

# Colorado Probation Research in Brief

## *Perceptions of Same-sex Domestic Violence Among Crisis Center Staff*

Brown, M. and Groscup, J. (2008). "Perceptions of Same-sex Domestic Violence Among Crisis Center Staff." *Journal of Family Violence* 24: 7

**Key Words:** Domestic Violence, Crisis Counseling, Gays, and Lesbians

### Summary/Conclusions

This study evaluated 120 crisis center workers to see if employees held different beliefs or perceptions regarding same-sex domestic violence compared to opposite-sex domestic violence (DV). In order to evaluate any potential biases, researchers created four vignettes of a DV situation. The only difference in each of the four vignettes was the sex of the perpetrator and the sex of the victim. Crisis center staff were then asked to complete a survey about their experience handling the DV situations. While staff believed that domestic violence had occurred in the same-sex vignettes, they also believed the situation was less serious, less likely to occur in the future, and felt less confident in handling those situations.

### Limitations of Information

The study tested crisis staff at one suburban crisis center and has not been repeated. Only one DV scenario was used. It's unclear how other DV scenarios may impact results. Staff attended cultural trainings, which may have swayed the study. Lastly, it's not clear if the crisis staff's beliefs regarding same-sex relationships had any influence on the outcome of the study.

**Caveat:** The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

### Decisions Affected by Perception

Prior research regarding same-sex domestic violence suggests that incidents of same-sex DV occur as frequently as in opposite-sex relationships. Incidents of DV are also theorized to follow similar cycles of violence regardless of type of relationship. Since same-sex and opposite-sex DV have many of the same attributes, researchers were interested to see if staff at crisis centers are influenced by the gender of the perpetrator in conjunction with the gender of the victim. Vignettes were created using opposite-sex (male abuser & female victim, female abuser & male victim) and same-sex (male abuser & male victim, female abuser & female victim) relationships.

Crisis center staff were asked to participate in a simulation with the four domestic violence vignettes. Each staff member completed a randomly assigned vignette. After the exercise, staff participated in a survey. The survey measured a number of variables including: confidence in the staff's decision, the responsible party, who was abusive, severity of the situation and the victim's ability to leave.

Staff concluded that there was an instance of DV in all of the four scenarios. Significant discrepancies occurred when it came to staff's confidence in decisions, how serious the situation was, likelihood the abuse will occur again, likelihood the abuse will get worse, the ease of which a victim can leave, and whether the staff member recommend-

ed the victim to leave. Generally, staff were less confident in their decisions in same-sex DV. They were also less likely to find the situation serious, that abuse would reoccur, or the abuse would get worse in female same-sex relationships. This is further supported by staff being more likely to recommend victims leave in opposite-sex relationships. Conversely, staff believed male victims of opposite-sex DV were able to leave the situation easier than other victims of DV.

### Practical Applications

- ✓ Probation officers in domestic violence caseloads should consider role-playing unfamiliar situations to increase skills and abilities.
- ✓ Limit gender specific terminology when inquiring about clients' significant others.
- ✓ Refer victims and perpetrators to appropriate services based on their unique and particular needs.
- ✓ Collaborate with local safe houses to identify resources for gay and lesbian DV victims.
- ✓ Attend cultural awareness training that includes a section on LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) culture.
- ✓ Be aware that same-sex domestic violence occurs as frequently and in similar cycles domestic violence as in opposite-sex relationships.
- ✓ Use active listening skills (i.e. reflections and summaries) to enhance the client's need to be heard and understood without judgment.