

# LGBT Demographics: Comparisons among population-based surveys

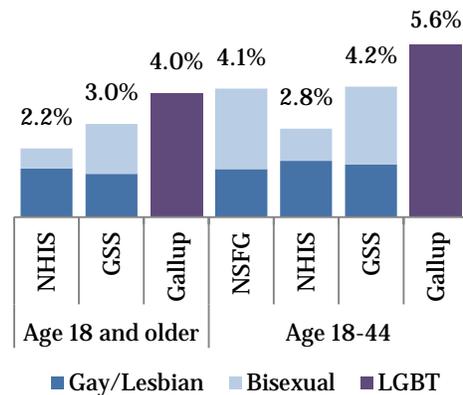
by Gary J. Gates

## Executive Summary

This report uses four large, national, population-based surveys to consider the ways in which LGBT populations are demographically similar to or distinct from their non-LGBT counterparts in the United States.

The surveys analyzed include:

- National Survey of Family Growth, 2006-2010 (NSFG)
- General Social Survey, 2008, 2010, 2012 (GSS)
- National Health Interview Survey, 2013 (NHIS)
- Gallup Daily Tracking Survey, 2014.



Comparisons of demographic characteristics are made among the surveys and, when possible, among sexual orientation identities to consider differences between those who identify as lesbian or gay and those who identify as bisexual. The term “LGB/T” is used to refer to respondents among the surveys since only one of the surveys explicitly included transgender within the LGBT identification question.

Despite variations across the surveys related to the time period in which data were collected, data collection modes, and the wordings of LGB/T identity questions, findings suggest many consistencies across data sources in demographic characteristics of LGB/T identified adults in comparison to their non-LGB/T counterparts. These consistencies persist even among surveys where estimates of the prevalence of LGB/T identified adults vary.

The proportion of adults who identified as LGB/T varied across the surveys from 2.2% in the NHIS to 4.0% in the Gallup data. These estimates imply that between 5.2 and 9.5 million adults in the United States identify as LGB/T.

But the actual motivation for measuring LGB/T identity on these surveys is less about a prevalence estimate and more about the ability to compare and contrast characteristics of LGB/T individuals with their non-LGB/T counterparts. The relative consistency of the characteristics of LGB/T samples across these surveys suggests that, while surveys may vary in the proportion of adults who are willing to identify as LGB/T in the survey, those who choose to identify are similar across surveys.

This increases confidence that differences or similarities observed between LGB/T identified and non-LGB/T identified adults are actually present in the population and not simply the result of a particular survey methodology or sample. Examples of consistent findings include:

- LGB/T identity is more common among younger populations.
- LGB/T populations generally share the racial and ethnic characteristics of non-LGB/T individuals.
- Adults are more likely to identify as LGB/T in the Northeast and West than in the South and Midwest.

The finding of higher levels of LGB/T identity among younger populations. This may be, at least in part, a result of increased levels of social acceptance experienced throughout the lives of younger LGB/T individuals when compared to their older counterparts. If this were true, then demographic distinctions between LGB/T and non-LGB/T populations, like differences observed in educational attainment, may become less apparent over time as a wider demographic cross-section of the population is willing to identify as LGB/T.

## Introduction

Substantial amounts of the demographic research focusing on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) populations has relied on analyses of US Census Bureau data that allows for identification of cohabiting same-sex couples (Black et al. 2000; Gates and Ost 2004; Gates and Cooke 2010; Baumle 2013; Kastanis and Wilson 2013). This focus on same-sex couples is, in part, a result of limited national data resources that include direct measurement of sexual orientation and gender identity.

In the last decade, several large, national, population-based surveys have included questions that measure sexual orientation. Unfortunately, these surveys do not include the direct measurement of gender identity. One data source does include those who identify as LGBT, but the four groups cannot be disaggregated. The availability of multiple surveys allows for the development of a more thorough and complete picture of the ways in which LGBT populations are demographically similar to or distinct from their non-LGBT counterparts in the United States.

Note that, in this report, “LGB/T” is used when referring to respondents among all of the surveys as an indication that only one of the surveys explicitly includes transgender within the LGBT identification question. References to LGB (when only sexual orientation identity was collected) or LGBT (when LGBT identity was collected) are used, as appropriate, when referring to respondents from individual surveys.

The analyses focus on four national population-based surveys:

- National Survey of Family Growth (2006-2010)
- General Social Survey (2008, 2010, 2012)
- National Health Interview Survey (2013)
- Gallup Daily Tracking Survey (2014).

Consideration is given to demographic characteristics including gender, age, race/ethnicity, educational attainment and geographic distribution. Comparisons are made among the surveys and among sexual orientation identities to consider differences between those who identify as lesbian or gay and those who identify as bisexual.

## Data and methodology

Table 1 presents details of the four data sources. The surveys vary on many dimensions including funding

source (public and private), data collection mode, sexual orientation identity question wording, and sample sizes. The National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) and the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) are publically-funded surveys conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), while the General Social Survey (GSS) and the Gallup Daily Tracking Survey are privately funded. The GSS, conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago, does receive support from the National Science Foundation. Modes include telephone and in-person interviews. In the NSFG, respondents are asked the sexual orientation identity question via computer audio and enter their answers directly into a computer. Three of the four samples are representative of adults aged 18 and older while the NSFG sample is restricted to those aged 18-44.

These analyses do not attempt to specifically assess how the variations shown in Table 1 may affect the willingness of respondents to identify as LGB/T and, therefore, how differences across surveys may affect the observed demographic and economic characteristics of those who identify. However, the variations could play a role in explaining differences observed across surveys.

Analyses of the NHIS, NSFG, and Gallup data use microdata with records from individual respondents. GSS analyses use the University of California-Berkeley’s Survey Data Analysis web application (which also analyzes microdata). Estimates from all surveys use weighting procedures provided by each survey that allow for interpretation of findings to be considered representative of adult populations in the US. When comparisons are shown between LGB/T respondents and their non-LGB/T counterparts, tests of statistically significant differences are made assuming the 95% confidence level. In charts and figures that compare estimates between LGB/T and non-LGB/T adults, differences that are statistically significant are shown in **boldface** while differences that are not statistically different are shown in *italics*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Non-LGB respondents in the NHIS include those who identified as straight, something else, do not understand, or did not respond to the sexual identity question. Non-LGB respondents in the NSFG include only those who identified as heterosexual/straight. Non-LGB respondents in the GSS include those who identified as heterosexual/straight along with those who did not respond to the sexual orientation identity question. Non-LGBT respondents in the Gallup data include those who answered no to the sexual orientation/gender identity question along with those who did not respond to that question.

**Table 1. Survey characteristics.**

Survey	Survey sponsor	Data collection mode	Sample characteristics	Sexual orientation identity question	Total sample size	LGB/T sample size
<a href="#">National Survey of Family Growth (2006-2010)</a>	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics	Audio Computer-Assisted Survey Instrument. Respondents enter their response to the sexual orientation identity question into a computer provided to them by an interviewer who visits their home. The question is asked via computer audio.	Representative sample of adults aged 18-44.	Do you think of yourself as... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Heterosexual or straight</li> <li>• Homosexual, gay, or lesbian</li> <li>• Bisexual</li> <li>• Something else</li> </ul>	19,622	Lesbian/gay: 397 Bisexual: 628 Heterosexual: 18,597
<a href="#">General Social Survey (2008, 2010, 2012)</a>	NORC, University of Chicago	Computer-Assisted Personal Interview. Respondents provide their response to the sexual orientation identity question to an in-home interviewer who then enters the response into a computer.	Representative sample of adults aged 18 and older	Which of the following best describes you? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gay, lesbian, or homosexual</li> <li>• Bisexual</li> <li>• Heterosexual or straight</li> </ul>	6,041	Lesbian/gay: 87 Bisexual: 101 Heterosexual: 5,085
<a href="#">National Health Interview Survey (2013)</a>	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics	Computer-Assisted Personal Interview. Respondents provide their response to the sexual orientation identity question to an in-home interviewer who then enters the response into a computer.	Representative sample of adults aged 18 and older	Which of the following best represents how you think of yourself? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lesbian or gay</li> <li>• Straight, that is, not gay</li> <li>• Bisexual</li> <li>• Something else</li> <li>• I don't know the answer</li> </ul>	34,577	Lesbian/gay: 571 Bisexual: 233 Heterosexual: 32,546
<a href="#">Gallup Daily Tracking Survey (January-June 2014)</a>	Gallup	Telephone interview. Respondents provide their answer to the LGBT identity question to a person during a phone interview.	Representative sample of adults aged 18 and older	Do you, personally, identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> </ul>	88,687	LGBT (Yes): 2,964 non-LGBT (No): 81,134

## LGB/T prevalence

In a review of population-based surveys conducted between 2005 and 2009 in the US, Gates (2011) found that estimates of the prevalence of LGB/T individuals among adults ranged from 1.7% to 5.6% with an average of approximately 3.5% identifying as LGB and, in an assessment of two state-level surveys, approximately 0.3% of adults identifying as transgender. In most of the surveys considered in those analyses, the proportion of adults who identified as bisexual is similar to the proportion that identified as lesbian or gay, and bisexuals tended to be majority female while lesbians and gay men were majority male.

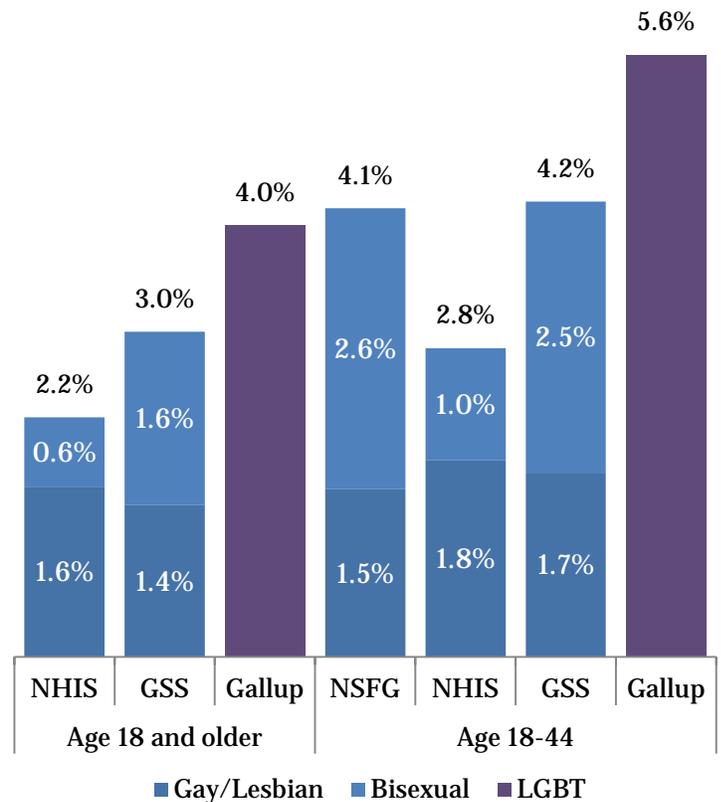
Among all adults, the proportion who identified as LGB/T varies from 2.2% in the NHIS to 4.0% in the Gallup data (see Figure 1). These estimates imply that between 5.2 and 9.5 million adults in the United States identify as LGB/T.

In all surveys, the proportion of those aged 18-44 who identified as LGB/T was higher than the proportion who did so among all adults. Estimates of LGB/T prevalence in this age group were similar in the GSS (4.2%) and NSFG (4.1%). The NHIS estimate was lowest at 2.8% and the Gallup estimate was highest at 5.6%.

The proportions of adults who identify as either lesbian or gay were quite consistent across the surveys. Among adults, the NHIS and GSS find 1.6% and 1.4%, respectively, identified as such. For adults aged 18-44, the variation among the three surveys (NSFG, NHIS, and GSS) ranged from 1.5% to 1.8%.

The surveys showed much more variation in the estimated proportion of adults who identified as bisexual. That estimate was lowest in the NHIS at 0.6% among all adults compared to 1.6% in the GSS. Among those aged 18-44, the bisexual proportion was 1.0% in the NHIS compared to 2.6% in the GSS. The NHIS was the only survey where bisexuals did not constitute a majority of those who identified as LGB.

**Figure 1. Proportion of adults who identify as LGB/T, by survey.**

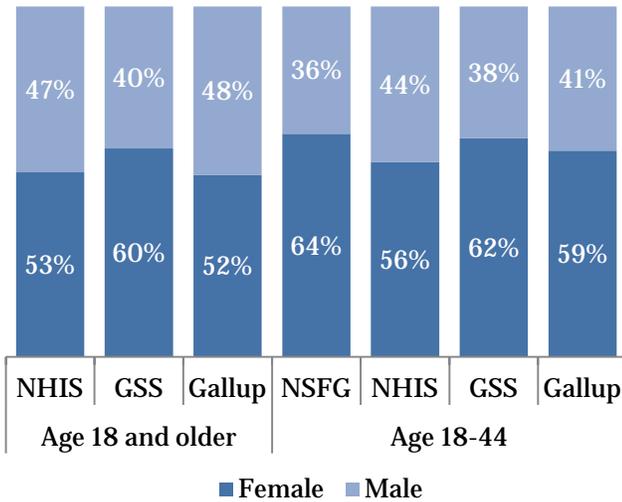


## Gender

None of the four surveys explicitly measured gender identity, so respondents were classified in all as either female or male. In all surveys, the majority of LGB/T respondents were female, particularly among those aged 18-44 (see Figure 2). In analyses not shown in Figure 2, non-LGB/T respondents were split fairly evenly between male and female in all of the surveys.

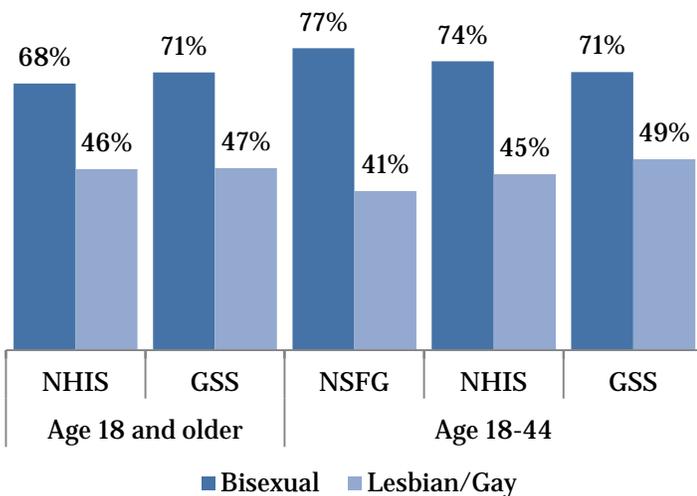
In all surveys, women comprised a higher portion of LGB/T individuals aged 18-44 than among all LGB/T adults. Among all adults, between 52% and 60% of LGB/T respondents were female. In the younger age group, the estimates of the proportion of LGB/T individuals who were female ranged from 56% to 64%.

**Figure 2. Gender composition among LGB/T adults, by survey.**



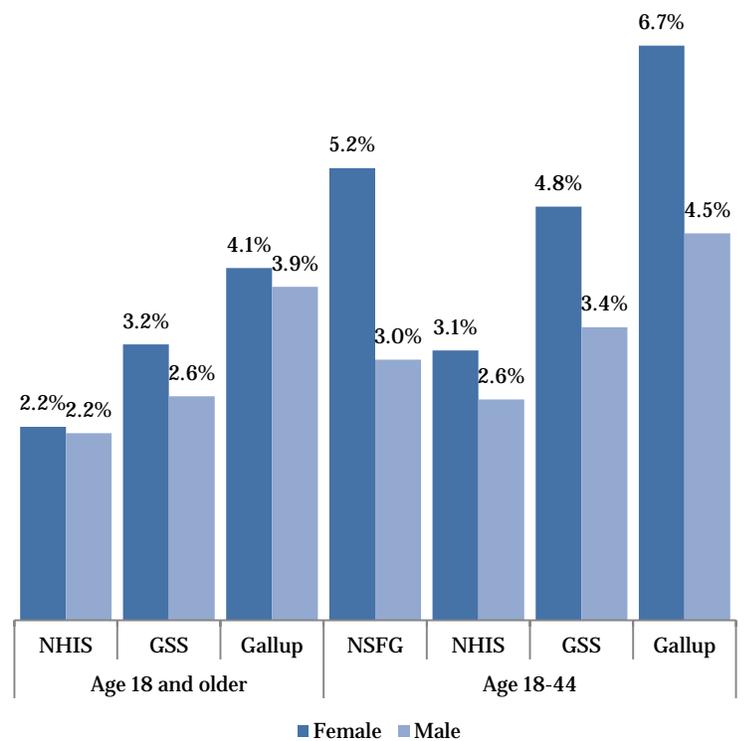
The gender composition was quite different between those who identified as bisexual and those who identified as either lesbian or gay in all surveys (see Figure 3). Women represented a substantial majority (from 68% to 77%) of bisexuals while they were a minority (from 41% to 49%) among those who identified as lesbian or gay. Notably, while the overall prevalence of LGB/T identity and lesbian/gay versus bisexual identity varied considerably among the surveys, the gender composition of the samples, regardless of their prevalence, was more consistent.

**Figure 3. Proportion of adults who are female, by sexual orientation identity and survey.**



The percentage of adults who identified as LGB/T was higher among women than among men, particularly among those aged 18-44, and the estimates of prevalence varied considerably across surveys (see Figure 4). For example, among all adults in the Gallup data, 4.1% of women and 3.9% of men identified as LGBT. But among those aged 18-44, the difference was 6.7% versus 4.5%, respectively. All of the surveys suggested a larger gender gap in LGB/T identification among younger adults.

**Figure 4. Proportion of adults who identify as LGB/T, by gender and survey.**



### Age

LGB/T identified adults were, on average, younger than their non-LGB/T counterparts in all of the surveys (see Table 2). Further, adults who identified as bisexual were, on average, younger than their lesbian and gay counterparts. Among all adults, non-LGB adults had an average age of 47.0 and 45.7 in the NHIS and GSS, respectively. For lesbians and gay men, the average age was 41.5 in the NHIS and 40.0 in the GSS. Among bisexuals, it was 34.3 in the NHIS and 35.2 in the GSS.

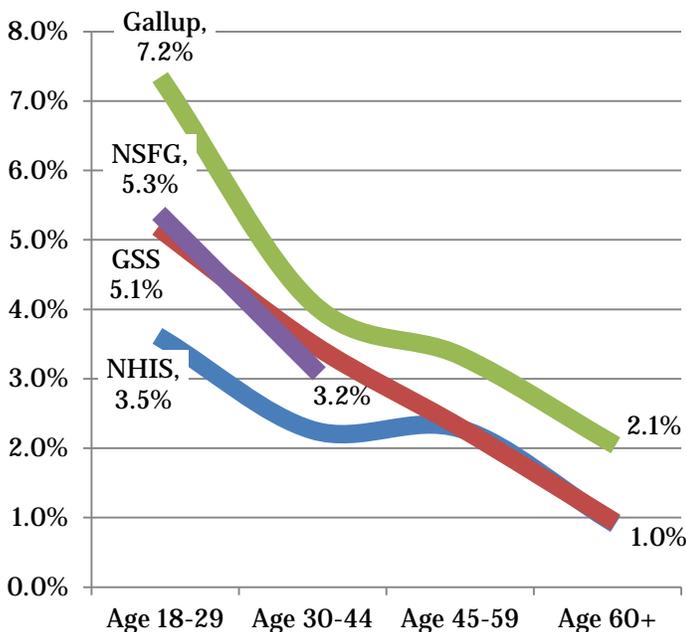
**Table 2. Average age, by sexual orientation identity and survey.**

	Age 18 and older		
	NHIS	GSS	Gallup
LGB/T	<b>39.4</b>	<b>37.5</b>	<b>39.2</b>
non-LGB/T	47.0	45.7	47.5
Lesbian/Gay	<b>41.5</b>	<b>40.0</b>	n/a
Bisexual	<b>34.3</b>	<b>35.2</b>	n/a

	Age 18-44			
	NSFG	NHIS	GSS	Gallup
LGB/T	<b>28.7</b>	<b>28.8</b>	30.1	<b>28.0</b>
non-LGB/T	31.0	30.9	31.5	30.6
Lesbian/Gay	31.0	<b>29.6</b>	30.3	n/a
Bisexual	<b>27.4</b>	<b>27.3</b>	29.2	n/a

Identification as LGB/T declined with age in all of the surveys (see Figure 5). For example, in the Gallup data, 7.2% of adults under age 30 identified as LGBT compared to just 2.1% of those aged 60 and older. Similar to the analyses regarding gender, the analyses regarding age suggest that while the proportion of LGB/T individuals among these surveys varied, the demographic characteristics of the samples, as evidenced by similar average ages across surveys, were relatively consistent.

**Figure 5. Proportion of adults who identify as LGB/T, by age group and survey.**



## Race/ethnicity

In all of the surveys analyzed except Gallup, there were no significant differences in the racial or ethnic characteristics of LGB and non-LGB adults. Statistically significant differences in racial and ethnic identification by LGBT identity were found in the Gallup data, where LGBT adults were less likely to be White and more likely to be African-American, Hispanic, and some other racial or ethnic identification when compared to their non-LGBT counterparts.

Approximately two-thirds of LGB adults identified as White and non-Hispanic in the NHIS and GSS compared to 60% of LGBT respondents in the Gallup data (see Table 3). Across those three surveys, African-Americans comprised between 11% and 16% of LGB/T adults and Hispanics comprised between 13% and 20%.

**Table 3. Proportion in racial and ethnic identities among LGB/T adults, by survey.**

	Age 18 and older		
	NHIS	GSS	Gallup
White, non-Hispanic	69%	66%	60%
African-American, non-Hispanic	11%	14%	16%
Hispanic	13%	16%	20%
Asian, non-Hispanic	4%		2%
Am. Indian/AK native, non-Hispanic	1%	NA	NA
Multi/Other, non-Hispanic	2%	4%	2%

	Age 18-44			
	NSFG	NHIS	GSS	Gallup
White, non-Hispanic	65%	62%	59%	54%
African-American, non-Hispanic	12%	15%	17%	18%
Hispanic	13%	14%	19%	23%
Asian, non-Hispanic		6%		3%
Am. Indian/AK native, non-Hispanic	NA	1%	NA	NA
Multi/Other, non-Hispanic	9%	3%	6%	2%

Across all of the surveys, LGB/T individuals aged 18-44 had higher proportions of racial and ethnic minorities when compared to the full adult LGB/T population. While not shown in Table 3, this pattern was also true among non-LGB/T individuals.

In the NHIS and NSFG, the proportion of adults who identified as LGB/T was not generally higher among racial and ethnic minorities when compared to White, non-Hispanic adults (see Table 4). In the GSS and Gallup, racial and ethnic minorities were somewhat more likely to identify as LGB/T than their White, non-Hispanic counterparts.

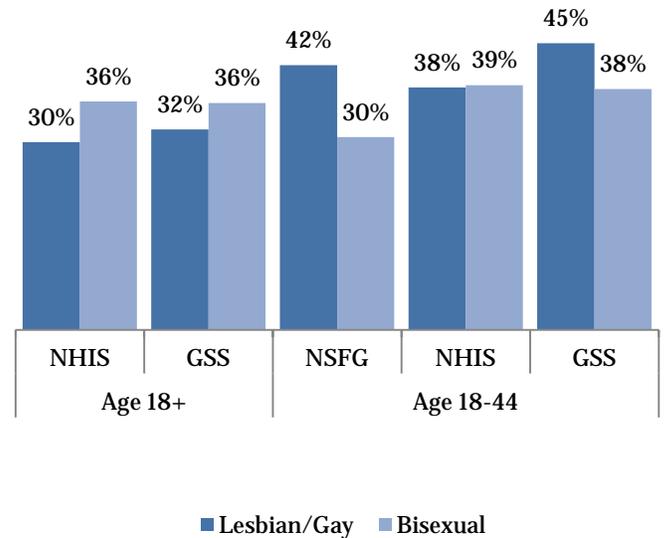
**Table 4. Proportion of adults who identify as LGB/T, by race/ethnicity and survey.**

	Age 18 and older		
	NHIS	GSS	Gallup
White, non-Hispanic	2.3%	2.9%	3.6%
African-American, non-Hispanic	2.2%	3.1%	5.6%
Hispanic	1.9%	3.6%	5.7%
Asian, non-Hispanic	1.6%		4.4%
Am. Indian/AK native, non-Hispanic	2.4%		
Multi/Other, non-Hispanic	3.6%	2.4%	6.5%

	Age 18-44			
	NSFG	NHIS	GSS	Gallup
White, non-Hispanic	4.4%	3.0%	4.1%	5.3%
African-American, non-Hispanic	4.1%	3.2%	4.6%	7.0%
Hispanic	3.0%	2.0%	4.3%	6.3%
Asian, non-Hispanic		2.5%		4.8%
Am. Indian/AK native, non-Hispanic		3.1%		
Multi/Other, non-Hispanic	4.4%	4.7%	3.6%	8.4%

Among all adults, estimates of the proportion of bisexuals who identified as other than White, non-Hispanic were generally higher than comparable estimates among lesbians and gay men, though differences were generally not statistically significant (see Figure 6). Among adults aged 18-44, lesbians and gay men were more likely than bisexuals to identify as other than White, non-Hispanic.

**Figure 6. Proportion of adults who identify as other than White, non-Hispanic, by survey.**

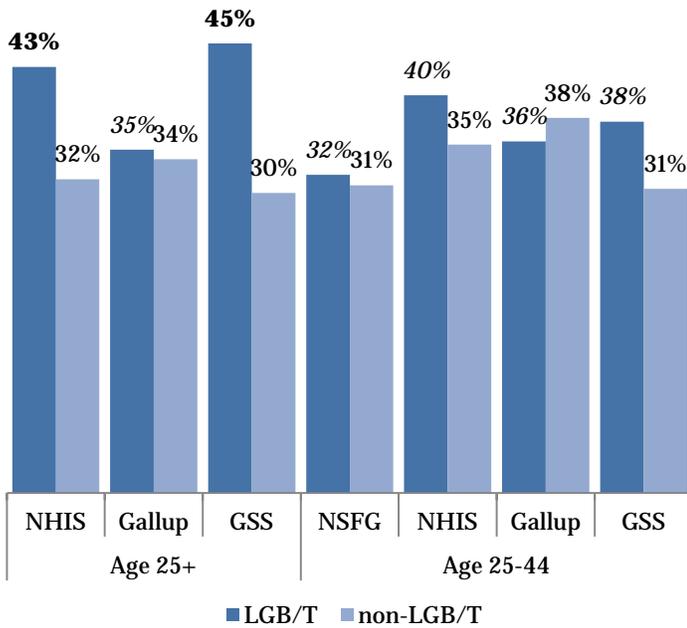


## Educational attainment

Findings regarding educational attainment did not show a completely consistent pattern across surveys with regard to the association between LGB/T identity and educational attainment. In the analyses of educational attainment, samples were restricted to adults aged 25 and older in order to more accurately assess if individuals had attained at least a college degree.

Among all adults aged 25 and older, the NHIS and GSS data both showed that LGB individuals were more likely to have a college or graduate degree when compared to their non-LGB counterparts (see Figure 7). In both surveys, more than 4 in 10 LGB individuals aged 25 and older had a college or graduate degree compared to only about 3 in 10 of non-LGB individuals. In the Gallup data, LGBT identity was not associated with differences in educational attainment. Among adults aged 25-44, none of the surveys showed statistically significant differences in educational attainment associated with LGB/T identity.

**Figure 7. Proportion with a college degree among adults aged 25 and older, by sexual orientation identity and survey.**



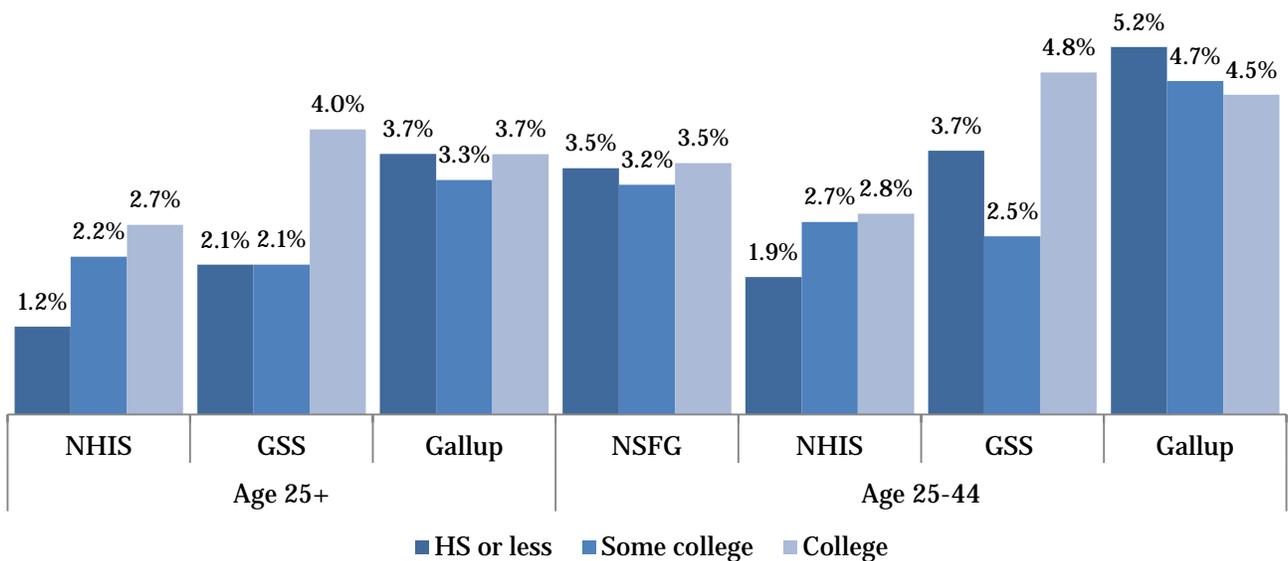
Across all of the surveys, there were mixed findings regarding the degree to which higher education was associated with a greater likelihood of identifying as LGB/T (see Figure 8). The NHIS was the only one of the four surveys to show a consistent pattern whereby LGB identity increased with education. This pattern was observed both in analyses of all adults aged 25 and older and among adults aged 25-44.

In the GSS data, college-educated individuals were more likely than others to identify as LGB but differences between those with high school or less education and some college were not observed among all adults aged 25 and older. Among those aged 25-44, those with some college were less likely to identify as LGB compared to those with a high school diploma or less.

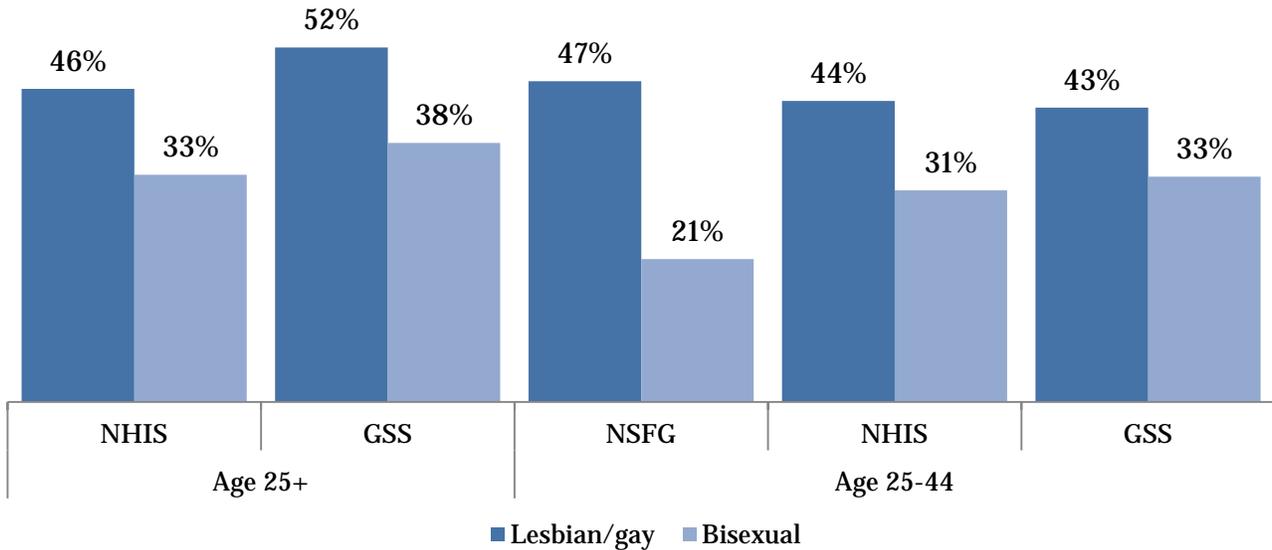
The Gallup and NSFG data did not show a clear relationship between LGB/T identification and educational attainment.

In all surveys, those who identified as lesbian or gay reported higher levels of education than those who identified as bisexual (see Figure 9). For example, among adults aged 25 and older in the NHIS data, 46% of lesbian and gay identified individuals had a college degree compared to just 33% of their bisexual counterparts.

**Figure 8. Proportion who identify as LGB/T, by educational attainment and survey.**



**Figure 9. Proportion of adults with a college degree, by sexual orientation identity and survey.**

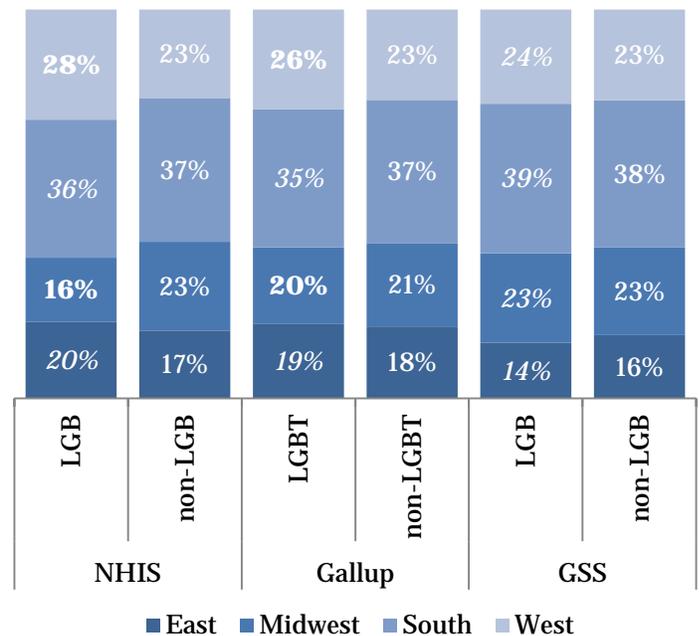


## Region

In the NHIS and Gallup data, the proportion of LGB/T adults who lived in the Midwest was significantly lower than the proportion of non-LGB/T adults who lived in that region (see Figure 10).<sup>2</sup> LGB/T adults were also more likely to live in the West when compared to their non-LGB/T counterparts in the two surveys. The GSS data did not show differences in the distribution of LGB and non-LGB adults across regions.

The NHIS and Gallup data were also consistent in showing that the percentage of adults who identified as LGB/T was highest in the West, followed by the East, South, and Midwest (see Figure 11). In both surveys, the differences in LGB/T identification were significantly higher in the West when compared to the Midwest and South (in the NHIS, the difference between the East and Midwest was also statistically significant). In the GSS, the West had the highest estimate of LGB identity, but the proportions of adults who identified as LGB in that survey were not statistically different across regions.

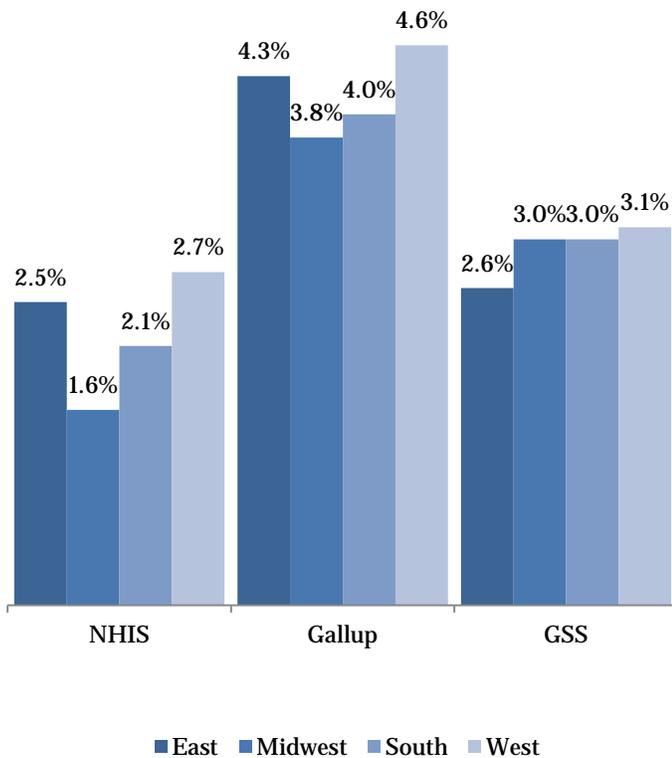
**Figure 10. Proportion of adults who live in regions, by LGB/T identity and survey.**



<sup>2</sup> The NSFG data used for these analyses did not include information about the geographic location of respondents.

The distribution of lesbian- and gay-identified individuals across regions did not differ significantly with that of bisexual-identified individuals in the NHIS and GSS data.

**Figure 11. Proportion of adults who identify as LGB/T, by region and survey.**



## Discussion

Despite variations across four population-based surveys related to the time period in which data were collected, data collection modes, and the wordings of LGB/T identity questions, the findings from these analyses suggest many consistencies across data sources in the demographic characteristics of LGB/T identified adults in comparison to their non-LGB/T counterparts. These consistencies persist even among surveys where estimates of the prevalence of LGB/T identified adults vary.

For example, while the NHIS survey found that a relatively low 0.6% of adults identified as bisexual, the sample of bisexual individuals in the NHIS shared many characteristics with bisexual samples from the GSS and the NSFG. Relative to their lesbian and gay counterparts in all of these surveys,

bisexuals were more likely to be female, were younger, and had lower levels of education.

Media reports of these survey findings often focus on prevalence estimates of LGB/T individuals. But the actual motivation for measuring LGB/T identity on these surveys is less about the prevalence estimate and more about the ability to compare and contrast characteristics of LGB/T individuals with their non-LGB/T counterparts. The relative consistency of the characteristics of LGB/T samples across these surveys suggests that, while surveys may vary in the portion of adults who are willing to identify as LGB/T in the survey, those that do choose to identify are similar across surveys.

This increases confidence that differences or similarities observed between LGB/T identified and non-LGB/T identified adults are actually present in the population and not simply the result of a particular survey methodology or sample. Examples of consistent findings include:

- LGB/T identity is more common among younger populations.
- LGB/T populations generally share the racial and ethnic characteristics of non-LGB/T individuals.
- Adults are more likely to identify as LGB/T in the Northeast and West than in the South and Midwest.

Educational attainment represents a demographic characteristic in which surveys varied in conclusions about the degree to which LGB/T adults differed in their educational attainment relative to non-LGB/T adults. Among all adults aged 25 and older, the NHIS and GSS showed higher levels of educational attainment among LGB respondents, a finding not supported by the Gallup data. However, among 25-44 year olds, all surveys show smaller differences between LGB/T and non-LGB/T adults in their educational attainment.

Many studies have observed relatively high levels of education among LGB-identified individuals and among those in same-sex couples (e.g., Black et al. 2000; Baumle 2013; Gates 2013). The findings in these analyses suggest that this may no longer be the case, particularly among younger LGB/T populations.

A clear area of agreement across the surveys was the finding of higher levels of LGB/T identification among younger populations. This may be, at least in part, a result of increased levels of social acceptance experienced throughout the lives of younger LGB/T

individuals when compared to their older counterparts. If this is true, then demographic distinctions between LGB/T and non-LGB/T populations, like differences in educational attainment, may become less apparent over time as a wider demographic cross-section of the population is willing to identify as LGB/T.

The relatively new additions of NHIS and Gallup data to the LGB/T data landscape mark ongoing progress in our ability to understand how sexual orientation and gender identity affect demographic and geographic characteristics. This understanding can be important in the design and evaluation of programs, both public and private, that target LGB/T populations. Ongoing measurement of sexual orientation and gender identity on large population-based surveys also offers the promise of a better ability to understand demographic trends and consider how changes in social acceptance along with LGB/T-related laws and policies affect the well-being of LGB/T individuals and their families.

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**Gary J. Gates**, PhD is the Williams Distinguished Scholar and a national expert in the demographic, geographic, and economic characteristics of the LGBT population.

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