

Gay and Bisexual Men's Perceptions of Police Helpfulness in Response to Male-Male Intimate Partner Violence

Introduction

Recent research suggests that gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (MSM) experience intimate partner violence (IPV) at rates similar to or higher than those documented among heterosexual women. However, little to nothing is known about MSM's perceptions of IPV within their community, or the differences between their perceptions of same-sex IPV and heterosexual IPV.

Methods

This study was approved by Emory University's ethics committee (IRB). Sexually active MSM over the age of 18 were systematically recruited over five months in 2011 in Atlanta, GA using venue-based sampling. Venue-based sampling is a derivative of time-space sampling, in which sampling occurs within prescribed blocks of time at particular venues. As a method to access hard-to-reach population, venue-based recruitment is a process in which a sampling frame of venue-time units is created through formative research with key informants and community members. Potential participants were interviewed outside venues by study staff and eligible men were given information on how to complete the study survey. After obtaining consent, participants completed an anonymous, web-based survey approximately twenty minutes in length, covering several topics, including their perceptions of three components of partner violence among gay/bisexual men: the severity of partner violence (*"How big of a problem do you think partner violence is among gay/bisexual men?"*), commonness of partner violence (*"How common do you think partner violence is among gay/bisexual men?"*), and helpfulness of a police response (*"If a gay/bisexual man were experiencing partner violence and contacted the police, how helpful do you think the police would be in assisting him?"*). These three perceptions were also assessed for heterosexual women. Each question was assessed using a five-point Likert scale, after which responses were coded into positive, natural, or negative – for example, in response to police helpfulness, 'very helpful' and 'helpful,' 'neither helpful nor unhelpful,' and 'unhelpful' or 'very unhelpful.'

Internalized homophobia was quantified using a subset of the Gay Identity Scale (GIS) (Brady & Busse, 1994), a validated scale that assesses acceptance of homosexual feelings and thoughts, as well as how open a respondent is about his homosexuality with family, friends, and associates. From these data, an index variable of internalized homophobia was created. No points were added to the index for neutral responses to any scale item. Positive point values were assigned to agreement with internally homophobic sentiments, and negative points were assigned for agreement with statements of gay pride. Thus, increasing index score was correlated to a decreased amount of pride and acceptance of homosexual thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Experiences of homophobic discrimination were assessed by creating an index scale of reported responses to ten possible experiences of discrimination due to sexual orientation based on previous studies (Díaz et al., 2001): being made fun of as a child, experiencing violence as a child, being made fun of as an adult, experiencing violence as an adult, hearing as a child that gay men would grow up alone, hearing as a child that gays are not normal, feeling that your gayness hurt your family as a child, having to pretend to be straight, experiencing job discrimination, and having to move away from family. Respondents were awarded one point for each positive response.

Differences in responses based on perceptions of IPV for heterosexual women versus gay men were assessed using chi-square testing. Correlates of a comparatively negative view of police helpfulness were identified using a logistic regression model. The model included age (18-24, 25-34, 35-44, and >44), race (White non-Hispanic, Black non-Hispanic, and Latino/Hispanic or Other), sexual orientation (gay/homosexual or bisexual), education level (High School or less, some college or 2-year degree, or college/university or more), employment status, HIV status, and receipt of either physical or sexual partner violence in the past 12 months, with the key covariates of interest being the indices of internalized homophobia and homophobic discrimination.

Results

A total of 1,074 men completed the survey. Of these, 1,041 had complete data for all covariates of interest and were included in the analysis. The sample was predominately young (51% under 35 years of age), gay-identified (11% bisexual-identified), racially diverse (54% non-White), educated (48% college or more), and part- or full-time employed (77%). Approximately one-quarter (24.3%) of the sample reported positive HIV status, and 37.3% of the sample reported having three or more anal sex partners in the previous six months.

When comparing the issues of partner violence among heterosexual women versus among gay/bisexual men, the majority of respondents reported identical perceptions of the commonality of IPV for gay/bisexual men and heterosexual women (82.5%), and identical perceptions of the magnitude of the IPV problem among gay/bisexual men compared to heterosexual women (84.3%) (**Table 1**). However, perceptions of police helpfulness showed significant heterogeneity. Only 39.7% of respondents reported identical perceptions of police helpfulness when comparing gay/bisexual men and heterosexual women. Of the majority that reported divergent perceptions, 97.0% reported that contacting the police would be *less* helpful for a gay/bisexual men experiencing partner violence compared to a heterosexual woman experiencing partner violence. Therefore, 58.5% of the sample in total viewed the police as less helpful towards gay/bisexual men than heterosexual women in cases of intimate partner violence.

Table 1. Comparative perceptions of commonness of IPV, severity of IPV, and police helpfulness in response to IPV for gay/bisexual men versus heterosexual women

	%	n
<i>How common is partner violence among gay/bisexual men?</i>		
More common than respondent's perception for women	8.0	83
As common as respondent's perception for women	82.5	859
Less common than respondent's perception for women	9.5	99
Chi-square p-value	0.0000	
<i>How big of a problem is part violence among gay/bisexual men?</i>		
Bigger problem than respondent's perception for women	5.0	62
Same problem as respondent's perception for women	84.5	877
Less of a problem than respondent's perception for women	9.8	102
Chi-square p-value	0.0000	
<i>If a gay/bisexual man were experiencing partner violence and contacted the police, how helpful would the police be?</i>		
More helpful than respondent's perception for women	1.8	19
As helpful as respondent's perception for women	39.7	413
Less helpful than respondent's perception for women	58.5	609
Chi-square p-value	0.0000	
TOTAL	100	1041

The results of the logistic regression modeling are summarized in **Table 2**. A dose-response effect was apparent in that increasing education level was correlated to increasing cynicism to police response. In other words, when compared to men without a high school diploma, men who had completed a 4-year college/university degree were 2.5 times as likely to perceive that police would be more helpful to a heterosexual female victim of IPV than to a homosexual male victim of IPV. A similar finding was documented among men who reported more forms of homophobic discrimination over the lifetime. Men with increasing scores on the homophobic discrimination index were accordingly more likely to have a negative opinion of possible police response to a homosexual male victim of IPV.

Table 2. Logistic regression results, with odds ratios and (95% Confidence Intervals). Regression outcome was reporting that police would be less helpful towards a gay/bisexual man experiencing IPV than towards a heterosexual woman experiencing IPV. Significant differences are highlighted in ***bold italics***.

Exposures	Odds Ratio (95% CI)
<i>Age</i>	
18-24	Referent (1.0)
25-34	1.27 (0.87, 1.87)
35-44	1.30 (0.86, 1.98)
45+	1.06 (0.68, 1.65)
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	
White non-Hispanic	Referent (1.0)
Black/African American non-Hispanic	0.76 (0.55, 1.04)
Hispanic/Latino or Other	0.79 (0.52, 1.20)
<i>Sexual Orientation</i>	

Gay/Homosexual	Referent (1.0)
Bisexual	0.82 (0.52, 1.29)
<i>HIV Status</i>	
Negative	Referent (1.0)
Positive	0.95 (0.68, 1.34)
Unknown	1.70 (0.95, 3.03)
<i>Employment Status</i>	
Employed	Referent (1.0)
Unemployed	0.80 (0.57, 1.12)
<i>Education</i>	
High School or Less	Referent (1.0)
Some College or 2-year degree	2.26 (1.51, 3.38)
College or More	2.59 (1.72, 3.90)
<i>Recent Partner Violence</i>	
Recent Physical and/or Sexual IPV	0.79 (0.58, 1.08)
<i>Homophobia Indices</i>	
Internalized Homophobia Index	0.99 (0.98, 0.99)
Homophobic Discrimination Index	1.12 (1.06, 1.19)

Discussion

Several conclusions can be drawn from these novel results. First, although it is only recently that same-sex IPV has become the purview of researchers and public health interventionists, gay and bisexual men perceive the severity of partner violence in their community to be on par with the severity of partner violence in the heterosexual community. Less than 10% of the sample viewed partner violence among gay/bisexual men as less of a problem or as less common compared to partner violence among heterosexual women. However, while gay/bisexual men agree upon the commonness and severity of partner violence, their perceptions of police helpfulness in response to male-male partner violence are negative overall. This result, combined with the finding that men who reported more instances of homophobic discrimination also viewed a hypothetical police response to a gay/bisexual male victim of partner violence as poorer than that for a heterosexual female victim of violence, suggest an understanding of gay men's perceptions of partner violence within their community that is in line with Meyer's (2003) theory of minority stress. Specifically, gay men's learned expectation of prejudice and rejection are likely being fueled by both a heteronormative society that views homosexuality as deviant *and* a hegemonic understanding that women, not men, are victims of partner violence. As these stressors are internalized by gay and bisexual men, this homophobia fatigue serves only to further isolate IPV victims. In truth, the actual helpfulness of a police response to a homosexual male victim of IPV is of secondary concern: if he never seeks police intervention for anticipation of futility, the helpfulness is moot. As the response to same-sex IPV emerges in courthouses, police stations, hospitals, clinics, and community centers, this homophobia fatigue among gay and bisexual men must be considered by practitioners not only as a potential barrier to success, but also as an opportunity for dialogue, modified efforts, and collaboration.