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# *Policing the Gay Community: An Inquiry into Textually- mediated Social Relations [1]*

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## **Introduction**

Gay steambaths can be found in many major cities of the world, especially in North America. Steambaths in Canada were originally a feature of turn-of-the-century European immigrant communities, a place where families took their weekly bath. As these communities assimilated and residential plumbing improved, steambaths lost traditional customers and began catering more and more to gay men. During the 1970s gay-owned baths in Canada supplanted European-type saunas, offering not simply a steam bath, but a variety of facilities, including weight rooms, swimming pools, lounges with cafeterias and televisions, professional massage areas, tanning equipment, sun decks, and whirlpools. Most importantly, these clubs provide gay and bisexual men with a venue for sex with other men. Although steambath sex is often referred to as 'anonymous sex', in Toronto at least, the baths have much more of a communal character, somewhat akin to the relation European-styled baths originally had with local immigrant communities. Because the baths in Toronto are located in the gay ghetto, they have become places where people keep in touch with friends and acquaintances and look forward to having sex with regular partners. Thus, gay steambaths in Toronto have become a feature of the social organization of the gay community.

Near midnight on February 5th, 1981, the intelligence bureau of the Metropolitan Toronto Police raided four downtown gay steambaths and arrested more than 300 men as being either keepers or found-ins of a common bawdy-house [2]. The scope and violence of these raids made them a cause celebre. Three years earlier, after a similar but smaller raid, gay people in Toronto had established the Right to Privacy Committee (RTPC) to defend men