

# **Out of the Closet or Under the Rug: An Analysis of Same-Sex Domestic Violence in Idaho**

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## **Abstract**

*To date, there have been a limited number of studies that focus on the events of terror and injury, identified as domestic violence, as it occurs within the lives of homosexual couples. Through a review of academic articles and an analysis of government statistical data, this paper will address the prevalence of reported incidents of domestic violence within same-sex couples in the state of Idaho as compared to those reported nationally. The incidents of same-sex domestic violence within the state of Idaho will also be compared to incidents within heterosexual couples at the state and national levels to assess the prevalence of domestic violence within same-sex couples by using heterosexual couples as the “norm”. This should enable the reader to make comparisons that enable one to understand the magnitude of domestic violence. The prevalence of such events should be evaluated to enable the enactment of programs applicable to the homosexual community that will inevitably be of benefit to all of society.*

## **Introduction**

To date, there have been a limited number of studies that focus on the events of terror and injury, identified as domestic violence, which occurs within the lives of homosexuals. Through a review of academic articles and analysis of data obtained from the U.S. Bureau of Justice and the Idaho State Police, this paper will address the issue of intimate partner violence within same-sex relationships in the state of Idaho as it compares to that within heterosexual relationships on state and national levels.

In light of current public attention given to the life-styles and social make-up of same-sex couples, one must ask if a comparison can or should be made between the domestic violence within heterosexual relationships and that within same-sex relationships. Is there a similar rate of occurrence with similar intensity? What are the reporting rates and reasons for not reporting within same-sex relationships?

## **Review of Research**

### **Definition of abuse**

Analysis of the current academic literature has found a limited amount of research on the subject of domestic violence within same-sex relationships. Most of the research found in this area specifically focused on lesbian relationships or same-sex relationships in general with very few addressing violence within gay male relationships.

Over the years, the issue of violence within a relationship has been signified by various terms, such as wife beating, spousal abuse, and intimate partner violence. Though many researchers have utilized a variety of criteria to define violence within a committed relationship, a definition of domestic violence that includes physical harm, threats of physical harm, verbal harassment and insults, failure to provide medications, property damage, threats of outing, prohibiting contact with family and friends, and coerced sexual activity would appear to be the most comprehensive definition as applied to same-sex relationships (Burke, 1998; Burke & Owen, 2006; Burke, Jordan,

& Owen, 2002). According to Claire Renzetti (1992), discussion of domestic violence must also include the issue of power, which she defines as “the ability to get others to do what one wants them to do regardless of whether or not they want to do it”, and the power imbalances that are considered a primary correlate of abuse within relationships (as cited in McClennen, Summers, & Daley, 2002, p.278).

## Patterns of abuse

Similarities can be seen between the cyclical patterns of abuse within same-sex relationships and that of heterosexuals (E. Seelau, S. Seelau, & Poorman, 2003; Burke & Owen, 2006; Burke et al., 2002; Turell, 2000). Both tend to begin with a period of “tension building” that moves to “simple assault” that may escalate into “acute battering” before returning to a “calming stage”. This cycle of abuse continues to increase in intensity and frequency as the time between stages decreases and may eventually culminate in severe injury or death to the victim (Burke & Owen, 2006, p. 7).

## Rates of abuse

While there do appear to be similarities in the pattern of abuse, the research is varied as to whether the rates of abuse are comparable. Several authors found the rate of frequency of incidents of violence within same-sex relationships to be about the same as that between heterosexuals (Kuehale & Sullivan, 2003; Mahoney, Williams, & West, 2001; Seelau et al., 2003; Turell, 2000; West, 1998). McClennen et al. (2002) also conservatively placed the lesbian victim count at approximately 500,000 per year (McClennen et al., 2002). Burke and Owen (2006), however, utilized a 2003 analysis of the National Criminal Victimization Survey as a basis for their assertion there is a higher rate of violence within same-sex relationships than that of heterosexual couples.

There appears to be some discrepancy in the research as to frequency rate comparability. Yet, there is agreement throughout the research on the similarities in the types of abuse, reasons for non-reporting, and perpetrator traits between incidents of domestic violence within lesbian couples and heterosexual couples. Though similarities have been found in the types of abuses suffered by victims in abusive same-sex relationships and that of victims in heterosexual relationships (Kuehale & Sullivan, 2003; Mahoney, Williams, & West, 2001; Renzetti, 1998; West, 1998; Worcester, 2002), Renzetti (1998) cautions, “in both lesbian and heterosexual relationships, the motivations underlying abusive behavior – manipulation, coercion, punishment, and control – are more important for understanding domestic violence than the form the abuse happens to take” (Renzetti, 1998, p. 118). To this, Worcester (2002) adds the call for identifying the motivations of abuse within the context of societal inequalities and gender roles that are promoted and perpetuated through violence.

## Failure to report

Similarities exist between the reasons for same-sex victims’ non-reporting and heterosexuals’ failure to report. Both have the fears of retaliation and not being believed by authorities along with the sense of confusion as to whether or not to get their “loved one” in trouble, mixed with the belief that the incident is a private matter (Kuehale & Sullivan, 2003). Added to those are issues of control and power, fear, and a lack of safety (Worcester, 2002). However, the lesbian victim has several unique hurdles to overcome as well as the feelings of shame and fear that are associated with all abuse (Burke & Owen, 2006; Burke et al., 2002; Kuehale & Sullivan, 2003; McClennen et al., 2002; West, 1998; Worcester, 2002).

Lesbians must face social workers who often assume only men batter and are less likely to be supported by their own peers who often refuse to believe lesbians are capable of committing abuse (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). They must face feminist assumptions that portray domestic violence as the result of patriarchy and misogyny that “often blinds feminist activists from the realities of abuse within lesbian relationships” (Ristock, 2002, p. 4). There also exists a fear of re-enforcing a homophobic society’s negative views of lesbian relationships.

Lesbians must deal with such issues of homophobia that are both internal and external. “Internalized homophobia occurs when lesbians and gay men accept heterosexual society’s negative evaluations of them and incorporate these into their self-concepts” (Renzetti, 1998, p. 122). Homophobia also may lead to isolation and an increased dependency as the couple spends an increasing amount of time and energy “hidden” from society, thus increasing feelings of powerlessness that can lead to an “obsessive” closeting of one’s sexual orientation. Renzetti (1998) contends, “partners’ relative dependency on one another has been found to be strongly associated with abuse in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships” (Renzetti, 1998, p. 122). Homophobia was also found by West

(1998) to be the most cited reason for the under use of mainstream community programs by homosexual victims and perpetrators of domestic violence (West, 1998).

Worcester (2002) points out that society perpetuates violence within lesbian relationships by sending “strong messages” that violence within heterosexual relationships are not socially acceptable, but there are no social implications for violence within socially unacceptable relationships (Worcester, 2002). Community laws also protect heterosexual victims, while at the same time failing to expressly address domestic violence within homosexual relationships (Seelau et al., 2003).

The possibility of having one’s sexual orientation exposed against one’s will or knowledge (“outing”) is another factor that affects a lesbian’s decision to report victimization. The threat of outing has been identified as a “dual edge sword” that is often used as a coercive tactic by abusers and inhibits some victims from seeking help (Ristock, 2002). Ristock notes, “it is still risky for some of us to be out and it can be dangerous to reveal abuse within an already oppressive context” (Ristock, 2002, p. ix).

## Perpetrators

The personality characteristics of abusers in lesbian relationships have been found to be similar to the traits of heterosexual male abusers (Younglove, Kerr, & Vitello, 2002). Perpetrators share the characteristics of self-hatred, depression, insecurity, jealousy, low self-control, history of battering, tendency to blame the victim, and substance abuse (Basile, 2004; Burke & Owen, 2006; Burke et al., 2002; McClellan et al., 2002; Renzetti, 1998; West, 1998). Renzetti (1998) also places emphasis on the intergenerational transmission hypothesis, while Ristock (2002) states this is more of an excuse than a reliable predictor (Ristock, 2002). Farley’s (1996) qualitative study utilizing demographic profiles from 288 clients who had been referred for perpetrator treatment explored the prevalence of intergenerational abuse and self-abusive behaviors among homosexual abusers. He found a high level of previous mental health treatment with 1/3 reported as suicidal, 20% homicidal, and 80% reported their parents were also abused as children. Farley’s study noted the perpetrators varied in economic status, education, occupation, and race/ethnicity. These perpetrators also tended to see themselves as victims (Farley, 1996).

Worcester (2002) notes the core issues of abuse in both lesbian and heterosexual relationships are one of power and control. The most determinate factors in a person becoming an abuser appear to include “growing up learning how to be violent, having an opportunity to be violent, and choosing to be violent” (Merrill, G.S., 1996 as cited in Worcester, 2002, p. 1406). Worcester also notes, heterosexual women who use violence within a committed relationship are usually victims utilizing force to escape abuse and tend to use violence most often to end oppression aimed at them rather than as a means of control. Though some incidents of females abusing their male partner have been documented, the female perpetrator rarely evokes the same sense of fear in their victims as that expressed by female victims of male perpetrated violence (Worcester, 2002).

## Problems

The current studies are seriously lacking in validity, as the studies to date have not allowed the measurement of “true prevalence”. This is attributed to the largely hidden population that makes it difficult to draw a large random sample, so the current statistics should be interpreted cautiously (Renzetti, 1998). Lack of uniform definitions of abuse across the various studies has also been identified a potential fault of current studies (Younglove et al., 2002; Renzetti, 1998; Ristock, 2002).

Seelau et al. (2003) points to a need for greater understanding of perception of abuse by police, prosecutors, judges, and the public as a method of ensuring all victims, regardless of gender role, fair treatment (Seelau et al., 2003). Burke and Owen (2006) also call for changes in domestic violence laws to include same-sex couples, adequate training of criminal justice personnel, resources for shelter and counseling, and the gay/lesbian community action (Burke & Owen, 2006). Gay/lesbian community activists’ time and energy are currently focused on fighting prejudice, discrimination, and hate crimes that are diverting attention from the problems of domestic violence within their own community and in effect, keeping the problem of same-sex domestic violence closeted (West, 1998).

## Methodology

### Hypothesis and research question

The purpose of this study was to show the frequency of domestic violence within same-sex relationships in the state of Idaho as it compares to similar incidents within heterosexual relationships as an attempt to answer the question: *Does sexual orientation have an effect on the frequency of domestic violence incidents?*. It was hypothesized the frequency of domestic violence incidents within same-sex relationships will be comparable to such events that occur within opposite-sex relationships.

#### *Data Sources*

Population data for this study was obtained from the 2000 United States Census, which was the first time same-sex households were included as a household option. The household choices offered on the 2000 Census for Unmarried-partner households included Opposite-sex partners with male householder, Opposite-sex partners with female householder, Same-sex partners with male householder, or Same-sex partners with female householder. Male and Female householder counts were combined within the categories of Opposite-sex partners and added to the total count for the category of Married-couple households to provide the count for Heterosexual Coupled Households. The totals from the categories Same-sex partners with male householder and Same-sex partners with female householder were combined to acquire the count for Same-sex Coupled Households. This method of identifying same-sex and heterosexual households was utilized on both the state and national levels.

The data used to calculate rates of incidents of domestic violence within the state of Idaho was obtained through an examination of reports issued by the Statistical Analysis Center of the Idaho State Police (ISP). The acts of violence against an intimate partner that were utilized in defining an incident were “physical injury, force, or threat of force, and includes the crimes of homicide, rape, sexual assault, robbery, intimidation, kidnapping/abduction, aggravated assault, and simple assault” (Kifer, 2005, p.3). This definition of an incident was also used in determining the number of incidents nationally.

National data was extracted from the United States Bureau of Justice Statistics’ compilation of data gathered through the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) which collects data on each criminal incident reported to the police. Therefore, an incident for this report is limited to those events recorded by the police and reported through NIBRS.

### Method of analysis

This study utilized an exploratory, descriptive analysis of data extracted from NIBRS to compare raw numbers, rates, and the percentage of change over time in domestic violence incidents same-sex and heterosexual relationships at the state and national level. A table format was used to present the data and most efficiently express a comparison between the state and national incidents reported.

### Threats to validity

Threats to internal validity were brought about by the exclusive use of secondary data which did not afford the opportunity to structure questions directly addressing the fear of outing that may have prevented gays and lesbians from openly reporting an incident as domestic violence. There also exists a threat to the validity of the population count obtained through the U.S. Census in that it fails to account for those households that may not have felt safe or comfortable enough to disclose a same-sex relationship. Additionally, a threat to validity exists through the use of data collection based on the reporting officer’s perception of an event and does not allow for possible police officer bias in recognizing or identifying an incident as one between same-sex couples.

## Results

### Data section

Analysis of data from the 2000 U.S. Census showed a population of 1873 households in Idaho and 594,391 households nationally that self-identified as same-sex partners. There were also 615,674 households in Idaho and 59,374,609 households nationally that identified as heterosexual couple households. Data provided by the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey of 2004 estimated the population of same-sex households in Idaho to have been 2407 with a heterosexual household population of 649,435. This survey also estimated the national population of same-sex households at 707,196 with an estimated heterosexual household population of 60,357,211 (Table 1).

Table 1. Idaho and National Households

	IDAHO	NATIONAL
Year 2000 Same-sex Coupled Households	1873 (0.30% of total Idaho coupled households)	594,391 (0.99% of total national coupled households)
Year 2000 Heterosexual Coupled Households	615,674 (99.7%)	59,374,569 (99.01%)
Year 2004 Estimated Same-sex Coupled Households	2407 (0.37%)	707,196 (1.16%)
Year 2004 Estimated Heterosexual Coupled Households	649,435 (99.63%)	60,357,211 (98.4%)

An analysis of data obtained in the year 2000 by the Statistical Analysis Center of the Idaho State Police revealed 23 incidents of domestic violence within same-sex relationships which translated to a rate of 0.08 incidents per 1000 same-sex households in the state of Idaho for the year 2000. Data for the same time period also showed 5649 incidents of domestic violence occurred within heterosexual relationships in the state which translated into a rate of 0.11 incidents per 1000 heterosexual households. National data obtained from the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics for the year 2000 recorded 1426 incidents of domestic violence within same-sex relationships and 109,959 incidents in heterosexual relationships. This translates into 0.42 incidents per 1000 Same-sex Coupled Households and 0.54 incidents per 1000 Heterosexual Coupled Households nationally for the year 2000.

The Idaho State Police in 2004 reported 42 incidents of domestic violence within same-sex relationships and 5983 incidents within heterosexual relationships. This translates into rates per 1000 population of 0.06 same-sex relationships and 0.11 for heterosexual relationships. The Bureau of Justice Statistics recorded 2837 incidents within same-sex relationships and 130,881 incidents within heterosexual relationships for the year 2004 which translates into 0.25 incidents per 1000 same-sex households and 0.46 incidents per 1000 heterosexual households (Table 2).

Table 2. Incidents of Domestic Violence

	IDAHO		NATIONAL	
	Reported Incidents	Incidents per 1000	Reported Incidents	Incidents per 1000
Year 2000 Incidents within Same-sex Households	23	0.08	1426	0.42
Year 2000 Incidents within Heterosexual Households	5,649	0.11	109,734	0.54
Year 2004 Incidents within Same-sex Households	42	0.06	2837	0.25
Year 2004 Incidents within Heterosexual Households	5,983	0.11	130,881	0.46

Table 3 shows the percentage of increase or decrease in reported domestic violence incidents in the state of Idaho from 1998 to 2005 for homosexual and heterosexual relationships as recorded by the Idaho State Police. As indicated by the table, the changes in the actual number of reported incidents of domestic violence in the state of Idaho show very little to no variation between that reported for heterosexual couples and that reported for same-sex couples over the period. The table also indicates very minimal increases within the categories for the time period.

Table 3. Domestic Violence Changes in Idaho

% +/-	1998 to 1999	1999 to 2000	2000 to 2001	2001 to 2002	2002 to 2003	2003 to 2004	2004 to 2005
Heterosexual Relationship	-0.07	0.06	0.04	-0.01	0.06	-0.02	-0.06
Homosexual Relationship	0.25	0.06	0.04	0.24	0.06	0.37	0.07

## Conclusion

The study analyzed secondary data obtained from the 2000 U.S. Census, the Idaho State Police Statistical Analysis Unit, and the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics to answer the question; *“Does sexual orientation have an effect on the frequency of domestic violence incidents?”*

As evidenced by Table 1, those self-reporting as a same-sex household on the 2000 U.S. Census made up only 0.30% of the total households in the state of Idaho and less than 1% of the total households nationally. As the 2000 Census was the first time same-sex households were included as an option, it will be interesting to see if more same-sex couples will be willing to identify as such in future surveys.

Data reported through NIBRS was translated into a rate of incidents per 1000 households and displayed in Table 2. Analysis of this data concludes the rates of incidents of domestic violence per 1000 same-sex household was slightly lower than that of heterosexual households in Idaho and nationally. This directly contradicts earlier research by Burke and Owen (2006) that asserted there is a higher rate of violence within same-sex relationships than that of heterosexual couples and is consistent with previous findings by authors Kuehale & Sullivan (2003), Mahoney, Williams, & West (2001), Seelau et al (2003), Turell (2000), and West (1998).

The use of data gathered through the National Criminal Victimization Survey by Burke and Owen may account for the possible discrepancy in the findings, as that survey gathers data based on the perceptions of the victim rather than that of the reporting officer. Therefore, the results of this study should be cautiously interpreted to avoid the under counting of a significant portion of an elusive population.

Additional study would allow community leaders to accurately formulate policy to identify and address domestic violence issues within all segments of the community. Also, accurate portrayal of the gay community would afford the police the opportunity to provide the same level of protection as that provided to the mainstream. As all citizens are to be treated equally and fairly by those who have sworn to “serve and protect”, no victim should have to choose between coming out of the closet and sweeping their problem under the rug as has occurred with domestic violence throughout history.

The gay and lesbian community also must recognize the ugly truth that domestic violence does occur within same-sex relationships. Perhaps if the majority and the marginalized recognize their similarities in this issue, there would be an opportunity to envision other areas in common. All of society will benefit once the problem of domestic violence within any relationship is no longer swept under the rug or hidden in the closet.

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## Appendix A

Table 1

	IDAHO	NATIONAL
Year 2000 Same-sex Households	1873	594,391
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Table 2

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Table 3. Changes in Domestic Violence in Idaho, 1995 to 2005

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Homosexual Relationship	0.25	0.06	0.04	0.24	0.06	0.37	0.07