



# Domestic Violence, Sexual Violence, Human Trafficking, and LGBTQ Communities

Interpersonal violence including domestic violence, sexual violence, and human trafficking is rooted in oppressive beliefs and systems. While anyone can experience these forms of violence, it's important to recognize that people with marginalized identities, like people from LGBTQ communities, are targeted for harm at much higher rates.

## WHAT IS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE (DV)?

Domestic violence is a broad term that refers to physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, or financial abuse that takes place within an intimate partner or family relationship. People who use violence in the context of a relationship between straight, cisgender partners use the same tactics of power and control as people who use violence in the context of a relationship with one or more LGBTQ partners. Additionally, abusers may exploit inequitable laws and widespread social beliefs like homophobia, biphobia, or transphobia in their abuse (PCADV, 2021).

## WHAT IS SEXUAL VIOLENCE (SV)?

Sexual harassment, abuse, and assault are widespread public health and social problems collectively referred to as sexual violence. Sexual violence includes any type of unwanted sexual contact, harassment, exposure, exploitation, or abuse. Sexual violence encompasses non-physical forms of harm, such as street harassment or receiving unwanted sexual images, as well as

physical forms of harm, such as inappropriate touching, child sexual abuse, or rape. While sexual violence can be perpetrated by a stranger, it is most commonly committed by someone the survivor knows, such as a friend, family member, or acquaintance (PCAR, 2021). In LGBTQ communities, bisexual women and trans people experience the highest rates of sexual violence, with the abuse often first occurring during childhood (HRC, n.d.).

## WHAT IS HUMAN TRAFFICKING (HT)?

When HT involves adults, human trafficking occurs when there is a use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain sex or labor in exchange for something of value, such as money, food, or shelter. In cases involving minors, the use of force, fraud, or coercion is not necessary to meet the definition of human trafficking (CSE Institute, n.d.). LGBTQ youth are seven times more likely to have experienced trafficking than heterosexual, cisgender youth (Lambda Legal, n.d.).

## HOW DO DV, SV, AND HT INTERSECT?

It is common for these forms of interpersonal violence to co-occur. For example, sexual abuse often occurs within domestic violence situations, and trafficking and sexual exploitation often involves sexual violence. While sexual violence and trafficking can happen between strangers, people are most commonly harmed by someone they know and trust, including family members.

If a relationship does not already exist, people who want to cause harm will often build trust with the victim or survivor by creating an intimate-partner, friend, or family-like relationship with them prior to or throughout the abuse or trafficking. These relationships can create dependence, sometimes making it difficult for survivors to recognize the relationship as abusive. Survivors may also be less likely to tell friends or family or to report the harm they are experiencing to authorities if they care about the person who is hurting them (Dabby, 2019; PCADV, 2021; PCAR, 2021).

It is also important to point out that many of the risk factors for domestic violence, sexual violence, and human trafficking overlap. These risk factors are not the fault of any individual, but are areas in which social supports are weak or inadequate (PCADV, 2021; PCAR, 2021; Polaris, 2015):

- Discrimination and oppression based on identity: such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, ability, sexual orientation, immigration status, and faith affiliation
- Past history of trauma
- Systemic discrimination related to a person's limited English proficiency
- Widespread discrimination and lack of support for people experiencing addiction, mental illness, homelessness, and poverty
- Limited or lack of social or family supports, including involvement with the child welfare system or foster care and the trauma of recent migration or relocation



**It is common for domestic violence, sexual violence, and human trafficking to co-occur.**

## IMPACT ON SURVIVORS

DV, SV, and HT are complex issues and LGBTQ communities are very diverse. Not everyone will experience DV, SV, and HT at the same rates or in the same ways. People who hold multiple identities that are targeted for oppression (such as race, ethnicity, age, culture, or immigration status) are often at higher levels of risk due to the compounding effect of discrimination.

When LGBTQ people experience interpersonal violence, such as DV, SV, and/or HT, there can be many barriers to disclosing the abuse and receiving help. Many survivors share common emotions about telling someone that may include embarrassment, shame, self-blame, fear of not being believed, or concerns about retaliation. However, LGBTQ survivors face additional barriers to disclosure and help-seeking, including (PCADV, 2021; PCAR, 2021; Polaris, 2015):

**When LGBTQ people experience domestic violence, sexual violence, and/or human trafficking, there can be many barriers to disclosing the abuse and receiving help.**

- Danger of being outed
- Danger of receiving transphobic, homophobic, and biphobic responses from service providers, medical personnel, or law enforcement
- Concerns about drawing negative attention to LGBTQ communities
- Historical and systemic discrimination and violence against LGBTQ communities
- Lack of civil legal protections and discrimination within those systems
- Knowledge that others in the community have not received help and have been further traumatized when seeking services

## SUGGESTIONS FOR AN EFFECTIVE RESPONSE

Most survivors will choose to report to friends or family before seeking assistance from helping professionals or law enforcement. Receiving an empathetic, compassionate, and affirming response upon disclosure can help to mitigate the trauma LGBTQ survivors may experience. Letting the survivor know that they are believed and that they are not alone can be critical to their healing.

Additional ways that service providers can respond effectively include the following recommendations (Polaris, 2015):

- 1 Educate yourself about LGBTQ terminology, including the importance of using correct pronouns. Practice using these words and pronouns until you can do so easily.
- 2 Recognize the additional concerns LGBTQ survivors may have about disclosure and reporting, and practice advocacy by supporting the survivor's decisions in this area regardless of your own preferences.
- 3 Proactively build and maintain relationships with LGBTQ-friendly organizations and service providers to provide cross-training, establish referral processes, and to participate in each other's activities and committees.
- 4 Hire LGBTQ staff and provide cultural humility training to all members of staff.
- 5 Make sure the agency's materials and resources depict diverse communities of people.
- 6 Adapt forms to be inclusive of all identities and explain why certain information, such as demographic information related to gender, race, or ethnicity is required so that people understand why they're being asked to share it.
- 7 Ensure that services are trauma-informed and survivor-centered.
- 8 Empower survivors. Do not mimic the power and control dynamics that the survivor may have experienced during the abuse, assault, or trafficking.

educate

recognize

build &  
maintain

diversify

empower

## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE RESOURCES

### To find help near you in PA:

<https://www.pcadv.org/find-help/find-your-local-domestic-violence-program>

### To find help near you nationally, call:

1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

### Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence Resources

<https://www.pcadv.org/initiatives/lgbtq/>

### The Problem: Domestic Violence in LGBTQ Communities & Barriers to Safety

<https://vawnet.org/sc/rates-and-prevalence-dv-lgbtq-communities>

### Supporting LGBTQ Survivors

<https://vawnet.org/sc/improving-services-lgbtq-individuals>

## SEXUAL VIOLENCE RESOURCES

### To find help near you in PA:

<https://pcar.org/help-pa/find-services>

### To find help nationally, call:

1-800-656-4673

### Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape Resources

<https://pcar.org/about-sexual-violence/lgbtq>

### Sexual Assault & LGBTQ Communities

<https://www.hrc.org/resources/sexual-assault-and-the-lgbt-community>

### FORGE

<https://forge-forward.org/>

## HUMAN TRAFFICKING RESOURCES

### Polaris Project

<https://polarisproject.org/lgbtq-communities-and-human-trafficking/>

### Working With HT Survivors: LGBTQ Communities

<https://www.supporthtsurvivors.org/lgbtq>

### Lambda Legal

<https://www.lambdalegal.org/criminal-justice-initiatives/trafficking>

### Breaking Barriers: Improving Services For Lgbtq Human Trafficking Victims

<https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/breaking-barriers-lgbtq-services.pdf>

### Survivor Inclusion/Engagement Resources: Survivor Inclusion

<https://www.survivoralliance.org/survivor-inclusion>

### Survivor Engagement Resources

<https://www.survivoralliance.org/survivor-engagement-resources>

### Toolkit for Building Survivor Informed Organizations

[https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ee517995ce62276749898ed/t/5f2153265fc11d7703a5d8db/1596019499993/toolkit\\_for\\_building\\_survivor\\_informed\\_organizations-2.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ee517995ce62276749898ed/t/5f2153265fc11d7703a5d8db/1596019499993/toolkit_for_building_survivor_informed_organizations-2.pdf)

### To find help, contact the National Human Trafficking Hotline:

1 (888) 373-7888, Text 233733 (Text "HELP" or "INFO"), or visit <http://humantraffickinghotline.org/>

## REFERENCES

- Dabby, C. (2019, October 31). Domestic violence and human trafficking: Advocacy at the intersections. Family and Youth Services Bureau. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/fysb/news/domestic-violence-and-human-trafficking-advocacy-intersections>
- Human Rights Campaign. (n.d.) Sexual assault and the LGBTQ community. <https://www.hrc.org/resources/sexual-assault-and-the-lgbt-community>
- Lambda Legal. (n.d.). Trafficking. <https://www.lambdalegal.org/criminal-justice-initiatives/trafficking>
- Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence. (2021). Ending abuse in the LGBTQ community. <https://www.pcadv.org/initiatives/lgbtq/>
- Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape. (2021). About sexual violence: LGBTQ. <https://pcar.org/about-sexual-violence/lgbtq>
- Polaris. (2015). Breaking barriers: Improving services for LGBTQ+ human trafficking victims. <https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/breaking-barriers-lgbtq-services.pdf>
- Villanova Law Institute to Address Commercial Sexual Exploitation. (n.d.) Sex trafficking 101: Act 105 (2014): PA's comprehensive anti-human trafficking law. <http://cseinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Human-Trafficking-Resource.pdf>

## SPECIAL THANKS

PCAR is grateful to Melissa Perkins and Ted Hoover, Persad Center; Keisha McToy, Alder Health Services; Dre Ceja & Sahara McGrath, LGBT Center of Central PA; Wade Arvizu, Survivor Alliance; and Michelle Cooper and Denise Scotland, Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence, for sharing their time and expertise to the collaborative development of this resource.

*This project was supported by subgrant No. 30269 awarded by PCCD, the state administering office for the SASP and STOP Violence Against Women Formula Grant Programs. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication/program/exhibition are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of PCCD or the U.S. Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.*



© Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape and  
Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence 2022.  
All rights reserved.

[www.pcar.org](http://www.pcar.org) [www.pcadv.org](http://www.pcadv.org)