

“Asked if I have experienced homophobia, I’ll say no. What I mean by that is I have not had my head kicked in”: Understanding LGBT+ perspectives on hate crime and barriers to reporting in the UK

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Rachel Russell¹ , Freya O’Brien¹ and Laura Boulton¹ 

Abstract

As Covid-19 restrictions eased in 2021, a wave of LGBT + hate crime was reported in the media across local regions in the United Kingdom (UK). Although recorded hate crimes are increasing, as few as one in ten victims report instances of victimisation. Whilst decision-making processes and models of reporting helping to understand the reasons for under-reporting of hate crimes have been explored, there is a lack of UK-based research into the LGBT + community’s understanding of what constitutes hate crime, their perceptions of the police, and barriers to reporting such offences. Through 12 semi-structured interviews with LGBT + individuals from a northern UK city, thematic analysis revealed key factors contributing to under-reporting. Participants expressed uncertainty about what constitutes an anti-LGBT + hate crime, particularly in relation to verbal abuse, and often did not perceive their experiences as severe enough to report. Low confidence in engaging with the police stemmed from concerns about poor treatment, disbelief, and fears of homophobic or transphobic attitudes within law enforcement. Additionally, participants were largely unaware of third-party reporting centres (TPRCs) as an alternative method for reporting. Based on these findings, the study recommends improving police engagement through better training on LGBT + issues, reducing the tokenistic use of LGBT + officers, and launching awareness campaigns to clarify what

¹School of Law and Justice Studies, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK

Corresponding author:

Rachel Russell, School of Law and Justice Studies, Liverpool John Moores University, John Foster Building, 80-98 Mount Pleasant, Liverpool L3 5UZ, UK.

Email: r.l.russell@ljmu.ac.uk

constitutes a hate crime, and promote the use of TPRCs. These measures could help bridge the gap in reporting and improve police-community relations.

Keywords

LGBT+, hate crime, police legitimacy, reporting, perceptions of police

Introduction

According to the [Crown Prosecution Service \(CPS, 2022\)](#), anti-LGBT + hate crime is ‘any incident/crime which is perceived by the victim or any other person, to be motivated by hostility or prejudice towards a person because of their sexual orientation or transgender identity, or perceived sexual orientation or transgender identity’. The historical criminalisation and othering of non-heterosexual individuals based on normative ideologies surrounding gender and sexuality are thought to fuel prejudice and violence against LGBT + people ([Peel et al., 2021](#)). There is a wealth of research to date indicating that hate crimes are psychologically and emotionally more damaging than non-hate crimes ([Iganski and Lagou, 2015](#)); the recognition of this has led to enhancements in the criminal justice system reframing groups who have been historically persecuted by police to being those requiring specific police protection ([Pickles, 2019](#)). Charities supporting those who are affected by LGBT + hate crimes have reported a 65% rise in victims coming forward for support ([Galop, 2023](#)). Further, local UK police forces have seen an increase in the reporting of offences against victims who identify as LGBT+, particularly when Covid-19 restrictions eased after the pandemic ([Police Professional, 2021](#)). Although the number of incidents seems to be rising, hate crime reporting is decreasing ([Home Office, 2023](#)); only 13% of victims who had experienced LGBT + hate crime had reported incidents to the police ([Galop, 2021](#)), low in comparison to other types of hate crime ([Home Office, 2020](#)). Under-reporting has implications for society and the individual, including masking the true scale of the problem ([Giannasi, 2014](#)), creating issues for developing evidence-based policy and legislation ([Baumer and Lauritsen, 2010](#)), setting budgetary decisions and priorities ([Torrente et al., 2017](#)), and rendering victims unable to access practical and emotional help ([Boateng, 2018](#)).

Although there are existing frameworks seeking to explain the reasons why the public may not report general offences ([Goudriaan, 2006](#); [Goudriaan et al., 2005](#)) and typologies of barriers to reporting hate crime, there has been a paucity of research examining the reasons why there such an under-reporting of hate crime by members of the LGBT + community in the UK. Similarly, whilst there have been empirical studies into police perceptions of LGBT + communities and their responses to anti-LGBT + hate crimes ([Briones-Robinson et al., 2016](#)), there have been far less examining LGBT + perceptions of police ([Gillespie, 2008](#); [Miles-Johnson, 2015](#); [Nadal and Davidoff, 2015](#)). The current study therefore aims to examine factors influencing reporting of LGBT + hate crime hearing the views and experiences of members of the LGBT + community. This will allow for the cross-validation of existing frameworks of the reporting of crime and hate crime, as well as extending our knowledge of the challenges LGBT + may face. Findings may

inform strategies to encourage and support members of the LGBT + community to come forward when victimised.

Models of reporting

Goudriaan et al. (2005) and Goudriaan (2006) discussed four decision-making processes and models of reporting which can help explain underreporting of crime in general: i) *rational* – victims weigh up the benefits and costs of reporting an offence (i.e., perceiving that the crime is not serious enough, police cannot or will not do anything, or the offence could be dealt with without police intervention), ii) *psychological* – decision-making is influenced by the victim's emotions surrounding the event (e.g., fear of further victimisation or retaliatory attacks; Fisher et al., 2003), iii) *institutional* – victims' willingness to report relates to their perception and previous negative experiences of the police (Tolsma et al., 2012; Torrente et al., 2017), and iv) *community* – decision to report is influenced by community networks. The latter is particularly prevalent in marginalised or stigmatised groups where victimisation is most prominently and acutely felt (Davies et al., 2017).

Models attempting to explain general crime under-reporting are not well suited to hate crime as they are based largely on victimisation surveys which over-represent certain categories of crime (e.g., property and personal theft); these crimes do not incorporate the same sentiments and characteristics of hate crime victims (Hardy, 2019). Crimes underlined by profit rather than stigma underestimate the adverse psychological effects specifically associated with hate crime (Chakraborti, 2018). Furthermore, research shows that even the reporting behaviours of general crime minority victims varies significantly from non-minority victims (Zaykowski et al., 2019). Hence, Vergani and Navarro (2023) developed a specific typology highlighting five key obstacles to victim reporting offences motivated by hate: i) *internalisation* - beliefs and values validating and normalising hate victimisation, ii) *unawareness* - lack of knowledge and understanding of the legislation, and protection of marginalised groups, iii) *fear of negative consequences* - fear of retaliation or of being outed, iv) *distrust of statutory agencies* - the relationship between the victim, their community and the police, and their own or others' previous negative reporting experiences, and v) *accessibility* - limited access to technology, police stations, and support services.

Models specifically relating to hate crime towards LGBT + community members have not yet been developed; therefore, the current study will frame the results of previous studies on this topic within the typology put forward by Vergani and Navarro (2023) and refer to the literature base on hate crime in general, as well as the scant findings from research into LGBT + hate crime.

Internalisation. High private regard and high identity centrality, coupled with low public regard, increases overall awareness and concern about what constitutes anti-LGBT + violence, which subsequently increases community members willingness to engage in social action and report an incident (Sheehan et al., 2021). Meyer's (2003) Minority Stress Model describes how members of the LGBT + community are more susceptible to stressful social environments due to their stigmatised social position which can lead to an

increase in: (i) the need to conceal and hide their feelings and identity, (ii) expectations of rejection, and (iii) internalised feelings of homophobia.

Unawareness. Discrimination can be inferred from verbal cues (e.g., anti-LGBT + remarks), visibility (e.g., if occurring in a known LGBT + location), and contextual inferences (e.g., if occurring at an LGBT + event) (Herek et al., 1997). However, there is significant lack of awareness amongst minority groups regarding what constitutes, and is subsequently perceived to meet, the official definition of a hate crime (Chakraborti and Hardy, 2015), which may increase reluctance to report (Galop, 2021).

Fear of negative consequences. Victims may fear secondary victimisation from the police, whether by police indifference to their experience, or the fear of being ‘outed’ by engaging in a formal criminal process (Pezzella et al., 2019). Fear of perpetrator retaliation has been found to be higher amongst hate crime victims in comparison to non-hate crime victims (Erentzen and Schuller, 2020). Furthermore, the fear of the act of reporting may have a negative effect on a relationship with the perpetrator (e.g., if a family member), exacerbating psychological suffering and vulnerability, and leading to feelings of disempowerment (Vergani and Navarro, 2020). Reporting can therefore create a downward spiral of negative emotions, leading to social withdrawal, subsequent heightened expectations of rejection, and fewer coping mechanisms (Feddes and Jonas, 2020; Garland et al., 2010).

Distrust of statutory agencies. LGBT + people may hold more negative views regarding the police than their heterosexual counterparts (Nadal et al., 2015; Owen et al., 2018). Policing is still largely dominated by a heterosexual ethos (Silvestri, 2017), which may impede engagement and trust shown by LGBT + people towards the police (Tomsen and Mason, 2001). Further, the societal norm of disliking LGBT + communities has been found to drive negative police behaviours, with it being argued the societal and governmental grouping of LGBT + people into one homogenised group further contributes to the ‘othering’ of sexual minority people by predominantly heterosexual police forces (Bernstein and Kostelac, 2002). Each instance of LGBT+-related police failure brought into the public sphere can serve to undermine public confidence (Independent Office for Police Conduct, 2021), something which Jones (2015) argues was largely ignored or hidden in the past.

Discriminatory treatment, apathetic responses, or being treated as a perpetrator by police can affect how likely members of the LGBT + community are to report instances of victimisation and may decrease overall confidence in cooperating with the police (Chakraborti, 2018). Males may feel the need to “act straight” in front of the police due to fears of detainment or victimisation, whereas women may be mistreated by police if they appear too masculine; these feelings may lead to hesitancy in seeking help from the police (Nadal et al., 2015: 467). Transgender people are especially vulnerable to mistreatment from the police (Hodge and Sexton, 2020) which affects their levels of trust (Serpe and Nadal, 2017).

In recent years, attempts have been made to improve relations between the police and the LGBT + community (Owen et al., 2018), and there is now a higher proportion of

LGBT + police officers; a key step towards improving relations between the police and local LGBT + communities (Jones, 2015; Jones and Williams, 2015). Further, LGBT + members who have witnessed patrols and received help from the police at Pride have more favourable perceptions of the police as a result (Gillespie, 2008); however, perceptions of the police can indeed vary by age due to lived experience and the historical incidents and treatment relating to LGBT + communities being observed during a person's lifetime (Bitterman and Hess, 2021; Gillespie, 2008). Lastly, whilst recent police liaison programmes such as LGBT + police liaison officers have been implemented to tackle under-reporting, there is limited research into their effectiveness (Dwyer et al., 2023).

Accessibility. Third-party reporting centres (TPRCs) emerged in response to the inquiry into the Metropolitan Police handling of the murder of Stephen Lawrence, with a recommendation made by MacPherson (1999) that there needed to be an alternative to the police reporting mechanism of hate crimes as a way of circumventing poor police-community relations. However, many people are not familiar with TPRC options for hate crime offences or may perceive them to be inaccessible due to their physical location or their dependence on certain technology (Chakraborti, 2018). Furthermore, Wong et al. (2020) argue many TPRCs are failing to increase hate crime reporting due to a lack of government funding and not being administered by individuals who represent the minority communities who would typically benefit from engaging with these services.

The present study

The present study seeks to extend previous research on LGBT + hate crime by specifically examining the factors that influence victim reporting with an aim to generate evidence-based recommendations for policing practice to encourage and support members of the LGBT + community to come forward when victimised.

Method

Participants

Twelve participants were recruited via purposive snowball sampling and interviewed in May 2022. Inclusion criteria required participants to self-identify as LGBT + aged 18 years or older and to live in the city being discussed. The majority ($n = 7$, 58%) of participants were male, followed by four females (33%) and one non-binary (9%) person. Three (25%) participants identified with a gender that differed from birth assignment. All participants self-identified as LGBT+ with five sexual orientations identified within the sample group with six (50%) identifying as gay, whilst the others were queer ($n = 2$), bisexual ($n = 1$), pansexual ($n = 1$), and transgender heterosexual ($n = 2$). Participant ages ranged between 21 and 48 years of age ($M = 30.33$, $SD = 9.59$) (Table 1).

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Participant	Gender identity	Sexuality	Age range
1	Cisgender man	Gay	Generation Z
2	Non-binary	Pansexual	Generation X
3	Transgender man	Heterosexual	Generation Y
4	Cisgender man	Gay	Generation Z
5	Cisgender woman	Queer	Generation Z
6	Cisgender woman	Queer	Generation Z
7	Transgender woman	Heterosexual	Generation Y
8	Cisgender woman	Bisexual	Generation Z
9	Cisgender man	Gay	Generation Z
10	Cisgender man	Gay	Generation X
11	Cisgender man	Gay	Generation Y
12	Cisgender man	Gay	Generation Y

Interview schedules

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with questions split into two parts: (i) demographic questions, and (ii) questions exploring participants' experiences, perceptions, and attitudes towards reporting hate crimes within the LGBT + community. The interview guide was developed based on a review of relevant literature and discussions with experts in the field and included open-ended questions aimed at exploring factors influencing hate crime reporting among LGBT + individuals.

Procedure

Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 min and all interviews were conducted online using an audio transcription tool with participants' consent. Field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual information. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the researchers' university ethics panel, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and they were informed about their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Analysis

Thematic analysis was manually employed to analyse the interview data (Braun and Clarke, 2006); transcripts were reviewed multiple times to familiarise the researcher with the data. Initial codes were generated by identifying key concepts and patterns within the data that were interesting, relevant and meaningful to the aims of the research. Codes were then grouped into higher-order themes and related sub-themes whereby quotes referring to the same concept, belief or idea were categorised together. The interviewer-maintained reflexivity throughout the data collection and analysis process, acknowledging their own biases and assumptions; in this case, the interviewer does not identify as LGBT+ and has

therefore not personally experienced any instances of such hate crimes; this was a point acknowledged at the beginning of each interview. The interviewer is a ‘conscience adherent’ (Wahlström et al., 2018: 83), and supports the LGBT + community.

Results and discussion

After a thorough analysis of the data, five key themes emerged throughout the study: (i) internalisation (i.e., victim perception of the severity of the crime), (ii) unawareness (i.e., lack of understanding of what constitutes a hate crime), (iii) distrust in police response, (iv) how to improve trust in police response, and (v) accessibility of reporting processes. Each of these themes will be discussed with regards to how they support or contradict existing knowledge and how they can serve as barriers to the reporting of anti-LGBT + hate crimes to the police.

Internalisation: Victim perception of severity as a barrier to reporting

Instances of abuse, particularly verbal, were not viewed as serious due to being somewhat normalised; 50% ($n = 6$) of participants expressed uncertainty regarding the severity required for an incident to be classed as a hate crime worth reporting, perceiving verbal abuse as not being severe enough. This resonates in research (Galop, 2021; Wong and Christmann, 2008). These could be born out of the harmful historical rhetoric and stigmatisation concerning the LGBT + community which has normalised violence (Gatehouse et al., 2018; Godzisz and Viggiani, 2019), and been internalised (Vergani and Navarro, 2023):

I have experienced verbal abuse loads of times, but would not even dream of reporting that. (P2)

If it was something verbal, or someone shouting in the street or someone saying something online, I don't think I would report it. (P8)

I've been asked a question like, have you experienced, you know, homophobia in your life? And what I've noticed recently is my answer is interesting, because I will say as an automatic, I'll say no, or I will automatically go, uh, fortunately not. And what I mean by that is I have not had my head kicked in. (P12)

Others reported that people they knew did not realise verbal insults were a hate crime:

Something that I'm really surprised by is not a lot of people realise that they've been a victim of a hate crime because often slurs or violence or anything like that has been very normalised for the community [...] they seem very like, oh, but it wasn't that bad. Like, no, it's fine, it's fine. Then they downplayed that experience. (P5)

I don't think the slurs [...] I don't think people would count them. (P7)

Only one participant in this study had reported a verbal incident to the police, believing verbal abuse can be just as severe as physical:

Verbal can also have the same effect as physical because mentally it can really destroy and affect someone's confidence. Everyone's got different traumas, past traumas, childhood traumas, and it can affect some people more than others. (withheld)

Unawareness: Lack of understanding of what constitutes an anti-LGBT + hate crime

Whilst all participants in this study believed both verbal and physical actions due to someone's gender or sexuality may fall under the umbrella term of anti-LGBT + hate crimes, there was a clear lack of certainty regarding any true definition, which would support previous findings:

I've had a couple of things happen in the past but I'm like, I don't know if that classes as a hate crime. (P4)

Seventeen percent ($n = 2$) of participants believed microaggressions and online abuse may be hate crimes, whereas one participant believed stalking and misgendering could be classified as such.

I would say the common thing would be the name calling and misgendering, especially regarding young transgender females. (P8)

Reasons for (not) reporting: Perceived outcome of reporting anti-LGBT + hate crimes

Forty-two percent ($n = 5$) of participants said they would be willing to report a hate crime to police, 33% ($n = 4$) were unsure, and 25% ($n = 3$) were not willing to report. Of those who would be willing, their reasons were predominantly linked to wanting these incidents to be recognised in the official statistics to act as evidence if the incident was repeated, and to show solidarity with other community members (Goudriaan, 2006):

Even if I feel that, like everyone says, nothing gets done, at least it's evidenced. So, if there's a repeat incident, then the information's there that I've reported this, and this is the second time or if it's happened again there's a third time. So, there's a sort of a paper trail. (P7)

And I think if I consistently remind myself, like the reason it's important is so that they have statistics to look back on to prove that this does happen [...] They care about the statistics, and if those stats aren't there then they're definitely not gonna listen to us because in their mind they're gonna be like, well, it doesn't happen that often or, like you always see reports of like, oh hate crime reports have dropped XYZ amount of times and it's like, yeah, because people don't feel safe or comfortable reporting it. (P5)

The most prominent barrier to reporting an anti-LGBT + hate crime was the belief nothing would be done by police (58%, $n = 7$); a similar percentage has been found in previous research (54%; Galop, 2021). This was followed by a lack of confidence the

participants would be believed or treated fairly ($n = 4$, 33%), and a fear the officer or the wider police institution would hold either homophobic, biphobic, or transphobic views ($n = 4$, 33%). A quarter of participants ($n = 3$) feared being outed by the police because of reporting, with the same number believing historical police brutality was still a reporting barrier within the LGBT + community. The least prominent barriers raised by participants were fear of retaliation and embarrassment:

There's a real history of police brutality against marginalised communities so I think a lot of people, especially queer people or people of colour, would not at all feel comfortable going to the police. (P6)

Sometimes they would feel like they would be outed. A couple of incidents I have read, they have identified the person as a transgender female, and that person might not actually want to be outed as a transgender person. (P7)

Of the two participants who had reported, neither received any meaningful follow-up from the police:

It was verbal abuse, so the next day I put in the crime, and I've got a clear photo of this man as well. But no-one got in touch with me. It's now been like a month and a few weeks and still no one's got in touch with me. (withheld)

So, still to this day, that was two years ago, I still haven't heard anything from that incident. And it happened [where] there's like cameras and stuff, and still nothing happened. (withheld)

Despite having never reported an instance of anti-LGBT + hate crime, sentiment from the other participants was also predominantly negative with regards to their perception of police responses to reports made by people they knew:

I know someone who got really badly beat up last year and still nothing's been really done about it. (P1)

I've got a lot of friends who are LGBT and a few of them have gone to police and nothing's been done. Obviously last summer, with all the hate crimes that happened over homophobic attacks and stuff, it didn't really feel like much was done about that. (P4)

The experiences of others seemed to have impacted on the participants' willingness to report, highlighting how important the influence of community networks is on victims' decisions to report (Goudriaan, 2006; Tolsma et al., 2012; Torrente et al., 2017). This sentiment is particularly prevalent in marginalised or stigmatised groups where victimisation is most prominently and acutely felt (Davies et al., 2017).

Participants highlighted how the police may not respond to verbal hate crimes, as opposed to physical:

It's a very, like, brush under the rug kind of thing, especially if it's just, like, verbal. (P6)

I just don't feel that they would follow up verbal stuff as much. You'd be put to the back of the queue. (P10)

Some also expressed worries about how they would be treated if they decided to report, based on what they had heard from people who had reported:

They've not been listened to, so they've made them feel like it's their fault. I've heard the story of police not taking it serious, sort of, like, laughing and sort of, like, giving each other nudges. (P7)

It's basically, they're not gonna be believed or they think it's their fault or it's again, it's just, it's a culture with the police, I think. (P10)

I've known people who have been attacked or discriminated against, or abused, where the police have been quite dismissive and quite quick to question or not to believe LGBTQ+ people. (P12)

Of those participants who were unsure as to whether they would be willing to report, their uncertainty stemmed from their lack of belief they would be treated appropriately by the police, alongside confusion as to whether the incident would be considered serious enough by the police:

I think like having to walk into a police station or call is very intimidating. And I won't feel comfortable doing that. [...] From what I understand and my friends' experiences, like they haven't always been very like understanding. And so that kind of puts me off. (P4)

Part of me thinks, well, is there any point reporting? But then there's another part of me that says, well, no, I have to. Because it's important to be allied to your community. (P1)

This would support [Goudriaan's \(2006\)](#) rational framework for non-reporting in relation to decision-making, whereby victims weigh up the benefits and costs of reporting, with many victims feeling the crime is not serious enough, and the police cannot or will not do anything. There is still ambiguity for many police officers regarding the legal definition of hate crime, partly because it occurs (or is reported) less frequently than other crimes ([Wickes et al., 2017](#)). Furthermore, the requirement to prove motivation, regardless of the severity of the incident, is challenging in practice ([Cronin et al., 2007](#)), which may reduce police willingness to investigate. This could explain why participants hold such negative perceptions of the outcome of reporting to police.

Finally, of the three who were not willing to report, their reasons were linked to their feelings towards reporting an offence to someone who was not within the LGBT + community, the police or the criminal justice system more broadly ([Goudriaan, 2006](#)):

I just wouldn't feel comfortable talking to someone who wasn't either in the community or wasn't really educated in the gay community about how that actually felt or how that has affected me. (P9)

I just don't believe in the criminal justice process. (P12)

No, I'd rather go somewhere other than the police. [...] The people who I know who have reported have had quite difficult experiences with that and have either been dismissed or made to feel very uncomfortable and unsafe. (P6)

Interestingly, however, when asked if they would be willing to provide a statement to police following an anti-LGBT + hate crime, 75% ($n = 9$) of participants said they would, with general sentiment being the police wanting to take a statement reduces their fears about nothing happening or not being believed. However, four (33%) stated they were unsure as to whether they would do this due to the potential stress and trauma it may cause.

When asked if they knew how to report a hate crime to the police, 58% ($n = 7$) of participants did not know how to go about this. Of the five participants that did know how to make a report, two of these only knew as they had previously reported an incident to the police. When further asked what method of reporting they would use if required, 66% ($n = 8$) of participants said they would contact the police directly whereas 33% ($n = 4$) said they would not feel comfortable doing this and would therefore seek out an alternative organisation for advice.

Improving trust in police response to LGBT + hate crime

Perceptions of police presence at pride. The most prominent theme when discussing the relationship between police and the LGBT + community was Pride (a celebration of diversity and the ongoing advancements of LGBT + rights), which was raised by 75% ($n = 9$) of participants. Pride began as a form of protest in response to police and government treatment of LGBT + communities but has more recently become a celebration of diversity and the ongoing advancements of LGBT + rights. Police presence at Pride has been contested in the past, with some scholars believing it signifies social progress (Gillespie, 2008) whilst others claim police inclusion is “part of the oppressive system that activists seek to dismantle, and thus can only hurt the cause” (Bruce, 2016: 147). This study found participants expressed both positive and negative feelings concerning police presence. Positive views were generally linked to the organisational police presence at Pride:

Any visibility of being supported to the LGBT community is really good. (P2)

From going to Pride and stuff like that, the police and police cadets are usually, they're there to help. (P8)

Unlike Gillespie (2008) who found Pride attendees over the age of 40 held largely negative views about the police, this study found that, of the participants who shared negative views regarding police presence at Pride ($n = 4$), three of those were under the age of 25. Those with negative perceptions link these to specific actions and/or behaviours of attending police officers. For example, one participant highlighted how the police were protecting anti-LGBT + protesters:

They were, like, all round these people that were, like, protesting about, you know being gay is wrong. [...] they were telling us to go away, when we were standing there, and I was like, God, you're protecting someone who's just homophobic. (P1)

Another participant felt police officers were gathering intelligence about attendees:

What I think annoyed me is I remember there being a number of police officers, the blue bib ones, like, gathering intelligence on people. [...] So, they kind of look really friendly and they'll get engaged in conversation, like, ooh isn't it a great day and stuff, but actually their role is to, like, monitor the process and to collect information. (P12)

Importance of police characteristics when engaging with the LGBT + community. According to Zempi (2020), white heterosexual males are the most visible embodiment of the police force in the eyes of the LGBT + community which can create a sense of fear and distrust for LGBT + persons as it is the white, male, heterosexual demographic who are also most widely associated with homophobia. Several participants in this study referenced how personal characteristics of police officers, and the use of these, can impact upon their perceptions of the entire force, and can hinder police attempts at a better relationship with the LGBT + community. One participant highlighted discomfort at Pride due to a lack of representation of officers attending:

Even in things like Pride, like, the presence of police can be quite a frightening one for a lot of people because it's a lot of kind of quite cis, male figures who are present. There's not, I guess, like a level of representation where you would feel comfortable, like, feeling like they maybe had a shared experience or a shared empathy of your experience. (P6)

Several participants remarked on the use of tokenism (Moss Kanter, 1977) by the police and how this translates to their community. Whilst two participants felt seeing LGBT + police officers can be reassuring, others felt it does not help with improving police LGBT + relations:

They've got like a lesbian police officer who is very vocal about being a lesbian and very vocal about being a police officer. And there's also a trans police officer who again does workshops and talks with young people. And then they also become like the spokesperson for that, which I really just dislike. And I understand why they do it because, you know, I get it. But again, that does kind of leave a sour taste in people's mouths because then, you know, both the lesbian police officer and the trans officer, like they're both white people, they're both very middle-class people, they're both well educated people. So, even then it's like, well, you're still not speaking to, like, all lesbians or all trans people. And, you know, I do find that that, potentially, could create more barriers in the long run because then people are like, well, it seems disingenuous to kind of hire two people and then them be the spokespeople. (P5)

Whilst most research around tokenism and the police has focused upon the female gender (Stichman et al., 2010), Stroshine and Brandl (2021) argue there is reason to believe minority groups may hold a more negative view of tokenism. Whilst this study did not involve any other minority group for comparison, it would indicate tokenism is not viewed in a positive light by LGBT + persons. Participants in this study then took this conversation further and commented on their concerns around having to report to cis-gender heterosexual male officers, with three participants (male and female) saying they would only want to report to a female officer. Some males might feel the need to act straight in front of male officers, and females less masculine to avoid being victimised

(Nadal et al., 2015). These findings indicate participants felt this form of masking would not be as necessary if they were reporting to a female officer:

I feel like I would be more comfortable with seeing a female officer because I feel like they'd be more compassionate. (P8)

Accessibility: Awareness of third-party reporting centres

Third-Party Reporting Centres (TPRCs) were established due to recommendation #16 in the MacPherson Report (1999) as a way of circumventing negative relationships between the police and the community by offering an alternative method of reporting does not rely upon the victim contacting the police directly. The report stated there should be an option to report at locations other than police stations, and this option should be available 24 h a day. The impetus for TPRCs was victim dissatisfaction with police response to hate crimes (Chakraborti and Hardy, 2014) and to tackle the longstanding issue of the underreporting of hate crimes (Hardy, 2019). Participants in the present study were largely unfamiliar with the ability to report crimes directly to a third-party (92%, $n = 11$). Seventy-five percent of participants ($n = 9$) stated this knowledge would increase their willingness to report:

I would much rather do that because then I don't have to engage with the police directly, which you know, as I've mentioned, can be like super traumatic anyway. And I think that's so good. I'm genuinely so surprised that I didn't even know that that was a thing because that is just perfect for me, like, especially because that's what everyone needs, they need that emotional support. (P5)

I think I'd feel more comfortable in a sense of, you know, the people who you're having a conversation with will have specific training around dealing with your experience and will have a level of empathy towards your experience. I think having a conversation with someone who you know is there to listen and to support you in reporting would be a completely different experience. (P6)

It therefore appears that, if awareness levels were improved, more incidences of hate crimes would be reported and there would be more empirical knowledge to inform police activities aimed at reducing victimisation of the LGBT + community.

The study identified five key themes that impact the reporting of anti-LGBT + hate crimes to the police: internalisation, unawareness, distrust in police response, improving trust in police response, and accessibility of reporting processes. Internalisation, where victims downplay the severity of verbal abuse due to societal normalisation, was a significant barrier to reporting. Many participants also lacked clarity on what constitutes a hate crime, contributing to unawareness and confusion about reporting thresholds. Distrust in the police was prevalent, with over half of the participants feeling that their reports would be ignored or handled poorly, stemming from both personal experiences and community influence. Despite these barriers, many participants expressed a willingness to report if it would contribute to official statistics or future investigations. Enhancing trust in police response was linked to more visible, supportive, and inclusive police engagement, particularly at events like Pride. However, concerns about tokenism and the characteristics

of officers (e.g., gender, sexual orientation) also played a role. Finally, awareness of TPRCs was low, but participants believed these alternatives would make them more likely to report, as they offered emotional support and reduced direct police involvement. These findings highlight structural and cultural barriers to reporting anti-LGBT + hate crimes, underscoring the need for systemic changes in how such crimes are perceived and addressed.

Implications

The findings suggest key implications for improving police relations with the LGBT + community and encouraging the reporting of anti-LGBT + hate crimes. Firstly, targeted training programs should be developed to equip cisgender, heterosexual male officers with the confidence and knowledge to engage meaningfully with the LGBT + community. This would challenge stereotypes of homophobic male officers and demonstrate allyship from those outside the community, potentially reducing distrust. Training should include education on correct language use, gender identities, and the specific challenges faced by LGBT + individuals, and could be delivered in collaboration with local LGBT + advocates to foster a more empathetic and informed police force.

In addition, public awareness campaigns are essential to promote TPRCs as accessible and safe alternatives for reporting hate crimes. These campaigns should focus on increasing knowledge about what legally constitutes an anti-LGBT + hate crime, as the findings indicate that many community members are unclear about the thresholds for reporting incidents. Providing clear, accessible information through online platforms, community outreach, and LGBT + support networks can help bridge this gap in awareness and empower more individuals to come forward.

Lastly, improvements to police follow-up procedures are crucial to rebuild trust. Participants' negative experiences with inadequate or absent follow-up on reported incidents highlight the need for better communication and responsiveness from the police after reports are made. This could include regular updates on the status of investigations and ensuring that victims feel heard and supported throughout the process. These steps could reduce the perception that reporting is futile and encourage greater participation in holding perpetrators accountable.

Limitations and future research

The small sample size means the thoughts and feelings discussed may not be truly representative of the wider LGBT + community. This study also focuses upon the perceptions of LGBT + persons in one city following a wave of anti-LGBT + hate crimes, therefore the findings should not be generalisable. Further exploration into the experiences of intersectional identities—such as LGBT + individuals who also belong to racial or ethnic minorities—may shed light on how multiple layers of marginalisation affect their interactions with the police and willingness to report hate crimes. This research could help develop more tailored interventions that address the specific needs of diverse LGBT + populations.

Further, this study relies solely on the perceptions of the LGBT + community and does not seek out the experiences and/or perceptions of the police. A future direction of study would be to expand the scope of this research to involve a larger number of participants across multiple cities whilst also interviewing serving police officers to understand their experiences of engaging with the local LGBT + community and any barriers they perceive to strengthening this relationship. Future research could also explore the effectiveness of police training programs designed to improve interactions with the LGBT + community, particularly in how these programs impact officers' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours over time. Longitudinal studies tracking changes in LGBT + individuals' perceptions of police after such interventions would provide valuable insight into whether these efforts are successful in building trust and increasing reporting rates.

Additionally, future studies could investigate the role of community-based organisations and TPRCs in facilitating the reporting of anti-LGBT + hate crimes. Research could assess the impact of TPRCs on hate crime reporting rates and explore how well-known or utilised they are within different LGBT + subgroups. This would provide a clearer understanding of the effectiveness of TPRCs as an alternative reporting mechanism and whether expanding their reach could increase reporting among marginalised communities.

Conclusion

This research aimed to examine LGBT + participants' perceptions of hate crime and the factors influencing their reporting of such offences. Findings revealed that, while participants recognised both verbal and physical abuse as hate crimes, there was significant uncertainty about what constitutes a reportable offence, particularly regarding verbal abuse. Many participants also adapted their behavior or appearance to reduce victimisation risks, reflecting an internalisation of threat. In terms of perceptions of the police, participants expressed low confidence in engaging with law enforcement, citing fears of being treated poorly, not being believed, or encountering homophobic or transphobic attitudes. Additionally, most participants believed that reporting would lead to no meaningful outcome, with many receiving no follow-up on prior reports. A lack of awareness of TPRCs further contributed to underreporting, though most participants indicated they would now be more likely to report if they could use TPRCs. These findings underscore key issues around understanding hate crimes, confidence in the police, and the potential of alternative reporting mechanisms to improve engagement.

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ORCID iDs

Rachel Russell  <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-8017-3483>

Laura Boulton  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5623-8884>

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