IDENTITY REPORTS

SEXUAL ORIENTATION BIAS IN ALASKA

MELISSA S. GREEN
JAY K. BRAUSE

FOREWORD BY
JANET L. BRADLEY

Prepared for Identity Inc. with major funding from the Chicago Resource Center Foundation
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IDENTITY INCORPORATED
Anchorage Alaska 1989
FOREWORD

Many Alaskans believe that there is no real discrimination in Alaska. This compelling report on sexual orientation bias and its poignant case histories will convince the reader of the reality of discrimination against Alaskans because of sexual orientation.

Whether discrimination is intentional or whether it is motivated by ignorance, the victim still suffers as a result. Certainly, living with the threat of harassment and violence, the impending loss of employment or housing, and potential shunning sets the boundaries of freedom for gays and lesbians in Alaskan society today.

As Alaskans, we must become educated about sexual orientation discrimination and about the gay and lesbian experience of Alaskan life. We must become informed about sexual orientation bias against our neighbors, our friends, our families, ourselves.

This report, then becomes our challenge; for if we believe that our vision of Alaska is marred when discrimination exists, we must commit ourselves to eliminating sexual orientation discrimination.

Both as a society and as individuals, we must change our minds and our hearts; we must change our laws to protect Alaskans from discrimination because of sexual orientation.

Janet L. Bradley
FORMER EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
ALASKA STATE COMMISSION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
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INTRODUCTION

Identity Reports is a direct outgrowth of Identity's statewide study One in Ten: A Profile of Alaska's Lesbian and Gay Community (1986). One in Ten explored a wide variety of concerns to the gay and lesbian community, including experience of discrimination, physical and emotional health status, chemical dependency issues, personal demographics, family and religious background, political involvement and a general needs assessment. One in Ten proved valuable as a population profile, but its data were insufficient to analyze the dynamics of sexual orientation bias and discrimination. Consequently, Identity's Board of Directors decided to conduct a second, more focused research effort to examine sexual orientation bias in Alaska.

Identity Reports is the result of that decision. Consisting of three different reports, Identity Reports answers some of the questions One in Ten could not: Who are the victims of sexual orientation bias in Alaska, and what are their stories? How do victims' sexual orientation become known to their victimizers, so that discrimination, violence, or harassment result? Do nongay Alaskans experience discrimination because they are falsely assumed to be gay? What effect does sexual orientation bias have on the victims? Why do some people discriminate against gay and lesbian people while others do not? The answers to these questions make Identity Reports rewarding, if lengthy, reading. For those who desire a short summary of the report, please turn to the section called, "Overview of the Report." For another informative exploration, turn to Appendix A, B, or C and read the comments from the survey participants. However you read Identity Reports, these three reports act as a comprehensive review of the complex issues surrounding sexual orientation bias and discrimination in Alaska.

NOTES ON LANGUAGE USAGE

Several terms used in this report may not be familiar to all readers. "Coming out" refers to the self-recognition and acceptance of one's sexual orientation or identity as lesbian or gay. It is also used to describe the process of disclosing one's sexual orientation to another person—for instance, to "come out" to one's parents. To be "out to someone" means the other person is aware of one's sexual orientation. To be "closeted" means one chooses not to let others know about one's sexual orientation. To "come out of the closet" is the same as coming out. The term "Holy Union" refers to a religious ceremony in which a relationship between two people of the same sex is celebrated, but is not recognized by law.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We sincerely thank the commissioners and staff of the Anchorage Equal Rights Commission for their early sponsorship and assistance; Drs. Karen Seccombe and Jack Kruse of the University of Alaska for their assistance in preparing the questionnaire and Dr. Dennis Fisher for help in analyzing data for Closed Doors; Kay Cisneros, who wrote the grant; James Crane, Esq. of the ACLU for information about the Anchorage Blue Book case; Judge Gail Frates, who helped us locate court documents; David McCartney for news stories from the award-winning program Out in the North on KSKA, Anchorage public radio; the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force; Laura Lampe for her ad design and layout work; Jeanne Fortier for technical review of the discrimination cases; and Janet Bradley, the past executive director of the Alaska State Commission on Human Rights, for her foreword to this report.

There were many other people who helped our efforts with generous gifts of time or money: John, Ruthi, Joan, Marguerite, Gene, Bob, Leo, Jo Anne, Lucy, Sean, Don, Abigail, Chris, Lucille, Floyd, Sara, and others. We'd also like to thank all the respondents to Prima Facie and Closed Doors who completed questionnaires or participated in interviews. Finally, we acknowledge with deep gratitude the people at the Chicago Resource Center Foundation, whose financial generosity made this whole project possible; former Anchorage Mayor Tony Knowles for his assistance; the Southeast Alaska Gay and Lesbian Alliance (SEAGLA) and the Alaska Housing Market Council for contributing toward printing additional copies of this report.
OVERVIEW OF THE REPORT

BACKGROUND

Identity Reports: Sexual Orientation Bias in Alaska is the research complement to the profile of the gay and lesbian community in Alaska called One in Ten (Identity, 1986). Identity Reports was designed to explore issues of sexual orientation bias that One in Ten did not address. From early 1987 through the spring of 1988, researchers gathered information from surveys, public records, and personal interviews in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, and other communities in Alaska. This information is the source for the three papers which make up Identity Reports.

The first paper, Coming Out: Issues Surrounding Disclosure of Sexual Orientation, is largely based upon review of One in Ten and a study conducted by researchers at the University of Chicago. It discusses some of the factors influencing individual choices about coming out (or disclosing one's sexual orientation) to others, as well as the possible consequences of these choices — particularly in relation to discrimination and mental health.

The second paper, Closed Doors: Sexual Orientation Bias in the Anchorage Housing and Employment Markets, reviews the first published findings from two questionnaires designed to assess attitudes of a random sampling of 191 Anchorage employers and 178 landlords toward homosexual employees and tenants. The paper also explores the association between personal acquaintance with homosexuals and attitudes towards them.

The third, Prima Facie: Documented Cases of Sexual Orientation Bias in Alaska presents a chronicle of 84 incidents of sexual orientation bias collected through personal interviews and written accounts from newspapers, court records, and private files. These case histories, ranging from verbal abuse to employment and housing discrimination to assault and murder, speak to the personal consequences of sexual orientation bias in Alaska.

MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE REPORT

Coming Out (Statewide report)

1. On the average, gay and lesbian Alaskans first recognize their sexual orientation at the age of 12.5 years, but do not disclose their sexual orientation to others until they are 20.1 years old, a difference of nearly eight years. Even in adulthood, only about half of their parents are told, and only two-thirds of their sisters and brothers. Coworkers, employers and supervisors, and neighbors are even less likely to be told.

2. Lesbians and gay men are frequently unwilling to come out to others because they fear discrimination or other sanctions. Fifty-three percent feel their communities are unsafe to live openly as gay men or lesbians; 23% feel that they would be fired or laid off if their employers or supervisors learned of their sexual orientation.

3. Gay men and lesbians who are more out tend to experience discrimination more readily than those who are closeted, and are more likely to settle for low-paying, low-status jobs where their sexual orientation will not present an issue. Seventy-one percent of lesbian and gay Alaskans have experienced one or more forms of discrimination, harassment, or violence because of their sexual orientation while living in Alaska. Sanctions due to sexual orientation bias may come family members as well as non-family members. Gay and lesbian youth, or youth perceived to be gay or lesbian, may also be at risk for verbal abuse, threats, and violence in their schools.

4. Highly closeted gay men and lesbians are more likely to enjoy the benefits of high-paying, high-status jobs than are openly gay or lesbian individuals, but they also experience more problems with alienation, depression, low self-esteem, and conflicts about their sexual orientation.

5. Stress caused by the experience of discrimination or other sanctions, or fear of these sanctions, may lead to negative coping styles such as abuse of alcohol or other drugs. Thirty-five percent of lesbian and gay Alaskans are at risk for problem drinking. Fear of sanctions may act as an obstacle for lesbians and gay men who seek help from mental health providers or self-help groups.

6. Sixty-four percent of gay and lesbian Alaskans believe that, "Equal rights and opportunities for lesbians and gay men can only be achieved when we 'come out of the closet' in greater numbers." Fifty-one percent see advocacy for a lesbian/gay equal rights bill as the service from which they would most benefit as gay and lesbian Alaskans.
Closed Doors (Anchorage report)

1. Thirty-seven percent of Alaska’s gay and lesbian population has experienced employment or housing discrimination while living in Alaska.

2. Thirty-one percent of Anchorage employers would either not hire, promote or would fire someone they had reason to believe was homosexual in their employ. Twenty percent of Anchorage landlords would either not rent to or would evict someone they had reason to believe was homosexual.

3. Twenty-three percent of employers stated that their company has a written policy of non-discrimination including sexual orientation and 8% said they have homosexual employees. Eight percent of landlords stated that they have a written policy of non-discrimination including sexual orientation and 18% said they currently have homosexual tenants.

4. Forty-two percent of employers have a friend or family member who is gay or lesbian while 39% of landlords have a friend or family member who is gay or lesbian.

5. Among those employers who did not have a friend or family member who was homosexual, 57% would not hire someone they thought to be homosexual, while fewer than one in seven (14%) of the employers who had homosexual friends or family members would not hire someone they thought to be homosexual. Among those landlords who did not have a friend or family member who was homosexual, 34% would not rent to someone they thought to be homosexual, while fewer than one in ten (9%) of the landlords who had homosexual friends or family members would not rent to someone they thought to be homosexual.

6. Forty-three percent of both employers and landlords support an ordinance to protect homosexuals from discrimination in Anchorage (57% of both employers and landlords oppose this ordinance).

7. Sixty-four percent of the employers and landlords who know lesbians or gay men personally support an ordinance prohibiting sexual orientation discrimination. In contrast, only 29% of the employers and landlords who do not know lesbians or gay men personally support such an ordinance.

Prima Facie (Statewide report)

1. Eighty-four actual incidents of antigay bias, discrimination, harassment, or violence were recorded involving 30 men and 21 women in the Municipality of Anchorage, the City and Borough of Juneau, the Fairbanks North Star Borough, and in 10 other locales in Alaska. Incidents ranged from simple bias to discrimination in housing, employment, public accommodations, or other discrimination, to violation of fundamental constitutional rights, to verbal abuse, harassment, or threats, to assault, sexual assault, or murder.

2. The victims of sexual orientation bias were predominantly lesbians or gay men, but heterosexuals who were wrongly assumed to be lesbian or gay were also victimized. Respondents generally experienced antigay bias because of an agent of bias’ knowledge or assumptions about their sexual orientation or because of the respondent’s association with a lesbian/gay-related organization, activity, or issue, rather than for any other reason. However, agents of bias were sometimes reluctant to name sexual orientation as their reason for acting against respondents, despite the lack of legal protection against sexual orientation discrimination in Alaska.

3. Discrimination was most likely to originate with agencies, institutions, or businesses, etc., while harassment and violence was most likely to originate with individuals acting alone or in concert with other individuals.

4. Although it has been widely documented that antigay harassment, violence, and discrimination have increased in recent years in the U.S., at least partly due to “AIDS backlash,” only one case of AIDS-related bias was presented. Nonetheless, the potential that AIDS will serve as an “excuse” or “permission” to discriminate against, harass, or commit violence against gay and lesbian Alaskans is quite real.

CONCLUSION

This report and its predecessor, One in Ten, document the existence of statewide bias and discrimination against gay men and lesbians living in Alaska. Knowing this bias exists, many gay and lesbian Alaskans attempt to hide their orientation from others in order to protect themselves from discrimination, violence, or harassment. This practice of hiding results in what could be called homosexual anonymity— an “invisibility” that cannot assure
protection for lesbians and gay men because victims of sexual orientation bias are just as often those who are assumed to be homosexual as those who are known to be homosexual. The result is inescapable: There will be victims of sexual orientation discrimination as long as such discrimination is tolerated in our society. Our choice is to allow it to continue—or to resolve to end it.

In 1966 an Anchorage housing discrimination survey was prepared for the Alaska State Commission for Human Rights. That survey found that 55% of Anchorage landlords would not then rent to blacks or natives. The public reaction was strong and effective—within several months, the Anchorage Human Relations Commission was created to monitor and confront discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, and ancestry. In 1989, Identity Reports' finding of discrimination against gay men and lesbians is no less compelling, and laws to protect gay and lesbian citizens from intentional acts of discrimination are equally justified. The question facing Alaskans now is whether de facto discrimination against our lesbian and gay neighbors should be ignored or prohibited by our laws. How Alaskans choose to answer this question will affect lesbian and gay Alaskans for years to come.
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Former Executive Director
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Identity Reports: Sexual Orientation Bias in Alaska is the public research complement to the profile of the gay and lesbian community in Alaska called One in Ten released by Identity Inc. in 1986. Identity Reports was researched from early 1987 through the spring of 1988, using information from surveys, public records, and personal interviews in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, and other communities in Alaska.

Consisting of three different sections, Identity Reports answers critical questions previous research could not: Who are the victims of sexual orientation bias in Alaska, and what are their stories? How do victims' sexual orientation become known, so that discrimination, violence, or harassment result? Do nongay Alaskans experience discrimination because they are falsely assumed to be gay? What effect does sexual orientation bias have on the victims? Why do some people discriminate against gay and lesbian people while others do not?

Identity Reports serves as a comprehensive review of the complex issues surrounding sexual orientation bias and discrimination in Alaska. It is vital reading for the public and private citizen alike.

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