



POLICY BRIEF

The Extent of Sexual Orientation Discrimination in Topeka, KS

by Roddrick Colvin



The Extent of Sexual Orientation Discrimination in Topeka, KS

INTRODUCTION

Ten years after a mayoral task force called for government action to stop discrimination against lesbians and gay men in Topeka, KS, a new survey of 121 gay, lesbian, and bisexual city residents conducted from October 2003 through January 2004 has documented continued widespread sexual orientation discrimination in employment, housing and government services.¹

On July 9, 1993, the Mayor's Task Force on Gay and Lesbian Concerns issued a report on lesbian and gay people in the City of Topeka and their experiences. The report noted that despite being integrated into every aspect of local life, lesbians and gay men faced pervasive harassment and discrimination in Topeka. The report recommended action by the City to help curb harassment and discrimination against lesbian and gay people. Ten years later, harassment and discrimination against gay, lesbian, and bisexual people in Topeka continues, and the city government still has not passed legislation banning discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.

This report is based on an analysis of 121 surveys completed by residents of Topeka from October 2003 to January 2004. This project is the result of collaboration between the Equal Justice Coalition of Topeka and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute.

The conclusions of the survey are inescapable: discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodation on the basis of sexual orientation continues to be a problem in the City of Topeka.

1. None of the 121 respondents identified as transgender. Thirty-nine percent were female, 60% male, and 1% identified their gender as "other." Thirty-one percent identified as lesbian, 58% as gay (this includes some women who identified as gay), 10% as bisexual, and 2% as "other."



RESULTS IN BRIEF

- 16% of respondents reported that they were *denied employment* because of their sexual orientation or gender identity
- 11% reported that they were *denied a promotion*, and 18% reported that they were *overlooked for additional responsibilities* at work due to their sexual orientation or gender identity
- One fifth to one third of respondents reported that they *had observed people being denied employment, denied a promotion, or overlooked for additional responsibilities at work* due to their sexual orientation or gender identity
- 15% of respondents reported that they were *fired* because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and another 24% have observed someone being fired for those reasons
- 35% had received *harassing letters, e-mails, or faxes* at work because of their sexual orientation
- 17% of respondents reported experiencing discrimination *buying or renting a home*, and another 20% observed such discrimination
- 11% of respondents reported that they experienced discrimination *seeking police protection*, and another 27% observed such discrimination
- 29% of respondents had observed discrimination based on sexual orientation *seeking social or government services*. 9% reported experiencing such discrimination

The conclusions of the survey are inescapable: discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodation on the basis of sexual orientation continues to be a problem in the City of Topeka. This climate has a direct impact on the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community as well as the city at large. These results underscore the need for the City of Topeka to adopt and enforce an ordinance to ban discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION

In Topeka, sexual orientation bias in employment is pervasive. Sixteen percent of the gay, lesbian and bisexual residents surveyed reported that they were denied employment because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Fifteen percent reported that they were fired because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Sixteen percent of respondents reported that their workspace was vandalized, and 24% reported being teased and harassed because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. As a result of a discriminatory work environment, 47% of respondents reported that they had to conceal their sexual orientation or gender identity to protect their jobs.

Forty-seven percent of respondents reported that they had to conceal their sexual orientation or gender identity to protect their jobs.



“My job found out that I was a lesbian and my ‘friend’ that came in every night was my girlfriend. She was told not to come in anymore or I would be fired. And later because she came in I was fired.”

—A lesbian Topeka resident

“I’ve had a boss that told gay jokes about an employee he perceived to be gay. That boss gave the dirty work assignments to that man.”

—A gay Topeka resident

“As soon as my newly appointed Republican boss suspected I was gay, he harassed me until I took a job with another state agency. Prior to that I had three outstanding employee evaluations, but he couldn’t find anything I did right. There was no protection. The various state affirmative action and discrimination offices were a slow-moving joke.”

—A gay Topeka resident

JOB DISCRIMINATION	Personally Experienced	Observed
Terminated	15%	24%
Denied Employment	16%	31%
Denied Promotion	11%	18%
Overlooked for Additional Responsibilities	18%	31%

JOB HARASSMENT AND VIOLENCE	Personally Experienced	Observed
Verbal or Physical Abuse	41%	35%
Vandalized Workspace	16%	22%
Harassing Communications	35%	28%
Teased or Harassed	24%	27%

HOUSING DISCRIMINATION

According to survey respondents, living in Topeka can be a challenge. Residents face numerous difficulties getting settled in the city. The most challenging difficulty is renting an apartment or buying a home. Seventeen percent of survey respondents reported anti-gay discrimination buying a home or renting and apartment in Topeka, and 20% observed such housing discrimination. Furthermore, 20% reported having trouble getting housing and renters’ insurance because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

HOUSING DISCRIMINATION	Personally Experienced	Observed
Buying/Renting a Home	17%	20%
Seeking Insurance	20%	19%

This discrimination did not end after the survey respondents found a place to live. In fact, 9% of respondents reported moving to a different home within the last five years as a result of harassment and discrimination. Additionally, 33% of survey respondents stopped walking together or holding hands, and 10% left a local house of worship as a result of harassment and discrimination.

PUBLIC ACCOMMODATIONS AND SERVICES

In the sphere of public accommodations, sexual orientation discrimination in Topeka is pervasive and damaging. These survey results suggest that gay, lesbian and bisexual people face hostility and discrimination when they try to access many basic services.

“My boyfriend is not allowed to see his kids anymore because he is gay, and his ex-wife thinks we will do something to the boys.”

—A gay Topeka resident

“My BF [boyfriend] at the time got violent with me. When I called the police, 911 did not seem concerned and when the officers showed up and realized it was a same-sex domestic [incident], they basically laughed, told us to work it out, and left. I did not feel secure.”

—A gay Topeka resident

“[The i]nsurance company cancelled [my] auto insurance after I put a non-related person ([my same-sex] spouse) living in [the] same residence as a principle driver of one of the vehicles I own.”

—A gay Topeka resident

“My son read a book on AIDS in 5th grade and was harassed for years, being singled out by other students and called ‘fag’ and rumors circulated about, ‘He must have AIDS and be a faggot.’ The school system must educate children more in both areas because the parents are definitely not doing their job.”

—A Topeka mother

PUBLIC ACCOMMODATION DISCRIMINATION	Personally Experienced	Observed
Seeking Medical Care	12%	15%
Seeking Police Protection	11%	27%
Applying for Bank Credit or a Loan	4%	9%
Seeking Custody or Visitation Rights	10%	25%



THE CONSEQUENCES OF DISCRIMINATION

The results of the survey reveal the effects of harassment and discrimination on lesbian, gay, and bisexual Topekans. This climate of hostility has a detrimental effect on the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community, and on the City of Topeka as a whole. Almost half (45%) of respondents reported that discrimination had an effect on their physical or emotional health. Furthermore, respondents expressed real concern about discrimination in Topeka. Forty-three percent were “somewhat” or “very” concerned about housing discrimination and 54% were concerned about employment discrimination. Such anxieties about discrimination help to explain the high rates of physical and emotional stress.

Almost half (45%) of respondents reported that discrimination had an effect on their physical or emotional health.

THE POLICY SOLUTION: A NONDISCRIMINATION LAW

While many aspects of discrimination cannot be solved solely through nondiscrimination laws, many of the concerns raised in this report can be addressed with a local ordinance. A comprehensive nondiscrimination law that includes sexual orientation and gender identity or expression could address the pervasive forms of discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodation documented in this study. Respondents of the survey agree with this assessment: 89 % would prefer a formal remedy to discrimination.

Despite the mayoral commission’s call to action to stop anti-gay discrimination a decade ago, no action has been taken. As this study shows, discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity continues to be a problem and a concern of many Topeka residents. Only with corrective action and enforcement of nondiscrimination statutes by local government can Topeka decrease anti-gay harassment and discrimination in Topeka.

A comprehensive nondiscrimination law could address the pervasive forms of discrimination documented in this study.

METHODOLOGY

The findings in this report are based on 121 surveys completed and returned to the Equal Justice Coalition of Topeka. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute then analyzed these survey data. Five hundred surveys were distributed, with an acceptable response rate of 24%. While not identical, the socioeconomic demographics of respondents closely resemble the Census data for the City of Topeka. This suggests that the respondents of the survey closely match the population of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Topeka.

2. Respondents were asked what, if any, corrective action they would prefer if they experienced harassment or discrimination. Eighty-nine percent selected register a complaint, file a lawsuit, or going to a Human Rights Commission. Eleven percent preferred some other option.



SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

AGE	Number	Percent
18-24	30	25%
25-34	27	23%
35-44	32	27%
45-54	19	16%
55-64	10	8%
65-74	2	2%
75+	0	0%

RACE	Number	Percent
White	87	73%
Latino/a or Hispanic	12	10%
Multi-racial	10	8%
African American	6	5%
Native American	4	3%
Other	1	1%
Middle Eastern/Arab	0	0%
Asian Pacific Islander	0	0%

GENDER	Number	Percent
Male	73	60%
Female	47	39%
Transgender or Intersex	0	0%
Other	1	1%

SEXUAL ORIENTATION	Number	Percent
Gay	69	58%
Lesbian	37	31%
Bisexual	12	10%
Other	2	2%
Questioning	0	0%

EDUCATION	Number	Percent
Some High School	5	4%
High School	15	13%
Some College	51	43%
Two Year Degree	7	6%
Four Year Degree	25	21%
Post Graduate Work	8	7%
Post Graduate Degree	9	8%

EMPLOYMENT	Number	Percent
Part-time	11	9%
Full-time	69	57%
Self Employed	10	8%
Retired	6	5%
Stay Home Parent	0	0%
Unemployed	15	12%
Student	7	6%
Other	3	2%



