore, the immediate concern is the form it should take. One option is to attempt to recruit a cohort of gay men and women through a large victimisation survey. Such surveys are conducted in Ireland from time to time and may provide an opportunity to monitor victimisation on a roll-over basis.

Even this apparently obvious approach is subject to some confounding variables. In addition to the problems faced by any victimisation survey, such as self-report bias and recall errors, some gay and lesbian respondents may be reluctant to identify themselves as such in a phone conversation or postal survey – where doing so poses a risk of being ‘outed’.

Additionally, whilst the sample size may be large enough to measure the prevalence and incidence of victimisation of gay men and women, and their attitudes and fears, it may be too small to draw more specific inferences about their experiences. Take the following hypothetical example:

*In a survey of 10000 respondents, 1000 identified as being gay or lesbian and 140 (14%) of these reported being victimised in the previous 12 months. Of this group, 21 (2.1%) said that they had experienced domestic violence, 40 (4%) physical assault on the street and 7 (.7%) sexual assault in a ‘cruising area’.*

Based on this example, we can be fairly confident that the victimisation level of 14 percent represents the national figure (within a narrow margin of error or ‘confidence level’). The difficulty arises when attempting to look at the specific nature of these victimisations, such as the extent of domestic violence or physical or sexual assault where the number of victims is small and thus the confidence levels or margins of error large. So whilst we can be confident that the 14 percent figure is accurate within a range of, say, +-3 percent, the sexual assault level may be accurate within a range of +-20 percent and thus be of little use.

Bearing this in mind, and the fact that large nationally representative surveys are costly to administer, research using convenience sampling through representative groups or gay events becomes much more attractive. This is particularly so when the object of the research is not to present hard figures, but rather gain an understanding of the nature of victimisations.

Ideally both avenues towards reaching an understanding of victimisation of the gay community in Ireland should be explored. Large victimisation surveys can provide an overall measure of the prevalence of crime being experienced by gay men and lesbians, whilst research conducted through representative groups can yield more detailed information about these experiences and the perpetrators of hate crimes.

It is also important to consider who should be tasked with overseeing the administration of such research. The lesson from abroad is that neither the police nor the GLB community are in the best position in this regard. Findings are often greeted with some scepticism by those who perceive findings as being politically motivated. This said, neither can the research be completed without the cooperation of both. Recent work conducted by the Centre for Social and Economic Research (CSER), Dublin Institute of Technology, on *The Number, Profile and Progression Routes of Homeless Persons Before the Courts* has been particularly successful and may offer an attractive multi-agency model for future research on this subject. The CSER study was commissioned by the Probation and Welfare Service and has benefited from the guidance of a research advisory committee drawn from different government and academic sectors. A similar strategy would ensure that gay representative groups and other concerned groups could have input into the direction that the research would take without impacting on the perceived independence of the findings and conclusions.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The case for additional research in Ireland, thus, is strong. It is not that senior management across the public and civil service sectors are unaware of the issues surrounding the violence and harassment of gay men and lesbians - the key issues are known, publicised and readily acknowledged. Legislation has been enacted (Employment Equality Act 1998 & Equal Status Act, 2000) that affords some protection against discrimination, and policies formulated that reflect the needs of the community in general. Groups such as the Equality Authority (2002) and the National Economic and Social Forum (2003) have published a number of reports that have paved the way for improved police service.

Missing, however, are the specifics that can only emerge from empirical research. The Garda Síochána has recognised that a more sensitive and sophisticated policing response in dealing with crimes against the gay community is required – as illustrated in the Gay and Lesbian Liaison Scheme. But beyond that, we know little about their experiences of victimisation.

The Gardaí would also benefit from studies into those who perpetrate hate crimes. Again it is likely that profiles developed elsewhere have applicability here, but it is unclear to what extent cultural and social differences may result in slightly different assailant characteristics. As noted earlier, in the US and UK there are organised groups that actively and openly support attacks against gay men and lesbians, a particularly ugly aspect of anti-gay culture that has not yet established a foothold in Ireland. Such differences hint at the possibility that perpetrator profiles have geo-specific or cultural-specific nuances that cannot be identified in the absence of research. In any case, identification of those most likely to perpetrate hate-crimes simultaneously brings the police into contact with high-risk offenders and provides an opportunity to put educational programmes in place that undermine prevailing prejudices.

Designing reliable and valid research poses a much more difficult problem. Accessing a representative sample of the gay community has posed an almost insurmountable obstacle for researchers in the past, with most studies resorting to convenience sampling through representative groups or gay-events. The extent to which experiences of victimisation among this highly visible and active section of the community differs from the gay community as a whole is unclear but poses concerns for researchers.

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