

Gay beats remain the subject of fear and violence. BRIDGET WILSON reports from the front line.

IT'S called "doing the beat". It's been going on since the beginning of civilisation and it's a practice that's not going to go away.

Gay beats: our most shameful sexual secret?

Men who want to have sex with men often don't have an option but to go to gay "beats" which can be at beaches, public lavatories, parks or shopping centres.

Sometimes they have sex at the beat, and sometimes they just want to talk and have contact with others of their kind.

Many of the men who use beats do not identify with being gay. Often they are married and have children. They don't feel comfortable in a gay bar or nightclub and the only place to make contact is the beat.

One of the attractions - for some of these men - of having sex in a public place is the element of potential danger. And therein lies the problem.

A gay man called Richard Johnson was bashed to death in a park in Alexandria two years ago and only a year ago, another man, Bill Allen, died from injuries he received in the same park. No-one goes to that beat any more.

Men who use beats also run the risk of being charged by the police with offensive behaviour. Often undercover detectives will dress in the style of gay men and go to a beat and make arrests.

At other times uniformed police will act after receiving complaints from the public or a council.

Both councils and the police force have been criticised for their lack of understanding this issue.

Sue Thompson, a Police Gay and Lesbian Client Services consultant, says that police are often "the meat in the sandwich".

Ms Thompson says: "They have to act but they need to keep a clear assessment of priority."

"You get bashers in public toilets and that is a far worse issue and a far more serious issue than so-called offensive behaviour. You've got violence with potential murder happening and that's much more of a problem for police."

Ms Thompson says that nowadays police are becoming more aware that violence directed towards beat users is more of a problem than beat users themselves.

And with all the publicity in the media about gay bashings, these incidents are being reported more often than in the past.

"That's a good plus," she says. "Whereas 10 years ago police might have thought: 'Well, so what? There's a bashing out there, they shouldn't be doing it - serves them right'; now there's been a shift of attitude."

The change in attitude has also come from the public. Ms Thompson says that up until a couple of years ago beat users were reluctant to report violence or police harassment.

"People are more willing to say even though I'm here [at the beat] - one: I don't deserve to be bashed; two: I deserve professional treatment by police. There's been an increase in people's expectations."

A working party of high-ranking police is expected to come up with an action plan for beats this month.

The staff officer for the State Commander, John Garvey, said that the police had received some positive feedback and the strategies that would



Phillip Keen (left) and Peter Kerans ... "most men are very discreet". Picture by KATE CALLAS

flow on should be "acceptable to all sides of the community".

Two men who probably know more about beats than most are Phillip Keen and Peter Kerans. They are two of nine beats outreach workers employed by the AIDS Council of NSW (ACON).

The beats program has been going since 1988. Its aim is to educate men who use the beats about safe sex practices and give support to beat users.

When Keen and Kerans first started working the beats, they often found that because some of the beat users didn't identify with being gay, they wouldn't get HIV or AIDS "because that only happened to fags on Oxford Street".

Keen and Kerans say they don't come across that attitude much these days because of the amount of publicity about HIV and traditionally Oxford Street and its surrounding areas have many gay venues.

And so for that reason, one of the main areas they target is around Botany

and as far south as Cronulla because there are no venues for men in that area to go to if they want to have sex with other men.

Keen says: "Overwhelmingly, most men who use beats are very discreet about the way that they use them. The last thing they want is to be discovered, so there's a sort of code that people follow, part of which is to avoid being noticed by someone who is not doing the beat. So people go a long way to avoid being noticed by the general public."

Both Keen and Kerans are concerned that a story in a Sunday newspaper quoted a police sergeant as saying that one particular park was "infested with homosexuals", during the day. The local council closed the public toilets in the park because police said they had been used as a "clubhouse". After the closure graffiti appeared that read: "Poofier bashers operate here. Beware."

Keen said he went to that beat a day

after the story appeared and no-one there would talk.

"Perhaps they [the beat users] thought we were plainclothes police - so this kind of thing gets in the way of our work and gets in the way of effective HIV prevention."

Peter Grogan is a member of the ACON legal working group, the Lesbian and Gay Legal Rights Service and a lawyer acting for several men who have been charged with offensive behaviour.

Last week a magistrate found that one of Grogan's clients believed the police who arrested him at a beat were "interested", but still found that the conduct was offensive "because", Grogan says, "it was an area in which the public might go - although they don't".

Grogan said: "In recent cases people have all been dealt with by section 556A of the Crimes Act which is where the offence is proven but no conviction is recorded."

"That highlights how absurd all of this is. Often these people may well be married or it's a great embarrassment for them at work. They've been put through the stress of being arrested, and fingerprinted and photographed and dragged through a court proceeding and very personal things are talked about."

"The magistrate believes that they [the offender] thought the police were genuinely interested - there was nobody else around - and they get no punishment [from the court]."

"It's a waste of everybody's time and energy and it forms magistrates' opinions of what gay men are like because that's their principal point of contact with them. It forms a lot of gay men's opinions of police officers and magistrates because it's their first contact with them."

"This practice is discriminatory." He also says that to call a beat a public place is a "furry".

"It's irrelevant because it's not a question of whether people can see [the offensive behaviour] - the only people who see [it] are police officers who deliberately go undercover and know what they're looking for and go looking for it."

"I've never seen any cases where there's been a civilian witness and that says something to me about the circumstances about the offence."

And because many of Sydney's hundreds of beats are on council property, ACON workers would like councils to have a deeper understanding of the AIDS council's work.

The beats outreach workers say that in order to get the message across, ACON needs more resources.

Peter Kerans says: "This work is being done on a shoestring because funding authorities still see beats as a way of HIV entering from the infected community into the general population through bisexual men. So for that reason they're handing their bets by funding to a certain extent but not funding it to the extent where you can actually do all the things you want to do like work with councils, police and cover Sydney effectively, which we don't."

Kerans says: "I think there's still a prevailing philosophy of trying to stop beat behaviour but we know it's always gone on - there are beats in Europe that have been known for centuries - they go on and they'll always be around."

IN BRIEF

Pollution code wins big award

A code to combat storm-water pollution on local beaches has won an award from the Keep Australia Beautiful Council. The code was drawn up by councils in the Sydney Coastal Council Group - Botany, Leichhardt, Manly, Mosman, Randwick, Rockdale, South Sydney, Sutherland, Sydney, Warringah, Waverley, Willoughby and Woollahra.

The group's chairman, Alderman Barbara Armitage, Mayor of Waverley, said: "The deterioration of Sydney's coastal waters must be halted, and an integrated strategy to control storm-water pollution takes us one step further towards cleaner, safer beaches."

The Stormwater Awareness Award will be presented at Mrs. Macquarie's Chair at noon on Thursday, June 25.

Page 4: Beachwatch figures

Tracey takes London bronze

Tracey Johnson, 20, a graduate of Kensington's Kenvale College, Tourism and Hospitality Management, has been awarded the City and Guilds Institute of London Bronze Medal for coming first in the world in her year's Food and Beverage Service Certificate.

The medal is not automatically awarded to the person placed first in any year, but to those who have achieved the highest mark in their examination as well as performing outstandingly in other subjects and certificates.

Bandit robs newsagency

A man lunged across the counter of an Oxford Street newsagency about 7 am on Saturday, grabbed an employee around the throat and demanded money.

Police said the bandit jumped the counter, attacked the 29-year-old employee, and ordered him to hand over the contents of the till before fleeing along Oxford Street.

Police described the thief as aged between 25 and 30, about 180 cm tall, of medium build with a prominent scar on his right cheek and with curly ginger hair.

New timetables

State Transit will introduce new bus timetables this Sunday for the 412 and 413 services from Campsie railway station to Sydney Town Hall. The frequency and number of services will not change. New timetables can be picked up from Kingsgrove bus depot. Inquiries 13 1315.

Gays launch their own volunteer street patrol

From Page 1 exactly what it was about and if they didn't, they'd ask.

"Within a month of the street patrol starting a lot of pushing and shoving and verbal abuse settled down and stopped."

Chief Inspector Kerry Beggs says street patrol members have made "a worthwhile contribution" to the Surry Hills area in a couple of instances when they alerted police to trouble spots.

Mr Beggs says he has no problem with concerned members of the public acting as the eyes and ears for police, but was opposed to so-called vigilante groups taking over the role of police.

Now the street patrol wants to expand the area it covers.

The patrollers need office space in the area and are hoping South Sydney Council can help. They also need more two-way radios, which cost \$2,500 each.

During the winter recess they'll hold a five- or six-week training program for volunteers who will gain security guard licences.

Mr Glynn says no special skills are needed, but a sense of commitment is essential, plus the ability to keep calm.

"Behaviour breeds behaviour, so if we're easy going and if we're smiling and chatting to people out there and educating them about carrying whistles we can usually calm down situations."

Whistles are catching on too, according to Mr Glynn, who says they work well as a deterrent.

On a recent Friday night he was standing outside the Exchange Hotel on Oxford Street when two men started fighting and a brawl looked as if it might develop.

"I just pulled my whistle out and gave it one big blast and the crowd dispersed and the two guys took off," he said.

"It was quite amazing."

He says that people should respond to the sound of a whistle by running

toward it and blowing their whistles too. The effect is to distract the attacker.

"Once they're distracted they're going to quit the scene."

Much of the street patrol's work is giving support to victims of violence. Patrollers will stay with the person who's been bashed while they go to the police station to report the incident, or to hospital for treatment.

"We don't expect that from Surry Hills [police station] any more but there's the odd incident where it does happen."

Mr Glynn says that according to research the average basher is probably a teenager from a western or northern suburb.

"When we get into the underlying reasons about why those people are out there doing it, it centres on confused sexuality."

He claims the bashers are often gay themselves, but are having trouble coming to terms with that.

"They take it out on what they perceive is a weak object - but I've got news for them: we're not that weak any more," says Mr Glynn.

"As far as the Darlinghurst/Surry Hills area is concerned, we've got a watch out on the area. We're looking out for people there and if they want to come in and mess with us, we're there

and it's not just us they have to deal with; they're going to deal with the police."

Mr Glynn says that he became involved in the street patrol with the advent of AIDS virus.

"To have people come into the area and bash us as well makes me very angry - sit on the sidewalks for five years and a lot of us are going to be dead anyway. We've got enough to deal with without this craziness."

He says what's needed is "a fair go for all".

"It's just a matter of educating people that gay men and lesbians have feelings and feel pain and die just like anybody else."

"It's this ingrained homophobia that's part of the education system and it needs to be changed. It is happening slowly."

It's just a matter of educating people that gays and lesbians have feelings like anybody else.

Mr Glynn said: "We want people to know that they'll be looked after and they're going to be treated fairly and courteously."

"We don't like the idea of people going to a police station to make a report about being attacked out on the streets and be dumped on because they're gay. It's happened in the past.