

Digging up past to reveal scale of gay-hate deaths

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Gay bashing and killings in the 1980s and 1990s were much greater.

Yuri Maslikov was a lecturer in ancient history at Macquarie University. Then he disappeared. It was 1985. He owned his own home. His bank accounts were never touched. He was listed as a missing person. After seven years his estate was wound up. This week a friend of his, Bev Kingston, made contact with me: “Yuri was gay and we thought that he had discovered that he had AIDS and decided to commit suicide. Now we think it’s possible he met with foul play.”

A lot of people are having similar second thoughts about gay men who went missing or whose deaths were classified as suicides or misadventure in the 1980s and 1990s. The more we look, the more we learn and discover the scale and violence of the gay bashing and killings in the 1980s and 1990s were much greater than the wider community realised.

The number of gay men murdered in gay-hate crimes between 1985 and 2000 in NSW may be as high as 70. Hundreds were hospitalised after assaults and thousands of gay men and lesbians were attacked. How was the scale of this not known?

Even Sue Thompson is having second thoughts. She was a key source in Monday’s column about the phenomenon. After spending a decade as the first gay and lesbian client consultant to the NSW Police, she estimated there were 46 gay-hate murders in NSW between 1989 and 1999. This estimate was supported by a study by criminologist Stephen Tomsen published in 2002.

But both these studies were based on an analysis of deaths classified as homicides. With the benefit of hindsight, and an accumulation of new

evidence, Thompson believes seven deaths of gay men on the northern beaches may have been misclassified as suicide or misadventure.

The same level of misclassification could be said about the deaths of gay men in the eastern suburbs.

One egregious example is the death of Cyril Olsen, 64. In August, 1992, he was found drowned in Rushcutters Bay. The autopsy revealed he had been beaten immediately before his drowning. His head was gashed. He died at what was then a well-known gay beat, or pick-up area.

An anonymous phone call gave police the name of a man with a record of violence who had allegedly said on the night Olsen died, "Let's roll a poof tonight". A second person also identified the same man as probably involved in the death.

Despite all this, Olsen's death is still recorded as a drowning.

After recent publicity, the NSW Police has decided to reassess the pattern of violent deaths involving gay men in the 1980s and 1990s. Detective Chief Inspector John Lehmann, of the Unsolved Homicide Team, has opened reviews of several cases classified as accidental death or missing person.

A useful reference point would be the report of Operation Taradale, compiled by then detective sergeant Stephen Page, whose four-year investigation identified links between the deaths of seven gay men, most of whose deaths remain unsolved.

The biggest mystery is why it has taken 25 years for the scale of the awful possibilities to be understood. One factor was the structure of the police, divided into area commands and treating all these crimes as local. Another was the culture of the police, which had an overt and institutional distaste of gay men 20 years ago. Another factor was AIDS, which was a far more serious concern for gay men. The association of AIDS with gay men also contributed to the malicious attacks. The most common profile of gay-bashing groups was unemployed, unskilled young men.

How times have changed.

During the past 48 hours, a video taken by a phone showing a handcuffed Mardi Gras reveller being thrown to the ground by a police officer on Saturday

was viewed about 500,000 times on social media. The police, in responding to the incident, pointed out no explanation was provided as to why the man was in handcuffs, that the police had a float in the Mardi Gras parade, and that relations between the police and the gay community are more solid than they have ever been. All true.

On Wednesday, even Police Minister Mike Gallacher, a former police officer, was moved to issue a statement about the incident: “The NSW government is committed to ensuring a full and proper investigation is carried out regarding this incident and we will await the outcome.”

This incident will likely be a minor passing squall, but there is a much bigger unresolved issue that might exercise the Police Minister.

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