“Who's Protected?” Exploring Perceptions of Domestic Violence Law by Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals

Xavier L. Guadalupe-Diaz \textsuperscript{a} & Jonathan Yglesias \textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a} Framingham State University, Framingham, Massachusetts

\textsuperscript{b} Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence Action Alliance, Richmond, Virginia


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"Who’s Protected?” Exploring Perceptions of Domestic Violence Law by Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals

XAVIER L. GUADALUPE-DIAZ
Framingham State University, Framingham, Massachusetts

JONATHAN YGLESIAS
Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence Action Alliance, Richmond, Virginia

Legal recourse is a vital avenue for many domestic violence victims. For lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people, these laws have historically been heterosexist. Considering the many states that are now inclusive of same-gender relationships, an existing data set was utilized to examine the influence of sociodemographic predictors on the perceptions of domestic violence law among LGB. Our findings illustrate that nonwhite LGB and those who have negative perceptions of law enforcement have the most negative perceptions of domestic violence legal protections as they apply to same-gender relationships. These findings have implications for service providers, advocacy and outreach organizations, and future research exploring the impact perceptions of legal avenues have on LGB victims.

KEYWORDS intimate partner violence, heterosexism, homophobia, victimization

INTRODUCTION

While research concerning lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) same-gender domestic violence (SGDV) has examined prevalence rates, dynamics of abuse, and resource allocation, few studies have examined the perceptions of domestic violence laws in an ever-changing legal climate (Greenwood et al., 2002; Merrill & Wolfe, 2000; Renzetti, 1996, 1999). With more than 30 states now including same-gender relationships in domestic violence laws, through the use of gender-neutral language, it is imperative that researchers seek to

Address correspondence to Xavier L. Guadalupe-Diaz, Department of Sociology, Framingham State University, 100 State Street, PO Box 9101, Framingham, MA 01701. E-mail: xguadalupezdiaz@framingham.edu
X. L. Guadalupe-Diaz and J. Yglesias
gauge whether the LGB community is informed and to what extent they are informed of their legal protections and rights (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs [NCAVP], 2010). In addition to creating greater access to legal structures intended to protect victims in cases of SGDV, the United States Department of Justice has recently moved toward expanding the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) to protect same-gender couples. Under this new expansion, “federal prosecutors would enforce criminal provisions in the VAWA in cases involving gay and lesbian relationships” (Savage, 2010). Furthermore, federal prosecutors may utilize VAWA legislation in cases of stalking and domestic violence across state lines and regardless of the gender of either the victim or the perpetrator.

With these structures changing, a crucial step in promoting formal help-seeking behaviors among victims is the very recognition of legal avenues which are open to and validating of these same-gender intimate relationships. While there is little research examining social influences on LGB perceptions of domestic violence laws, it has been well-documented that LGB domestic violence victims perceive the criminal justice system as an inaccessible and largely ineffective help-seeking option maintained by heterosexist and heteronormative frameworks (McClenen, 2005; Merrill & Wolfe, 2000; Renzetti, 1992, 1996; Robson, 1992; Scherzer, 1998). These perceptions have been repeatedly validated in the research, specifically illustrating an inherent homophobia present within the court systems, law enforcement protocols and responses, and the very language of legal codes which structure and maintain such systems-based approaches (Berrill, 1992; Fray-Witzer, 1999; Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999). In particular, inaccessibly to legal recourses affects victims of domestic violence who may also feel reluctant to report to the police because of fear of partner retaliation, the perceived “uselessness” of police involvement, or overall community perceptions of the police; these negative perceptions of the police may be more intense in nonwhite communities (Coulter, Kuehnle, Byers, & Alfonso, 1999). Furthermore, there is a longstanding history of homophobic police abuse including the criminalization of LGB Americans (Chauncey, 1994; Wolff & Cokely, 2007). Given this history between the police and the LGB community, domestic violence legal recourses may appear further out of reach.

In a recent analysis of New York State law, Stapel (2008, p. 249) argued that while “legal recognition of same-gender relationships were changing, domestic violence in the LGBT communities is not adequately addressed by current laws.” She proposed that homophobia within the legal system, an absence of domestic violence recognition among LGBT, and a lack of knowledge regarding legal remedies or movement-based approaches that would address violence make it difficult for LGBT victims to come forward. In examining help-seeking behaviors in a sample of Houston-area LGBT, Turell (2000) found that LGBT domestic violence victims were unlikely to seek help from the legal system, law enforcement, and other macrosystemic
resources. Among the reasons respondents cited for perceiving these as inaccessible, perception of homophobia and a lack of “realistic advice” were the most common (p. 43). Overall, only 4% of the study sample perceived legal services as necessary. These overwhelmingly negative perceptions of domestic violence legal assistance are further “compounded for those gays and lesbians who are also members of racial or ethnic minorities” (Tesch, Bekerian, English, & Harrington, 2010). In addition, other studies have shown that in comparison with lesbian women, gay men in particular may be less likely to seek formal legal recourse for SGDV victimization (Cruz, 2003; Island & Letellier, 1991; Kuehnle & Sullivan, 2003).

The state of the current literature on SGDV still does not address attitudes toward domestic violence laws and protection of LGB victims, or whether these rights to protection are even known. In particular, to the author’s knowledge, there exists no available study that illustrates the influence of race, gender, or perceptions of homophobia in law enforcement on victim attitudes toward domestic violence legal recourses. Antiviolence organizations, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community centers, domestic violence agencies, and other advocacy-based initiatives are often charged with the dissemination of information on new legal codes and the menu of options with regards to domestic violence laws or structured advocacy services available to a given community. However, the dissemination of accurate and easily understood information to community members presents a variety of social-structural barriers, including evidenced racial, socioeconomic, and engendered patterns associated with who receives and accesses formal community education and outreach and how they receive such resources. In addition to facing a variety of service barriers presented through the limiting nature of their geographic service area/range, many community-based advocacy organizations lack a truly effective multicultural outreach which would structure opportunities for victim support, rendering services and resources largely inaccessible to those who have been historically marginalized. It is essential that research begin to explore the disparity of legal knowledge in LGB communities pertaining to domestic violence protections (Turell, 2000). Specifically, this study seeks to explore various predictors of perceptions toward domestic violence law among LGB in Central Florida. In the state of Florida, Title XLIII - Domestic Relations, Chapter 741.28–741.31 defines domestic violence as

... any assault, aggravated assault, battery, aggravated battery, sexual assault, sexual battery, stalking, aggravated stalking, kidnapping, false imprisonment, or any criminal offense resulting in physical injury or death of one family or household member by another family or household member. (Florida Coalition Against Domestic Violence [FCADV], 2012)

The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP) refers to this type of definition as “gender neutral” (NCAVP, 2010). Under this state law,
as with dozens of other states, SGDV victims may seek legal recourse to prosecute abusers under domestic violence legal codes. The present study focuses specifically on the influences of race and gender on the perceptions of domestic violence law as it applies to same-gender relationships among LGB individuals. There is an emphasis on the need for applied and academic researchers to investigate whether the LGB community is aware of available legal avenues in cases of SGDV and therefore, perceives the criminal justice system as a viable resource and one that recognizes their intimate relationships for inclusion in domestic violence law. Furthermore, the study provides an examination of the disparities in these perceptions that exist within the LGB community, thus presenting the research community with paths for future investigation, education, and research. Utilizing data collected on SGDV prevalence and perceptions in Central Florida, this study examines the influence of race and gender on the views of legal protections and rights pertaining to SGDV among LGB individuals.

Three hypotheses were proposed regarding LGB perceptions of domestic violence laws and protections. These hypotheses specifically address concerns within the literature that gay/bisexual men and racially marginalized LGB may have the most negative perceptions of legal resources—in this case, domestic violence law as it applies to same-gender relationships. Furthermore, the study expands the available knowledge by including how perceptions of law enforcement may affect the perceptions of nonwhites and explores whether a gender gap exists between men and women.

The hypotheses tested are the following:

- **H1**: Among LGB, nonwhites have more negative perceptions of domestic violence law as it applies to same-gender relationships than whites.
- **H2**: Among LGB, men have more negative perceptions of domestic violence law as it applies to same-gender relationships than women.

Furthermore, a mediation hypothesis was tested:

- **H3**: Among LGB, the relationship between race and negative perceptions of domestic violence law is partially mediated by a respondent’s perception of law enforcement; non-white respondents have more negative perceptions of domestic violence law because non-white respondents also have a stronger negative perception of law enforcement.

**Literature Review**

**Heterosexism in Domestic Violence Law**

Prior to the 1970s, the terms *battered woman* and *domestic and sexual violence* were absent from the legislative lexicon (Renzetti, 2001). Since the
beginning of the violence against women (VAW) movement, progress has
been made in the way of legislative action intended to grant victims and
survivors of violence an institutional means of combating abuse. Most no-
tably, the Violence Against Women Act of 1994 (VAWA) has been show-
cased on the national stage—while still other legislative advancements have
been relegated to state and local government. Policy shifts and catalysts to
successfully accessing legal avenues with regards to gender violence have
historically been attributed to the scope and strength of mainstream policy
initiatives and their accompanying organizing efforts around advocacy and
victim-centered systems change (Westbrook, 2009). These mainstream ini-
tiatives, however, often lack the comprehensiveness and the intersectional
approach required to ensure equal access to newly established resources or
true power-sharing dynamics for those living on the margins.

In addition to advancements on the federal stage, states have made
concerted efforts to expand their domestic violence laws and legal structures
over the past three decades. Specifically, states have passed laws that aid in
the prosecution of domestic violence perpetrators and increase the severity
of punishment for convicted perpetrators (Dugan, Nagin, & Rosenfeld, 2003).
Stronger domestic violence laws have been advocated for on behalf of victims
who needed to be reassured that by reaching out for police intervention
their cases would not only be taken seriously but prosecuted effectively as
well (Buzawa & Buzawa, 1992; Davis & Smith, 1995). These advancements,
championed by feminist activists and scholars, led to a major change in how
the criminal justice system would deal with the issue of battered women,
specifically in the context of heterosexual married relationships (Ferraro &

Because the traditional feminist analysis of violence focuses on the sub-
jugation of women by men, the violence against women movement (broadly
speaking) has historically limited its scope to that of violence occurring
within the context of heterosexual relationships (DiStefano, 2009; Donovon
& Hester, 2010; Ristock, 2002). The result has been a homogenization of
the dynamics and contexts of abuse which have, over years of remedying
structures and services for heterosexual women, managed to manifest in
numerous ways throughout the movement. Victim-serving organizations are,
whether they recognize it or not, part of larger institutionalized approaches to
violence which can serve to perpetuate cultural narratives supported within
the mainstream (Ristock, 2002). Traditional expectations associated with how
and why violence exists and for whom dictate which experiences become
the standard—based on who can most convincingly (and traditionally) em-
body terms such as victim or survivor—and furthermore, which experiences
become the exception. As Ristock (2002) stated, “... in Foucault’s terms, dis-
courses operate with institutional support as ‘regimes of truth’. We need to
ask how ‘regimes of truth’ on domestic violence operate in the construction
of laws to obscure, delegitimize, or subjugate certain knowledges or subject
while legitimizing or normalizing others” (p. 24). The narratives constructed within the VAW movement, just as with many other grassroots-to-mainstream social movements, are overwhelmingly supported by traditional social norms and limited in scope with regards to identity politics.

Radical developments in domestic violence law—which have occurred in just the past 30 years—have worked toward improving the access of (predominantly white, able-bodied, heterosexual) battered women to the legal recourses needed to prosecute abusers. While these advancements in systems-wide recognition and response to domestic violence have radical grassroots origins, the barriers to access addressed by this and similar social movements have been largely limited to that of mainstreamed and normalized contexts. That is to say that movement resources and focus have been sequestered in such a way that women of color, LGBTQ, women with disabilities, low-income women, and communities otherwise existing on the margins still have limited systems access and response via lateral, inclusionary, and community-specific movements to address domestic violence. Still, to this day, and even within the context of heterosexual (and more mainstreamed notions of) intimate partner violence, there is no specific research that examines how much women know, and how accurate their knowledge is, with regards to domestic violence law. Rather, it is assumed that because heterosexual intimate relationships are included in these legal statutes, and because they are often limited to these relationships specifically, there is little to no need to investigate misperceptions related to institutional support for victims (Fray-Witzer, 1999). This proves to be particularly problematic for those whose identities, relationships, and social positions have largely been unrecognized or intentionally absent from the criminal justice process.

**Effect of Domestic Violence Laws and Their Accessibility**

The need for a concerted installation of domestic violence statutes was initially based upon three identified gaps: effective protections for victims, successful prosecution of perpetrators, and a reduction in the overall rate or prevalence of violent victimization (Dugan et al., 2003). Generally, two main ways in which researchers have gauged the impact of domestic violence law have been to examine the success rate between arrest and actual prosecution and to examine locality/geographic trends in domestic violence rates (Garner, Fagan, & Maxwell, 1995; Sullivan & Bybee, 1999; Tolman & Weisz, 1995). These studies explore to what extent domestic violence policy enables prosecution (and furthermore, what secondary or unintentional outcomes result from a particular mandate), and evaluation of mandatory-arrest laws, in addition to ultimately seeking to gauge the policy’s effect on reducing reported incidence of domestic violence. In Weisz and Earls (1995) and Sullivan and Bybee (1999), for example, local domestic violence arrests were followed from arrest to prosecution to determine if stricter policies had effects on
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prosecution success. Both of these studies concluded that only those perpetrators without prior criminal records were actually deterred from domestic violence recidivism. Exploring a similar question, Dugan and colleagues (2003) utilized aggregate data from the National Crime Victimization Survey to explore the effects of domestic violence policy reform on incidence of domestic violence, police involvement and enforcement, and practices regarding arrest. They found mixed results indicating that domestic violence resources for victims and legislative reform enabling these, in the form of criminal justice system access, both negatively and positively influences rates of domestic violence.

Central to this area of research is the need for increased exploration of what Dugan and colleagues (2003) understand as concrete correlations between reported incidences of violent victimization and policy reform. They go on to state that greater “efforts are needed within the criminal justice system and in domestic violence agencies to provide information and support to help domestic violence victims petition for appropriate orders that will most protect them from further abuse” (p. 288). This essentially sharpens the need for a consistent, accurate, and accessible dissemination of information and resources among community members—in addition to the coordination of efforts between advocacy-based, victim-serving organizations and the criminal justice system at large. Public perceptions of the accessibility of legal remedies in the case of domestic violence should be a crucial part of this research, particularly for LGB victims who are largely left out of the hegemonic narrative of what constitutes domestic violence and how and who protective sanctions serve. Existing research on the information-seeking behaviors of domestic violence victims shows that victims rely heavily upon—and more intimately trust—informal information and systems of support over those with institutional associations and, in many cases, may not be accessing the system at all (Gillum, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2006; Grayson & Smith, 1981; Harris & Dewdney, 1994; Harris et al., 2001; Peckover, 2003). This coping or survival strategy is common among communities frequently experiencing structural marginalization, as LGB victims of domestic violence are highly susceptible to (Renzetti, 1992). These informal patterns of information seeking for victims have been particularly emphasized in communities of color and other traditionally oppressed groups (Drew, 2008). A number of past studies focusing on how LGB access domestic violence legal recourse have shown a general distrust for institutional approaches to support and a heavy reliance on informal methods, such as seeking the support of family and friends (Merrill & Wolfe, 2000; Renzetti, 1992; Ristock, 2002; McClennen, Summers, & Vaughn, 2002). Furthermore, when LGB victims of violence are likely to seek formal services, it is more likely to be in the form of one-on-one counseling as opposed to engaging law enforcement, the criminal justice system, health care services, or shelters for battered women (Ristock, 2002). The opportunity for one-on-one power-sharing, referral, and support afforded through
counseling services juxtaposes the victim and report-centered bureaucracy of the criminal justice system. In addition to this, law enforcement often views same-gender partner abuse as a mutual fight, diminishing the severity and seriousness of the incident while withholding traditional avenues for victim-based resources and referrals (Ristock, 2002). Ristock contends that in being “consistent with the conclusions of Renzetti, Fray-Witzer, and Elliot, individuals at many levels of the criminal justice system (police, sergeants, lawyers, judges) fail LGB who have been abused, ultimately reinforcing a reluctance to interact with these systems altogether” (Ristock, 2002 p. 94). The very same minimization and perpetuation of abuses contributes to the reluctance of those occupying other marginalized sexual identities (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer) from pursuing and accessing domestic violence legal recourses.

While the literature does not specifically illustrate this, it should not be a leap in judgment to draw correlations between a historical victim distrust and accounts of institutional marginalization on behalf of criminal justice system responses and the LGB community's relative knowledge of the legal remedies afforded to them. Turell (2000) attributed what might be considered a substandard knowledge of legal remedies to the interplay of help-seeking behaviors and victim identity, looking specifically to indicators such as age, race, ethnicity, income, and sexual orientation. Turell also argued that little to no significant comparative data had been collected on the help-seeking behaviors of those who occupy historically oppressed identities, emphasizing that the normative experience of the LGB community had been constructed as one that is white. Turell’s findings highlight the significance of examining the complex intersection of social identities and how these may shape the help-seeking patterns of LGB victims of violence. Turell’s findings illustrate that within the LGB community, those who are nonwhite, male, and of lower incomes may be least likely to seek formal help or view legal resources of any kind as a helpful option. These findings provide some insight into what shapes perceptions of help resources and how they may be different across groups. In addition, geographic location has also been shown to affect perceptions of access to formal help. As an example, both Turell’s and Ristock’s studies suggest that urban areas are more likely to have culturally competent and comprehensive services than smaller cities or rural areas (Ristock, 2002; Turell, 2000). These outreach services are likely to disseminate information on legal resources and avenues of help seeking that are formally recognized by state laws. The presence of culturally specific outreach and resource referral programs in a given community is likely to have a positive impact on the relative knowledge base of that community, giving rise to the chance that more formal, institutional means of support (such as the criminal justice system) will be more readily accessed. However, research has not specifically addressed these variables as having an impact on knowledge and willingness of victims of violence to access legal remedies.
While a gap in literature exists in terms of knowledge base and formal resource availability with regards to LGB and marginalized identities, there is a great deal to be said about the context in which these gaps do exist. Only over the past 10 years or so has the movement to end violence against women begun to incorporate gender-neutral language into policy and advocacy efforts (NCAVP, 2010). This shift, intended to be reflective of the needs of LGB communities, has specifically focused on inclusivity with regards to legal remedies to violence and, specifically, revisions to protective order statutes. Overwhelmingly, victims of intimate partner violence have reported increased perceptions in power and safety as a result of having been issued a protective order (Logan & Walker, 2008). The ability to regulate space and determine the parameters by which criminal prosecution can be made is undoubtedly a significant step toward power restoration for many victims of violence. This, in turn, has had a significant effect on the policy trends and dialogue occurring both nationally and by state to create a more inclusive and effective criminal justice response to all forms of violence. By moving away from gender-restrictive language, as it may pertain to relationship status and victim/survivor access within legal code, many states now include same-gender relationships (NCAVP, 2010). The move has also, where necessary, dictated language revision in terms of any requirements that need to be met in order to obtain a protective order based on cohabitation. That is to say, where code may infer the nature and significance of a relationship based on language used to describe cohabitation status (i.e., the pronouns “he” and “she”), there now exist gender-neutral substitutes. The nature of these protective order codes has changed dramatically and is currently changing. Yet LGB individuals may have valid safety concerns around disclosing private information and details regarding the nature of their relationship and sexuality in order to access protection and services. The emergence of these policies, while intended to change the ultimate course and nature of help-seeking behavior among marginalized LGB communities, will remain just that, well-intentioned and ineffective without the presence of knowledge, attitude, and behavior change among targeted communities. Whether the move to make legal codes gender neutral and more inclusive truly addresses the specific resources, strategies, and legal knowledge base of LGB communities to respond to violence remains unaddressed in research. The present study seeks to address this gap in the literature by examining various sociodemographic predictors of LGB individuals’ perceptions of domestic violence law protections and rights. Built upon the previous findings that illustrate how policy has informed gendered domestic violence laws, this study sought to explore how a given sample of the LGB community perceives such laws following trends toward increased inclusivity.
METHODOLOGY

This study utilized an existing data set collected by the Red Door Project domestic violence awareness initiative in Central Florida. The use of this data set was found exempt from review by the University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board. The survey was constructed through a community participatory action model in which researchers, activists, and members of the community shared input on what aspects of SGDV were essential to gauge within the LGB community. This included prevalence of victimization and perpetration as well as perceptions of the law, police, and myths. Inspired largely by the Virginia Anti-Violence Project (VAVP) community violence survey, the members assembled a survey that consisted of four separate sections. Part I assessed basic sociodemographics, Part II gauged participants’ perceptions of domestic violence (this included the perceptions of domestic violence–related law that is the focus of the current study), and Parts III and IV assessed participants’ experiences with IPV and/or the perpetration of IPV.

The survey was made available online, was voluntary and confidential, and took approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete. Ideal probability-based sampling techniques were not considered to be a practical possibility while examining studies on the LGB population (Owen & Burke, 2004). The sample was sought through avenues frequented by LGB-identified individuals; targeted sampling allowed for the distribution and marketing of the survey in areas, organizations, and businesses that had a LGB clientele base. In addition, the participating LGB organizations utilizing the Red Door Project marketed the online survey link through existing electronic discussion lists. Furthermore, utilizing marketing materials (i.e., flyers and promotional products) and program and event agenda time for word-of-mouth engagement around the initiative allowed researchers to effectively seek out LGB-identified participants for this survey. Eligibility for the survey was determined with the following question:

1. Do you identify yourself as having a nonheterosexual sexual orientation or gender identity or expression not traditionally associated with your birth sex? (Or, do you identify somewhere along the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer spectrum?)

Only respondents that selected “yes” to this question were included in the data for analysis. The final sample size used for analyses was 317.

Instrumentation

DEPENDENT VARIABLE

A respondent’s perceptions of domestic violence law scale was constructed utilizing four survey items that assessed perceptions of protections and the
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rights same-gender couples receive under domestic violence laws in the state of Florida, as well as an item assessing how confident a survey participant was in knowing/identifying his or her rights. Only respondents who answered each of the four survey items were included in the construction of this scale. The following statements comprised the perceptions scale:

1. Florida law regarding domestic violence applies to LGBTQ relationships as well as straight relationships.
2. Protective orders are always available to LGBTQ persons experiencing violence in Florida.
3. I know my legal rights around same-gender partner abuse or abuse in a relationship where one or more partners are transgender.
4. I know my legal rights around sexual violence within the context of a same-gender relationship.

The values associated with scale items ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). These survey item components were added together to create the scale. The theoretical scale ranges from 4, indicating the most negative perceptions of domestic violence law, to 20, indicating the most positive; the actual range was 4 to 17. This scale yielded a moderately high reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of .74. Furthermore, the items loaded on one factor with an eigenvalue of 1.32 (chi-square = 244.24, \( p < .001 \)).

Explanatory and Control Variables

The two explanatory variables of race and gender were dichotomized. Race was recoded into white (0) and nonwhite (1) (Asian, Black, Hispanic, and other races). The original gender survey item included male, female, and transgender. Gender had to be dichotomized to only male (0) and female (1) as there were only eight transgender responses in this sample.

Income, years of education, age, residential location, and perceptions of law enforcement were included as control variables. The income variable was recoded to midpoints of income categories transforming it from a categorical variable into a continuous one. Furthermore, the education variable was recoded from a categorical variable to a continuous measure in years of education ranging from 9 to 18 years. Participants reported age as a continuous measure, and this remained unchanged. Finally, residential location was dichotomized to city and non-city residents on the basis of whether respondents indicated living in city proper or in a suburban county.

For H3, an index was constructed utilizing five survey items that assessed perceptions of law enforcement. These questions assessed whether a respondent felt that law enforcement was sensitive to LGB issues, homophobic, whether LGB avoid the police due to a fear of sexual orientation disclosure, whether transgender individuals avoid the police due to a fear
of gender identity disclosure, and finally whether the respondent would feel comfortable reporting his or her own incidence of IPV to the police. Response options were arranged in a Likert format ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The following are the specific questions utilized for this scale:

1. State and local law enforcement are sensitive to LGBTQ partner abuse.
2. I would feel comfortable calling state or local law enforcement to intervene in my own case of LGBTQ intimate partner violence if needed.
3. Some people in abusive same-gender relationships do not report abuse because they do not want to disclose their sexual orientation to the police or others.
4. Some transgender people in abusive relationships do not report abuse because they do not want to disclose their transgender status to the police or others.
5. The police are homophobic.

The values ranged from 1 to 5 and indicated more favorable views of the police as the values increased. This was not the case for the fifth item, which was reverse-coded in value to indicate that a higher score implied more favorable views of the police. For this item, “strongly disagree” was given a value of 5 while “strongly agree” was given a value of 1. Overall, higher scores on the scale indicated a more positive perception of law enforcement. The theoretical range was 5 to 25 and the actual range reflected this 5 to 25 as well. This scale yielded a moderately high reliability with a Cronbach’s alpha of .70. Furthermore, the items loaded on one factor with an eigenvalue of 1.37 (chi-square = 284.22, p < .001).

**Analytic Strategy**

To predict perceptions of domestic violence law as it applies to same-gender relationships, utilizing the main explanatory variables of race and gender in addition to the mediating variable of perception of law enforcement, linear regression with ordinary least squares estimators were employed. As previously described, perceptions of domestic violence law were operationalized as a continuous variable and this method was most appropriate. All assumptions were verified and held; no adjustments were needed. A series of four nested linear regressions were conducted. The first model included only control variables and subsequently each model after introduced an explanatory variable to illustrate the effect of each one.
RESULTS

Table 1 describes the sample used in the final analyses. The sample is mostly white (66%), more than half are female (55%), and are of fairly high socioeconomic backgrounds with an average of 15 years of education and a mean personal annual income of $42,800. Furthermore, most of the sample (70%) lives in a suburban area of central Florida and have a mean age of 39. The scales indicate that respondents have generally negative perceptions of domestic violence law protections and rights as it applies to same-gender relationships (bar $x = 10$, $SD = 3.4$). In addition, the law enforcement perception scale illustrated a negative perception of the police as it applies to responding to SGDV (bar $x = 9.5$, $SD = 2.9$).

Multivariate Analyses

In model 1 of Table 2, the control variables of residential location, education years, age, and income illustrated no significant findings. In model 2, only race was included, illustrating that those who were nonwhite had significantly more negative perceptions of domestic violence laws as applied to same-gender relationships, by $-1.6$ on the scale of 4 to 24 ($p < .001$). Model 3 added the female variable, which illustrated that those who identified as female had significantly more positive perceptions of domestic violence law as applied to same-gender relationships when compared to men by 0.78 on the scale of 4 to 20 ($p < .10$). The race effect was not diminished, still being considered significant, and illustrated that those who identified as nonwhite held more negative perceptions of domestic violence law by $-1.7$ on the scale of 4 to 20. Adding the female variable only slightly improved the overall model fit.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Dependent Variable</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceptions of DV Law (4–20)</td>
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<td><strong>Main Explanatory Variables</strong></td>
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<td>Nonwhite</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>City Resident</td>
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<td><strong>Control Variables</strong></td>
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<td>Age</td>
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*Data Source: Red Door Project.*
The final model introduced the perception of law enforcement scale. Adding this variable improved the overall model fit significantly and illustrated an R-squared value of .26, indicating that once all of the variables were included in the model, they explained 26% of the variance in perceptions of domestic violence law on the scale of 4 to 20 \( (p < .001) \). Furthermore, adding the law enforcement perceptions scale variable controlled for the female effect and slightly diminished the effect of race down to a \(-1.2\) for nonwhites on the scale of 4 to 20 for perceptions of domestic violence law.

This final model supports H1, illustrating that among LGB, nonwhites hold significantly stronger negative perceptions of domestic violence law as it applies to same-gender relationships. However, H2 was not supported by the final model and indicated that those who were female did not have more positive perceptions of domestic violence law. H3 proposed that the relationship between race and perception of domestic violence law would be partially mediated by a respondent’s perception of law enforcement. As hypothesized, nonwhites have more significant negative perceptions of domestic violence law than whites. It was proposed that this relationship may be partially explained by the assumption that nonwhites have more negative perceptions of law enforcement as illustrated in the literature. A Sobel-Goodman mediation test was performed on this to determine if there was first a relationship between race and perception of law enforcement. The results indicate nonwhites had a stronger negative perception of law enforcement \( (p < 0.05) \). In addition, perception of law enforcement was found to be related to perception of domestic violence law, with more

### TABLE 2 Unstandardized Coefficients from Linear Regression Predicting Perceptions of Domestic Violence Law Among LGB

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Explanatory Variables</th>
<th>M1</th>
<th>M2</th>
<th>M3</th>
<th>M4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nonwhite</td>
<td>−1.6***</td>
<td>−1.7***</td>
<td>−1.2**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.78†</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of Law Enforcement (5–25)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.49***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control Variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>−0.34</td>
<td>−0.21</td>
<td>−0.01</td>
<td>−0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Years</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income (in thousands)</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>8.17</td>
<td>8.69</td>
<td>8.18</td>
<td>3.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( F )</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>5.23</td>
<td>5.02</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( df )</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data Source: Red Door Project.*

\*\*\* \( p < .01 \), **\* \( p < .001 \), † \( p < .10 \).
positive views of law enforcement correlating with more positive perceptions of domestic violence law ($p < 0.001$). However, completion of the mediation test illustrated that perceptions of homophobia in law enforcement did not mediate the relationship between race and perceptions of domestic violence law. Interestingly, it was found that perceptions of law enforcement did mediate the relationship between gender and perceptions of domestic violence law. That is, while females had more positive perceptions of domestic violence law than males, this relationship was partially mediated by females’ more favorable perception of law enforcement, or at least a lessened sense of homophobia in law enforcement. From the previous models, it was determined that gender had a significant relationship with perception of domestic violence law with those who were female, illustrating an increase of 0.78 in perceptions of domestic violence law on the scale ranging from 4 to 24 ($p < .10$). While female identity was only marginally significant in model 3, an exploration of the potential mediation effect was pursued to gain further understanding of the influence perceptions of law enforcement may have had on perceptions of domestic violence law. Another Sobel-Goodman mediation test was performed to determine if such a relationship existed between gender and law enforcement perceptions. This resulted in a significant relationship between the two, with those who were female having more favorable views toward the police or more specifically, those who were female had an increase of 0.90 in the perceptions of homophobia in law enforcement scale ranging from 5 to 25 ($p < .05$). When perception of homophobia in law enforcement was introduced into the model, the female effect or the relationship between female and perception of domestic violence law disappeared. In other words, the relationship between female and perception of domestic violence law can be explained by the fact that females had a more favorable view toward law enforcement, thus resulting in more positive perceptions of domestic violence law. Figure 1 illustrates this relationship.

Panel (a) shows the effect of gender (female) on perceptions of domestic violence law without controlling for law enforcement perception. In Panel (b), when law enforcement perception is controlled for, the significant effect of female identity disappears. Based on this Sobel-Goodman test, 56% of the total female effect on perception of domestic violence law was mediated by law enforcement perception. Therefore, most of the difference in perceptions of domestic violence law between males and females is that females have a more favorable view of law enforcement.

Discussion and Conclusions

The results of this study demonstrate that among LGB there are significant differences and gaps in how domestic violence law is perceived and whether or not the community feels protected and included by such laws. First, this
builds upon previous findings that nonwhite LGB are least likely to access formal legal resources such as the criminal justice system by also illustrating that they perceive the law to be less inclusive of their relationships. The findings show that when compared to whites, nonwhites have significantly higher negative perceptions of domestic violence law as it applies to same-gender relationships. This is likely to influence a disparity in victim help-seeking behaviors, as a significant number of LGB victims may be less likely to seek out legal resources—perceiving them to be heterosexist and intentionally structured as inaccessible to victims of same-gender relationship violence. This is particularly problematic when considering that most states now have domestic violence laws that are inclusive of same-gender intimate relationships. Furthermore, these findings imply that non-white LGB may be largely (and likely, unintentionally) excluded from the community-based outreach and education of advocacy and victim-service organizations, explaining the existence of any potential knowledge gaps with regards to legal resources, changing policies, and protections.

These findings also indicate that those LGB who have more favorable views of the police, or perceive less homophobia in law enforcement, may also possess more substantial knowledge regarding their legal protections pertaining to same-gender domestic violence. This effect controlled for the gender influence, which also shows that men may have more consistently
negative perceptions of domestic violence law. This supports previous findings implying that lesbian women who are victims of domestic violence are also more likely to seek formal recourse through the criminal justice system as compared to gay men (McClennen et al., 2002; Merrill & Wolfe, 2000; Renzetti, 1992, 1996; Scherzer, 1998; Turell, 2000).

These findings have more implications for service providers and advocacy or community education organizations that focus on LGB domestic violence awareness, intervention, and prevention strategies. While these organizations generally seek to inform the LGB community of such issues, there may be a substantial gap in who receives educational outreach and how they receive this outreach. As previously mentioned, the recorded perceptions of domestic violence law are, in many cases, incongruent with policy reflected in state statutes. In this sample, taken from Central Florida, LGB residents do in fact have legal protections under current domestic violence law. While this is the current state of domestic violence laws, it appears that the community perceives the law to be non-inclusive, heterosexist, or, at least to some degree, unresponsive to same-gender domestic violence. These findings should stimulate those involved in antiviolence projects, domestic violence shelters, and victim resource and service-providing organizations to ensure that the LGB community is receiving the full range of information they need. Furthermore, this illustrates that even within the LGB community, significant information and perception-related disparities exist between those occupying varied racial and gender identities. A concerted effort to develop and further diversify culturally relevant outreach is needed in order to effectively reach nonwhite LGB communities who are least likely to receive information and education on domestic violence.

This study has several limitations that should be noted. First, the survey was constructed through a participatory action model that allowed for collaboration between researchers and activists in the community. This method of survey construction suggests that the survey items may not have had as thorough psychometric properties and tests as possible, which would ensure that each question fully assessed what was meant. The author-constructed scales can be examined for reliability but not for validity as there is no way to provide the psychometrics needed for comparison. The lack of external validity is further compounded as the study sample consisted only of those LGB residing in a single, and rather limited, geographical area. In addition, the method by which the sample was recruited may also introduce an unintended bias in the sample—in the sense that these respondents were comfortable with disclosing their sexual identities (or being “out”) in public spaces. These types of participants were also more likely to be white, and of higher income and education. However, there exists no clear probability-based sampling technique that would be entirely inclusive or reflective of the LGB population; especially considering the need to be “out” to be considered part of the population (McClennen, 2005).
Despite these limitations, these findings provide many promising implications for future research. Future research should seek to expand the participation of LGB in research initiatives and obtain broader, more diverse, and more inclusive samples. Through obtaining larger and more diverse samples, researchers can examine differences between races and ethnicities; including transgender or gender-nonconforming respondents extending perhaps to further geographic comparisons. In addition, these findings illustrate the need for future research to examine the relationship (believed to exist) between the perception of homophobia within law enforcement and the effect on reporting violent victimization. Overall, these findings should stimulate reflection for those in applied fields and research to ensure that the LGB community is accurately informed and has more accessible paths which would promote formal help-seeking avenues. Only in recent years has it been that many domestic violence laws have shifted toward gender-neutral language; it is crucial that public perceptions follow, allowing LGB victims of domestic violence to effectively and safely seek legal recourses to which they are owed.

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