Barriers Stopping LGBTI People from Accessing LGBTI Police Liaison Officers:

Analysing interviews with community and police

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Abstract

Police liaison programs that support LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex) people might go by many names (including GLLOs, LGBTI police liaison officers, etc.), but they have become the key model for providing police service enhancements for LGBTI people. These programs now dominate approaches used by police to build relationships between police and LGBTI communities, yet research on the effectiveness of these programs is limited. This paper examines interview data from LGBTI people and LGBTI police liaison officers in three states in Australia. The interviews were part of a broader study of LGBTI police liaison programs, which included a survey of LGBTI people about the issues they think impact upon these programs. The analysis demonstrates the key issues that stop LGBTI people from seeking support from LGBTI police liaison officers and how we might potentially improve this situation.

Barriers Stopping LGBTI People from Accessing LGBTI Police Liaison Officers:

Analysing interviews with community and police

Historically, relationships between police and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) people have been problematic due to the criminalisation of sodomy (Fradella & Grundy, 2016; see also American Civil Liberties Union, 2017) and discriminatory policing practices (Colvin, 2012a; Dwyer, 2014; Lambda Legal, 2015; Mallory, Hasenbush, & Sears, 2015). The policing of these communities has been traditionally informed by the notion that sexuality-, gender-, or sex-diversity was immoral and in need of regulation and criminalisation (Groombridge, 1999). Police organisations have also dedicated time and resources to building relationships with LGBTI people (Tomsen, 2009), including activities like community consultation committees and appearances at major LGBTI events (like marching in uniform in the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras). With the broad focus of police organisations on policing vulnerable people (Bartkowiak-Theron & Asquith, 2012), LGBTI–police relations have improved when compared to the overtly discriminatory policing practices of the past (Dario, Fradella, Verhagen, & Parry, 2020; Owen, Burke, Few-Demo, & Natwick, 2017; Tomsen, 2009), but these relationships are still tenuous (Russell, 2020).

LGBTI police liaison officer programs are a key service enhancement strategy by police organisations adopted to build relationships with LGBTI people and to support LGBTI victims. They were established around Australia from the late 1980s onwards to ameliorate historically problematic LGBTI–police relations. Many police organisations around Australia (Dwyer & Ball, 2013) and internationally (Colvin, 2012b; Copple & Dunn, 2017; Out to Protect, 2016) now have dedicated liaison programs that comprise typically volunteer police officers trained about LGBTI issues and do this role in addition to other duties associated

with their substantive role as an officer. Liaison officers are trained to understand LGBTI issues and are typically available to support LGBTI people in circumstances where they have been a victim, an offender, or even a witness to a crime. The officers are usually available when a LGBTI person wants to speak to them, providing a key form of frontline support for LGBTI people. Interestingly though, research indicates that while many LGBTI people are aware of these liaison officers, very few actually access them, and they do so infrequently (Berman & Robinson, 2010). This is even more paradoxical given that research highlights how people using these services feel better supported than those accessing mainstream police (Leonard et al., 2008).

This article examines the results of a project exploring LGBTI police liaison services across three states in Australia (Queensland, New South Wales, and Western Australia) to investigate the gap between awareness and access of these services. As part of a mixed-methods study, interviews were then conducted with LGBTI people to explore in-depth their experiences with LGBTI police liaison officers and the reasons they did or did not report victimisation to these officers. This paper focuses on the results of the qualitative interviews conducted for the project to answer a key question: what stops LGBTI people seeking support from LGBTI police liaison officers? We first discuss existing research literature in this area, followed by outlining the methodology we employed. We then examine the key themes that emerged from the analysis of the interviews. Finally, we present the key implications of our findings for policy and practice development in police and LGBTI community services.

Why Examine LGBTI Police Liaison Programs Now?

Police organisations do invest money and police time to build relationships with diverse, marginalised communities in different ways, but these can be difficult to sustain in police organisations with limited resources (Skilling, 2016). It is therefore important that we

not take these forms of relationship building for granted and attempt to understand the kinds of work they are doing and the relationships they are making possible. Two areas of research indicate the need to unpack how LGBTI people engage with police liaison services to better understand the gap between awareness and access of these services, in addition to an apparent lack of research specifically elaborating on LGBTI police liaison services.

LGBTI Victimisation Is Increasing and Victims Tend Not to Report

LGBTI communities have been victimised in public, private, and institutional spaces for some time (Hunter, 1990; Peel, 1999). Indeed, research reveals discrimination and abuse (verbal, physical, sexual, psychological, economic) perpetrated against LGBTI people by strangers (Harry, 1990; Mason, 1993), school peers (Hillier et al., 2010), work colleagues (Couch et al., 2007), family (Berrill, 1992), and even justice system actors (Amnesty International, 2005; Mallory et al., 2015; Seabrook, 1992). Research suggests LGBTI people experience nearly twice the level of public violence as their heterosexual counterparts (Herek, Cogan, & Gillis, 2002), with LGBTI people experiencing consistently higher levels of victimisation (Leonard et al., 2008) than the general Australian public (ABS, 2005). The higher levels of violence are especially concerning given reporting is decreasing among LGBTI adults. For instance, Australian research reports 87% of 600 New South Wales respondents (Attorney Generals Department of NSW, 2003), 75% of 1,094 Queensland respondents (Berman & Robinson, 2010), and 57% of 339 Victorian respondents (Leonard et al., 2008) in LGBTI communities did not report homophobic victimisation to police. LGBTI victims may fear the outcomes of reporting, including police homophobia, disclosure of LGBTI status, rejection from family/friends, and embarrassment about victimisation (Berman & Robinson, 2010; Pattavina et al., 2007). They may also make assumptions about reporting processes, such as assuming police will minimise incident seriousness, think it is a mutual fight in intimate partner violence, mistreat and further victimise them, fail to protect them,

judge them as at fault, assess the incident as too trivial/not reportable, or suggest reporting is futile because the offender will not be located (Pattavina et al., 2007). Similar concerns have been noted abroad (Amnesty International, 2005; Briones-Robinson, Powers, & Socia, 2016; Williams & Robinson, 2004).

Police Responses Can Be Unsupportive When LGBTI Victimisation Is Reported

A key reason why LGBTI people do not report victimisation relates to unsupportive and unhelpful police responses. Police-LGBTI interactions have been discriminatory and violent (Dwyer, 2014) and research shows unhelpful police responses including failing to arrest perpetrators, failing to intervene to protect LGBTI people, and not considering an offence a criminal issue unless it is serious (Amnesty International, 2005; Briones-Robinson et al., 2016; Miles-Johnson, 2013; Pattavina et al., 2007; Wolff & Cokely, 2007). Other research shows how police can assess who the perpetrator is in cases of same-sex intimate partner violence by examining who is ‘butch’ and ‘femme’ (and ‘noticeable differences in size’), and assuming the ‘femme’ is the victim (Hassounah & Glass, 2008, p. 322). Most importantly, research shows LGBTI people report unsupportive police responses more than the general public. Fifty-eight percent of respondents sought police assistance and felt supported in a Queensland study (Berman & Robinson, 2010), in contrast with 75% of the general public being satisfied with police (AIC, 2007). International research also suggests differential satisfaction with the police between LGBTI people and their heterosexual, cisgender counterparts (Dario et al., 2020; Gillespie, 2008; Miles-Johnson, 2015; Owen et al., 2017) which, in turn, might explain why, when victimised, LGBTI people are more likely to seek support from informal rather than formal networks such as the police (Kuehnle & Sullivan, 2003). These issues with reporting highlight the importance of exploring contextual factors, and the role of police liaison services in this landscape.

We Have Limited Research Specifically Exploring the Role of LGBTI Police Liaisons

Very little empirical research has examined LGBTI police liaison services in Australia, with available research being collected within broader studies on LGBTI victimisation (Berman & Robinson, 2010; Leonard et al., 2008). For example, Berman and Robinson (2010) conducted the largest ever study ($n = 1094$) of reporting homophobic and transphobic victimisation to police in Queensland. They found only 12% of the 53% victimised sought police assistance and of these only four percent sought support from LGBTI police liaison officers, with most noting the officers as supportive, although a few stated they felt unsupported. These low figures are remarkable considering 52% of respondents were aware of the availability of liaison officers. LGBTI communities expressed problems with LGBTI police liaison services, including high turnover, lack of availability of liaison officers, unrealistically large territories allocated to liaison officers, and lack of effective training, but interviews were not conducted with liaison officers to explore these concerns. This data is vital to ensure LGBTI victims are not “receiving reduced support and a less valuable service” (Leonard et al., 2008, p. 42) than those seeking support from general police, and to increase confidence of LGBTI people to report to police.

Methodology

This project sought to explore these concerns, aiming to provide detailed victim- and police-oriented analyses of the processes and practices of reporting LGBTI victimisation to police to address the gap between awareness and access of LGBTI police liaison programs. The project employed a mixed-methods approach to explore the localised, specific issues related to the context of LGBTI police liaison services. The methodology started with an online, structured questionnaire (marketed through a Facebook site and emails to LGBTI community organisations across all three states) targeting LGBTI people and invited them to complete an interview upon completing the questionnaire. When respondents had finished the

questionnaire, they clicked a link directing them to a separate survey that recorded their contact details so these details were de-coupled from their questionnaire responses. The questionnaire data is not discussed in this paper so the focus of the methodological discussion below is the qualitative methodology.

In addition to interviewing LGBTI people, we also interviewed LGBTI police liaison officers. We approached these LGBTI police liaison officers through an email from the State Coordinators of LGBTI police liaison programs in each state. Semi-structured interviews with both key stakeholder groups were conducted in person or by phone by team members following a semi-structured interview schedule with a range of prompts, and audio recorded interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes in duration. The project methodology underwent ethical review through the Queensland University of Technology, Griffith University, and the University of Sydney, and was administratively reviewed and approved by the research committees of police (Queensland Police Service, the New South Wales Police Force, and the Western Australian Police) and community organisations involved (ACON and Twenty10).

Forty-four ($n = 44$) LGBTI people expressed interest and were emailed by the research team. Ten ($n = 10$) LGBTI people from Queensland ($n = 7$) and New South Wales ($n = 3$) then replied to this email to arrange an interview. We had no expressions of interest to complete interviews with LGBTI people from Western Australia and none of the participants were aged 18 or under. Fifteen ($n = 15$) LGBTI police liaison officers expressed interest via email and interviews were conducted across Queensland ($n = 8$), New South Wales ($n = 5$), and Western Australia ($n = 2$).

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and the data was thematically coded using a three-step process. First, transcripts were uploaded into Leximancer text analysis software to generate key codes in the data. Second, these initial codes were used to structure the coding process using NVivo 10 qualitative data management program, with these codes constituting

the core themes in the data. Third, the research team were divided in half into two smaller coding teams each comprised of two members, and one person from each of these teams conducted an initial thematic coding process with the data in NVivo. Each team had a separate NVivo database so we would not be influenced by how we each interpreted the data. When this process was complete, we moved onto member-checking each of the coded sets of data to support inter-coder reliability (Braun & Clark, 2006; Vaismoradi et al, 2016). We did not have a quantifiable process by which this was tested – we had an extended workshop where the two coding teams discussed their similarities and differences in their coding. Where our interpretations differed, we returned to the data to ensure that our interpretations aligned with the data set. From this point, we read and re-read the data to find sub-themes in the data set.

Key limitations informed the results of this study. First, the type of convenience sampling used limited the overall generalizability of the project. While our preference would have been for a random sample, the mechanics of LGBTI people being a mostly unknown population in Australia meant that random sampling was not possible. Second, the sample sizes used in this project, and the responses we got from different participant pools, were limited by the differences in the questions across jurisdictions. As different police organisations agreed to different types of questions, we were unable to conduct more thorough comparative analysis across the jurisdictions. Third, our sample was impacted by what the different jurisdictions did with their programs. For instance, as New South Wales Police focused on ensuring that every officer could support LGBTI people in their role, with all officers receiving some baseline training, we had insufficient numbers of people in that jurisdiction that had contacted liaison officers. In contrast, Queensland Police did not do this and we therefore had a lot of people that had contact with liaison officers in this jurisdiction. Finally, the uptake of the study in each state appeared to be influenced by whether or not we

had someone on the ground in the state where the research was running. We had significant response from New South Wales and Queensland, but very limited, if any, response to the survey and the interviews in Western Australia because we did not have a researcher on the ground in that jurisdiction to drive the project.

Results: The Key Themes Emerging from the Interviews

Interviews with key stakeholder groups confirmed what existing research had begun to elaborate: that LGBTI people do not have a lot of one to one contact with LGBTI police liaison officers (Berman & Robinson 2010). All interviews with LGBTI liaison officers suggested that it was uncommon for LGBTI people to seek assistance from them directly. Officers noted how this happened “not very often” (ML3NSW),¹ “very rarely” (ML6QLD), “once a year” (FL1QLD, ML1QLD), or up to “half a dozen times a year” (FL2QLD, ML3QLD). It is unclear whether or not jurisdictions in Australia currently record statistics around the circumstances in which their LGBTI police liaison officers are deployed. Although the data demonstrated clearly that contact with LGBTI police liaison programs was minimal, data from the interviewees also demonstrated that multifarious, often conflicting issues created significant barriers that ultimately stopped LGBTI people from seeking support from LGBTI police liaison officers.

LGBTI Police Liaison Officers Are Expected to Be on the Side of LGBTI People at All Times

One of the greatest barriers noted by liaison officers was how “when someone from the gay and lesbian community did utilise the service, they assumed you were always going to be on their side” (FL1NSW). Multiple examples of these types of situations were provided in interviews with these officers:

¹ The letters and numbers following quotes from liaison officers indicate the sex of the participant, the fact that they are a liaison officer, the number of the participant, and the state in which they work. Thus, ML3NSW is the third male liaison officer from New South Wales interviewed. FL1QLD is the first female liaison officer from Queensland interviewed, and so on.

Sometimes it's not about being gay, straight, bi, it's about you got the wrong idea or you're in the wrong or it's got nothing to do with your sexuality ... let's say a nightclub scene where someone is highly intoxicated has been thrown out of a night club or a licensed premises and they are trying to convince you ... that the only reason they have been kicked out is because they are gay ... when in fact it is because they are highly intoxicated, it has nothing to do with discrimination.

(FL1NSW)

Another officer commented:

One was a neighbourhood dispute from [SURBURB NAME REMOVED], some weird place that was way away. Basically, the officer there wasn't doing what he thought he should be doing but then you look at the occurrences there and there's like years' worth of false complaints between both neighbours and that sort of crap.... Basically, he wasn't happy with the response and he thought he'd ring me.... I've had friends that have had people saying, 'I want the LGBTI liaison officer' and I said, 'Well that's me.' 'Well you're not treating me the way you should....' I'm like, 'You're still breaking the law....' So it doesn't mean because I'm gay, you're then going to get off.

(ML4QLD)

Liaison officers articulated an implicit expectation from LGBTI people that officers would necessarily support LGBTI people they were assisting, even when those people were breaching the law. This created considerable tensions between the desire to provide support to LGBTI people and the need to enforce the law: "I've often said that I get more support from the police for being gay than I do from the community for being in the police"

(ML2NSW). Interacting with a gay police liaison officer was assumed by members of the public to be their ticket out of doing something wrong. However, officers made it clear that this would not be the case. At other times, interviewees noted that it was not about doing something wrong that meant the LGBTI person could not be supported—it was rather about the lack of time these officers had to do their role: “it’s not because you are gay, it’s because we are busy you know” (ML2QLD). Officers noted that members of the public often assumed that taking time to move through the processes of reporting a crime was discriminatory based on the amount of time it was taking.

Negative Contemporary and Historical Police Experiences Stop LGBTI People Going to Liaisons

Negative past police experiences were a key concern influencing the willingness of LGBTI people to seek support from LGBTI police liaison officers. Importantly, past experiences included recent experiences they had and historical experiences they had heard about. Regardless of whether it was contemporary or historical, the interviewees made it abundantly apparent that negative interactions contributed to the development of negative perceptions of police, and subsequently less willingness to approach any police, including liaison officers. One interviewee noted that if they witnessed a New South Wales police officer “being bashed, why, I would join in or hold the person’s jacket so they don’t get blood on themselves. I hate them” (GM3NSW).² Close to one-third of respondents in our study noted negative experiences including abuse, police misconduct, and discrimination. These experiences included assault and corruption (in two cases) and verbal abuse (in two cases), and some discussions about police officers not taking their reports seriously, or focusing issues that were not relevant to their report, which in one case included asking a victim of

² The quotes from LGBTI people interviewed are referenced in a similar way to those from liaison officers above; the first letters refer to the participants’ sexuality and/or gender identification, the numbers to the number of the interview, and the final letters to the state of the participant. However, to distinguish between liaison and lesbian, the letters “LE” are used to identify lesbian women.

intimate partner violence about the purpose of sex toys rather than stopping the abuse they were experiencing (GM1QLD).

Not being taken seriously was a substantial issue for one participant subjected to years of sustained harassment from a neighbour. The interviewee stated police “didn’t believe me. They started with this position of doubt that this is harassment” (GM1NSW). The gay couple noted they were continually treated like they were over-reacting or told there was no evidence regarding the threats being made to them:

I made a complaint about the way we were being treated, and the basis of my complaint was essentially that every time one of those events took place we went into a police station and the police wanted to regard it as a new event. I understand that this is what they are required to do. If our car had been spray-painted pink, which happened three to four times, the police would say that is just an instance of vandalism. And I would have to go through all the events over and over again to establish a history and explain to them why it wasn’t just vandalism, why it was personally threatening, and why I did need their intervention. (GM1NSW)

There is no doubt that evidently negative experiences with police have heavily shaped how this person perceive police broadly, but importantly, they noted that the existence of the LGBTI police liaison program was unlikely to change how they viewed police regardless of the situation.

These ideas about police most certainly extended to historical mistrust of police. That is, historical negative experiences, regardless of whether they were personally experienced or heard about, meant that LGBTI people would not seek out support from liaison officers:

“Well, I think historical stuff is one. I don't think that applies to everyone, but historical

interactions is one” (FL2QLD), with liaison officers noting that older LGBTI people still believe “that we’re all a bunch of assholes” (ML4QLD) and they therefore “don’t want to talk to coppers anyway” (ML3QLD):

[A] lot of the issues that I was dealing with were older men and women who all had, if I can use the word, ‘hang ups’ from their treatment of police in the past or their perceptions of the police.

Whereas it’s not such an issue for younger people. (ML2QLD)

These attitudes were assumed to be widespread and evidenced by the critical response to police presence at Pride events or nightclub walkthroughs—LGBTI patrons assumed police were there to inflict violence in their safe spaces, rather than just to say hello (ML4QLD). Most importantly, if policing moments emerged that were reminiscent of historical violent policing practices with LGBTI people—such as the policing of Mardi Gras in 2013, where an officer violently arrested a gay male partygoer (see Rourke, 2013), relationships that police officers had forged with LGBTI people over many years were destroyed in an instant:

I know a lot of police have been working for many, many years to try to break down all those bad images and build up trust ... that trust was, you know, taken away very quickly. And personally, like I said, I work very closely for years with the same type of people from different organisations, government and non-government councils and things like that and you go to meetings after that happened and they treat you differently all of a sudden and you think, “well you have known me for years.” You know, so things like that are very hard. (FL2NSW)

Liaison officers interviewed made it abundantly clear that violent, discriminatory policing, reminiscent of (but perhaps not confined to) historical police-LGBTI interactions, still informs how LGBTI people think about and interact with police contemporaneously. Most

importantly, these historical ideas would constitute a substantial barrier to service delivery with LGBTI police liaison programs because they continue to inform whether or not LGBTI people decide to seek support from liaison officers: if “police still don’t understand ... like transgender issues, why would I pick up the phone and have a conversation?” (ML3NSW).

LGBTI Police Liaison Officers Are Perceived as No Different from General Police by LGBTI People

In this study, the very few LGBTI people that directly contacted LGBTI police liaison officers noted that interactions with these officers were not unlike dealing with general duties police officers. Some folks talked about how their experiences were not negative, but also “not especially” (GM1NSW) positive because all officers were experienced as equally supportive. In other situations, interviewees recounted how unsatisfactory experiences emerged from interactions with LGBTI police liaison officers. In the example above where a gay couple were being subject to sustained harassment from a neighbour, the police handling of the process was immensely harmful. The couple “would have to go through all the events over and over again ... [and] explain to them [police] why it wasn’t just vandalism” (GM1NSW), and this process was repeated over and over again:

[E]ven though I was going to the same station every time. And the disposition of the police is to not believe a victim when a victim says this is harassment and that goes for the GLLOS [Gay and Lesbian Liaison Officers] and every other police officer. That is where they let us down. (GM1NSW)

Although this process was repeated many times, the police still failed to believe he and his partner were being subject to sustained victimisation. What is even more disturbing is that this interviewee engaged in what he called “filtering”: where he and his partner went through an explicit decision making process about what would be, and what would not be, reported to

police, because they were concerned that reporting every incident of harassment to police would be a nuisance:

I can't remember which point in that list of events, but at some point, we decided to report everything that happened. But even then, we filtered. So we can't report the mouth abuse at the shopping centre. You can't do that. He called me a poofter, well yes. And then you have to go into this long discussion of why it is offensive to be called a poofter. Yes, we did filter, and we said we don't want to be a nuisance. A piece of advice that I got from [NAME REMOVED] that was really interesting was, she said "I don't think you should go make a formal complaint because then you will just get everybody offside. You will enter a complaints process and everyone will be offside." (GM1NSW)

"Filtering" like this shows a clear disconnect between the priorities for the victim and the priorities for the police. There were many unreported incidents experienced by this gay couple because they did not want to be seen as a nuisance, and even those incidents reported were not understood by police as ongoing, sustained harassment and abuse, but rather as isolated incidents. This response certainly evidences well the importance of having all police trained to understand LGBTI issues and ensuring that police databases have the capacity to record narrative of ongoing harassment and abuse. Furthermore, it highlights the need to educate the public and police about the importance of reporting any incident of harassment to fully comprehend the ongoing nature of this form of abuse.

Two other interviewees noted similar views on liaison officers being no more helpful or supportive than general duties police officers, with one stating "[t]hey're just wallopers with a different name" (GM3NSW). Liaison officers were in fact characterised as worse than

general police officers by one interviewee whose comments were informed by the experiences of one of their friends:

I don't think it would make any difference. In fact, I've heard from this friend of mine that in fact they are worse. Those who are gay, treat gay people harder especially if they are closeted. It can be worse. If they are, it's like the reverse of them trying to show favouritism.

Instead it can be worse. (GM2NSW)

While liaison officers did not have direct contact with this person, and the interviewee did not articulate how they came to think this way about liaison officers, he was not convinced that interacting with a police liaison officer would offer any more advantages than interacting with a general police officer, something that strongly suggests that all police officers require training about LGBTI issues.

Organisational Structures and Lack of Police Knowledge Denied LGBTI People Access to Liaisons

Not being able to access a police liaison officer for advice was an ongoing issue noted by both LGBTI people and LGBTI police liaison officers: “community people will come out and ask for a GLLO and a GLLO won't be on so they will walk out of the station”

(ML2NSW). Information was provided by LGBTI police liaison officers about how police organisations were structured in ways that denied LGBTI people access to liaison officers.

They noted how police rostering and shift systems meant LGBTI people could not access liaison officers due to “being fobbed around” because “accessibility is dismal” (FL1NSW).

LGBTI people also talked about how their requests for access to police liaison officers had gone unactioned or were ignored by general police officers they were dealing with

(GM3NSW, GM2NSW). Some participants raised the issue of how the programs lacked structure and formality in police organisations in ways that suggested they were of subsidiary

importance because officers only trained as liaison officers on an “as needed” basis. Officers suggested this would cause problems should a serious incident emerge involving a LGBTI person (ML5QLD).

There was significant frustration evidenced in the comments of LGBTI people that had unsuccessfully attempted to seek support from LGBTI police liaison officers. One lesbian female participant from Queensland recounted her experience of not being able to seek support with a liaison officer to report domestic violence: “I did not get hold of a liaison officer, who I would be more comfortable talking to ... I really wanted to be able to be dealing with the liaison officer, and they never returned my phone call” (LEF3QLD). Interestingly, this participant later states that she questioned whether or not police reception had taken her seriously “because I wasn’t about to get thumped” (LE3QLD). Similar experiences were recounted by a gay male participant in New South Wales: “there was very rarely one around, when I actually rang up and said can I speak to your GLLO they would say ‘she is not in today.’ ... I would leave a message to call me back and I wouldn’t get much” (GM1NSW). The thoughts of liaison officers interviewed very much aligned with these sentiments:

They ring back two days later and with our shifts particularly in the city they work two on, two off. So two 12-hour day shifts and then two 12-hour night shifts and then they go off for six. So if you are someone trying to contact a GLLO and they only have one at the command and you ring three times and each time I’m not there you might think that you’re being fobbed (FL1NSW).

Ironically, some liaison officers interviewed even suggested that requesting a liaison officer thwarted good public service simply because the rostering and shift systems meant liaison officers were so difficult to access:

“I would like to speak to a GLLO” and “Sorry they are not here.” Now good customer service is, “Now can I help you.” Now they have either left the station already, or if they get asked that next questions which they should, ”Ah yes I want to report whatever, a domestic assault or whatever but I’m not comfortable talking to just anybody, can I see a GLLO?” “Oh now I understand,” find out who it is, when they are on, find out if it is urgent. “Yes, it is urgent.” “We don’t have a GLLO on but there is senior detective out the back or there is a supervisor” ... we are here 24 hours a day we are dealing with stuff, everybody is trained to do things that’s why sometimes the GLLO things can get in the way. (ML3NSW)

There is no doubt that further exploration is needed of how a service enhancement program, like LGBTI police liaison programs, are not actually enhancing service simply because of police rostering systems. All these examples evidence well the need to conduct further research on how police operational administration and management may be limiting the access that LGBTI people have to liaison officers, in addition to how these programs may be limiting the overall effectiveness of service provision.

Another issue raised was the lack of knowledge of general duties police officers about LGBTI police liaison programs, and how this lack of knowledge impacted on people being able to access these services. Ultimately, if officers did not have knowledge about these services, how were they going to know to refer LGBTI people on?

There were further examples where requests for liaison officers made by LGBTI people were expressly ignored by general duties police officers because they lacked knowledge of these programs, although this was an issue highlighted only by participants

from New South Wales: “There is no need for them at all because they don’t seem to make a difference when you ask to see a GLLO they ignore you” (GM3NSW). Another commented,

It is a load of PR. I don’t know why the gay community actually needs specific LG liaison officers. When I was arrested for a so-called breach of an AVO against this drug dealer, I asked for a LG liaison officer [and] they ignored me (GM2NSW).

These issues were also highlighted by the liaison officers interviewed, with many noting how the lack of knowledge amongst general duties officers, about the programs and what services they offered, contributed to the overall invisibility of the LGBTI police liaison programs (Dwyer & Ball, 2020). Overall, they argued that if general police officers did not have knowledge of these programs, LGBTI people would not be provided with access to them when they needed this:

It's not marketed, neither internally [n]or externally. I've had police say to me “Oh, I didn't even know liaison officers existed, what do you do?” I thought, “Well, not very much because no one calls us because no one knows about us!” (FL1QLD)

Another officer commented, “I can pretty much guarantee that if I ring Police Link now and ask for a liaison officer, they wouldn’t have a clue where to put me” (ML4QLD).

Both liaison officers and LGBTI people suggest that general duties police officers need to know and understand the services provided by LGBTI police liaison programs. If they lack this knowledge, this will sustain the ineffectiveness of the program, and this is a problem that requires amelioration by police organisations.

Only LGBTI-Related Issues Should Be Reported to LGBTI Police Liaison Officers

The degree to which LGBTI issues were linked to what was being reported had a significant influence on whether or not LGBTI people would seek support from LGBTI

police liaison officers. Three interviewees, in Queensland and New South Wales, did not have past experiences with LGBTI police liaison officers precisely because they weighed up whether or not to seek support based on the relevance of the crime or issue to their sexuality (LE1QLD) and/or their gender identity (GQ1QLD). A key consideration in this process was whether LGBTI police liaison officers had the requisite understanding of the issues they needed support for:

I think I would go there if I knew they existed, like I mean my cousin's transgender so she's, I would imagine if she had any problems or she got bashed up because of her life, I think she would definitely feel more comfortable going there, you know, especially when people knew her in high school as a guy, so like that's something more of a tense situation like that I think she would go, whereas I don't know depending on what happened why I would need to report something or go there (LE1QLD).

Another officer from Queensland added,

I would have to know that they understood trans-gender and gender queer and let's say that I had been raped. I'd been vaginally raped; right now I don't think I would report that because I look like a dude. If I said that happened, there are a whole bunch of reasons I wouldn't report that. If that happened to me, but I looked like a dude but had both body parts I would worry they would continue to treat me a certain way and continue to use 'she' and see me as a woman. I would need to know that they understand transgender and that you can have X body parts but still be Y person and stuff like that (GQ1QLD).

A very careful, considered decision-making process is evidenced in these examples, with LGBTI people weighing up how much police liaison officers know (for instance, their knowledge of issues related to transgender experience), and therefore whether they are safe people to seek support from for their situation. These issues are also reflected in comments from LGBTI police liaison officers. Talking specifically about LGBTI people that attend a police station to report, male liaison 2 from Queensland contended that:

It depends on the age of the person. The person I'm thinking of is in his 30s and he was quite shy ... going up to the front counter and stating domestic violence or assault. Or you have this young 20-year-old who didn't blink an eyelid, and he didn't care what they thought whether he was gay or whatever. Again, this is depending on your culture and where you're at. (ML2QLD)

These comments evidence the importance of all police, not just liaison officers, having some understanding of the issues impacting the lives of LGBTI people, and that we need to educate LGBTI people about this being incorporated into police training so they feel safe to seek support from, and report crime to, police.

Considering LGBTI people do not feel safe asking for assistance from liaison officers, we asked all interviewees about making sexuality and/or gender diversity a standard question to enhance police service, like the Indigenous standard question (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2010). Some stated this was undoubtedly important: "Absolutely they should" (GM2QLD), but others suggested "they should not be allowed," then adding "[i]f it is relevant, yes, absolutely yes" (GM2NSW). Some participants suggested that their sexuality would be blatantly obvious to all police and there was therefore no need to ask: "I don't care ... it's pretty obvious" (GM1NSW) and "I wouldn't mind if they did because I am an openly gay person. But then I think, 'why do people have to come out as gay?'" (GM2QLD).

Overall, though, the responses from interviewees about this question were characterised by uncertainty—they vacillated between this being a useful and harmful strategy:

Respondent: It really depends on the context, and how it is relevant to what I was talking with the officer about.

Interviewer: So if there was a situation where you had been victimised and it was valid then, would you feel uncomfortable with an officer asking then?

Respondent: Depends on how they phrased it. If it was relevant, it was highly unlikely I would have offered the information. I'm perfectly capable of advocating for myself and giving the information by myself. (GQ1QLD)

Not all LGBTI interviewees were as comfortable as this interviewee about volunteering such information. It was no surprise, though, that agreement was much stronger about this concern when a discernible hate crime was involved:

Absolutely they should. There should be, and I don't know because I've read reports about this, the need for this and I don't know if the police are currently keeping records on LGBT hate crimes but it needs to be recorded and it needs to be recorded how bad this problem is.

This reminds me of another time where I was a victim down at Lismore, I had a Tropical Fruits stand and I was attacked quite badly and had to go to hospital for treatment and I asked for the police to attend and report it as—like the people were saying “you're a fucking poofter,” to report it as a deliberate anti-gay attack.... It needs to be recorded, there needs to be stats to say that this community is being attacked. (GM2QLD)

Liaison officers also supported these ideas and argued that people would not report a crime that technically does not exist as a crime—such as hate crime—even if there are other things that the offenders might be charged with. Female liaison 1 in Western Australia (FL1WA) discussed an example of this situation: “[w]e had a guy that had the living bejesus beat out of him at a beat and he was with another guy and they [police organisation] still didn’t see it as a homophobic hate crime.” If police had asked sensitive questions around sexuality and/or gender diversity in this instance, perhaps this might have had some chance of being recognised by police as a hate crime, and consequently this may encourage LGBTI people to report to police more often. Even though these questions have been previously raised in research (Dwyer 2008), these issues are yet to be discussed due to the related ethical sensitivities.

Anonymity Requests Impact How Much LGBTI Police Liaison Officers Can Support LGBTI People

Anonymity was an issue identified by police liaison officers as shaping the decisions that LGBTI people make about reporting crimes to police. Views were clearly mixed about how often victims requested anonymity, but interviewees did recognise that anonymity was a factor influencing victim decisions to report or not. Participants stated that victims felt discomfort about providing personal details when discussing incidents with police as they are often simply requesting advice, and this limits the assistance that a liaison officer can provide (ML3QLD). Sometimes people requested anonymity in the first instance (ML4QLD), but in other situations, liaison officers suggested that it was more a situation where they “don’t push them” (ML3QLD). There was a key tension between not receiving much needed information, yet also gaining enough information to proceed with a report to assist the person. It was therefore a careful balancing act that liaison officers engaged in when interacting with

LGBTI people. The degree of confidentiality was most often shaped by the type of situation being discussed:

You know if you do know the identity of your victim it does take some coercion to turn their mind set around and make them to bat on so to speak, because if you push the barrel and you don't have a victim, you can't do anything about it. But if it is an incident where someone said on Oxford street between 10 [and] 2 in the morning there is a large group of men frequenting souped up cars and they come and give the guys a bad time as they are walking down the street to their cars, well sure that can be anonymous and you don't need to push it because some information is better than none. (FL1NSW)

While the type of situation shaped whether or not anonymity was possible for the officer above, other interviewees noted it was the trustworthiness of police with confidential information that was more likely to shape this. Even liaison officers argued that “[n]ot everybody is trustworthy in the police and what happens with the information” (ML1NSW). At other times, frustration was expressed by LGBTI people that did not want to share certain details, yet they simultaneously expected the liaison officers to do something: “anonymous information, it is very hard. Someone comes into a police station and says, ‘I’ve been bashed up but I’m not going to tell you my name.’ That’s not really going to work or go very far” (ML3NSW). Regardless of the situation, it is evident that anonymity creates significant tensions for both LGBTI people and liaison officers, with officers struggling to balance this concern with the need for information that enables the progression of a formal report.

Rules Stop LGBTI Police Liaison Officers from Taking/Investigating Reports from LGBTI People and Complicate Supporting These People

A fundamental stipulation of liaison roles is that they are purely support roles, not investigative roles. At times, however, officers interviewed in this study noted they occasionally took reports depending on whether or not they had flexibility to do so from their supervisor: “There’s no reason why a manager can’t be a little flexible” (FL1QLD). There were mixed feelings about doing this, though, with a range of factors related to policing work generally, and particularly policing LGBTI people, that informed these decisions. Some officers suggested the rules around this were restrictive and problematic, particularly in situations where they had built rapport and trust with a community member and they did not want to pass the situation on to another officer that may not follow up:

You are just relying on other officers who you don’t even know to continue doing the right thing with the investigation ... it just takes one officer to say the wrong thing or obviously not be interested or go through the motions and all that good work can be undone in a matter of seconds. (ML1QLD)

Others agreed with this, saying that once the initial complaint is made and identified as LGBTI-related, then “I see benefit in forwarding the file to a LGBTI liaison officer for any follow-up and enforcement action of finalisation” (FL1QLD). Officers contended that police are now subject to so many accountability measures that “[i]t’s not worth them losing their job or getting in trouble and [not] investigate it just because they might be homophobic or whatever ... [W]e’re that accountable that they don’t really have the choice to do a crap job” (ML4QLD). This, they argued, could restrict the effectiveness of the program.

Other officers thoughts departed from this as they noted that it was actually a practical consideration (ML4QLD) because there were times where “someone else is more suited to

investigate” (FL1NSW), in cases where it is “a serious matter, so like a bodily harm or attempted murder” (ML3QLD), otherwise “it’d be like me getting a motor mechanic to fix your refrigerator” (ML3QLD). At other times, it was as simple as liaison officers being “snowed under” (ML4QLD) and lacking the time to address the situation. The issue can also be location based where a liaison officer is not based in the location of the offence and ultimately liaison officers “can’t cut through the QPS police or constraints or procedures, just because someone is an LGBTI officer” (ML3QLD). Finally, some officers argued forcefully that moving into investigating a report profoundly shifted the dynamic of the liaison interaction, with the liaison role falling away: “[w]hen you do that, you lose that capacity to actually interact” (ML6QLD). This was an especial concern when a LGBTI person being supported was found to be at fault: “those relationships that would have been established, have instantly been burned or getting burned because you no longer have that liaison capability” (ML6QLD). Not investigating any reports meant that a liaison could be firmly situated as being that person’s advocate by making sure that proper processes are followed, and that issues are followed up and responded to appropriately (ML2QLD). The priority for this group, then, was definitely the type of policing job they were dealing with and who had the appropriate qualifications to do that policing work. A secondary consideration was whether or not the person was going to be better supported better by a liaison officer.

Lack of Support from High-Level Police Management for LGBTI Police Liaison Programs

One factor that dominated interviews with liaison officers in Queensland and Western Australia was “the lack of support from the bosses” (ML5QLD). Officers were aware that high level management were not managing the program in effective ways and were “[v]ery pissed off” (FL1QLD), clearly noting that “the frustration is with the organisation” (FL2QLD). Some officers admitted they were engaging in more tasks than they were paid for

because they were doing the program coordinator role “because no one else will do it and I don’t want those relationships to slip away, basically” (ML4QLD). This had a range of flow-on effects that meant no funding or resources, and no time (ML4QLD; ML5QLD; FL1QLD; FL2QLD), all factors that prevented enthusiastic liaison officers from realising new program ideas (FL1NSW; ML3QLD; FL1QLD). Frustration was particularly directed at senior police management when permission for liaison officers to march in the Mardi Gras was not forthcoming, and how this subsequently demonstrated a message of non-support that made their job difficult (ML5QLD). Others made it clear they needed additional training to ensure their effectiveness as a liaison (ML4NSW; ML5QLD), and they needed additional time to maintain their LGBTI community networks (ML4NSW), with some officers doing this work in their own time (ML4QLD; ML5QLD). All these issues were identified as needing improvement to ensure the overall effectiveness of liaison programs.

Discussion

A number of key issues have emerged from our study that provide important indications of how police organisations might move forward with LGBTI police liaison programs. First, it is clear that LGBTI people had awareness of these liaison services, even if this awareness included misunderstanding about their role. Despite having this awareness, though, LGBTI people were not using these services to report and seek support as other research has found (Berman & Robinson, 2010). Importantly, this does not mean liaison services have no value – liaison officers interviewed argued strongly that simply having these services exist is as important as having them used. These services signal to LGBTI communities that police organisations recognise the queer diversity of communities and police (Colvin, 2012b). They provide meaningful demonstrations of policing as they align with procedural justice and police legitimacy (Dario et al., 2020; Mazerolle et al. 2013), where respectful, thoughtful policing, regardless of the outcome for the person involved, can

be exemplified both externally and internally with police organisations. Most importantly, liaison services are yet to be fully realised because investment by police organisations in these programs differs so widely, as other research has found (Tobler, 2006), and lack of visibility impacts who knows about them (Dwyer and Ball, 2020). With full support and solid investment, the programs could potentially be much more effective, and only then will be able to measure effectiveness of more siloed police service enhancement programs set up to support vulnerable people (Asquith and Bartkowiak-Theron 2014).

Second, barriers like not feeling issues are important enough, and not feeling comfortable to report because of lack of anonymity, are not new – they inform policing across all communities. However, in the LGBTI liaison role, these issues are exacerbated and complicated by existing attitudes about LGBTI folks both within and outside of police (Myers, Forest & Miller, 2004; Miles-Johnson, 2013a), and how LGBTI folks think about the seriousness of their issue (i.e. verbal abuse not being reported because they might be interpreted as a nuisance by police when it happened and was reported so often). Our data suggests that police reporting systems need change to recognise that multiple and ongoing incidents can exemplify a sustained pattern of abusive behaviour. This might lessen the vicarious trauma reported by our participants that came from retelling histories of abuse to each new police officer. They might also feel better supported simply because all incidents were considered important enough to be recorded in police records. This also points to the potential utility of establishing third-party reporting mechanisms so that people can anonymously report what might be patterned abusive behaviours for analysis by police.

Third, LGBTI police liaison roles clearly serve a role in breaking down homophobia and transphobia in policing organisations. Liaison officers noted one of the most important roles involved educating other officers about these issues, a form of ‘training’ which is perhaps yet to be articulated in existing research focused on the effectiveness of targeted

sensitivity training (Israel et al. 2014). This did not extend to overall internal communication (and managerial support) related to these programs with police organisations – it is abundantly evident that further communication work is needed to showcase the availability and value of liaison officers. External impacts of the role are also less clear and our research indicates the need for clearer communication with LGBTI people about what liaison officers can and cannot do.

Finally, precariousness certainly influences LGBTI police liaison programs and this is experienced by officers and LGBTI people. Relationships between police and LGBTI communities are heavily shaped by their contact with general duties officers – they are the officers that LGBTI people most commonly deal, something which indicates that all police officers ought to have specialist knowledge about LGBTI issues. Further, it highlights how siloed specialised liaison programs can mean problematic policing experiences with limited impact, but these programs need more time and investment before we can confidently make this claim. Liaison officers and LGBTI people in our study agreed that these programs were vital for supporting LGBTI victims, offenders, or witnesses. Our study shows that, until LGBTI police liaison programs are provided with sustained and sufficient investment and support by police organisations, we will not truly comprehend the relationship building work they do with LGBTI people and how they support them to report to police.

Conclusion

The climate in which LGBTI police liaison programs exist and function is complicated and challenging. Significant barriers exist which are keenly felt by both LGBTI people and LGBTI police liaison officers. Even so, these programs represent important positive symbols of LGBTI-police relationship building and indicate support for LGBTI people in many ways. Measuring the very complex full impact of these service enhancement programs, however, cannot be actioned at this point when these programs clearly need more

time to establish themselves to ensure we can capture a clear sense of how they best support LGBTI people in their relationships with police. We can only speculate about whether the critical influence of liaison programs is the internal process officers engage with in promoting more appropriate and sensitive policing to vulnerable communities, and broadly educating these officers in new directions. Alternatively, we are yet to understand comprehensively whether their role is instead one of making police organisations more approachable, and therefore more supportive, for LGBTI people, regardless of their status as victim or offender. What is abundantly clear at this point is how police organisations need to consistently invest in and support their LGBTI police liaison programs if they are to be effective in any way at all, and that this high level support and investment happens within a culture where efforts are being made to eradicate suspicion, mistrust, and problematic attitudes between LGBTI people and police.

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