

UCLA

Other Recent Work

Title

How Many People are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender?

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/09h684x2>

Author

Gates, Gary J.

Publication Date

2011-04-01

How many people are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender?



the
Williams
INSTITUTE

by Gary J. Gates, Williams Distinguished Scholar

April 2011

Executive Summary

Increasing numbers of population-based surveys in the United States and across the world include questions that allow for an estimate of the size of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) population. This research brief discusses challenges associated with collecting better information about the LGBT community and reviews eleven recent US and international surveys that ask sexual orientation or gender identity questions. The brief concludes with estimates of the size of the LGBT population in the United States.

Key findings from the research brief are as follows:

- An estimated 3.5% of adults in the United States identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual and an estimated 0.3% of adults are transgender.
- This implies that there are approximately 9 million LGBT Americans, a figure roughly equivalent to the population of New Jersey.
- Among adults who identify as LGB, bisexuals comprise a slight majority (1.8% compared to 1.7% who identify as lesbian or gay).
- Women are substantially more likely than men to identify as bisexual. Bisexuals comprise more than half of the lesbian and bisexual population among women in eight of the nine surveys considered in the brief. Conversely, gay men comprise substantially more than half of gay and bisexual men in seven of the nine surveys.
- Estimates of those who report any lifetime same-sex sexual behavior and any same-sex sexual attraction are substantially higher than estimates of those who identify as LGB. An estimated 19 million Americans (8.2%) report that they have engaged in same-sex sexual behavior and nearly 25.6 million Americans (11%) acknowledge at least some same-sex sexual attraction.
- Understanding the size of the LGBT population is a critical first step to informing a host of public policy and research topics. The surveys highlighted in this report demonstrate the viability of sexual orientation and gender identity questions on large national population-based surveys. Adding these questions to more national, state, and local data sources is critical to developing research that enables a better understanding of the understudied LGBT community.

Introduction

Increasing numbers of population-based surveys in the United States and across the world include questions designed to measure sexual orientation and gender identity. Understanding the size of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) population is a critical first step to informing a host of public policy and research topics. Examples include assessing health and economic disparities in the LGBT community, understanding the prevalence of anti-LGBT discrimination, and considering the economic impact of marriage equality or the provision of domestic partnership benefits to same-sex couples. This research brief discusses challenges associated with collecting better information about the LGBT community and reviews findings from eleven recent US and international surveys that ask sexual orientation or gender identity questions. The brief concludes with estimates of the size of the LGBT population in the United States.

Challenges in measuring the LGBT community

Estimates of the size of the LGBT community vary for a variety of reasons. These include differences in the definitions of who is included in the LGBT population, differences in survey methods, and a lack of consistent questions asked in a particular survey over time.

In measuring sexual orientation, lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals may be identified strictly based on their self-identity or it may be possible to consider same-sex sexual behavior or sexual attraction. Some surveys (not considered in this brief) also assess household relationships and provide a mechanism of identifying those who are in same-sex relationships. Identity, behavior, attraction, and relationships all capture related dimensions of sexual orientation but none of these measures completely addresses the concept.

Defining the transgender population can also be challenging. Definitions of who may be considered part of the transgender community include aspects of both gender identities and varying forms of gender expression or non-conformity. Similar to sexual orientation, one way to measure the transgender community is to simply consider self-identity. Measures of identity could include consideration of terms like transgender, queer, or genderqueer. The latter two identities are used by some to capture aspects of both sexual orientation and gender identity.

Similar to using sexual behaviors and attraction to capture elements of sexual orientation, questions may also be devised that consider gender expression and non-conformity regardless of the terms individuals may use to describe themselves. An example of these types of questions would be consideration of the relationship between the sex that individuals are assigned at birth and the degree to which that assignment conforms with how they express their gender. Like the counterpart of measuring sexual orientation through identity, behavior, and attraction measures, these varying approaches capture related dimensions of who might be classified as transgender but may not individually address all aspects of assessing gender identity and expression.

Another factor that can create variation among estimates of the LGBT community is survey methodology. Survey methods can affect the willingness of respondents to report stigmatizing identities and behaviors. Feelings of confidentiality and anonymity increase the likelihood that respondents will be more accurate in reporting sensitive information. Survey methods that include face-to-face interviews may underestimate the size of the LGBT community while those that include methods that allow respondents to complete questions on a computer or via the internet may increase the likelihood of LGBT respondents identifying themselves. Varied sample sizes of surveys can also increase variation. Population-based surveys with a

larger sample can produce more precise estimates (see SMART, 2010 for more information about survey methodology).

A final challenge in making population-based estimates of the LGBT community is the lack of questions asked over time on a single large survey. One way of assessing the reliability of estimates is to repeat questions over time using a consistent method and sampling strategy. Adding questions to more large-scale surveys that are repeated over time would substantially improve our ability to make better estimates of the size of the LGBT population.

How many adults are lesbian, gay, or bisexual?

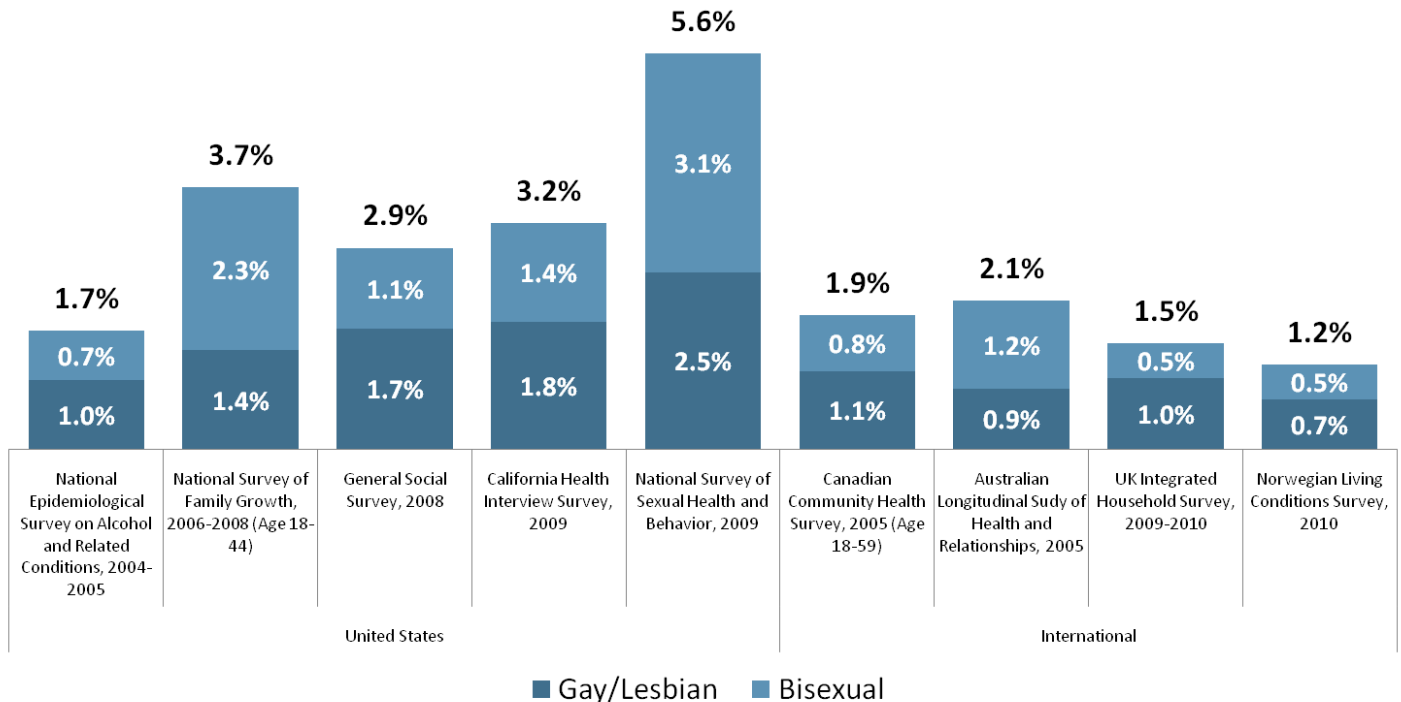
Findings shown in Figure 1 consider estimates of the percentage of adults who self-identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual across nine surveys conducted within the past seven years. Five of those surveys were fielded in the United States and the others are from Canada, the United

Kingdom, Australia, and Norway. All are population-based surveys of adults, though some have age restrictions as noted.

The lowest overall percentage comes from the Norwegian Living Conditions Survey at 1.2%, with the National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior, conducted in the United States, producing the highest estimate at 5.6%. In general, the non-US surveys, which vary from 1.2% to 2.1%, estimate lower percentages of LGB-identified individuals than the US surveys, which range from 1.7% to 5.6%.

While the surveys show a fairly wide variation in the overall percentage of adults who identify as LGB, the proportion who identify as lesbian/gay versus bisexual is somewhat more consistent (see Figure 2). In six of the surveys, lesbian- and gay-identified individuals outnumbered bisexuals. In most cases, these surveys were roughly 60% lesbian/gay versus 40% bisexual. The UK Integrated Household Survey found the proportion to be two-thirds lesbian/gay versus one-third bisexual.

Figure 1. Percent of adults who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.



The National Survey of Family Growth found results that were essentially the opposite of the UK survey with only 38% identifying as lesbian or gay compared to 62% identifying as bisexual. The National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior and the Australian Longitudinal Study

of Health and Relationships both found a majority of respondents (55% and 59%, respectively) identifying as bisexual.

The surveys show even greater consistency in differences between men and women

Figure 2. Percent of adults who identify as gay/lesbian versus bisexual.

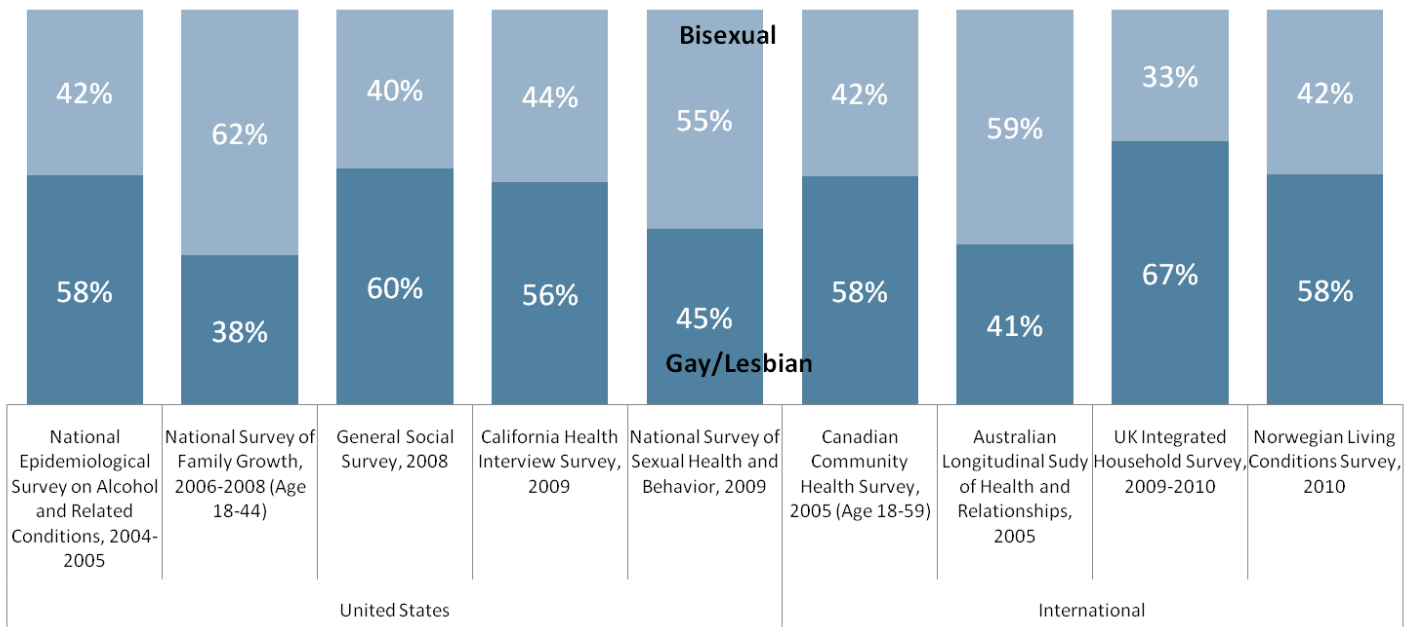
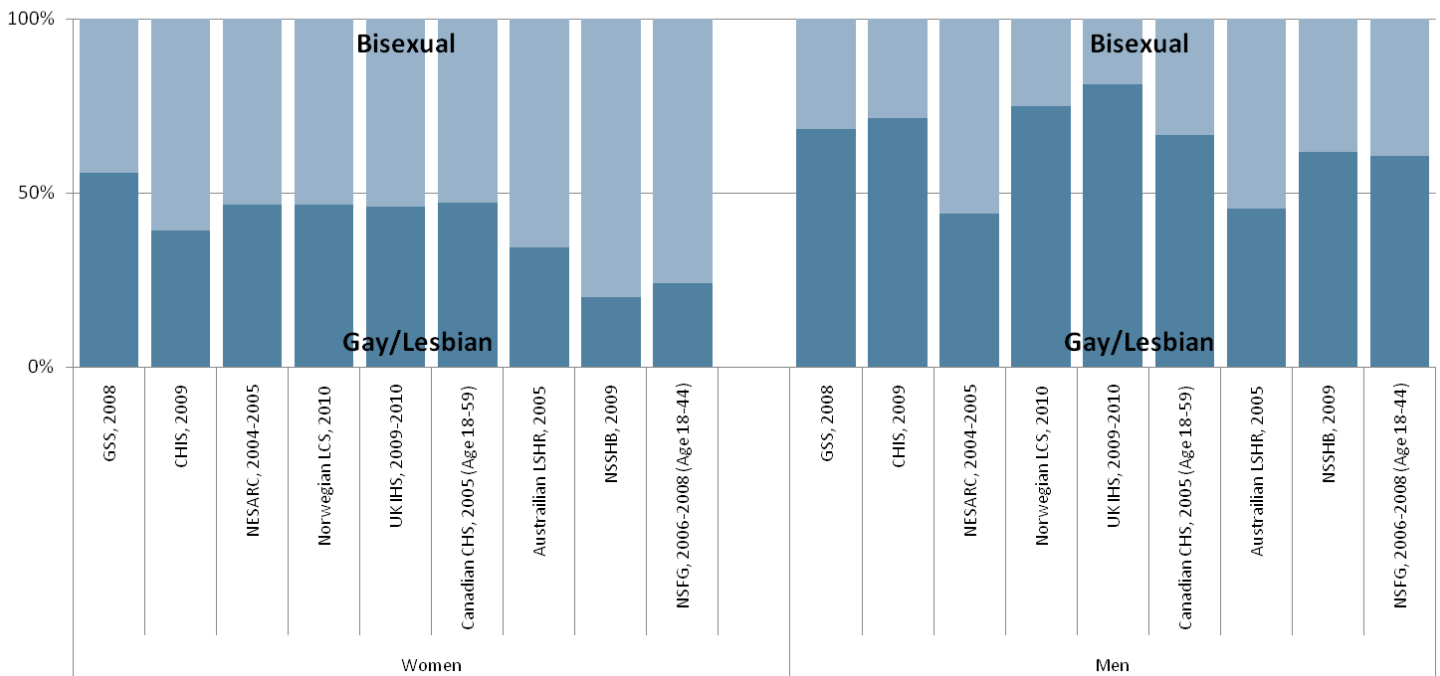
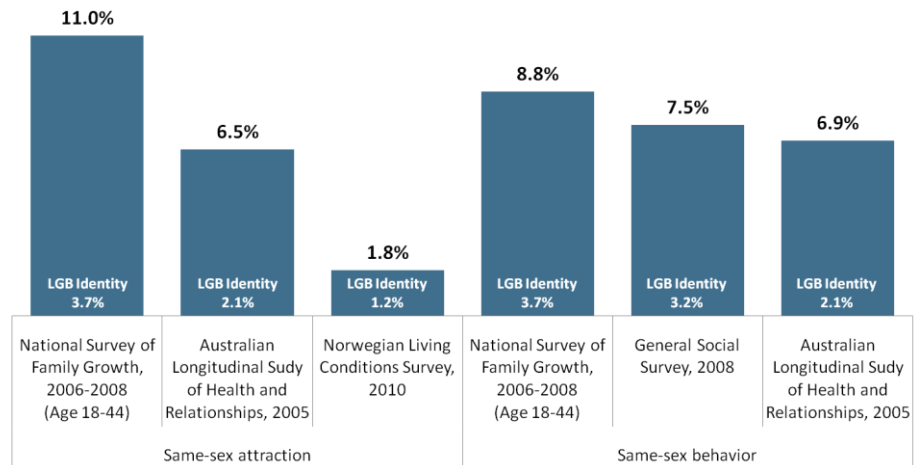


Figure 3. Percent of adults who identify as lesbian/gay versus bisexual, by sex.



associated with lesbian/gay versus bisexual identity. Women are substantially more likely than men to identify as bisexual. Bisexuals comprise more than half of the lesbian and bisexual population among women in eight of the nine surveys considered (see Figure 3). Conversely, gay men comprise substantially more than half of gay and bisexual men in seven of the nine surveys.

Figure 4. Percent of adults who report any same-sex attraction and behavior.



Four of the surveys analyzed also asked questions about either sexual behavior or attraction. Within these surveys, a larger fraction of adults report same-sex attractions and behaviors than self-identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (see Figure 4). With the exception of the Norwegian survey, these differences are substantial. The two US surveys and the Australian survey all suggest that adults are two to three times more likely to say that they are attracted to individuals of the same-sex or have had same-sex sexual experiences than they are to self-identify as LGB.

How many adults are transgender?

Population-based data sources that estimate the percentage of adults who are transgender are very rare. The Massachusetts Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey represents one of the few population-based surveys that include a question designed to identify the transgender population. Analyses of the 2007 and 2009 surveys suggest that 0.5% of adults aged 18-64 identified as transgender (Conron 2011).

The 2003 California LGBT Tobacco Survey found that 3.2% of LGBT individuals identified as transgender. Recall that the 2009 California Health Interview Survey estimates that 3.2% of adults in the state are LGB. If both of these

estimates are true, it implies that approximately 0.1% of adults in California are transgender.

Several studies have reviewed multiple sources to construct estimates of a variety of dimensions of gender identity. Conway (2002) suggests that between 0.5% and 2% of the population have strong feelings of being transgender and between 0.1% and 0.5% actually take steps to transition from one gender to another. Olyslager and Conway (2007) refine Conway's original estimates and posit that at least 0.5% of the population has taken some steps toward transition. Researchers in the United Kingdom (Reed, et al., 2009) suggest that perhaps 0.1% of adults are transgender (defined again as those who have transitioned in some capacity).

Notably, the estimates of those who have transitioned are consistent with the survey-based estimates from California and Massachusetts. Those surveys both used questions that implied a transition or at least discordance between sex at birth and current gender presentation.

How many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are there in the United States?

Federal data sources designed to provide population estimates in the United States (e.g., the Decennial Census or the American Community Survey) do not include direct questions regarding sexual orientation or gender identity. The findings shown in Figure 1 suggest that no single survey offers a definitive estimate for the size of the LGBT community in the United States.

However, combining information from the population-based surveys considered in this brief offers a mechanism to produce credible estimates for the size of the LGBT community. Specifically, estimates for sexual orientation identity will be derived by averaging results from the five US surveys identified in Figure 1.

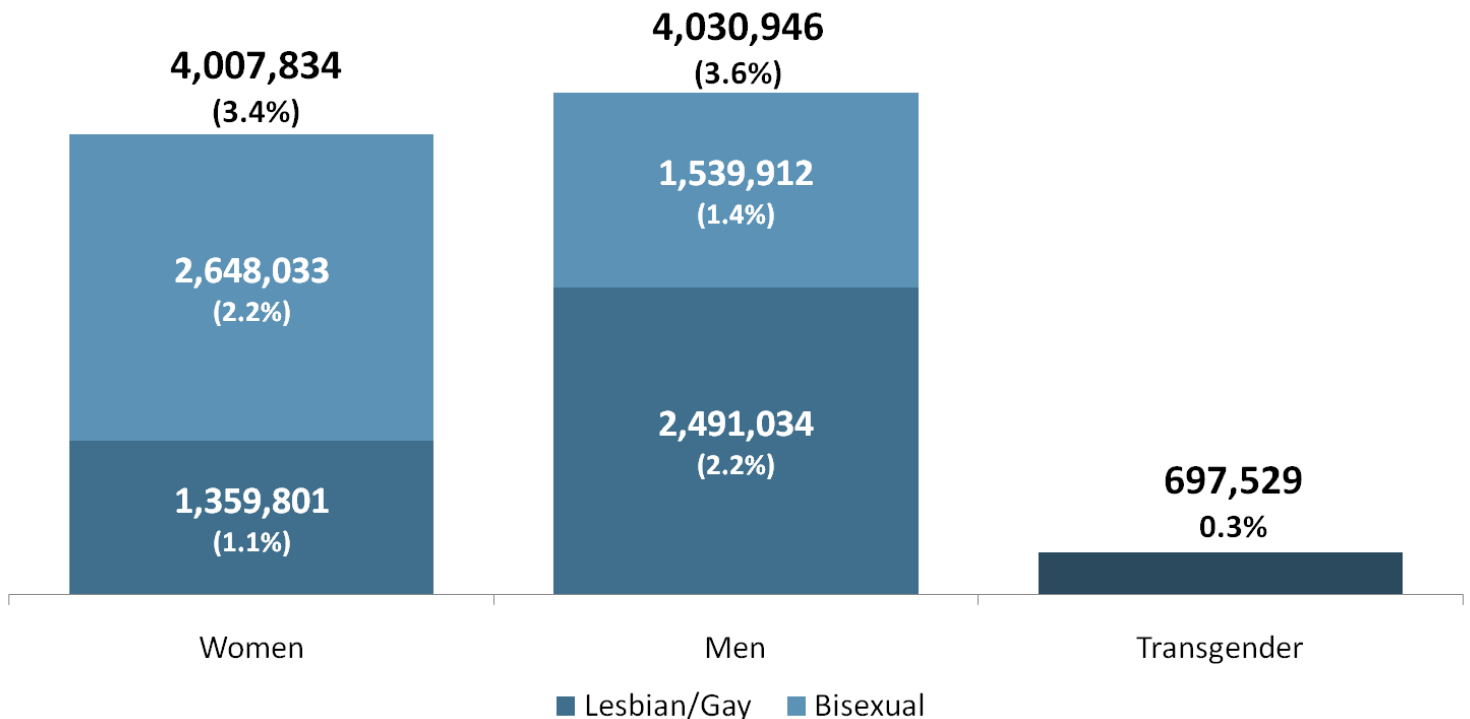
Separate averages are calculated for lesbian and bisexual women along with gay and

bisexual men. An estimate for the transgender population is derived by averaging the findings from the Massachusetts and California surveys cited earlier.

It should be noted that some transgender individuals may identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. So it is not possible to make a precise combined LGBT estimate. Instead, Figure 5 presents separate estimates for the number of LGB adults and the number of transgender adults.

The analyses suggest that there are more than 8 million adults in the US who are LGB, comprising 3.5% of the adult population. This is split nearly evenly between lesbian/gay and bisexual identified individuals, 1.7% and 1.8%, respectively. There are also nearly 700,000 transgender individuals in the US. Given these findings, it seems reasonable to assert that approximately 9 million Americans identify as LGBT.

Figure 5. Percent and number of adults who identify as LGBT in the United States.



Averaging measures of same-sex sexual behavior yields an estimate of nearly 19 million Americans (8.2%) who have engaged in same-sex sexual behavior.¹ The National Survey of Family Growth is the only source of US data on attraction and suggests that 11% or nearly 25.6 million Americans acknowledge at least some same-sex sexual attraction.²

By way of comparison, these analyses suggest that the size of the LGBT community is roughly equivalent to the population of New Jersey. The number of adults who have had same-sex sexual experiences is approximately equal to the population of Florida while those who have some same-sex attraction comprise more individuals than the population of Texas.

The surveys highlighted in this report demonstrate the viability of sexual orientation and gender identity questions on large-scale national population-based surveys. States and municipal governments are often testing grounds for the implementation of new LGBT-related public policies or can be directly affected by national-level policies. Adding sexual orientation and gender identity questions to national data sources that can provide local-level estimates and to state and municipal surveys is critical to assessing the potential efficacy and impact of such policies.

¹ This estimate uses data from the National Survey of Family Growth and the General Social Survey.

² Since the NSFG data only survey 18-44 year olds, this estimate assumes that patterns in this group are the same for those aged 45 and older. It may be that older adults are less likely to report same-sex attraction. If so, this estimate may somewhat overstate same-sex attraction among all adults.

References

- [Australian Longitudinal Study of Health and Relationships](#). Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University, Wave 1 Summary, 2005.
- California Health Interview Survey, 2009. Author analyses of data using [AskCHIS](#), UCLA Center for Health Policy Research.
- [California LGBT Tobacco Survey, 2004](#). Author analyses using machine-readable data file. California Department of Health Services, Tobacco Control Section.
- Chandra, A, Mosher, WD, Copen, C. [Sexual Behavior, Sexual Attraction, and Sexual Identity in the United States: Data from the 2006-2008 National Survey of Family Growth](#). National Health Statistics Report, Number 36, March 2011.
- Note: This report includes estimates cited from the National Epidemiological Survey on Alcohol Related Conditions and the National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior.
- Conron, KJ, Scott, G, Stowell, GS, Landers, S. Transgender Health in Massachusetts: Results from a Household Probability Sample of Adults, *American Journal of Public Health*, forthcoming.
- Conway, L. [How Frequently Does Transsexualism Occur?](#), December 2002.
- Joloza, T, Evans, J, O'Brien, R. [Measuring Sexual Identity: An Evaluation Report](#), UK Office of National Statistics, September 2010.
- Olyslager, F, Conway, L. [On the Calculation of the Prevalence of Transsexualism](#). Paper presented at the WPATH 20th International Symposium, Chicago, Illinois, September 2007.
- Reed, B, Rhodes, S, Schofield, P, Wylie, K. [Gender Variance in the UK: Prevalence, Incidence, Growth, and Geographic Distribution](#). Gender Identity Research and Education Society, June 2009.
- SMART (Sexual Minority Assessment Research Team). [Best Practices for Asking Sexual Orientation on Surveys](#). Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law, November 2009.
- Smith, TW, Marsden, P, Hout, M, Kim, J. Author analyses of 2008 [General Social Survey](#) using machine-readable data file. National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, 2009.
- Tjepkema, M. [Health care use among gay, lesbian and bisexual Canadians](#). Statistics Canada, Health Reports, 19:1, March 2008.

About the Author

Gary J. Gates, PhD is the Williams Distinguished Scholar at the Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law. He studies the demographic and economic characteristics of the LGBT population.

About the Institute

The Williams Institute on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Law and Public Policy at UCLA School of Law advances law and public policy through rigorous, independent research and scholarship, and disseminates its work through a variety of education programs and media to judges, legislators, lawyers, other policymakers and the public. These studies can be accessed at the Williams Institute website.

For more information

The Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law
Box 951476
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1476
(310)267-4382

williamsinstitute@law.ucla.edu www.law.ucla.edu/williamsinstitute