

National Gay and Lesbian
Task Force



How Big is the LGBT Community?
Why Can't I Find This Number?

By

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How Big is the LGBT Community? Why Can't I Find This Number?¹

Last year, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Policy Institute convened a group of 34 leading lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) researchers, advocates and community leaders to discuss these important questions, and to attempt to come to a consensus about how to offer a simple response to this complex inquiry.

How big is the LGBT community? Who wants to know? Why do we care about this? Our discussion of the "how" big question is detailed below, but equally important are the *who wants to know and why* points.

Many of us spend time trying to change public policy or laws to benefit LGBT people and their families. The size of our community is the economic cost/benefit multiplier that policy makers use when considering our issues. How much does employment and housing discrimination against LGBT people cost? How much do domestic partner benefits save us in the long run? We make our calculations and our civil rights arguments based in part on our collective answer to the "how" question.

Over the course of our convening, from very distinct disciplines and vantage points, participants reported several different ways that we answer this question to the many researchers, policy makers and members of the media who ask us.²

A determining factor in each response hinged on what researchers considered a definitive measure and how they measure it. Researchers measuring same sex *attraction* over the lifespan came up with a much larger number than those measuring LGBT *identity* in the current moment; still other numbers emerge when researchers respond on the basis of *sexual behavior* over a certain time period, rather than identity or attraction.³ On the "how" front, researchers asking voters as they leave polling places in their neighborhoods whether they identify as LGB come up with different numbers than those who ask participants to take a confidential health survey using headphones and a computer.

¹ If you are on deadline, as are many of the researchers and members of the media who ask these questions, feel free to skip to the final paragraph for your answer. However, if you hope to give this important query its proper treatment, we strongly suggest reading this short paper in its entirety.

² Answers included: (1) It's complicated. (2) 3-4% (National Exit Polling) (3) 7-10% (Youth Risk Behavior Surveys, multistate) (4) One in ten. (Kinsey) (5) The size of North Carolina; or 8.8 million people, which references the 3-4% figure in (2). (6) .25-1% of the community is transgender (a guess, which some of us are using). (7) We don't know.

³ Mosher WD, Chandra A, Jones J. Sexual behavior and selected health measures: Men and women 15-44 years of age, United States, 2002. Advance data from vital and health statistics; no 362. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2005.

How We Answered in the 1960s to the Early 1990s

From the 1960s to the early 1990s, political activists and popular media answered the “how” question definitively as “one in 10,” or 10 percent of the overall population, drawing upon Dr. Alfred Kinsey’s groundbreaking work in sexuality during the 1940s and 1950s. However, recent academic criticism of Kinsey’s work notes that Kinsey did not conduct a random sample, and so his statistic cannot be generalized to the full population. For example, Kinsey drew many of his participants from prisons, where situational same-sex behavior is more common than outside of prison. Further, many modern sex researchers question his focus on behavior, and specifically on orgasm, as a determinant of sexual orientation. In light of these and other critiques over the last decade, Kinsey’s one-in-10 figure has come to be regarded as an overestimation of the LGB⁴ population at large.

How We’ve Answered in the Late 1990s to the Present

In 1990, the U.S. Census Bureau created an unintentional sample of LGB same-sex couples when it attempted to measure cohabitation among unmarried heterosexuals in the general population. When unmarried couples who were lesbian, gay or bisexual checked off their gender in household surveys, same-sex partnerships became visible in a random sample for the first time in U.S. history⁵. Demographers and economists have used these figures to paint a portrait of same-sex couples in the U.S. and to make estimates about the LGBT population at large.

Additionally, during this period, thanks to the advocacy of AIDS and lesbian health activists, a few major state and federal health surveys piloted questions about same-sex sexual behavior. From these data sources, people engaging in same-sex behavior came to be estimated at 4–6%.

The 1990s also saw increasing interest in the voting behavior of LGB people, as critical political races turned on both LGBT issues and tiny margins of support. National Exit Polls (NEPs) commissioned by major television networks began to include the LGB question so that LGB voter influence in various campaigns might be determined. The NEP data, collected over the past 10 years, has consistently identified LGB voters as making up between 3% and 4% of the general voting population.⁶

⁴ Sexual orientation and gender expression are two distinct, essential aspects of identity. While lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people have historically constructed the “gay” communities together, researchers seeking to quantify the community whom ask sexual orientation questions *alone* fail to ascertain what percentage of the LGB community identifies as transgender and fail to reach transgender people who identify as heterosexual altogether.

⁵ Since the Census had no actual interest in measuring the LGB population in this manner, they certainly also made no attempt to collect data on the transgender population, which identifies as heterosexual as well as LGB.

⁶ Ken Sherrill (Hunter) is a pioneer researcher in this arena. Along with Murray Edelman (Rutgers) and Patrick Egan (NYU), Sherrill collaborated on a study of LGB political behavior through a random sampling

Finally, youth advocates in several states have succeeded in getting same-sex behavior questions added to their annual Youth Risk Behavior Surveys in an effort to track STI transmission and other health risks among youth. In Massachusetts, California and New York, where same-sex questions are posed, between 4% and 10% of youth report acting on a same-sex attraction.⁷

While these samples have yielded important data for researchers and advocates to consider, they are limited:

- NEPs compile data about LGB people who vote, which excludes LGB people who are undocumented, not registered to vote, or otherwise alienated from the political process. This figure then, is not a true ‘random’ sample.
- The census provides demographic information about LGB couples who feel secure enough to make their relationships visible on a legal document mandated by the federal government. Population estimates are extrapolated from this data set, as there are no LGBT identity questions on the census form.
- Health and social surveys describe the health issues and conditions of LGB people who are reachable by phone or paper surveys in their homes, and are willing to disclose intimate details of their sexual behavior to a stranger or on a form.
- Youth Risk Behavior Survey data tracks same sex behavior of the past year, and thus offers only a snapshot of same-sex sexual behavior, rather than LGBT identity. Additionally, literature notes that teen sexual identity is somewhat elastic and that teens tend to underreport behaviors that might gain negative parental or state attention.⁸

It is important to note that none of these random samples identify or quantify transgender people at all. There has been no random sampling of the transgender population in U.S. history. We simply have *no data* that attests to the size of this populace within the LGBT community, or describes what percentage of the transgender community identifies as heterosexual or LGB.

Attraction, Behavior and Identity

Rich Savin-Williams notes in his *Who is Gay?* article that there are three major markers of sexual orientation — attraction, behavior and identity. Depending on which reference point one draws upon to quantify the community, the answer to *Who is LGBT?* varies greatly.

process of Knowledge Networks, whose sampling population of fifty thousand has identified as L, G or B at a rate of 4%. See the Hunter College Study for their methodology.

⁷ For example, in NYC in 2007, 4.3% of male students responding to the YRBS had sex only with males and 2.6% with both males and females, while 4.2% of female students had sex with females only and 10.2% with both. See New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Epiquery: NYC Interactive Health Data System. YRBS 2007. June 18, 2009. <http://nyc.gov/health/epiquery>

⁸ There are a lot of resources on queer youth identity on the National Youth Advocacy Coalition website, www.nyacyouth.org, and youth, sexuality and identity issues at Advocates for Youth, www.advocatesforyouth.org.

In the myriad settings where attraction has been measured over the past 50 years, the percentage of people who report having same-sex attraction ranges between 4–25% of the general population.⁹ When queried about behavior, research subjects report at least one same-sex encounter at rates of up to 10%. In samples where subjects are asked whether they identify as LGB and are given the option to check off a straight/ heterosexual, L, G or B box, the percentage drops to approximately three to four percent.

Collection Methodology

Research has shown that the method by which one collects data has an effect on a subject's willingness to report same-sex attraction or behavior, or to identify as L, G, B, or T. The same group of subjects reveals a higher level of same-sex sexual behaviors and LGBT identity when asked by a mechanical voice phone survey than when asked by a live phone interviewer.¹⁰ Face-to-face surveys yield a lower percentage of LGB behavior and identity than more anonymous collection methods.¹¹ While LGBT stigma has certainly declined over the past 40 years of visible and vigorous LGBT activism, there is no doubt that anti-LGBT bias remains a fact of life, and that any survey of our population, including community-based samples, provides an undercount that is fueled by fear of recrimination.

Race, Class and Relationship to the State

Historically, communities that have been targeted by the state for discrimination and violence are less likely to identify themselves on government surveys. This phenomenon partly explains the huge jump in same-sex couples we observed in the census between 1990 and 2000. In 1990, LGB fear and skepticism about the census appears to have caused significant under-reporting of same-sex relationships with 145,130 couples reporting. The Task Force and other groups conducted a community-wide education campaign about the importance of census data, and researchers have used this data over the past two decades to make economic arguments in favor of LGBT civil rights. The jump from 1990 to 2000 — of an additional 456,079 couples, totaling 601,209 identifying as “unmarried partners” — simply cannot be explained by an increased interest in partnership among LGB people in that period.¹² Rather, the critical importance of making our community visible, and the efficacy of demographic data in

⁹ See Savin-Williams and Dickson, N., Paul, C., & Herbison, P. (2003). Same-sex attraction in a birth cohort: prevalence and persistence in early adulthood. *Social Science & Medicine*, 56(8), pp. 1607-1615.

¹⁰ Tourangeau, R., & Smith, T. (1996). Asking Sensitive Questions: The Impact of Data Collection Mode, Question Format, and Question Context. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 60, pp. 275-304

¹¹ Villarroel, M. A., Turner, C. F., Eggleston, E., Al-Tayyib, A., Rogers, S. M., Roman, A. M., et al. (2006). Same-gender sex in the united states: Impact of t-acasi on prevalence estimates.(telephone audio computer-assisted self-interviewing). *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 70(2), 166(131).

¹² Gaydemographics.org. 1990 Census results for same-sex couples. Retrieved June 29, 2009, from http://www.gaydemographics.org/USA/1990_Census.htm; Gaydemographics.org. 1990 Census results for same-sex couples. Retrieved June 29, 2009, from http://www.gaydemographics.org/USA/2000Census_Gay_state.htm

civil rights struggles has persuaded more members of the community to overcome their fear of stigma or censure and report their relationship status on the census.

When we apply this analysis to people of color communities that have been disproportionately targeted for incarceration and policing, to immigrants and undocumented people, and to people stigmatized by poverty — we can imagine that the double or triple jeopardy these LGBT people experience may prove an overwhelming barrier to responding frankly to such an inquiry. It is not hard to imagine that a black, gay-identified, homeless transwoman or an undocumented Latino gay man who speaks English as a second language might experience filling out the census or responding to an NEP pollster as more threatening or culturally dissonant than a white urban lesbian homeowner.

Vantage Points

At the Creating Change convening, each of us answered the “how” big question from our unique vantage points. Those of us with academic training in the health or political sciences offered views grounded by the rigors of our specific disciplines. Advocates representing various constituencies offered friendly critiques of current research frameworks: Youth workers noted that without expanding our LGBT boxes to include a response choice for “queer,” we would likely be undercounting the LGBT youth population. A leader in the African-American community reported that none of the black men in his life identified as LGBT, but as *homosexual*, and would be unlikely to respond to questions as they are currently constructed on either federal and community-based surveys. Transgender advocates noted that the language and identifiers of the transgender communities vary greatly across income, education, race and geography.

How Big is the LGBT Community?

Sifting through the tremendous expertise and disparate viewpoints shared in our national convening, and with the huge caveat that this is a complicated question, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute offers the following:

Given the realities of anti-LGBT bias and violence, and taking into account that there is no comprehensive employment legislation protecting LGBT workers, an unknown percentage of the community will decline to identify as LGBT on federal, state and community-based questionnaires.

Random sampling such as the census and National Survey of Family Growth, and not-quite random samples such as the NEP surveys provide a “floor” estimate of the community at about 4% of the general population.

When we look to current state and federal health survey data, which collects information on same-sex sexual behaviors, including Youth Risk Behavior Surveys, we come to a figure between 4–10%.

However, given the fact that there is currently *no research whatsoever* that samples transgender people in the general population, and the reality that highly vulnerable LGBT people — including a percentage of gender-nonconforming/trans people, people of color, immigrants, non-English speakers, undocumented and low-income people — are unlikely to identify as LGBT on even an anonymous questionnaire, we believe that the lower end of the 4–10% figure significantly undercounts the community.

Accordingly, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute estimates the LGBT population — that is people who identify as LGBT or create family or sexual affiliations that involve people of the same sex — as somewhere between 5–10% of the general population.