

national news

Homophobic hate crime report

Grim data documents a rising tide of homophobic hate crimes
by Katrin Snow

Gay and lesbian organizations around the country released grim data recently documenting a rising tide of homophobic hate crimes. According to Robin Kane, Public Information Manager of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute, antigay violence around the nation went up 31 percent in 1991. "As the gay and lesbian community becomes more politically active, which is necessary in order to gain civil rights," Kane said, "it also becomes a more visible target for those who hate us."

The task force released information on a total of 1,812 incidents of violence in five large U.S. cities—New York, Boston, Chicago, Minneapolis/St. Paul, and San Francisco. Kane says the rise doesn't reflect just higher reporting rates. Although statistics often jump when new antiviolence programs open, those five cities operate well-established programs. Minneapolis/St. Paul endured the sharpest rise, a 202 percent increase in homophobic violence.

Portland's Lesbian Community Project (LCP) installed the Homophobic Violence Reporting Line last July and in six weeks logged as many incidents of homophobic violence as the state of Oregon reported for the entire year in 1990. The Homophobic Violence Reporting Line and Documentation Project is an effort to document antigay and antilebian crimes that generally have not been reported to the police, largely because of the long-standing mistrust between the police and the gay community.

Both Portland's gay community and its police department say the Homophobic Violence Reporting Line is helping improve relations between them and will present a more accurate picture to the public of antigay violence. The numbers indicate that the level of violence in Portland is a little more than half that in Boston and Chicago. From July through December, there were 83 incidents targeting 114 individuals. Eleven of the perpetrators were women, 80 were men.

Of victims who identified their sexual orientation, there were 48 lesbians, 24 gay men, one bisexual, and one straight woman. Nationwide, of the 2,117 victims of homophobic attacks, 77 percent were men, 21 percent were women, and 2 percent were gender unknown.

LCP's report includes descriptions of the crimes. A sample:

>A white man on a bus started talking about "faggots," how they "could learn a lot from the OCA," and "I ain't scared of no fucking faggot."

>Two lesbians were harassed by four drunk, loud heterosexual men, who said, "You look like a big fucking dyke to me, you make me sick, you fucking dyke," and loudly talked about their penises. One grabbed his penis and pissed on the sidewalk.

>Two gay men were accosted by two heterosexual men who said, "You're fags, aren't you?" and then began hitting them, knocking one to the ground.

>A woman riding a bike was harassed by four heterosexual men in a car. "Is that a man or a dyke? Does she have tits and a pussy? Let's see!" Two of the men then got out of the car and chased her until she lost them by going into a park.

Kane said antigay political campaigns and homophobia in the nation's culture fuel hate crimes. "What they do is, they rely on stereotypes of gay and lesbian people, not true images of gay

and lesbian individuals," said Kane. "They rely on stereotypes of us which therefore lead people to believe we should be hated and also therefore we should be attacked."

Donna Red Wing, executive director of the Lesbian Community Project, charged the Oregon Citizens Alliance with fueling hate crimes in the state by mounting a ballot measure campaign that would declare homosexuality perverse and abnormal under the Oregon Constitution.

"If you believe a person is a danger to your children, it's easy to hurt that person," said Red Wing. "If you believe a person carries disease and pestilence, it's easy to deny him [or her]. And if you believe a person is perverse and abnormal, it's easy to ignore their pain."

According to the police bureau and some hotline workers, most perpetrators of hate violence are individuals, not organized bigots. But Scot Nakagawa, program coordinator for the Coalition for Human Dignity, said white supremacists are responsible for a small, violent, and influential number of hate crimes. "Organized white supremacists become significant because they use homophobia to recruit members," said Nakagawa. "Their extreme acts of violence give the green light to others with bigoted sentiments."

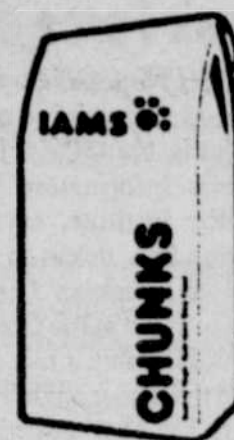
Red Wing estimated 75 percent of people reporting to LCP won't ever report to the police. "I think a lot of that has to do with OCA stuff," she said. "People don't want their name on a report that shows they're queer." Fear of being labeled "gay" in police files, fear they'll become victims a second time if employers or others find out they're gay, and a history of police disrespect squelch the voices of lesbian and gay crime victims. Gays and lesbians are probably the most frequent targets of hate crime perpetrators, according to a 1987 Justice Department report, but gay-bias crimes, while rapidly rising in numbers, are still vastly underreported nationwide. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force annual survey of gay-bias crimes in six major cities found a 42 percent increase in 1990 over 1989 and six times the number of reports to gay victim assistance organizations as to police.

Captain Roberta Webber, who heads the Portland Police Bureau's bias crimes unit, said she knew some people who report to the hotline will not report to police and are afraid of what police will do with the information, but said she's encouraged by the number who do. "One day alone a couple of weeks ago, I got two phone calls from people who had just reported to the hotline and called to report to the police bureau, and that's very encouraging."

Webber said general information from the hotline can be helpful to police, even without having a victim report, by letting them know if areas of town become frequent locations of antigay attacks. The report includes eight charges of inadequate police response and one incident of verbal abuse by a police officer. Webber said the charges would be investigated.

Lesbian and gay activists said fighting the violence means that politicians have to speak out in support of civil rights statutes and hate crimes laws including sexual orientation. Currently, only five states and 90 cities or counties include sexual orientation in civil rights statutes. Twenty states, including Oregon, and about 11 cities or counties now cover sexual orientation in hate crimes statutes.

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