

Are Homosexuals Facing an Ever More Hostile World?

By JAMES KIM

New York Times (1857-Current file); Jul 3, 1988; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2004)
pg. E16

Anxiety Over a Reported Rise in Attacks

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A FLURRY of recent studies have confirmed what many gay-rights groups say they already knew: Harassment and crimes against homosexuals are increasing. Moreover, gay-rights advocates say, the incidents are becoming more violent.

They acknowledge that their conclusions are based on a surge in the number of reports, which does not necessarily mean an increase in the number of attacks. Statistics are hard to come by because the police generally do not classify assaults according to motivation. Even where they keep track of bias-related crimes, as in New York City, the circumstances of an attack are often ambiguous, and many go unreported. But recent studies by both government and advocacy groups have found hostile incidents to be rising.

The problem seems to stem from a complex mix of circumstances, including anxieties and resentment about the AIDS epidemic.

"AIDS is a convenient new excuse to attack the gay community," said David M. Wertheimer, the executive director of the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project.

Several weeks ago, a man in Chicago had to be hospitalized after an assailant attacked him with a bottle,

screaming epithets with references to AIDS. In New York, a man suffered nearly fatal stab wounds when a gang of 10 people attacked him in Central Park, taunting him with anti-gay slurs.

"The problem is emerging as one of the most serious social problems of the decade," said Mr. Wertheimer. Kenneth B. Morgen, a psychologist in Baltimore who has studied the issue, said, "This is a crime that is coming out of the closet."

In a report issued last month, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, a Washington-based lobbying organization, said that last year it received reports of 7,008 anti-gay incidents, 42 percent more than in 1986. Verbal abuse accounted for 78 percent of the incidents, physical assaults for 12 percent and vandalism for 5 percent.

Kevin T. Berrill, director of the organization's anti-violence project, notes that of the 64 local groups that provided data for the report, 23 said anti-gay attacks were more frequent last year than in 1986. Eleven said they were less frequent, and 30 said they were not sure.

A study that Mr. Morgen conducted in Baltimore found that 16 percent of homosexuals had been harassed or assaulted at least once by someone who mentioned AIDS, and 14 percent experienced this in the last year.

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The New York Times/Nancy Peabody
Marchers at the annual Gay and
Lesbian Pride March on Fifth
Avenue last weekend.

The number of people who seek counseling after being harassed or assaulted is also rising. Mr. Wertheimer's group in New York served 14 percent more people last year than in 1986. A San Francisco group, Community United Against Vio-

lence, reported 11 percent more victims over the same period and said the number of attacks requiring medical attention rose 22 percent.

"There is no escaping the conclusion that anti-gay violence is a serious problem," Mr. Berrill said.

Recent government reports, including those issued by the New York Governor's Task Force on Bias-Related Violence and the National Institute of Justice, have reached similar conclusions.

"Although it's very, very difficult to document, we sense there's been an increase in these attacks," said Catherine M. Abate, chairwoman of the New York State Crime Victims Board and former executive deputy commissioner of the New York State Division of Human Rights.

Political Progress

At the same time, there is evidence of increased acceptance of homosexuality. In the last decade, some states and cities have adopted anti-discrimination laws and voters have elected some openly gay candidates. President Reagan's AIDS commission has recommended Federal action to bar discrimination against those infected with the virus.

In New York City, many gay people say they have detected signs of greater acceptance by heterosexuals, especially well-educated pro-

fessionals. But the extent of sympathy among other groups is less clear.

For example, the Governor's task force report found, "One of the most alarming findings in the youth survey is the openness with which the respondents expressed their aversion and hostility toward gays and lesbians." More than 30 percent of the junior and senior high school students surveyed said they had witnessed harassment of students and teachers thought to be homosexual.

People who have studied the problem say it is obscured in part because so many incidents go unre-

ported. An October 1987 study commissioned by the National Institute of Justice said that homosexuals rank with Southeast Asians as the least likely to report bias crimes.

The House of Representatives has passed a bill requiring the collection of statistics by local authorities. A companion bill is awaiting action by the Senate. At least three states, Connecticut, Minnesota and Maryland, now have similar laws.

"We can do surveys until we're blue in the face," Mr. Berrill said. "What we really need is more official documentation of the problem."