



Gaybashing

by Andrew Matzner

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For many in the glbtq community, the consequences of living in a homophobic and transphobic society include the threat of physical violence and verbal harassment. Indeed, violence perpetrated against people thought by their attackers to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered occurs with disturbing frequency in the United States and other countries.

Gaybashing attacks represent a significant percentage of all hate crime incidents in the United States. For example, according to the Human Rights Campaign, FBI statistics for 2001 show that sexual orientation-based hate crimes constituted 13.9% of all reported bias incidents, making it the third highest ranked category, after crimes due to racial and religious prejudice. Actually, such crimes are much more frequent than reported and probably constitute a higher percentage of all hate crimes than such statistics suggest.

Many random instances of gaybashing occur because an attacker, upon witnessing a person's appearance or behavior, makes a conjecture regarding that person's sexuality or gender identity. Thus, a person who does not identify as, for instance, gay, may find himself attacked because the perpetrator perceives him as such.

However, the term "gaybashing" also encompasses those physical, verbal, or written attacks made against people who are publicly open about being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered, or against glbtq people in general. Examples include the murder on November 27, 1978 of San Francisco city supervisor and gay rights activist Harvey Milk, who was targeted by former supervisor Dan White specifically because of his sexual orientation, and the inflammatory and slanderous statements about gay people made by talk show host Dr. Laura Schlesinger (for example, calling them "biological errors" and "deviant") in the late 1990s.

A 1984 report by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force suggested that almost every glbtq-identified person surveyed has experienced some form of verbal, physical, or property-related abuse as a direct consequence of their sexual or gender identification.

Prevalence

Gaybashing incidents are under-documented because they are often not reported to the police or other authorities. Due to the extent of homophobia and transphobia in our society, victims who are closeted may fear exposure if they report an incident. Such exposure, if repeated in the media, could in turn lead to secondary victimization, in that a person could, for example, lose his or her job or become estranged from family. Victims of gaybashing may also feel that they could become vulnerable to discrimination, and even violence, within the criminal justice system itself if they go to the police.

In addition, gaybashing incidents are underestimated because such crimes, especially if they involve rape against lesbians, are often classified by authorities as sexual assaults rather than hate crimes. Finally, many states do not have hate-crime statutes that include sexual orientation (let alone gender expression), so a crime motivated by anti-gay/transgender bigotry may not be able to be prosecuted as such.

Accordingly, it is impossible to estimate the prevalence of gaybashing incidents, since so many remain invisible to law enforcement and the media.

Moreover, while gaybashing in the United States and Canada has been the subject of some scrutiny, the phenomenon is by no means confined to North America. Indeed, it is a particularly grave problem--especially for transsexuals--in parts of Latin America and Eastern Europe, where statistics on gaybashing are often not compiled at all.

Gaybashing in the Media

It is rare that gaybashing incidents generate major media coverage. Until the 1990s, gaybashing was not considered a crime that warranted more than local attention. In the 1980s, however, gay people became visible in the media due to the spread of AIDS in the United States. The epidemic, and its connection to the gay community, led to increased levels of anti-gay fear and hatred, which, in turn, fueled increases in gaybashing.

Although statistics are not available on the actual numbers of AIDS-related attacks, it is significant that gaybashing incidents that included verbal references to AIDS, as well as attacks against people with AIDS, became more noticeable in the late 1980s.

Two murders, motivated by homophobia and transphobia, that occurred during the 1990s garnered significant national media attention. Matthew Shepard, a 21-year-old gay University of Wyoming student, was targeted by his assailants because of his sexual orientation. On October 7, 1998, in Laramie, Wyoming, Shepard was lured from a campus bar by two men who gave him a ride. The men drove him to a remote location, savagely beat him, tied him to a fence, and left him to die.

On Christmas Day, 1993, Brandon Teena was beaten and raped by two men who had learned that Brandon, whom they had previously befriended and had believed was male, had actually been born female. Following the attack, Teena reported the rape to the local police, who failed to take any action against the assailants. Almost a week later, the two men tracked Teena down and murdered him.

These two gaybashing cases generated widespread publicity regarding hate crimes perpetrated against the glbtq community. Indeed, both crimes inspired well-received films and plays: Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir's documentary *The Brandon Teena Story* (1998); Kimberly Peirce's feature film *Boys Don't Cry* (1999); Moises Kaufman and the Techtonic Theater Project's play *The Laramie Project* (2000, made into an HBO motion picture in 2002); and NBC's *The Matthew Shepard Story* (2002). These projects, in addition to the original media coverage of the crimes, served to thrust the murders into the public spotlight, and highlighted the need for hate crime legislation.

In particular, Matthew Shepard was viewed with a great deal of compassion in the media. As a young, white, attractive, "normal-looking" college student who was tortured and killed with sensational brutality, Shepard was viewed as the acceptable face of homosexuality to whom sympathy could be given.

Despite the outpouring of sympathy and concern aroused by Shepard's brutal murder, however, gaybashing incidents still typically go unnoticed in the mainstream media.

In an effort to call attention to the bashing of transgendered individuals, activist Gwen Smith established the website *Remembering Our Dead* to honor the memory of transgender murder victims, estimated at one person a month. The Remembering Our Dead project spawned the National Day of Remembrance, an annual event begun in 1999, which is now observed in dozens of cities around the world.

Motivations for Gaybashing

Because gaybashing incidents are so under-reported, it is difficult to make generalizations about the frequency of such attacks, as well as the characteristics of the perpetrators. However, according to Karen Franklin, gaybashing is the most socially acceptable, and probably the most common, type of hate crime, especially among male teenagers and young adults.

Franklin has identified four categories of gaybashers. First, there are those who believe that homosexuality is morally wrong. From their perspective, sexual minorities must be attacked in order to enforce social norms and protect the community.

Second, young people who are thrill-seekers may engage in gaybashing because they are bored and want to have some fun, and homosexuals and transsexuals may seem like easy targets to them. A third group is adolescents who, because of peer-dynamics, commit gaybashing assaults in order to prove their toughness and normative sexuality to their friends. A final category consists of males who think that homosexuals are sexual predators, and thus react violently if they believe that a gay person has flirted with them.

Gaybashing is an extremely serious act because of the message that is sent by its perpetrators: Non-normative gender expression and sexual orientation will not be tolerated in our society and, in fact, may legitimately be responded to with violence. This message not only impacts the individual victim, but also spreads fear into the entire glbtq community. The result is that glbtq people often feel vulnerable and unprotected.

Gaybashing also sends the message that whether a person is actually lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or queer, if they are perceived by others as being so, a negative (and potentially violent) reaction may occur. Hence, gaybashing also tends to reinforce normative sexual behavior and gender expectations.

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Remembering Our Dead Website: www.gender.org/remember.

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