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New data on violence against LGBTQ+ people makes ‘grim reading’ – and undermines NZ’s inclusive reputation

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New Zealand is ranked the tenth most inclusive society by international legal standards, with a reputation for being forward-thinking and progressive – especially when it comes to the rights of sexually and gender-diverse individuals.

But recent high-profile hate crimes against the LGBTQ+ community suggest we may not be as progressive as our global reputation suggests.

The painting over of rainbow pedestrian crossings in Gisborne and Auckland might seem like comparatively minor crimes. But they highlight the insidious – and increasingly overt – nature of prejudice against the rainbow community.

A major concern for members of this community is how easily this kind of prejudice spills over into criminal acts against them. And there are indications of a concerning trend. The number of reported hate crimes against transgender people rose by 42% between 2022 and 2023.

This is backed by overseas research. According to a study from the United States, gay/lesbian and bisexual individuals are significantly more likely to be victims of violence than heterosexual men and women.

But how do rates of violence and crime faced by LGBTQ+ individuals here compare to the general population in New Zealand? For the first time, our new research sheds light on crime victimisation rates among the LGBTQ+ population in New Zealand. It's grim reading.

High rates of crime victimisation

Our research used data from the New Zealand Crime and Victims Survey (NZCVS).

The NZCVS surveyed approximately 32,000 New Zealanders between 2018 to 2022. Participants were asked about their experiences with crime. The survey collected information on reported and non-reported offences, and asked the participants about their socio-demographic characteristics, including sexual orientation and gender identity.

LGBTQ+ individuals include those whose sexual orientation is gay/lesbian, bisexual, or other, or when being gender diverse or when gender identity and biological sex differ (also called transgender).

We found LGBTQ+ individuals were much more likely to be victims of crime than non-LGBTQ+ individuals.

Almost half of LGBTQ+ respondents (46%) reported being a victim of at least one crime in the previous year, compared to a third of non-LGBTQ+ people (31%).

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Members of the LGBTQ+ community were also much more likely to be a victim of crime more than once. According to the survey, approximately 22% of LGBTQ+ individuals experienced more than one victimisation in the previous year, compared with 11% of non-LGBTQ+ individuals.

Two groups stood out in particular: bisexual individuals and transgender/gender-diverse people.

One potential explanation for the crime rates against LGBTQ+ people is that they have higher-than-average risk factors that are unrelated to their sexual orientation or gender identity. For example, they are younger and have lower incomes on average.

But our research refutes this explanation. Even after accounting for these other risk factors, the crime victimisation rates among LGBTQ+ individuals were much higher than among non-LGBTQ+ individuals.

Motivating factors

The NZCVS also collected information on the perceived motivation behind the crime. Response options included sexual orientation, sex or general discrimination.

We found LGBTQ+ individuals were more likely to say the perceived reason for crime was their sexual orientation or their sex compared to non-LGBTQ+ individuals.

The consequences of these offences were also more severe for LGBTQ+ individuals.

They were more likely to suffer from physical injuries or need time off work. They were also more likely to feel less noticeable effects of the violence: lower life satisfaction and a greater sense of feeling unsafe.

Living up to NZ's inclusive reputation

In the long term, understanding how victimisation affects LGBTQ+ individuals can help shape policies that are better tailored to prevent crime and support victims. This includes building greater awareness and knowledge in the sexual and family violence sectors to prevent and support affected rainbow communities.

But until that happens, crime victimisation continues to disproportionately affect LGBTQ+ individuals. New Zealand needs to do something to close that gap.

Our research highlights a serious gap between how New Zealand is perceived on the global stage (safe and inclusive), and the reality of life for our LGBTQ+ community (increasingly unsafe and threatened by intolerance).

New Zealand's laws must ensure crimes against people based on their sexual orientation and gender identity will not be tolerated. The ongoing review of the Human Rights Act is a step in the right direction but more needs to be done to explicitly protect trans, non-binary and intersex people against discrimination.

The authors want to thank Tabby Besley for her feedback. Tabby is the managing director at InsideOut, which provides resources, workshops, consulting, advocacy and support for anything concerning rainbow communities