

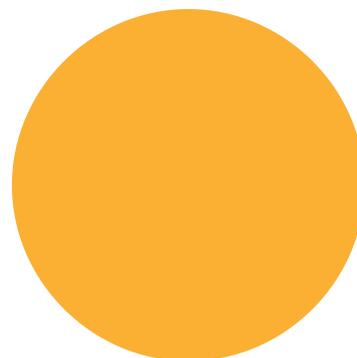
# PREVENTING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN LGBT COMMUNITIES

Understanding how discrimination, stigma, and social exclusion are barriers to healthy relationships

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THE PROJECT TO END DOMESTIC VIOLENCE



The purpose of this issue brief\* is to contribute to a much-needed discussion on a primary prevention approach to domestic violence within Alberta's LGBT\*\* community. This means stopping violence before it occurs. This brief – and the report upon which it is based – highlights how discrimination, stigma, and social exclusion at all levels of society can negatively impact the daily lives of LGBT people and damage their intimate partner relationships. Recommendations are focused on change at the provincial level.



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**Shift's decision to focus on LGBT communities for this brief follows a request from the Government of Alberta to support the redesign of its strategy *Family Violence Hurts Everyone: A Framework to End Family Violence in Alberta*. A key priority area identified in the new framework is a primary prevention approach to domestic violence within Alberta's LGBT communities. As a result, Shift was funded to explore research to support the design of a plan. This issue brief provides a summary of the ideas that emerged from that research.**

**A** lifetime spent as targets of deep-seated social stigma and intolerance can significantly damage the lives and relationships of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people.

Understanding just how LGBT-phobia and other forms of discrimination can affect the LGBT community is critical for policy makers and service providers to understand if domestic violence is to be prevented.

For more than two decades, domestic violence in heterosexual relationships has gained attention and recognition as a violation of human rights and a serious health and social issue, resulting in the creation of local and global initiatives, as well as the adoption of new policies, practices, and social norms.<sup>2</sup>

While beneficial, many of these approaches fail to promote understanding, or support the development of effective responses to domestic violence within LGBT communities.<sup>3</sup> Canadian researchers, policy makers, and service providers have yet to fully acknowledge and appreciate the nature and scope of domestic violence within LGBT communities and, as such, comprehensive prevention and intervention approaches are lacking in this country.<sup>4</sup>

Stigma and discrimination based on the belief that heterosexual relationships are the only ones that are natural, normal, and worthy of support, have produced “the devastating pervasiveness of hatred and violence in the daily life [of LGBT people] based on being seen, perceived, labeled, and treated as an ‘Other.’”<sup>5</sup> This stigma results in marginalization, social exclusion, invisibility, and sometimes violence,<sup>6</sup> and can have multiple negative health consequences, such as depression, stress, and suicide.<sup>7</sup>

Further, stigma and discrimination in economic, legal, cultural, and social spheres of society create barriers that can prevent individuals within the LGBT community from realizing their full potential.<sup>8</sup> This experience then becomes the context in which interpersonal and domestic relationships are formed. Adding to this complexity is that each group within this umbrella of communities encounters specific barriers that are unique to them.<sup>9</sup>

\* This issue brief is a summary of an extensive research report written by Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence. For information on this report, please contact [lmwells@ucalgary.ca](mailto:lmwells@ucalgary.ca).

\*\* LGBT will be used to represent LBTTTIQQ2SA\*, which includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, 2-spirited (“T” is also utilized), asexual and allies. The asterisk at the end of LBTTTIQQ2SA\* denotes evolving perspectives on identities, definitions, and terminology that comprise these communities. Common references to these communities include LGBT and LBTTTIQQ.<sup>10</sup>

## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN LGBT COMMUNITIES

Individuals within the LGBT community experience the same types of abuse that are present in heterosexual domestic violence, including physical, emotional, psychological, and economic abuse. However, LGBT people can also face *additional* abuses:

- » **Shame** - abusers may shame their partner for their sexual orientation and/or question the validity of their gender or their status as a 'real' lesbian, gay man, bisexual or transgender person;
- » **Fear** - abusers may use society's perceived fear and hatred of LGBT communities to convince their partner of the dangers and repercussions of reaching out to others;
- » **Control** - abusers may try to control their partner's expression of sexual/gender identity; and
- » **Exposure** - abusers may threaten to 'out' their partner's sexual or gender identity by telling others.<sup>11</sup>

"Discrimination exists when the state, society, a social group, or an individual separates, excludes, expels or even wishes to destroy a person or a group, deny their rights or prevent the exercise of their rights, based solely on the belief that they or their practices deviate from social norms."<sup>12</sup>

While we know anecdotally that these types of abuses exist, we don't have good data on the prevalence of domestic violence among LGBT Canadians. Discrimination, stigmatization, and a failure to recognize LGBT partnerships significantly hinder accurate data collection. This becomes even more complicated because of community members' reluctance to disclose their sexual

orientation, gender identity or domestic violence circumstances to researchers, or to participate in other data collection methods.<sup>13</sup> For instance, there are no definitive data on the number of Canadians who belong to LGBT communities,<sup>14</sup> and national data on same-sex common-law partners have only been collected since 2001. Meanwhile, the 2005 legalization of same-sex marriage only recently provided the legal and social context to collect data

on this demographic.<sup>15</sup> For these reasons, obtaining accurate information on the number of LGBT Canadians who have experienced abuse in their intimate relationships is a complex and difficult task.

While some Canadian and American literature indicates that the prevalence of domestic violence within same-sex partnerships is similar to that of heterosexual couples,<sup>16</sup> other studies suggest that rates are much higher in LGBT communities, particularly when considering data on specific communities within the spectrum of gender and sexual diversity, such as transgender persons.<sup>17</sup> A review of 17 studies on same-sex domestic violence, published between 1995 and 2006, indicates that domestic violence is present in one quarter to one-half of same-sex partnerships.<sup>18</sup>

But careful interpretation of these statistics is vital to understanding the bigger picture.

Some researchers<sup>19</sup> emphasize that domestic violence statistics cannot be separated from other forms of physical and non-physical violence that exists *outside* of an intimate partnership. Studies that provide the prevalence rates of abuse without an understanding of the larger social context within which violence occurs, do not paint an accurate picture – and in fact may do more harm than good. It is important to dig deeper to understand what it means to live as a LGBT person in a world where heterosexuality is viewed as the norm.

## RISK FACTORS

Risk factors are circumstances or experiences that occur in a person's life that can make them more susceptible to becoming a victim or perpetrator of domestic violence.

Shift's research has identified specific risk factors that LGBT communities experience that may lead to domestic violence. The risk factors are:

- » LGBT-phobia and traditional gender norms;
- » Early stigma and LGBT-phobic harassment; and
- » Social exclusion and isolation throughout the lifespan.<sup>20</sup>

## LGBT-PHOBIA AND TRADITIONAL GENDER NORMS

This first risk factor is at the heart of the stigma and discrimination that negatively impact LGBT communities through all stages of the lifespan. LGBT-phobia affects people's ability and right to feel accepted and protected within their families, while going to school, obtaining work and housing, and while engaging with the community and other aspects of society.<sup>21</sup>

When it comes to intimate partnerships, this phobia also affects LGBT couples in multiple ways. Because non-heterosexuality is still considered abnormal by many people in our society, members of the LGBT community can feel devalued or struggle to resist internalizing society's negative views about them. This internalization can result in shame, self-hatred or hatred of an intimate partner, and may manifest as abuse or domestic violence.<sup>22</sup>

The term LGBT-phobia is used in this issue brief to encompass feelings of fear, dislike, discomfort and prejudice towards people who identify as LGBT. LGBT-phobia is also used to encompass "heterosexism, the assumption that everyone is heterosexual and that heterosexual relationships are the only relationships that are natural, normal, and worthy of support."<sup>23</sup>

Likewise, traditional gender norms – norms and values accepted by society and taught by families and communities – are limiting and exclude those who do not, or choose not to fit within these socially-defined parameters.<sup>24</sup> These gender norms also include views of sexual orientation and society's overarching belief of how a male or female *should* act. Prevailing gender norms promote the idea that being different is negative or simply not acceptable – resulting in sanctioned community and societal violence.

## EARLY STIGMA AND LGBT-PHOBIC HARASSMENT

The second risk factor for domestic violence victimization and perpetration is early stigma and LGBT-phobic harassment. Very early in life, children learn acceptable social norms and values from their families, communities, and schools, including views of gender and sexual orientation.<sup>25</sup> Kids who are stigmatized or experience LGBT-phobic harassment from family, friends, schools, and community members can be excluded from these networks and rejected from their families. These experiences can lead to future depression, substance abuse, eating disorders, poverty, sexual violence victimization, high rates of self-harm, and suicide.<sup>26</sup>

A recent study<sup>27</sup> of 3,700 Canadian high school students that focused on school safety for LGBT youth, found that for many, harassment is a part of their daily lives. The results of this study revealed that:

- » 60 per cent of LGBT youth did not feel safe at school;
- » LGBT youth were twice as likely to experience verbal harassment than non-LGBT youth;
- » Transgender youth were three times as likely to report verbal harassment;
- » One-third to one-half of all LGBT youth reported sexual harassment, with transgender youth (50 per cent) being most likely to experience violence; and
- » One in five LGBT youth also reported experiences of physical violence due to their gender or sexual orientation.

Notably, this Canadian study was unable to capture the experiences of students in Catholic schools due to these schools' refusal to participate, suggesting that safety issues for LGBT youth in faith-based schools require further study.<sup>28</sup>

In Alberta, a survey conducted with LGBT youth underscored that many youth do not feel supported or accepted by adults within their school environments. School-aged youth who participated in this survey commented that if they were to disclose their LGBT identity, a majority of their teachers (56 per cent) and a vast percentage of their student peers (73 per cent) would not react positively.<sup>29</sup> This study reinforces the importance of schools as key settings to stop early stigmatization, social exclusion and harassment.

It is clear from these studies that early stigma and LGBT-phobic harassment create long-term barriers to the prevention of domestic violence. Youth who are bullied, vilified and physically abused because of their gender or sexual orientation are at risk of internalizing these feelings and possibly carrying them into future intimate partner relationships. This treatment can be considered a form of psychological and physical abuse. If these forms of abuse are not addressed within the context of child-abuse prevention strategies, LGBT children and youth will continue to be negatively, and significantly, affected.

### SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND ISOLATION THROUGHOUT THE LIFESPAN

The final risk factor is social exclusion and isolation of LGBT people, which occurs at various levels, including family, community, and social institutions.<sup>30</sup> For youth, this can lead to homelessness and poverty related to their exclusion from family or other natural support networks.<sup>31</sup>

Social exclusion also exists on a larger scale. In fact, in 76 countries around the world, LGBT people are subject to harsh, cruel, and dehumanizing legislation that contravenes international human rights law.<sup>32</sup> Even in Canada, policy, practice, and social norms continue to exclude transgender persons. However, Canadians have made some progress. Homosexuality was decriminalized in 1969,<sup>33</sup> followed by sexual orientation being protected in several provinces, starting with Quebec in 1977.<sup>34</sup> In 1996, sexual orientation was given protection under the Canadian Human Rights Act,<sup>35</sup> while in 2005, equal rights for marriage was extended to same-sex couples – consistent with the values of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.<sup>36</sup>

### BARRIERS TO ACCESSING SUPPORT

In addition to specific risk factors for domestic violence, LGBT people also experience barriers to accessing safe and appropriate services when violence does occur. This is because community interventions are often based on a traditional gender dyad (male as perpetrator and female as victim) understanding of intimate partnership violence.

This view creates further invisibility for LGBT people, whose relationships and realities as victims or perpetrators of violence are not recognized.<sup>37</sup> These underlying assumptions have detrimental effects on LGBT communities because they impede both prevention and intervention efforts, limiting the level of societal support, funding, and research directed towards the prevention of LGBT domestic violence.

For LGBT people who *do* contemplate seeking help from services or the judicial system, dealing with LGBT-phobia and other forms of discrimination can be a deterrent.<sup>38</sup> Given a lifetime of stigma and social exclusion, LGBT people may be reluctant to report domestic violence to formal authorities due to the belief that “being victimized by their partners is less frightening than being victimized by the system.”<sup>39</sup> For some, seeking outside help could mean having to disclose information that had been kept private from family, friends, employers, and other significant people in their lives, such as their gender identity or sexual orientation. The choice to either “come out” or to continue being abused presents a complex dilemma.

Given a lifetime of stigma and social exclusion, LGBT people may be reluctant to report domestic violence to formal authorities due to the belief that “being victimized by their partners is less frightening than being victimized by the system.”<sup>40</sup>

## WHAT IT ALL MEANS

Understanding how LGBT persons experience the world around them is an important first step to understanding domestic violence in LGBT intimate partnerships. This understanding provides the grounding for an effective primary prevention strategy.

We also know that over time, the risk factors faced by LGBT people can potentially exacerbate violence in their own intimate partner relationships. However, implementing key intervention tactics early on can create awareness among parents, teachers and administrators, normalize LGBT realities in the eyes of mainstream society, and provide better training so social agency staff can help put an end to the violence – now and for future generations.

A primary prevention strategy that supports individuals within the LGBT community starts at home and is carried into schools, the community, places of worship, the workplace, and society. By understanding the nature, scope and root causes of how domestic violence develops in LGBT relationships, we can help address gaps that exist in policies, research, and services.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations focus on change at the provincial level following the Government of Alberta's request for research that can inform a primary prevention strategy.

Recommendations for the Government of Alberta (GOA) are as follows:

- » **Amend the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act** to include early stigmatization and forced gender and sexual conformity of LGBT children and youth by parents and guardians as a form of psychological abuse.
- » **Implement a social media campaign** that helps to shift social norms to be more inclusive of gender and sexual diversity, and that provides information and resources to assist parents and other adult role models to provide supportive responses and assistance to LGBT children and youth in their care.
- » **Repeal s. 11.1 of the Alberta Human Rights Act**, which allows parents to remove their children from educational programming that deals with religion, human sexuality, or sexual orientation.
- » **Implement a Gay-Straight Alliance policy directive with all Alberta school boards** to create school environments free from violence and harassment, and provide awareness and education on issues related to gender and sexual identity, LGBT-phobia and heterosexism, and healthy relationships.
- » **Ensure the GOA's new Ending Bullying Strategy targets the eradication of LGBT-phobia, bullying and harassment within schools and the community.** Generic anti-bullying approaches will not ensure safe and supportive environments for gender and sexually diverse populations. Strategies should include a specific focus on addressing values, beliefs and patterns of behaviour that promote heterosexism and LGBT-phobia.
- » **Increase funding to programs that focus on LGBT children, youth and their parents.** There are emerging examples of progressive programming within Alberta that build healthy relationships: WiseGuyz<sup>41</sup> (Calgary Sexual Health Centre) and Camp fYrefly<sup>42</sup> (Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services) are two examples.
- » **Ensure current investments in domestic violence services across Alberta reflect the needs and solutions identified by the LGBT community.** The GOA should review all relevant contracts with service delivery agents to ensure this population is being served across the prevention continuum.
- » **Invest in action-oriented research with LGBT communities so that their experiences and challenges can be better understood and addressed in order to prevent domestic violence.** Partnering with researchers, community-based organizations, and LGBT community to better understand the nature, scope, barriers, gaps, and solutions is critical to developing an effective continuum of support.

## CONCLUSION

If we are going to prevent domestic violence in LGBT communities, we need to understand the damage caused by LGBT-phobia, harassment, violence, social exclusion, and rigid gender and sexuality norms. In the context of intimate partner relationships, “the overarching difference in the lives of same-sex versus heterosexual couples is that the former must continually cope with the special challenges of claiming a socially stigmatized identity.”<sup>43</sup> For LGBT partnerships where domestic violence is present, this exclusion and isolation can create significant barriers that may entrench both the perpetrator and the victim within an unhealthy relationship, with little support, services or networks to rely on for help.

This issue brief is a summary of the report *Domestic Violence in Alberta’s Gender and Sexually Diverse Communities: Towards a Framework for Prevention*, completed by Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence.

From a primary prevention perspective, social exclusion and isolation can contribute to a host of barriers that impede LGBT people from living to their full potential within society, experiencing healthy and socially-accepted self-identities, and engaging in healthy intimate partnerships. In order to lay the necessary groundwork to prevent violence within and against LGBT communities, key risk factors for domestic violence need to be addressed on an individual and family level, and within schools, the

community and all institutional facets of society over the lifespan. In tandem with this approach is the need to eliminate barriers that currently prevent safe, appropriate, and accessible services and supports for those who are currently involved in abusive domestic partnerships.

Dedicated efforts are needed to develop a foundational body of Canadian literature on LGBT domestic violence, its root causes, and on issues related to the primary prevention of violence. This would assist policy makers, practitioners, schools, academics, and community members to uncover and implement safe and appropriate prevention and intervention initiatives. LGBT communities and alliance organizations, agencies, academics, and individuals should contribute to this important work.<sup>44</sup>

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Shift's purpose is to enhance the capacity of policy makers, systems leaders, clinicians, service providers, and the community at large to significantly reduce, and eventually end domestic violence in Alberta. We are committed to making our research accessible and working collaboratively with a diverse range of stakeholders to inform and influence current and future domestic violence prevention efforts through primary prevention.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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