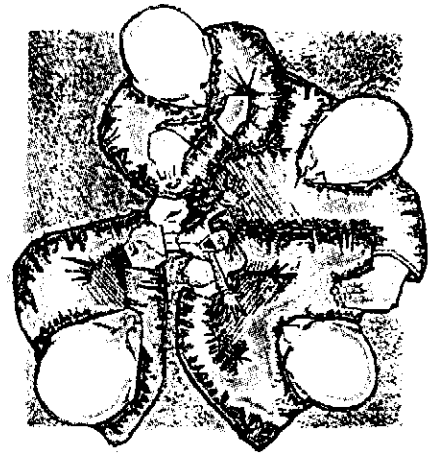
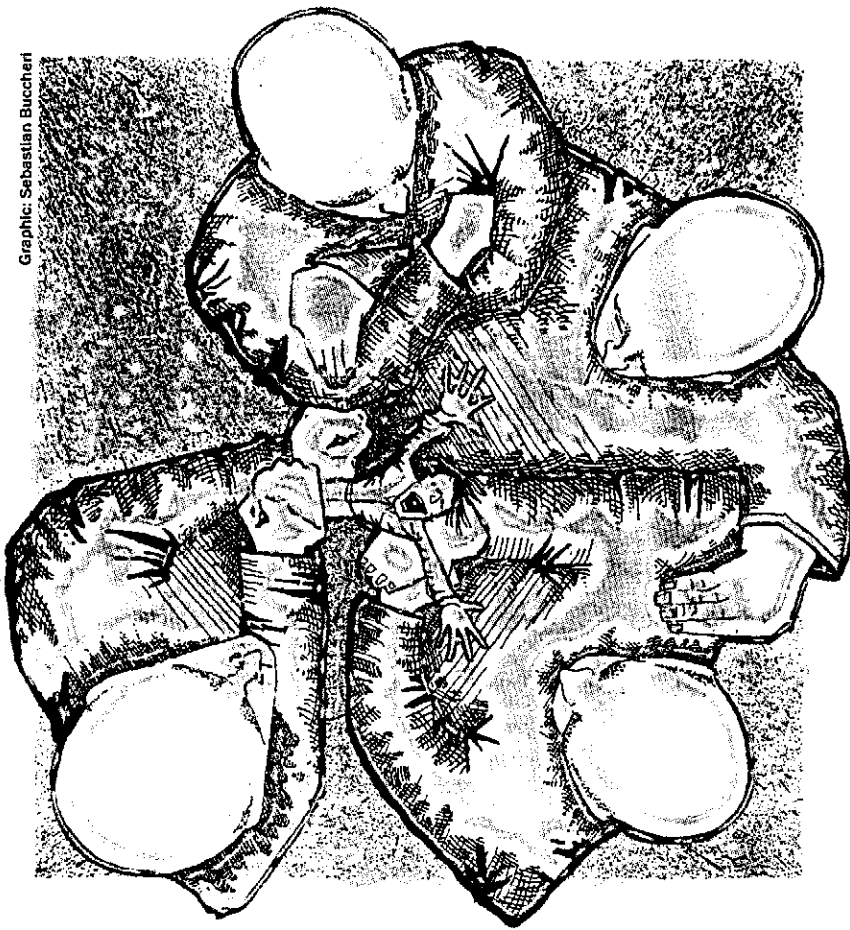


Graphic: Sebastian Buccheri



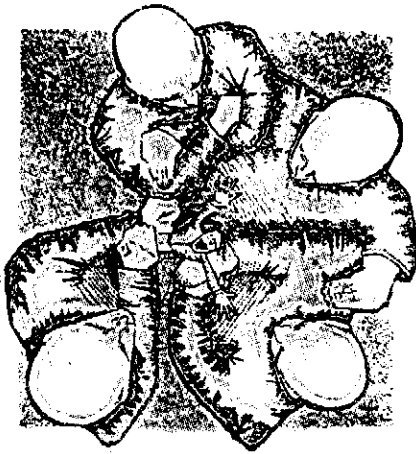
# Young, gay and bullied

A survey by Stonewall, the national lesbian and gay campaign group, found that more than a third of gay men and women – and half of those aged under 18 – have been victims of homophobic violence in the last five years. **Ian Rivers**, lecturer of psychology at the University of Luton, has conducted extensive research in homophobic abuse in schools and paints a gloomy picture of systematic violence.

**C**URRENT FIGURES suggest that as many as 27 per cent of primary school pupils and 10 per cent of secondary school pupils are bullied regularly every term.

For the last two years, I have been researching the problem of homophobic abuse in schools and its long-term effect upon the mental health and social development of lesbians and gay men. Since 1993 over one hundred and forty lesbians, gay men and bisexuals have responded to articles and advertisements in the popular press and a further eighty have completed very detailed questionnaires about their experiences since leaving school.

Overall, the results show that the

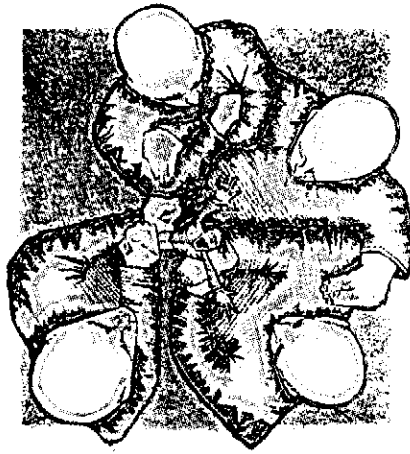


bullying which lesbians and gay men experienced in school was more severe in nature than general bullying. When questionnaires were analysed according to the types of bullying behaviour participants reported, the most common form of harassment was found to be name-calling (80 per cent); followed by being ridiculed openly by other pupils and, occasionally, by teachers (69 per cent); and being hit or kicked (59 per cent). However, various other methods of victimisation were also reported by participants including having rumours and stories spread about them (55 per cent); being teased regularly (49 per cent); being stolen from (45 per cent); being frightened by the way in which they were looked or stared at (45 per cent); being sent to Coventry (23 per cent); and being sexually assaulted (8 per cent).

For many lesbians and gay men, the term 'bullying' does not adequately describe their experiences of school. One gay man wrote that he had been raped by a teacher, while others have reported their clothes being set alight; having chemicals thrown at them during science lessons; being urinated upon; and being burnt with cigarettes while being held down. Similar levels of violence were experienced by lesbians – one young woman wrote that she had been raped by a male pupil while another said that a group of pupils used to knock her down and drag her around the school playing field by her hair.

It is not surprising to learn that 40 per cent of participants reported attempting suicide on more than one occasion. When this figure was broken down further, the number of reported suicide attempts per person was found to be higher than anticipated with an average of four reported attempts per person as a result of not wanting to be lesbian or gay; and five attempts per person as a result of having problems at home or at school.

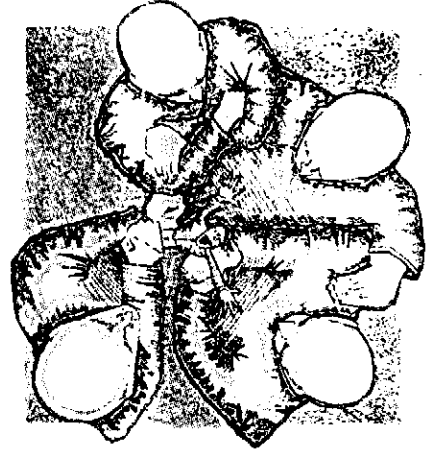
In addition to reports of attempted suicide, some participants said they lived daily with the long-term effects of bullying. Nightmares and flashbacks were a common occurrence; some said they felt insecure in long-term relationships and became overly



possessive because they were afraid their partners would leave. Levels of depression, anxiety and hostility were higher than normal among the group as a whole, and several participants said that they had sought counselling or psychiatric help at some point. The effect bullying can have upon the quality of life is illustrated very well in the following extract which is taken from a letter I received recently from a 30-year-old gay man.

'The words "gay" or "puff" were used as terms of verbal abuse, the meaning of which I was unclear about at first. I used to dread every single day of going to and being at school, especially the time spent on the school bus as there was no escape from the verbal jibes. The advice I received at home was contradictory and there seemed to be no solution in reporting the matters to teachers, as I felt it would simply make matters worse (a snitch as well as a puff). The effect on my academic achievement was that in the first year my exam results were much lower than my previous efforts at primary school.

'The only method I found to block out what was going on around me was to create a mental wall and solely concentrate on school work. The over-riding commitment to my work was shown by my studying each and every night immediately I got in, finishing around ten o'clock with a break for tea. My social life was practically zero for five years. This reliance on academic achievement to bolster my self-worth, coupled with an innate desire to strive for excellence, created more and more pressure until my final year at university (when) a series of anxiety attacks resulted in my not



taking my exams.

'In many ways I became a recluse, not venturing out on my own except when I had to attend school. I refused to take my dog for a walk because I feared running into "lads" who would start with the verbal abuse. I still experience this fear when I go out and when passing groups of lads.

'In some ways I was lucky that the mental abuse did not run to violence. However, the mental pain I went through was significant and only after seeing a counsellor last year was I able to unlock that particular door. I have already described how my behaviour is still affected by my experience and I believe what happened at school also helped delay my coming out both to myself and (my) parents/friends'.

Like all young people, lesbian and gay teenagers need support and protection in school, and it is clear that this support has been seriously lacking in the past. Although the research reported here is ongoing, there is also a need for practical interventions to support young lesbians and gay men as they come to terms with their sexuality. As Simon, who is now 18, told me, 'I have been bullied for as long as I can remember because my so called "friends" suspect that I am gay. I have gone through school not talking to anyone because deep down I know they are right'. ■

• For further information relating to this research project contact Ian Rivers at the Department of Psychology, University of Luton, Park Square, Luton LU1 3JU. Currently, data is being gathered on contemporary school experiences of lesbians and gay teenagers. If anyone thinks they could help with the collection of data, please contact Ian Rivers. Confidentiality is guaranteed to all participants.

## USEFUL PUBLICATIONS

**Lesbians, Gays and Education: resource list.** Available, price £9.00, from the Lesbian Information Service (LYSIS), PO Box 8, Todmorden, Lancashire OL14 5TZ.

**The Gay Teen.** Edited by Gerald Unks. Published by Routledge, 1995, £11.99.

**Challenging Lesbian and Gay Inequalities in Education.** Edited by Debbie Epstein. Published by the Open University Press, 1994, £12.99.