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DYKE PSYCHE

Anti-Gay and Lesbian HATE CRIMES: An Interview with Jeanine Cogan

by Esther Rothblum



There has been a lot of recent media focus on crimes that take place based on victims' membership in oppressed groups. To find out more about anti-lesbian and gay hate crimes, I phoned Dr. Jeanine Cogan, a psychologist who has conducted research and influenced federal policy on this issue.

"Hate crimes are defined legally by specific legislation," said Jeanine Cogan, "however the commonality across the different pieces of legislation is that hate crimes are crimes that are based on real or perceived group membership. Usually that includes race, ethnicity, national origin, and religion. Sometimes it also includes sexual orientation, disability and gender. That means you were specifically chosen, sometimes out of a crowd, because you belonged to or where thought to belong to, one of the above groups."

Along with Drs. Gregory Herek, Roy Gillis and Eric Glunt at the University of California at Davis, Jeanine worked on a long-term grant funded by the National Institute of Mental Health (in fact, the first grant ever funded by that organization about gay and lesbian issues that did not focus on AIDS). The purpose of the research study was to look at the psychological consequences of having survived an anti-gay or anti-lesbian hate crime. The research team also predicted that experiencing a hate crime would have more serious consequences than experiencing a crime that was not based on the group membership of the victim.

They surveyed more than 2,500 people in the greater Sacramento, California area, including people who lived up to 100 miles away in rural areas. "When we were recruiting participants we never said 'please take part in a study of hate crimes,' because we didn't want to bias the kind of person who would participate in the study," said Jeanine. Instead, they referred to the study as one examining a range of experiences important to lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals with a focus on health and well-being. All members of the research team were familiar members of the gay and lesbian communities that they studied.

The research team found that one in four gay and bisexual men and one in five lesbians and bisexual women had experienced a hate-motivated crime since the age of 16. Jeanine said: "We found that individuals who experienced a hate crime against their person—a physical or sexual assault, an attempted assault, a robbery—had more psychological distress after

such a hate crime than people who experienced a crime of similar severity that was not aimed at them because of their sexual orientation. We also found a time factor. We know that people who experience a crime tend to be psychologically distressed. And, over time, people recover. In our study, we found that those who had experienced a crime that was not a hate crime tended to feel better after two years. But people who experienced a hate crime took much longer—five years on average—for their symptoms to dissipate. So if you're around someone who experienced a hate crime years ago, you may still see some symptoms of distress." These symptoms of distress could include depression, post-traumatic stress, anxiety and anger.

Then the research team interviewed 450 of the 2,500 respondents. They compared those who had experienced a hate crime, those who had experienced a crime unrelated to their sexual orientation, and those who had experienced no crime. "We got a lot of information about hate crimes," Jeanine said, "and those people who had experienced a hate crime often defined it as such based on tangible evidence. For example, the language that was used—being called a dyke while being assaulted. Or, the vandalism indicated a hate-motivated crime, such as having the word 'lesbian' smeared on their door with paint. Or theirs was the only car with a rainbow flag, and the only car damaged in a parking lot."

Jeanine found that listening to the respondents' stories was quite frightening to her. She counseled the other interviewers about this fear, a phenomenon that has been termed "indirect trauma" (for example, lesbians feeling victimized just by hearing of hate crimes happening to other lesbians).

She also found a difference in the way lesbians and gay men were victimized. "Some lesbians were physically assaulted by a former male partner, such as a former husband, when the lesbians came out to these men," Jeanine recalled, "We ended up calling it 'heterosexual revenge.' Some gay men, on the other hand, were lured to have sex by other, presumed 'straight' men and then assaulted by these men. "And this was a pattern we found only among men."

Jeanine is now working at the American Psychological Association in Washington, DC, where she is involved in changing hate crime policy at the national level. "I've been working with Sharon Shaw Johnson, who is the direc-

tor of GLOVE—Gay Men and Lesbians Opposing Violence—and they collect hate crimes data and do interventions. Both of us have noticed that it is the butch woman and the 'effeminate' man who are at particular risk for hate crimes because they defy our ideas of gender."

Jeanine's policy work focuses on broadening the definition of hate crimes. As part of a hate crimes coalition, she is attempting to amend a current civil rights statute that can be used against a perpetrator who bashes a person based on that person's group membership. She is trying to include sexual orientation, disability and gender in the definition of hate crimes. "The real hot potato is gender," she says. "The FBI is concerned that if every rape against a woman is a hate crime, they don't have the personnel to cope with the huge numbers." With a broad-based hate crimes coalition, Jeanine had many conversations with the Department of Justice about the inclusion of gender as a hate crime. In the end they supported adding gender, and President Clinton has endorsed the Hate Crime Prevention Act and has put funds into the budget for more FBI agents to work on hate crimes.

Jeanine is also thrilled to have been successful in combining research with policy. The Bureau of Justice Statistics conducts an annual survey on criminal victimization. They sample 50,000 households in the US about crime experiences in the past year. Along with many other advocates, Jeanine was successful in getting this survey to include questions about hate crimes. This will allow for national statistics about hate crimes over the next years. Documenting the prevalence of an issue is an essential step for receiving an appropriate government response. So this will be an important contribution.

For more information, see Gregory Herek, Roy Gillis, Jeanine Cogan, and Eric Glunt (1997). Hate crime victimization among lesbians, gay and bisexual adults: Prevalence, psychological correlates and methodological issues. JOURNAL OF INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE, volume 12, pp. 195-215.

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