

Anti-Violence Project Urges Gays and Lesbians To Take Offense

by {ga=lcrawford}

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(Nov-Dec '00) Four loud and boisterous young men, probably college age, were on the number 4 train shouting back and forth to each other across the aisle, oblivious to the stares from the other passengers. Then, suddenly, the inevitable.

"He's a faggot," one of them said, about someone they knew.

"A faggot," another repeated loudly.

"Faggot," the third said. And they said it again and again, like a chant.

Is there any slur more common? Is there any practice more prevalent among young men, than ridiculing gay people? Is this harmless, or does it lead to harassment, and violence?

"Don't Just Take It," announces a recent advertising campaign of the [New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project](#)

, with the picture of an angry mouth in the background spewing epithets. "Take Offense. Call AVP."

With a 24-hour confidential and bilingual hotline, the Anti-Violence Project documents bias incidents that range from simple verbal harassment to murder. Celebrating its twentieth anniversary, the Anti-Violence Project is the only victim services organization serving the gay and lesbian community in the state, offering crisis intervention, counseling and other services for victims of hate crimes, rape, sexual assault, domestic violence, HIV-related violence, and police abuse and misconduct.

Harassment, Intimidation And Violence

The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs released a [report](#) earlier this year documenting incidents of violence against lesbian, gay, transgender and bisexual people in 25 communities across the country. In New York City, there were 499 incidents reported in 1999. This included 6 murders, 210 assaults, 18 sexual assaults and rape, 299 reports of intimidation, 241 incidents of harassment, and 66 reports of telephone or mail harassment.

Typical anti-gay harassment, according to the report, involves the use of slurs. Harassment

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alone is not a crime, but is monitored because "it is often accompanied by, or escalates into, more violent types of behavior." Intimidation is defined as when speech or gestures are used to threaten an individual; most often, intimidation is illegal. Many of the numbers were down from the previous year (although not sexual assaults and rapes, which increased), but it is possible that the decrease only reflects less reporting due to cutbacks last year in outreach and advertising.

"There is also concern that because of high visibility cases like the murders of Billy Jack Gaither and Matthew Shepard," said Clarence Patton, Director of Community Organizing and Public Advocacy of the Anti Violence Project, "people experiencing a single harassment or minor violence feel they don't deserve to report it." AVP hopes the new advertising campaign will encourage more people to contact them.

The report also profiles people committing the offenses: 86 percent were male, almost two-thirds were under the age of 30, and another third were between 30 and 44 years old. Although there were fewer reported incidents in 1999, the number of offenders rose from the previous year. What this means, the report explains, is a sharp increase in the incidents perpetrated by groups of ten or more individuals.

New Layers Of Protection

The New York State [Hate Crimes Act of 2000](#), signed into law in July went into effect a few weeks ago. The measure, which increases penalties for bias related crimes, includes protection for lesbians and gay men for the first time in the history of the state. There was also hope for passage of the Federal Hate Crimes Prevention Act, but that has yet to happen.

The city recently transformed the police department's Bias Unit into the [Hate Crimes Task Force](#), and increased the budget. Getting anti-gay incidents classified as hate crimes, however, has sometimes been a problem. Clarence Patton recounted the story of a few men walking down the street when a van almost hit them. They cursed the driver and the van stopped, the occupants jumped out shouting anti-gay epithets, chased the pedestrians down the street, caught up with one of them, and beat him with a beer bottle which resulted in his losing an eye.

"Even though the incident may have started as a traffic violation," said Patton, "it escalated because the perpetrators thought these people were gay. It should be classified as bias."

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The Anti-Violence Project fought for a year and finally succeeded in getting it classified as a bias crime. "There is some sense of justice," said Patton, "for the police to say, yes, what happened to you was a bias crime."

Deal With It

"All of us have been called things and we just kept walking," said Patton. "We heard X number of things in a day and said, I can't deal with it." But the Anti-Violence Project is urging everyone to stop and deal with it.

"By documenting all of these incidents, we can say to the community, to government, to leadership, look, this is what is happening, how it is happening, and the effect it is having on the victims."

What about preventing anti-gay sentiment and violence?

"You have to get to people while they are young," said Patton, and he recommended programs in the schools to teach tolerance.

"Some queer young people stop going to school or can't do the work any longer because all day, every day, they hear things," said Patton. Community and religious leaders, too, says Patton, have an obligation to talk about this. "A lot of faiths have come under bias attacks: the Catholics, Jews, black churches, all have been victims of bias. You can't parse it out and say I'm only going to deal with anti-Semitic or anti-black crimes. We need everyone to deal with this, come up with real strategies and make it a priority."

Related Information:

- [Empire State Pride Agenda: New York's Lesbian and Gay Political Advocacy Organization](#)
- [National Gay and Lesbian Task Force](#)
- [New York City Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center](#)

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