

UNDERSTANDING ISSUES FACING BISEXUAL AMERICANS



This report was authored by:

Movement Advancement Project

The Movement Advancement Project (MAP) is an independent think tank that provides rigorous research, insight and analysis that help speed equality for LGBT people. MAP works collaboratively with LGBT organizations, advocates and funders, providing information, analysis and resources that help coordinate and strengthen their efforts for maximum impact. MAP also conducts policy research to inform the public and policymakers about the legal and policy needs of LGBT people and their families.

BiNetUSA

BiNet USA is America's civil-rights & advocacy group for all bisexual, fluid, pansexual & queer-identified people and their families, friends & allies.

Bisexual Resource Center

Founded in 1985, the Bisexual Resource Center is the oldest national bisexual organization in the U.S. that advocates for bisexual visibility and raises awareness about bisexuality throughout the LGBT and straight communities. The BRC envisions a world where love is celebrated, regardless of sexual orientation or gender expression.

About this report:

The series of publications that includes UNDERSTANDING Issues Facing LGBT Americans is a primer that introduces the major areas in which LGBT Americans face legal barriers to fully participating in life and provides a summary of what advocates are doing to work for change. This report incorporates information current as of September 2014. Please see www.lgbtmap.org/understanding-lgbt-issues for more information.

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INTRODUCTION

There are over 9 million LGBT people in the United States.¹ While more than half identify as bisexual (see *Figure 1*), the high poverty, discrimination, and poor physical and mental health outcomes within the bisexual population—often at rates higher than their lesbian and gay peers—point toward an urgent need to provide services and support for this segment of the community. This guide contains an introduction to the bisexual community, an overview of the economic and health disparities facing the community, and some recommendations for supporting bisexual people through advocacy, research, and programming.

TERMINOLOGY

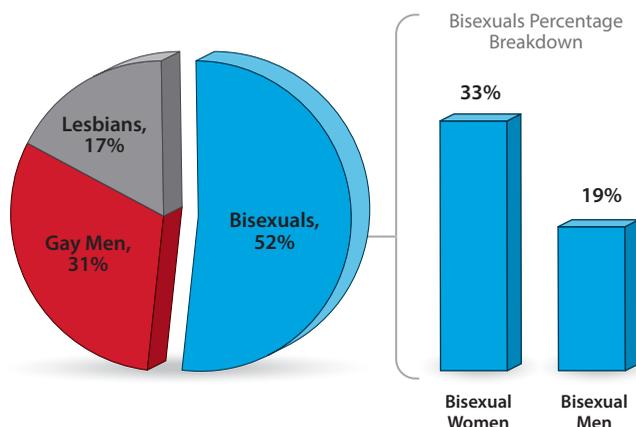
The term *bisexual* (or *bi*) describes people who have the capacity for emotional, romantic and/or physical attraction to more than one sex or gender. Bisexual people can be in different-sex relationships, same-sex relationships, or single. Bisexuality is not dependent on how many relationships someone has had with people of each gender or how strong their feelings are. See *Table 1* for terms to use and terms to avoid when speaking about the bisexual community.

COMMUNITY

Bisexual people live in every state and are ethnically and racially diverse. More women identify as bisexual than men.² Bisexual people are parents,³ teachers, athletes, writers, politicians, musicians, and artists.

Bisexual people often face pervasive stereotypes and myths surrounding bisexuality. For example, when people come out as bisexual, it is often assumed that they are “confused” about or hiding their “real” sexual orientation.⁴ These stereotypes and myths can lead to

Figure 1: Percentage of LGB Community



Source: Gary J. Gates, “How many people are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender?” *The Williams Institute*, April 2011, <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Gates-How-Many-People-LGBT-Apr-2011.pdf>.

discrimination or even “erasure” – that is, when people assume or claim that a bisexual person is straight or gay based on the gender of their current partner, or when someone refers to the “LGBT” or “gay” community and does not mean to include bisexual people.

This fear of being stereotyped manifests itself in a real way: research shows that bisexual people are six times more likely than gay men and lesbians to hide their sexual orientation. Data from the 2008 General Social Survey finds that one-quarter (25%) of bisexual people have never told anyone they are bisexual, compared to just 4% of gay men and lesbians.⁵

Table 1: Bi-Inclusive Terminology		
Terms to Use	Usage Examples	Terms to Avoid
bisexual (adj.) or bi (adj.)	“She’s bisexual.”/“He is bi.” “bi men and women”	Always try to use the term that someone identifies with.
lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (if needed for clarity)	“laws that protect lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people”	“LGBT” (when talking with those who are not yet strong supporters)
openly bisexual, openly bi	“She is openly bi.”	“She admitted/claimed to be bi.”

Adapted from: Movement Advancement Project and GLAAD, “An Ally’s Guide to Terminology,” <http://www.lgbtmap.org/allys-guide-to-terminology>

DISPARITIES

LGBT Americans face higher rates of poverty, unemployment, and negative health outcomes than straight Americans, but among LGB people, bisexuals face disproportionately higher rates of these negative outcomes than lesbians and gay men. This may be because bisexual people face discrimination from within the LGBT community as well as from non-LGBT people. Only 28% of bisexuals say that all the important people in their life know they are bisexual, compared to 77% of gay men and 71% of lesbians (see *Figure 2*).

Poverty

Approximately 25% of bisexual men and 30% of bisexual women live in poverty, compared to 15% and 21% of heterosexual men and women respectively and 20% and 23% of gay men and lesbians (see *Figure 3*).⁶ Bisexual women are more likely to depend on public financial assistance such as SNAP (food stamps).⁷

Employment

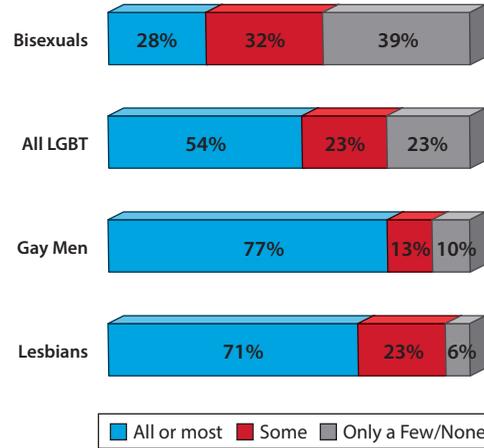
Bisexual people face discrimination in the workplace. While 20% of bisexuals report experiencing a negative employment decision based on their sexuality, almost 60% of bisexual people report hearing anti-bisexual jokes and comments on the job.⁸ Nearly half of bisexual people report that they are not out to any of their coworkers (49%), compared to just 24% of lesbian and gay people.⁹

Violence

Bisexual people experience higher rates of sexual and intimate partner violence than gay, lesbian, and straight people.¹⁰ Bisexual women experience significantly higher rates of violence both overall and by significant others, compared to lesbian and straight women: 46% of bisexual women have experienced rape, compared to 13% and 17% of lesbian and straight women, respectively. Sixty-one percent of bisexual women have experienced rape, physical violence and/or stalking by an intimate partner, compared to 43% and 35% of lesbian and straight women respectively (see *Figure 4* on the next page).¹¹ More than half of bisexual women who experienced violence by an intimate partner reported that they had missed a day of work or school, feared for their safety, or experience another negative impact.¹² Bisexual men also report higher rates of sexual violence; nearly half of bisexual men (47%) report experiencing sexual violence other than rape in their lifetime.¹³

Figure 2: Gay Men, Lesbians More Open With Family and Friends

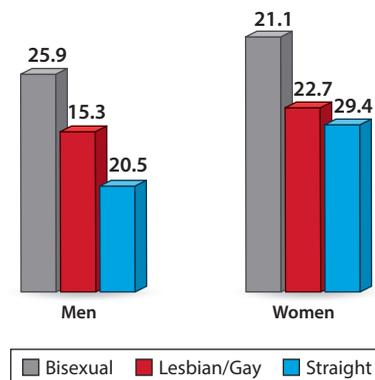
% Saying That . . . Of The Important People In Their Life Know They Are LGBT



Source: PewResearch, "A Survey of LGBT Americans," July 13, 2013, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/06/13/a-survey-of-lgbt-americans/>.

Figure 3: Percent of Poor Heterosexual, Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Men and Women

% of people at or below 100% of the Federal Poverty Level
(From 2006-2010 National Survey Of Family Growth)

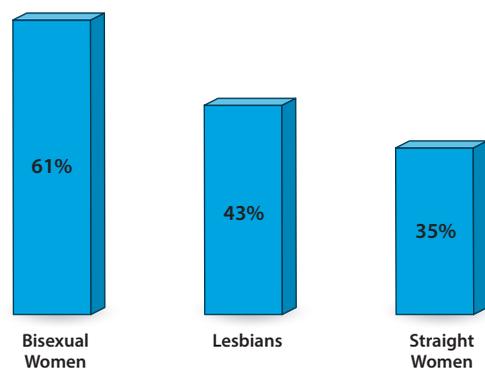


Source: M.V. Lee Badgett, Laura E. Durso, & Alyssa Schneebaum, "New Patterns of Poverty in the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community," *The Williams Institute*, June 2013, <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/LGB-Poverty-Update-Jun-2013.pdf>.

Many bisexual victims of violence are young: a majority of bisexual victims of rape report it occurred between the ages of 11 and 24.¹⁴

Bisexual survivors of violence are 2.3 times more likely to have an act of violence against them classified as a "hate crime" by the police. When bisexual survivors interact with police, however, they are three times more likely to experience police violence than people who are not bisexual.¹⁵

Figure 4: Women Experiencing Intimate Partner Violence
% Of Women Who Say They Have Experienced Rape, Physical Violence, And/Or Stalking By An Intimate Partner



Source: M.L. Walters, J. Chen, and M. J. Breiding, "The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010 Findings on Victimization by Sexual Orientation," National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013.

Health

Bisexual people have high rates of poor physical and mental health. Physical disparities include higher rates of hypertension, poor or fair physical health, smoking, and risky drinking than heterosexuals, lesbians, or gay men.¹⁶ In a study of women ages 50-79, bisexual women had a 17.6% lifetime prevalence of any cancer, compared to 11.9% for straight women and 14.2% for lesbian women.¹⁷

One study comparing men's sexual orientation to their health outcome found bisexual men reported higher rates of daily smoking (27.2% of bisexual men compared to 26.2% gay men and 21.1% of straight men) and risky drinking (16.3% of bisexual men compared to 11.1% of gay men and 13.3% of straight men) than their peers.¹⁸ Bisexual youth are also at higher risk for substance abuse than their peers.¹⁹

Studies in Australia and Canada have shown deep disparities in mental health between bisexuals and their peers.²⁰ According to the American Journal of Public Health, among women, bisexual women report the highest prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (of PTSD) (26.6% versus 6.6% of straight women), with high prevalence of PTSD setting the stage for poorer health throughout adulthood.²¹

Bisexuals have higher suicidality rates: one study found bisexuals were four times more likely and lesbian and gay adults two times more likely to report attempted suicide

Faith's Story: Choosing Between Being Myself and Being Safe



Nearly every single time I've come out as a bisexual woman in the workplace, I've experienced severe sexual harassment. Coworkers have made inappropriate jokes, made sexual advances, and shown me sexually graphic photos. I've had several jobs where I felt unsafe.

Early in my career, I brought such concerns to my employers' human resources department, but received little, if any, support. One told me that I brought harassment upon myself simply because I was out. Another said that my experience didn't qualify as sexual harassment because I am bisexual. I'm a good worker, an excellent worker, but at times when I've asked for fair treatment, I've been denied. It's unfair to have to choose between being visible and being safe at work. I shouldn't have to choose between being employed and being open about who I am.

—Faith Cheltenham

than straight adults.²² Another study found that bisexual men were 6.3 times more likely to seriously consider suicide in their lifetime and gay men 4.1 times more likely than straight men.²³ A recent study in the Journal of Adolescent Health found that bisexual teens who reported suicidal thoughts did not report a decrease in these thoughts as they aged into adulthood, unlike their straight peers.²⁴

Despite these disparities, and perhaps compounding them, bisexual people are less likely than gay men or lesbians to be out to their health care providers.²⁵ The body of research on bisexual health is growing, but more data is always helpful when trying to show the health disparities facing bisexuals.²⁶

Dr. Herukhuti's Story: A Day at the Free Clinic



I spent a day at a local free clinic to get tested for HIV. I walk off the elevator and discover a group of people scattered in seats in an area to my right. I assume that I'm expected to join them. There's also a specificity to our humanity that's equally present: we don't have health insurance, and many of us are poor or the working poor. Our access to the nice, clean offices of a private doctor is limited.

There are various kinds of bodies that inhabit the seats. Most are Black or Latino, though there are a few that are not. I sit among my fellow public health citizens.

Finally, they call me into the doctor. He takes a brief and inadequate sexual history. He asks me about my sexual history with women. I wait for his questions about my sexual history with men. They never come. He moves on to take the samples he needs for the tests. He gives me a date to return and I'm out. But wait, where are the questions about my sexual history with men?

I walked into this clinic to get tested for sexually transmitted diseases and unintentionally walked into a test of the public health system's capacity to adequately respond to the sexual realities of the public they serve.

—Written by Dr. Herukhuti and excerpted from
Recognize: The Voices of Bisexual Men

RECOMMENDATIONS

Cultural Competence

In order to fully support the whole lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community, it is vital that community organizations that support LGBT people are providing culturally competent care to their bisexual clientele. Bi-specific trainings for service providers can help providers feel comfortable working with bisexual clients and vice versa. For example, researchers recommend that "therapists must understand that the experiences of clients who identify as bisexual can be much different from the experiences of their lesbian and gay clients."²⁷

Visibility

Organizations that do serve the bisexual community should publicize the fact that they have bi-specific services and should consider ways their organizations can be visibly and openly affirming of bisexual identities. Health providers can create a welcoming environment by openly displaying pamphlets and other materials that are bi-specific. Organizations that serve the LGBT community as a whole, but who lack bi-specific programming should consider providing tailored services to the bisexual population.

Data Collection

There is conclusive data showing that bisexuals experience poverty, workplace discrimination, negative health outcomes, and violence at higher rates than lesbian, gay, and heterosexual Americans. But further data can only help build the case for culturally competent care for bisexual people. When researching LGBT people, it is important to distinguish bisexual people from their gay, lesbian, and straight peers. This can be achieved by allowing participants in polls and research to self-identify their sexual orientation, rather than categorizing individuals based on their current relationship status or sexual activity. And while using "different-sex" and "same-sex" is more precise than "gay and lesbian couples," it may still fail to explicitly account for bisexual people. It is important to be precise about which population the data is referring to and which populations are excluded from the discussion.

It is also important to distinguish between sexual orientation and gender identity. Surveys that ask if a person identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender risk conflating a person's gender identity with their sexual orientation. This confusion can lead to artificially inflated or lowered indicators, when parsing the community more precisely would reveal the higher

risks facing bisexual and transgender people. Conflating gender identity and sexual orientation also fails to count transgender people who identify as bisexual, lesbian, gay or straight.

Funding for the development of more bisexual-focused research and support for researchers should be prioritized. Bi-specific studies can help showcase the importance of including bisexual people in bisexual-specific and general LGBT programming.

CONCLUSION

While they comprise more than half of the LGB community, bisexual people experience significant health, safety, and economic disparities. The failure to account for bisexual lives and experiences compounds lack of social support and keeps bisexual people in the closet. Cultural competence, deliberate and thoughtful visibility, and data collection will support the bisexual community and combat stigma and discrimination against bisexual people.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ This number comes from analysis by Gary Gates, a demographer at *The Williams Institute*. Population estimates of the LGBT community are difficult to obtain and vary based on methodology and source. A 2011 analysis by *The Williams Institute* of several population-based surveys estimated that 3.5% of the U.S. population identified as LGB (1.8% as bisexual) and 0.3% as transgender. A 2012 Gallup survey of more than 120,000 adults found that 3.5% of adults identify as LGBT. In 2013, the National Adult Tobacco Survey, administered by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, found that 3.5% of adults identified as LGB, with 1.6% identifying as bisexual. More recently, the National Health Interview Survey found that 1.6% of respondents reported they consider themselves lesbian or gay, and 0.7% bisexual. Concerns about confidentiality and experiences of discrimination and stigma likely mean that some people who identify as LGBT are less likely to do so on a survey—particularly when a survey is conducted in person or via the phone, such as the National Health Interview Survey. See Gary J. Gates, “How many people are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender?” *The Williams Institute*, April 2011, accessed July 30, 2014, <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Gates-How-Many-People-LGBT-Apr-2011.pdf>. Hereafter Gates, “How many people.” (This study also found that: “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.”); Gary J. Gates and Frank Newport, “LGBT Percentage Highest in D.C., Lowest in North Dakota,” Gallup Politics, February 15, 2013, accessed August 4, 2014, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/160517/lgbt-percentage-highest-lowest-north-dakota.aspx>; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “National Adult Tobacco Survey,” 2013, accessed August 4, 2014, http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/surveys/nats/; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “National Health Interview Survey,” 2014, accessed August 4, 2014, <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhis.htm>.
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- ³ Abbie E. Goldberg, Nanette K. Gartrell, and Gary Gates, “Research Report on LGB-Parent Families,” *The Williams Institute*, July 2014, accessed August 7, 2014, <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/lgb-parent-families-july-2014.pdf>. (“An estimated 59% of bisexual women and 32% of bisexual men report having had children, compared to 31% of lesbians and 16% of gay men. These figures, then, imply that nearly two-thirds of LGB parents (64%) are bisexual.”)
- ⁴ Gary J. Gates, “Sexual Minorities in the 2008 General Social Survey: Coming Out and Demographic Characteristics,” *The Williams Institute*, October 2010, accessed July 30, 2014, <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Gates-Sexual-Minorities-2008-GSS-Oct-2010.pdf>.
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- ¹² M.L. Walters, “NISVS.”
- ¹³ M.L. Walters, “NISVS.”
- ¹⁴ M.L. Walters, “NISVS: Ages for first reported completed rape. Completed as compared to attempted rape.”
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