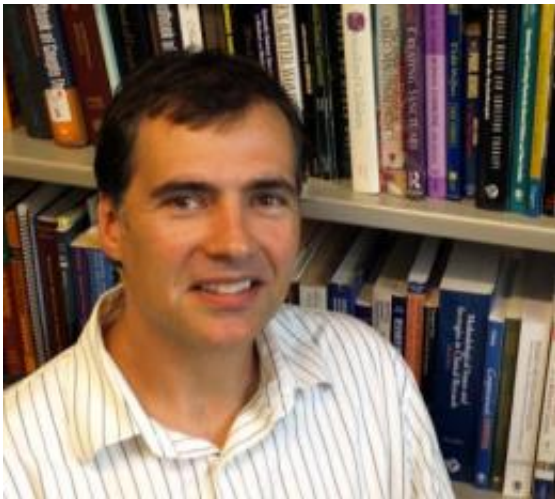


# Little safe haven for sexually assaulted LGBTQ victims

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Jeffrey L. Todahl, a researcher at the University of Oregon's College of Education, has found members of the LGBTQ community are hesitant to acknowledge sexual assaults because of mistrust and a fear of judgment by those who should provide assistance. Credit: University of Oregon

Being a victim of sexual assault and seeking help is difficult for anyone, but when the victim is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or queer (LGBTQ) the thought of reporting a crime may well be laced with added layers of uncertainty and mistrust, according to a study in Oregon.

The study, appearing in the August issue of the journal *Violence Against Women*, found that 94 percent of respondents -- most of them identifying as LGBTQ in Eugene-Springfield -- think [sexual violence](#) is

a problem, but just 72 percent agreed it is in their community. Eighty-seven percent of respondents also said that that sexual violence prevention tailored to the LGBTQ community is needed, and more than 60 percent felt local agencies and law enforcement were ill-equipped.

Of 130 participants, ranging in age from 15 to 71, 58 percent claimed to have been sexually assaulted. The participants were 83 females, 40 males, six who identified as transgender and one who did not specify sexual identity. Thirty respondents (23 percent) were gay, 20 percent were lesbian, 18.5 percent were bisexual and 18.5 percent were heterosexual; the remainder claimed to be in multiple categories or did not respond.

"The take-home message was that sexual violence is real and complicated for members of the LGBTQ community," said lead author Jeffrey L. Todahl, a professor of couples and family therapy in the UO College of Education's department of counseling psychology and human services. "There are additional barriers because of discrimination. It is hard enough to reach out to ask for help if you are sexually assaulted. This is compounded when you have to wonder if people in law enforcement, at a hospital or with an agency will think poorly of you because of your sexual orientation. An LGBTQ victim will ask, 'Will I be judged, and is your organization safe? If I can't trust you, I cannot get the help I need.'"

The study, drawn from a convenience sample rather than a random one, was part of a larger project funded by the Oregon Attorney General's [Sexual Assault](#) Task Force. Potential respondents were recruited through various targeted means, including through a listserv for sexual and domestic violence social service activists and providers.

In addition to the survey, four focus groups with a total of 14 participants (mean age 41) identified the biggest problem is low

community awareness and support. Researchers found a "social ignorance of the existence of LGBTQ communities and limited open discussion of the sexual violence occurring within the LGBTQ community." Several focus group members noted that society in general -- and even LGBTQ members -- dismiss even the possibility that sexual violence occurs in the LGBTQ community.

When a sexual assault occurs, Todahl said, members of the LGBTQ community continue to be cloaked in fear of judgment. "LGBTQ persons live in an inherently dangerous environment and reasonably assume that they may be targeted, mistreated and blamed -- even by service providers, [law enforcement](#) and health-care professionals," Todahl and colleagues noted.

"They have to start with the assumption that I don't trust you," Todahl said, adding that "you" refers to organizations, police, friends and even family members who don't accept their lifestyle choices. They don't feel safe and worry that they will be quickly judged."

The study, he said, allowed LGBTQ members to voice their experiences. "And it provides a chance for us to explore a deeper understanding of the issue. Because of the discrimination they feel, they have to circle the wagons. They don't feel safe anyway. They have to protect the legitimacy of their sexual orientation. If assaulted by a member of their own community, they don't want it to get out because many people think there is something wrong with them as it is."

Based on the study, researchers learned that participants believe that sexual assault must be more clearly defined socially and must carry real consequences. "The general community needs to be more welcoming of people's sexual orientation," Todahl said. Participants also suggested that workers at agencies, from police to health care to social service agencies, be trained to better understand sexual assault and what it means to be a

member of a sexual minority, he added.

LGBTQ members need to know what agencies are safe, Todahl said. Agencies should be re-evaluating such things as their names and the messages a name imply, and even what their intake forms look like. "Are they welcoming?" he said.

Source: University of Oregon ([news](#) : [web](#))

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