

Combating gay bashing

On November 9, a Supreme Court judge sentenced two youths who had pleaded guilty to the gay bashing and slaying of Richard Johnston. While many many look to the courts to impose sentences that will deter gay bashers, there is a growing realisation that stiff penalties are not the only or best means of preventing these crimes. MARTYN GODDARD examines the phenomenon of gay bashing, and an innovative approach for combatting it.

The bashers are back. And this year, they're early. Every summer, the level of violence against gay men in inner Sydney soars. And the result has always been a depressingly familiar cycle — because until recently, the seasonal nature of violence has not been recognised.

In previous years, the onset of the bashers' open season has sparked a rash of reports to gay newspapers and to gay political organisations. The story has been followed up in the straight press, and pressure is put on the police to respond by increasing resources.

But by the time more police actually get out on the streets, autumn has arrived — and the level of violence is in decline. And so they assume either that they have solved the problem, or that we have been exaggerating.

A more reliable indication of the levels of violence are the figures on gay murders. Murders of men in the past year, who have been killed specifically because they are gay, amount to between five and ten percent of the annual NSW murder rate.

These cases included:

- Two men whose bodies were found — six months apart — beneath cliffs in the Bondi-Tamarama area;
- Richard Johnson, who died after being bashed at a beat in Alexandria;
- A teacher, Wayne Tonks, who was found dead in his flat, a plastic bag over his head;
- 43-year-old Garry George Webster, found stabbed to death in a Campbelltown motel, the word "poof" cut into the bloodstained mattress.

These cases — plus another two — are only those which are known to gay journalists and Police Gay Consultant Sue Thompson as specifically gay-related murders. There are 100 murders, on average, in NSW every year. The six deaths account, therefore, for six percent of the annual total. And, there are almost certainly more which have not been identified as gay-related.

While few bashers are ever caught, the clear-up rates for gay murders are quite high. These young thugs are not particularly hard to find. Perhaps the same methods of detection should be used to find gangs which have not yet

actually committed murder.

Few gay men who have lived in Darlinghurst or Surry Hills for longer than about a year have escaped violence. The bashings are a daily fear, overlaying every aspect of our lives. There are attempts — like the Whistle Project — to fight back. But generally, the bashers have all the advantages.

But who are the bashers? Are their motives purely hate, or mainly greed? Is it their idea of fun? Gradually, a picture is emerging.

The Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby's *Streetwatch Report*, released earlier this year, studied 69 bashings. The bashers were all aged under 25, and some — nine percent — were under 15. They did not display physical courage, hunting in packs of up to 15 and picking almost exclusively on targets who were alone or in pairs.

By its nature, Streetwatch — which relied on reports from the victims of violence — could say little about the motivations and backgrounds of the bashers. It is not unusual for someone being beaten up to politely ask his assailants where they live, and what are their reasons for doing this?

Some tantalising glimpses into the world of the young thugs were provided recently when police, youth workers and community members spent three days in an inner-city high school, trying to challenge that school's culture of anti-gay violence.

Police believe students at that school may have been responsible for as many as three murders, and scores of bashings, over more than two years.

It is difficult to understand how staff and other students could have ignored this dangerous reality for so long. It's hard to believe that teachers had no inkling of what was going on. But if they did know, they chose not to blow the whistle.

Sue Thompson, who was largely responsible for the intervention, has asked us not to name the school. Reluctantly, we agreed. Thompson fears that if the school is named, school authorities may prevent any further interventions. With their less than energetic attitude for most of the last two years, that may be

a reasonable fear.

Students right through the school were split into groups, and confronted with their attitudes.

The intervention team reported that boys, generally, were far more homophobic than girls. Questions from girls tended to be sensible, thoughtful. Often, the boys were silly and offensive. Homosexuality poses a pathological level of threat to many of these teenage boys.

Girls tended to recognise that most people had homosexual desires, and that this was natural. Boys also said most people had homosexual desires — but were far less likely to regard this as natural.

"Boys were much more threatened by the concept of male homosexuality than the girls were by the concept of lesbianism," one member of the intervention team said. "Some of the boys thought homosexuals simply shouldn't exist."

"Boys who bash excused their bashing by saying they had been 'felt up' by gay men in the past. They said they didn't believe that all gay men were sexually predatory. But they acted as if that was the case."

The three-day intervention was one stage in a major reassessment of students' attitudes to anti-gay violence. But it had taken the deaths of at least two men to bring them to that point.

Some students were clearly in turmoil, torn between loyalty to a friend — or a brother — who has habitually bashed and possibly killed, and the growing realisation that such behaviour was no longer defensible. One Muslim boy struggled to accept the rights of gays to exist — but said his religion stood in the way of such acceptance.

The most difficult of the students were four 14-year-old aboriginal boys. They were entirely committed to the idea of beating up gays, and would not let go.

They were taken into a group on their own, with members of the intervention team. One looked, for a while, as if he might be capable of change; the others made sure that did not happen.

They saw no parallel between the oppression they suffered as aborigines, and the oppression of gays and



The Alexandria Park beat: the site of Richard Johnston's murder and other gay bashings. The entrances are now blocked off.

lesbians. They said they beat up gays because they had been 'touched up' in the past. And because the bible — which they hadn't read — said so.

They were asked if they saw a gay man in the toilet, would they bash him? Yes, they said.

If there were two gay men, and one was aboriginal, what would they do? They would tell the aboriginal gay man to leave, and beat up the white one. They said they would only attack men who were alone, and agreed that they were physical cowards.

The fact that four of the school's worst homophobes are aboriginal is particularly sad. Perhaps members of oppressed groups owe each other greater honour. But nobody should assume that they were homophobic because they were aboriginal. Even they didn't make that excuse.

There is a common belief in the gay community that the bashers are "westies" who come into the city to bash and rob. But that appears not to be

the case — if only because the western suburbs bashers are more likely to concentrate on beats in their own districts.

Last summer, there was a spate of robberies of gay men — some in broad daylight — in which the victims did not see who hit them. They said they were felled from behind, and thought they had been hit by a piece of wood — or a baseball bat.

One 15-year-old boy — who boasted that he robbed \$5000 from one gay man — told the inner-city school intervention team of a gang which used baseball bats. And he knew where the gang lived. Double Bay.

In August, a gay man — an ex-cop — was attacked by four youths, but easily overcame them. Indeed, he had to rescue them from the anger of other gay men who saw their ill-considered attack. That man, after rescuing his bashers, talked to them and gave them the cab fare home. Their destination? The lower

north shore.

The desire to bash homosexuals is not confined to the western suburbs, or to the working class. It is ingrained in this society, at all levels: rich and poor, black and white, migrant and native born Australian.

There is something about us which profoundly threatens some youths. Perhaps it is the traditional macho fear of being fucked, and thereby losing identity as a man. For some, it is an attempt to hide their own homosexual desires, or to punish in others what they fear in themselves. There is a number of cases in which bashers later realise, and accept, their own homosexuality.

After the age of 25, bashers seem to stop bashing.

There is one bright note. The inner-city poofier-bashing school has reported a change in many of its students. They are now less likely to call each other poofers and faggots in the playground.

Well, it's a start.

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