

# CRIMINAL JUSTICE DEPARTMENT CHAIRS' ATTITUDES TOWARD HOMOSEXUALS AND CURRICULAR ISSUES

By Alexis J. Miller, Ph.D. and Danielle McDonald, Ph.D.<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*Criminal justice students have stronger negative attitudes toward homosexuals than do other social science students (Cannon 2005; Miller 2001; & Olivero and Murataya's 2001). The current research surveys criminal justice department chairs' attitudes toward homosexuals and the number and nature of courses in their departments that deal with gay and lesbian issues. Results show that male chairs and chairs that are older and white tend to have more negative feelings towards homosexuals. Furthermore, while chairs' believe that some gay and lesbian issues are also criminal justice issues, courses covering issues facing homosexual in the criminal justice system are lacking.*

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<sup>1</sup> Alexis J. Miller, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Criminal Justice, and, Danielle McDonald, Ph.D. Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice, Northern Kentucky University, USA

## Introduction

In October of 2005, Cannon published an article in the *Journal of Criminal Justice Education* titled “Ain’t No Faggot Gonna Rob Me!”: Anti-Gay Attitudes of Criminal Justice Undergraduate Majors. Cannon’s (2005:238) paper addressed the attitudes criminal justice and non criminal justice students had regarding homosexuals and concluded that criminal justice students tend to hold “more negative attitudes towards gays and lesbians than other students”. This finding was supported by previous research conducted by Miller 2001; Olivero & Murataya 2001; & Ventura et al. 2004.

Cannon (2005) asked the question, where does the criminal justice department belong in the university: is it a social science, humanity, or business program? Although, criminal justice departments are typically placed in colleges of social science and/or humanities, Cannon (2005) suggests that this might not be the best “fit”. Cannon supports this conclusion by citing previous research (Schellenberg, Hirt, & Sears, 1999), which found social science majors had more positive attitudes towards gays and lesbians than science or business majors. However, this prior research contradicts Cannon’s findings, where criminal justice majors held opinions more like those of business majors causing him to further suggest that criminal justice might be a better “fit” within the business school.

Finally, Cannon (2005) examined where the negative attitudes criminal justice students hold for homosexuals originated. Specifically, he addressed the possibility that criminal justice, as a major or desired field, may attract people who inherently hold more negative attitudes towards homosexuals. Cannon (2005) further examined how criminal justice faculty could be responsible for the negative attitudes students hold toward homosexuals by asking the question, is criminal justice faculty doing anything within the classroom to address this issue? This is an important question because both prior research (Patton & Mannison, 1993; 1994), and Cannon (2005:240) found that a “significant predictor of a respondent’s attitude towards gay men was whether he/she had taken any classes which specifically addressed gay or lesbian issues”. Thus, when students take classes that address gay and lesbian issues they tend to have more positive attitudes towards homosexuals than those students who have not completed classes addressing such issues. Hence, by incorporating homosexual issues into already existing courses or by offering specific courses on gay and lesbian issues, faculty may be able to improve the attitudes of criminal justice students towards homosexuals.

In a second article, Cannon and Dirks-Linhorst built upon Cannon’s original research by examining criminal justice programs and the courses they offered. Cannon et al (2006) created their sample using criminal justice programs found on the American Society of Criminology’s website. Cannon et al. (2006:269) gathered information from the chairs of these departments regarding the “extent of curricular offerings which formally address issues related to all minorities”. Cannon et al. (2006) found gay and lesbian issues were not fully integrated into criminal justice curriculum in comparison to race and gender issues. In fact, Cannon et al. (2006:273) state “a course dedicated to the interactions of the criminal justice

system with the gay and lesbian community does not exist among the respondent programs”. Cannon et al. (2006) research methods are very similar to that of the present study. However, while they used national data, the current study addresses the department’s course offerings and the attitudes of chairs toward homosexuals at four year universities that offer degrees in criminal justice or criminology in the southeast region.

### **Literature Review**

Presently, there are only a few studies available addressing criminal justice students’ attitudes towards homosexuals: Cannon’s 2005 research; Ventura et al (2004), Miller (2001) and Olivero et al. (2001). Although the research on this subject is minimal, at some level, each study concludes criminal justice or law enforcement students possess more negative attitudes towards homosexuals than other majors and/or are less inclined to identify homosexuals as victims of hate crimes.

Previous research has shown the attitudes criminal justice students carry outside the classroom may contribute to poor decision making in the field of criminal justice (Miller, 2001; Miller, Tewksbury, Hensley, 2004). As seen in Miller et al. (2004), the responsibility of giving criminal justice students knowledge to correct the myths they have regarding crime falls on faculty in criminal justice. While criminal justice faculty are not completely responsible for changing negative attitudes students have of homosexuals, they are responsible for giving them the knowledge to critically think about their negative attitudes. It is important that criminal justice faculty provide an education confronting all of the myths and stereotypes regarding criminal justice, including those concerning homosexuality and the issues homosexuals face in the criminal justice system.

Furthermore, if students continue to hold these negative attitudes towards homosexuals, these attitudes could, in the future, affect the decisions they make once employed within the criminal justice system (Miller, et. al. 2004). Cannon et al. (2006:265) stated, “criminal justice professionals are only as proficient in these community interactions as their education, training and personal attitudes permit”. The few studies that have been conducted concerning police officers and their attitudes/behaviors towards homosexuals are not promising. Arnott (2000) reported that police officers tended to have homophobic attitudes and misconceptions of homosexuals. Additionally, Comstock (1991) and Nardi and Bolton (1991), both concluded the police, themselves, may also be perpetrators of hate crimes. Gay and lesbian respondents have reported fearing the police, including fears that police will not take their complaints seriously (Berrill, 1993). If homosexuals feel uncomfortable with the police, they may be less likely to report hate crimes (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999).

So, what can be done to improve the attitudes of criminal justice students? If faculty, do *not* accept the negative attitudes criminal justice students have towards homosexuals as inherent, then we are responsible for providing criminal justice students with an education in this area. As criminal justice faculty, we have accepted and addressed the need to educate students

regarding gender and crime and race and crime. However, when it comes to homosexuality and crime, we are still substantially lacking (Cannon et al., 2006). Cannon et al. (2006:273) found, nationally, “a course dedicated to the interactions of the criminal justice system with the gay and lesbian community does not exist” and the inclusion of the topic in other courses were limited.

Prior research on this subject supports the idea we may not be doing enough to overcome the negative opinions criminal justice students have regarding homosexuals. According to Cannon (2005), a significant predictor of better attitudes toward homosexuals was if a student had taken a course on gay and lesbian issues. Thus, the following questions are posed. Do criminal justice/criminology departments have adequate coverage of homosexual issues in required or elective courses? Is the inclusion of homosexual issues in classroom discussions left to the discretion of the faculty or is it a standard requirement? Do chairs of departments with degrees in criminal justice and/or criminology have negative attitudes towards homosexuals?

Furthermore, Cannon et al. (2006) had suggested future research directions that are represented in the present study, including: questions addressing the size of the program, how the inclusion of gay and lesbian issues was directed (syllabus driven or faculty choice), and whether the institution was a public or private university. The current study also includes questions concerning the attitudes of criminal justice department chairs on homosexuals.

## **Methods**

The current study's sample was derived from chairs of departments in criminal justice, criminology, and combined departments in the southern region of the United States. Since chairs of departments ultimately decide over issues involving course learning outcomes, course descriptions, types of courses offered in departments and which faculty will teach particular courses, for this research it was decided data would be gathered from chairs of departments as opposed to individual faculty. Furthermore, only universities and colleges offering bachelor degrees in criminal justice or combined programs, i.e. criminal justice, criminology, and political science. The southern region included states defined by the Southern Criminal Justice Association, the regional association affiliated with the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences. Those states include: Kentucky, West Virginia, Virginia, Tennessee, North and South Carolina, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Florida. Universities and colleges in the southern region were chosen specifically over other ACJS regions because negative attitudes towards homosexuals are highest in the south (Herek, 2002).

Over the summer of 2006, questionnaires were sent to chairs of Criminal Justice, Criminology and combined departments at four year universities/colleges that offered some form of criminal justice as a major in the southeast region (N=119). A list was generated from [www.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com) website because an exhaustive list of four year universities/colleges [www.internetjournalofcriminology.com](http://www.internetjournalofcriminology.com)

with criminal justice, criminology and combined programs in the southeastern region could not be located. In 2006, this website allowed one to search for schools with the aforementioned majors within the southeastern region. Of those 119 identified departments, 55 were returned, yielding a 46% return rate.

First, chairs were asked questions about their opinions regarding gay and lesbian issues and their connection to criminal justice along with if, and how, these issues are included in the classroom. The questionnaire, for instance, included questions addressing the inclusion of gay and lesbian issues in required and/or elective courses and if the inclusion of these issues is by individual instructor choice or course curriculum. Finally, questions were also asked pertaining to any special/dedicated or unique courses in their department addressing gay and lesbian issues. Refer to Appendix 1 for a complete list of these questions. Next, chairs were asked to describe their institution and department. A majority of the respondents were from public (65.5%) institutions with less than 8,745 students (61.8%). Only 27.3% of the departments were stand alone departments of criminal justice, 3.6% were stand alone criminology departments, and 10.9% were departments of criminal justice *and* criminology. One (1.8%) department was a sociology department and two (3.6%) were political science departments. The remaining 47.3% of the departments were multi-disciplinary, thus they were some combination of sociology, political science, criminology and/or criminal justice. The mean total number of majors in the departments was 265, while 60% of the departments that participated reported fewer than 265 students.

**Table 1. Department and Student Demographics.**

Public or Private Institutions		
	Frequency	Percent
Public Institutions	19	34.5
Not Public Institutions	36	65.5
Total	55	100
Total Number of Students at Institution		
	Frequency	Percent
Below Mean (8,745)	34	61.8
Above Mean (8,745)	21	38.2
Total	55	100
What best describes your Department?		
	Frequency	Percent
Criminal Justice Only	15	27.3
Criminology Only	2	3.6
Criminal Justice and Criminology	6	10.9
Sociology	1	1.8
Political Science	2	3.6
Multiple Disciplines	26	47.3
Other	3	5.5
Total	55	100
Total Number of Majors in Department		
	Frequency	Percent
Below Mean (265 Students)	33	60
Above mean (265 Students)	22	40
Total	55	100

Following the list of questions concerning the institution and department, the chair's demographics were gathered (refer to Table 2). A majority of the chairs (69.1%) were male. Furthermore, a majority of the chairs who responded were white (69.1%). The mean age of respondents was 49, thus age was recoded and 54.5% of the respondents were 50 years of age or older.

**Table 2.** Department Chairperson's Demographics

Sex		
	Frequency	Percent
Male	38	69.1
Female	14	25.5
Missing	3	5.5
Total	55	100
Race		
White	38	69.1
Not White	14	25.5
Missing	3	5.5
Total	55	100
Age (Mean = 49)		
49 Years Old and Younger	21	38.2
50 Years Old and Older	30	54.5
Missing	4	7.3
Total	55	100

The attitudinal section of the questionnaire used for the present study was previously used in a study with educators, albeit high school teachers, to test their attitudes towards homosexuality (Price, 1982). The attitudinal section of the questionnaire consisted of 29, 7 point Likert Scale, statements regarding homosexuals. Please refer to Appendix 2 for a complete list of the questions. The Cronbach's Alpha score of reliability was high at .964.

**Findings**

An overwhelming 87.3% of the chairs believed that some gay and lesbian issues were also criminal justice issues. However, these issues were not being taught in courses dedicated to the problems gays and lesbians face in criminal justice. Cannon et al. (2006) found no existing courses dedicated to gay and lesbian issues. However, the current research found one such course offered in a department in the southeast region.

Participants were asked questions regarding the inclusion of gay and lesbian issues in other criminal justice curricula. As can be seen in Table 3, while a majority of them responded that some gay and lesbian issues were also criminal justice issues, only one-half stated these issues were addressed in *required* courses and, of that half, only 9.1% listed such topics were required as a part of course curriculum. A majority of departments (58.2) left the inclusion of these topics up to the individual instructor. Finally, of those participants who stated gay and lesbian issues were required as a part of the course curriculum, only 32.7% stated these issues were covered adequately in the required courses.

Next, participants were asked the same questions about the inclusion of gay and lesbian issues in *elective* courses. Sixty one point eight percent (61.8%) stated gay and lesbian issues were addressed in elective courses and 32.7% agreed these topics were covered adequately in elective courses. However, only 3.6% required these issues to be addressed as a part of the course curriculum.

**Table 3. Inclusion and Adequacy of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Required and Elective Courses**

Gay and Lesbian Issues also Criminal Justice Issues		
	Frequency	Percent
Yes	48	87.3
No	6	10.9
Missing	1	1.8
Total	55	100

	Gay and Lesbian issues in Required Courses		in Elective Courses	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Yes	28	50.9	34	61.8
No	15	27.3	9	16.4
Don't Know	11	20	22	21.8
Missing	1	1.8	0	0
Total	55	100	55	100

	Basis of Inclusion in Required Courses		in Elective Courses	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Individual Instructor	32	58.2	36	65.5
Required as part of course curriculum	5	9.1	2	3.6
Other	5	9.1	6	10.9
Missing	13	23.6	11	20
Total	55	100	55	100

	Adequacy of Coverage in Required Courses		in Elective Courses	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Agree, they are covered	18	32.7	18	32.7
No Opinion	11	20	8	14.5
Disagree, they are not covered	10	18.2	13	23.6
Missing	16	29.1	16	29.1
Total	55	100	55	100

To further investigate, a scale addressing the individual chairs' perceptions of homosexuals was also included. There were 29 items on the scale (See Appendix 2). Only items 3, 13, 18, and 23 were positive statements regarding homosexuals. The remaining items were derogatory statements or myths concerning homosexuals. Participants were asked to agree or disagree using a seven point Likert Scale. After reversing items 3, 13, and 23, a score was summed creating a range between 29 (being the most homophobic) and 203 (being the least homophobic). The mean summed score of all participants was 173.06 and the standard deviation was 32.

The majority of the differences between the chair characteristics and departmental characteristics were straight forward. For instance, male chairs had a mean summed score on the attitudinal scale lower than females, thus indicating a more negative attitude towards homosexuals. The mean age of the participant was 49. Again, as expected, those chairs older than the mean age (50+) had a more negative attitude towards homosexuals. However, unexpectedly, white chairs had a more negative attitude towards homosexuals. Previous research has typically found that non-whites were more likely to have negative attitudes towards homosexuals (Cannon, 2005; Miller, 2001; Olivero et al., 2001; Ventura et al., 2004)

In regards to department demographics, public institutions' chairs had a more positive attitude of homosexuals with a mean of 182.52, while private institutions' chairs reported a mean of 155.14. Larger universities reported more positive attitude towards homosexuals, for example, universities with a total number of students above the mean of 8,746 reported a summed mean of 182.94, while smaller universities reported a summed mean of 166.96.

The department's designation of major did make a difference regarding the chair's attitude towards homosexuals. Departments that offered criminal justice degrees only had a lower summed mean score (162.72) than multi disciplinary departments (176.94). This indicates that 'stand alone' criminal justice department chairs have a more negative attitude towards homosexuals than other department chairs. However, when the data were recoded to include criminal justice and criminology departments, the difference disappeared.

A series of regression analyses were run to determine if any of the independent variables used above were predictors of attitudes towards homosexuals. For the first analysis, the following independent variables were included: race, sex, and age. As can be seen from Table 4, the only significant variable (at the .05 level) was sex. Thus, male chairs of criminal justice/criminology departments were more likely to have negative attitudes towards homosexuals. Similarly, prior research had found sex was a significant factor for male criminal justice students, who were more likely to report negative attitudes toward homosexuals.

For the second analysis (see Table 4), the independent variables were the designation of a public institution, the total number of students at the university and whether the department was designated as exclusively a criminal justice department. The only significant

variable (at the .05 level) was the designation of public universities. Thus, chairs of departments at public universities reported more positive attitudes towards homosexuals than chairs of departments at private universities.

**Table 4.** Regression Analyses: Predictors of Attitudes Towards Homosexuals

	B	SE	Beta	t	Sig
(Constant)	159.181	7.341		21.683	.000
Public Institutions	24.465	10.307	.367	2.374	.021
Total Number of Students at University	3.558	10.122	.055	.351	.727
Criminal Justice Departments	-12.800	9.087	-.180	-1.409	.165

Dependent Variable: Summed score of attitudes towards homosexuals  
 $R^2 = .200$

	B	SE	Beta	t	Sig
(Constant)	165.309	23.789		6.949	.000
Race	-9.246	10.762	-.123	-.859	.395
Sex	27.829	10.570	.378	2.633	.011
Age	.140	.458	.043	.306	.761

Dependent Variable: Summed score of attitudes towards homosexuals  
 $R^2 = .130$

### Conclusion

There are several important conclusions from the current study. First, the departments' course curriculum is examined. Even though chairs of criminal justice departments overwhelmingly agreed that some gay and lesbian issues were also criminal justice issues (87.3%), only one-half of the chairs indicated that gay and lesbian issues were included in *required* courses. Furthermore, 58.2%, of that half, allowed the individual instructor to decide whether to include the topic in the course. While in regards to *elective* courses, 61.8% of chairs stated gay and lesbian issues were included in elective courses, with 65.5% of them allowing the individual instructor the ability to decide whether to include the topic. Of those chairs who stated that gay and lesbian issues were covered in both *required* and *elective* courses, only 32.7% agreed the topics were covered adequately.

Next, Cannon et al. (2006) found no courses addressing gay and lesbian issues in criminal justice departments nationally. This study, albeit only in the southeast region, did find one course dedicated to addressing gay and lesbian issues in criminal justice. However,

the finding of one course does not dismiss or change the significance of Cannon and Dirks-Linhorst's 2006 study.

Finally, white chairs had a more negative attitude toward homosexuals, which differs from previous research with college students that concluded African Americans were more likely to hold negative attitudes about homosexuals (Ellis et al., 2002; Klamen, Grossman, & Kopacz, 1999). This study found male chairs had more negative attitudes toward gays and lesbians than female chairs. This finding is similar to conclusions of prior research conducted with male and female criminal justice students, where male criminal justice students held more negative attitudes than female students (Cannon, 2005). In the current study, chairs who were older (50+) tended to have more negative attitudes towards homosexuals, while prior research had concluded younger people were more likely to hold negative attitudes toward homosexuals (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980; Kurdek, 1988; Oliver & Hyde, 1995; Whitley & Kite, 1995). However, in a more current study, Lyons, DeValve and Garner (2008) did not find a relationship between age and positive attitudes towards homosexuals suggesting the relationship between age and attitudes toward homosexuals may have more to do with the population being studied.

Previous research on this subject supports the idea we may not be doing enough to overcome the negative opinions criminal justice students have of homosexuals. According to Cannon (2005), a significant predictor of better attitudes towards homosexuals was if a student had taken a course on gay and lesbian issues. As can be seen from Cannon et al. (2006) research and the current study (which did report one course), even though chairs of criminal justice departments agreed that some gay and lesbian issues were also criminal justice issues, there were essentially no courses on such issues offered in criminal justice.

Thus, it can be concluded that criminal justice departments do not have adequate coverage of homosexual issues in required or elective courses. And, the inclusion of homosexual issues in classroom discussions were a discretionary issue left solely up to individual faculty. Finally, chairs of departments in private institutions and departments designated as solely criminal justice departments tended to have more negative attitudes towards homosexuals.

As always, there were limitations with this research. First, while the return rate from the participants was acceptable (46%), the study was limited to only the southeast region. Thus, it may not be generalizable to other regions in the United States. Second, the low  $R^2$  values in Table 4 show important independent variables are missing from the models. Future researchers may want to explore the possibilities offered by a factorial analysis or a qualitative approach to assess the attitudes towards homosexuals. Finally, the survey instrument used for the present study did not distinguish between lesbians and gay men. Previous research suggested that attitudes towards lesbians were not as negative as those towards gay men (Herek et al., 1996; Kite & Whitley, 1998). It would be beneficial for future research to distinguish between gays and lesbians. Furthermore, research addressing the

criminal justice faculties' attitudes towards gays and lesbians would be beneficial to assess whether or not we, as educators, are contributing to the negative attitudes criminal justice students have of homosexuals.

Attitudes students take from the classroom into the 'real' world may affect how they treat someone. If criminal justice students' attitudes towards homosexuals are not being challenged by faculty in criminal justice departments then some might argue that we, as educators, are doing a disservice to the community. In fact, in one of the *few* studies addressing law enforcement officers and attitudes towards homosexuals, Lyons et al. (2005) found police officers endorsed homophobic attitudes. While the notion that criminal justice students or police officers are homophobic may be unimportant to some, as mentioned in Lyons, et. al. (2005), if we substitute this bigotry towards homosexuals with Blacks or Jews the importance of these attitudes become clearer. Thus, and finally, more studies need to be conducted regarding the attitudes professionals (i.e. police, probation & parole officers) in the field of criminal justice have regarding homosexuals.

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*Appendix I.*

Department Information

Do you believe that there are some gay and lesbian issues that are also criminal justice issues?  
If yes, do you believe that these issues should be a topic of discussion in criminal justice courses?

Are gay and lesbian issues addressed in any of your department's required courses?  
If yes, do you believe that there is adequate coverage of gay and lesbian issues in your department's required courses?

Is the inclusion of gay and lesbian issues in your required courses based upon individual instructor, required part of course curriculum, or other reason?

Are gay and lesbian issues addressed in any of your department's elective courses?  
If yes, do you believe that there is adequate coverage of gay and lesbian issues in your department's elective courses?

Is the inclusion of gay and lesbian issues in your elective courses based upon individual instructor, required part of course curriculum, or other reason?

Is there a special/dedicated/unique course in your department that addresses gay and lesbian issues?

Which of the following best describes your department? Criminal Justice only department, Criminology only department, Criminal Justice & Criminology department, Sociology department, Political Science department, Social Work department, Department with multiple disciplines/majors (e.g. Criminal Justice, Sociology and Social Work), Other

Which of the following best describes your institution? Public University with graduate programs, Public University with no graduate programs, Private University with graduate programs, Private University with no graduate programs, Community college

How many degrees does your department award yearly?

How many full-time faculty do you have in your department?

Approximately how many total students are in your university (as a whole)?

Approximately how many total undergraduate students have a major in your department? (either criminal justice, criminology, sociology, political science, social work, etc.)

Approximately how many undergraduate students have a criminal justice major in your department?

Approximately how many total undergraduate students have a minor in your department?

*Appendix 2.*

Attitudinal

1. Homosexuals should not be permitted to raise children.
2. Homosexuals should not be allowed to hold important positions.
3. Homosexual marriage should be made legal (Positive Response Reversed).
4. Homosexuals should be locked up and not released until cured.
5. I would be upset if I were a parent and found out that my son or daughter were a homosexual.
6. Homosexuality should be a criminal offense.
7. Homosexuality is a sin.
8. The number of children seduced by homosexuals is greatly exaggerated.
9. Homosexuality is unnatural.
10. The thought of homosexuality “makes me sick.”
11. Homosexuals are sick.
12. If homosexuality is allowed to increase it will destroy our society.
13. Other than their sex lives, there is little difference between homosexuals and everybody else. (Positive Response Reversed)
14. Homosexuality tends to make an individual’s whole personality bad.
15. I find it hard to believe that homosexuals can really love each other.
16. It would be a mistake to ever have homosexuals for bosses and leaders over other people.
17. Homosexual males are generally more feminine than other males.
18. A homosexual relationship could be as rewarding as male-female relationships (Positive Response Reversed).
19. Homosexuals should never be allowed to teach school or supervise children.
20. I can hardly imagine myself having a close friendship with a homosexual.
21. Because of its unusual nature, sex between homosexuals can only be animal-like pleasure.
22. I would not want homosexuals to live near me.
23. Homosexuality is just a different kind of life style, and therefore, should not be condemned. (Positive Response Reversed)
24. Homosexuals are very unhappy people who wish they could be like everybody else.
25. Homosexuals simply can’t be trusted.
26. Homosexuality is not normal and should be done away with for the good of society.
27. I can’t see what homosexuals are complaining about; if they would just leave everybody else alone there wouldn’t be any problem.
28. Homosexual females are generally more masculine than other females.
29. If homosexuality is accepted by society it will cause more people to become homosexuals.