



National Coalition *for* LGBT Health

LGBT Inclusion in Federal Health Surveys

Federally supported health surveys serve as the nation's primary method for gathering data about its population, and they also determine how disparities and differences are recognized and addressed in subpopulations. Currently, federally supported surveys such as the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS), the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), and the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), collect data on a range of demographic information, including age, sex, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. These demographics are used in conjunction with behavioral data to determine funding and program priorities for federal, state, and local government. Unfortunately, these surveys routinely ignore the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. Only a handful of federally supported health surveys have ever asked about sexual orientation, and no nationwide surveys currently ask about gender identity and sexual orientation. Moreover, no public nationwide survey allows for the identification of people at the intersections of disparity groups: for example, LGBT people of color cannot identify both their race and ethnicity and their sexual orientation and gender identity on any nationwide survey. The lack of these measures leaves the government, service providers, and researchers in the field of LGBT health with a serious lack of tools to identify, track, and address health disparities affecting the LGBT community.

Below is a list of common questions researchers and policymakers ask when considering adding a LGBT identity question to a survey instrument.

Will people stop taking the survey if you ask them if they are LGBT?

Research has shown us that this concern is unfounded. Large-scale surveys asking LGB or LGBT questions show no break off as a result of the question(s). Two clear examples are the Epidemiological Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions and the Nurses Health Study II, both of which had zero break offs with an LGB question. This is with a combined sample size of 120,000 surveys.^{1 2}

Even refusals to answer are minimal. In fact, a respondent is approximately four times more likely to refuse to answer the income question. In one study, when respondents refused to answer questions about LGB identity, these respondents were much more likely to refuse to answer any other personal questions, including race, income, and age. This suggests that the refusal has less to do with the topic and more to do with a general unwillingness to answer any personal questions.³

Are there tested questions for LGBT identity?

In 2005, researchers at Brown University cognitively tested an LGBT question for inclusion on nationwide health surveys.⁴ Cognitive testing is the gold standard for developing a survey question because it can uncover many problems with interpretation that go undetected in less rigorous testing methods. In 2007, the question underwent additional cognitive testing, using a

wider population sample, and it was again successful.⁵ The tested and recommended question is as follows:

Do you consider yourself to be one or more of the following (check all that apply):

- Straight
- Gay or lesbian
- Bisexual
- Transgender

[Add option for respondent to name another category if feasible for the survey]

Are LGBT identity questions included in any federal health surveys?

Several federal surveys presently collect some form of LGB data. These surveys include the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES); National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG); National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions; National Household Survey on Drug Abuse; and the National Comorbidity Study-R. However, no federal surveys currently include a question on gender identity. Moreover, it is important to note that the largest and most widely referenced of federal health benchmark surveys, the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS), does not currently include a question or questions asking about sexual orientation and gender identity.⁶ This is a serious omission that has significant impact on LGBT health research, as NHIS is the federal government's most comprehensive and influential survey.

Are LGBT identity questions included in any state health surveys?

Questions on sexual orientation, sexual behavior, sexual attraction, and gender identity are becoming increasingly common on the state level. Currently, at least eight Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System questionnaires (BRFSS) and at least thirteen Youth Risk Factor Surveillance System questionnaires (YRBSS) include questions on sexual orientation, behavior, and attraction, and several BRFSS and YRBSS questionnaires have included or currently include a question about gender identity.⁷

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¹ Landers S, Conron K & R Sell. (2007). "Developing Data for Advocacy." National LGBTI Health Summit, Philadelphia, PA.

² Case P et al. (2006). "Disclosure of sexual orientation and behavior in the Nurses' Health Study II: results from a pilot study." *J Homosex* 51(1):13-31.

³ Carlini BH et al. (2006). "What does this have to do with quitting smoking? Push & Pull of Asking Sensitive Questions to Callers Seeking Tobacco Treatment Through Quitlines." NCTOH, Washington, DC.

⁴ Clark MA, Armstrong G. & L Bonacore. (2005). "Measuring Sexual Orientation and Gender Expression Among Middle-Aged and Older Women in a Cancer Screening Study." *J Cancer Ed* 20(2):108-112.

⁵ Scout & SE Senseman. (2008). "Cognitive Testing of an LGBT Surveillance Question." Available from www.lgbttobacco.org.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Almazan, E et al. (2009). *Best Practices for Asking Questions about Sexual Orientation on Surveys* Los Angeles, CA: The Williams Institute. Available from www.law.ucla.edu/williamsinstitute/publications/Publications-ImproveDataCollection.html