

# Reachable: Data collection methods for sexual orientation and gender identity



by Andrew Park  
March 2016

This report has been produced in conjunction with a presentation at a civil society event during the sixtieth session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, March, 2016, New York.

---

## Introduction

In the past few years, researchers have begun developing new methods to measure sexual orientation and gender identity. Sexual and gender minorities<sup>1</sup> have often been classified as “hard-to-reach” populations. However, recent developments in data collection methods demonstrate the increasing number of research methodologies available to those seeking a greater understanding of the lived realities of sexual and gender minorities. This report highlights some examples of data collection methods and presents examples of their use around the world.

The audience for this paper is non-researchers who seek a basic understanding of data collection methods regarding sexual orientation and gender identity. This paper is not a review of data collection. Rather it provides a small number of examples of data collection efforts.

## I. THE NEED FOR DATA COLLECTION

The United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon recognized the relationship between data and decision-making when he observed that “[g]ood data and statistics are indispensable for informed decision-making by all actors in society.”<sup>2</sup> Policy makers and advocates often operate without reliable information about important aspects of the lives of sexual and gender minorities, including socio-economic status, educational attainment, patterns of exclusion from employment, information about physical and mental health, ability to participate in civic institutions, and other development outcomes.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> There is no universally accepted term to define the group of people whose sexual orientation and gender identity does not conform to majority-based norms of sexuality and gender. Those individuals whose sexual orientation and gender identity do not conform to majority-based norms of sexual and gender are referred to, in this paper, as sexual and gender minorities. The term sexual and gender minorities is commonly accepted in social science literature. However, the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) are often used to denote the same community. The term intersex is used by many as well, though it should be noted that intersex refers to atypical sex characteristics. It is neither a sexual orientation nor a gender identity.

<sup>2</sup> Ban Ki-Moon, Message on World Statistics Day, October 20, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Park, *An Inclusive Approach to Surveys of Sexual and Gender Minorities: Report of Meeting, Kathmandu, Nepal* (Los Angeles: The Williams Institute, 2015); Demographic and Health Surveys used by many development agencies as the source of information do not include information about sexual orientation and gender identity. “What we do”, *The DHS Program: Demographic and Health Surveys*, <http://dhsprogram.com/What-We-Do/index.cfm>; As of the writing of this document, neither the UN nor any international statistical body has developed standard or guidance on whether, or how, to collect data on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Increasing this level of available data about sexual and gender minorities would help improve the quality and effectiveness of public policy.

Until recently, there has been very little quantitative research about the lived experiences of sexual and gender minorities in most parts of the world. Researchers in Asia,<sup>4</sup> Latin America,<sup>5</sup> and sub-Saharan African<sup>6</sup> have noted that, until the last few years, research on sexual orientation has been scarce. Globally, until the mid-1980s, research on homosexuality was scarce and focused on identifying the causes of homosexuality for the purposes of developing prevention initiatives.<sup>7</sup> A scholarly review of the research on identity formation in sexual minorities noted the historically low level of knowledge about the process of identity formation and how it varies across ethnicity, social class, or region or between Western and non-Western societies.”<sup>8</sup> Most research targeting sexual or gender minorities in these regions has been conducted in the context of HIV epidemiological or prevention research, and tends to not focus on anything beyond sexual risk involving those assigned male at birth.<sup>9</sup> There is also a general lack of research about people with intersex conditions, and almost all research is in a medical/clinical framework.<sup>10</sup>

Governments and civil society leaders have come to realize that data about sexual and gender minorities is needed for a number of reasons:<sup>11</sup>

- Inclusion of sexual and gender minorities in the sustainable Development Goals and other development priorities.
- Identifying the impact of stigma and prejudice on development outcomes such as income, safety, education, health, family life, violence, migration, etc.
- Identifying the preferences and life-goals of sexual and gender minorities.
- Evaluating the effectiveness of government and civil society programs meant to reach sexual and gender minorities.
- Assessing government efforts to respect, protect and fulfill the human rights of sexual and gender minorities.

---

<sup>4</sup> Arunrat Tangmunkongvorakula et al., “Sexual Identities and Lifestyles Among Non-Heterosexual Urban Chiang Mai Youth: Implications for Health,” *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 12, no. 7 (2010): 827-841.

<sup>5</sup> Jaime Barrientos and Michel Bozon, “Discrimination and Victimization against Gay Men and Lesbians in Chile: Two Patterns or Just One?” *Interdisciplinaria* 31, no. 2 (2014): 323-339.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Larmarange et al., “Homosexuality and Bisexuality in Senegal: A Multiform Reality,” *Population* 64, no. 4 (2009): 635-66. “There is almost a total lack of research focusing on transgender populations in South Africa,” Geoffrey A. Jobson et al., “Transgender in Africa: Invisible, Inaccessible, or Ignored?” *SAHARA-J: Journal of Social Aspects of HIV/AIDS* 9, no. 3 (2012): 160-163.

<sup>7</sup> Frits van Griensven et al., “The Prevalence of Bisexual and Homosexual Orientation and Related Health Risks Among Adolescents in Northern Thailand,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 33, no. 2 (2004): 137-147, 137.

<sup>8</sup> Ritch C. Savin-Williams and Kenneth M. Cohen, “Developmental Trajectories and Milestones of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Young People,” *International Review of Psychiatry* 27, no. 5 (2015): 357-366.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Jones, Tiffany et al., *Intersex: Stories and Statistics from Australia. Intersex: Stories and Statistics from Australia* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Park, *An Inclusive Approach to Surveys of Sexual and Gender Minorities: Report of Meeting, Kathmandu, Nepal* (Los Angeles: The Williams Institute, 2015).

### III. DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Researchers and governments have begun to consider integrating methodologies to gather data about the demographic characteristics of individuals of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, and intersex status. As all people have a sexual orientation and a gender identity, these methodologies can be used to collect data about the sexual orientation and gender identity of all members of any given population. Some research has been initiated by adding components about sexual orientation and gender identity to ongoing survey programs, such as national youth surveys or national health surveys. Other research has been undertaken as independent research efforts. Any such research should conform with relevant standards regarding human subject research, and should take into account ethical and safety considerations.

#### **Gender Identity and Expression.**

Researchers are developing new approaches to surveying gender identity and expression. While the choice of methodology depends on a variety of factors including the specific purpose of the research effort, the following examples of data collection approaches serve to illustrate options available to researchers using surveys:

- A two-step approach: Among the most effective is the “two step” approach, which includes measures assigned sex at birth and self-reported gender identity at the time of the survey.
- A single-item approach: The respondent is asked to choose a term that best describes their gender identity.<sup>12</sup>
- Questions to assess gender expression.<sup>13</sup>

These and similar methods have been used to measure gender identity and expression in several regions of the world.<sup>14</sup>

Researchers have also developed methods to respond to challenges involved in data collection about sexual and gender identities which are culturally specific and unique. For example, in 2011, the government of Nepal attempted the world’s first census in which respondents had the option of choosing “Male,” “Female,” or “Third Gender.” The effort was not successful for a number of reasons, among which was that large proportions of the gender minority population did not identify with the term “third

---

<sup>12</sup> The Gen-iuss Group, *Gender-Related Measures Overview*, (Los Angeles: The Williams Institute, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Wylie SA, Corliss HL, Boulanger V, Prokop LA, Austin SB, “Socially assigned gender nonconformity: A brief measure for use in surveillance and investigation of health disparities,” *Sex Roles* 63, no. 3 (2010): 264-276.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Equality and Human Rights Commission, Meera Balarajan, Michelle Gray and Martin Mitchell, “Monitoring equality: Developing a gender identity question Research Report 75,” (London: National Centre for Social Research, 2011); K. Knight, A. Flores, S. Nezhad, “Surveying Nepal’s Third Gender: Development, Implementation, and Analysis,” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (2015): 101-122; Telma A. Martins, Ligia Regina F.S. Kerr, Raimunda H. M. Macena, Rosa S. Mota, Kalina L. Carneiro, Rogério C. Gondim & Carl Kendall, “Travestis, an unexplored population at risk of HIV in a large metropolis of northeast Brazil: A respondent-driven sampling survey,” *AIDS Care* 25, no. 5 (2013): 606-612; Dr Stefan D Baral, MD, Tonia Poteat, PhD, Susanne Strömdahl, MD, Andrea L Wirtz, MHS, Thomas E Guadamuz, PhD, Prof Chris Beyrer, MD, “Worldwide burden of HIV in transgender women: a systematic review and meta-analysis,” *Lancet Infectious Diseases* 13, no. 3 (2013): 214-222.

gender.” Subsequent research determined that the use of culturally specific terms such as “Methi” and “Kothi” would have increased the effectiveness of the census effort.

## Sexual orientation

Researchers have identified methods to assess the sexual orientation of individuals.<sup>15</sup> Conceptually, sexual orientation has three dimensions, each of which can be measured using a survey:

- Self-identification: how does one identify one’s sexual orientation.
- Sexual behavior: the sex of partners (i.e. individuals of the same sex, a different sex, or multiple sexes).
- Sexual attraction: the sex or gender of individuals that someone feels attracted to.

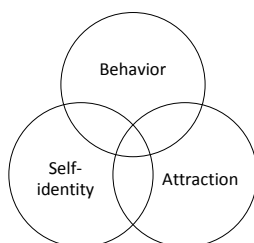


Figure 1 Sexual Orientation Venn Diagram

These methods of measurement have been used throughout the world.<sup>16</sup>

## Intersex

While research about intersex people outside the clinical setting is scarce, recent discussions about best practices for research methodologies have increased.<sup>17</sup> One large scale clinical evaluation study focused on treatment satisfaction, and a more recent survey of intersex people examined a number of demographic factors including employment, education and social support.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Gary J. Gates, *LGBT Demographics: Comparison Among Population-Based Surveys* (Los Angeles: The Williams Institute, 2013); Sexual Minority Assessment Research Team, *Best Practices for Asking Questions about Sexual Orientation on Surveys* (Los Angeles: The Williams Institute, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Examples include Mexico, Brazil, Chile, Belize, Costa Rica, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Macedonia, Senegal and a number of other countries. Jose Antonio Izazola-Licea et al., “Prevalence of same gender sexual behavior and HIV in probability households survey in Mexican man,” *Journal of Sex Research* 37 (2000): 37-43; Maria Luiza Heilborn et. al, *O Aprendizagem da sexualidade. Reproducao e trajetorias socias de jovens brasileiros*, Garamond, Rio de Janeiro (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Garamond/Fiocruz, 2006); Barrientos, Delgadok, Jaime, *Violencia homofobica en America Latina y Chile* (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones y Publicaciones El Buen Aire, Ediciones el Desconcierto 2015) 68; ПОДДРЖАНО ОД ШВЕДСКИОТ ХЕЛСИНШКИ КОМИТЕТ, Идентификување на ЛГБТ\* популацијата во Република Македонија - 2004/2005 година (резултати од спроведена анкета); Скопје 2005;

<sup>17</sup> ОИ Австралија, *Including intersex in research studies and surveys*, ОИ Webiste, May 25, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Jones, Tiffany, et al, *Intersex: Stories and Statistics from Australia. Intersex: Stories and Statistics from Australia* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2016,) 4-6, 26.

### III. SOCIAL STIGMA MEASUREMENTS

For LGBT people, social stigma is the belief among the general population that someone with a particular sexual orientation or gender identity is unable or unfit to fulfill other roles in society, such as being a good worker, student, tenant, family member, or citizen. Stigmatization against sexual and gender minorities can be measured by examining the extent to which general society disapproves of those groups. Data about public opinion of LGB people has been collected using multiple methods in nearly every country in the world.<sup>19</sup>

### IV. MEASUREMENT OF DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES

Studies about development outcomes experienced by sexual and gender minorities are too numerous to review. Each week the literature grows as new research is published in scientific journals. Not only have each of these efforts increased the general level of knowledge about the impact of stigma and discrimination on specific dimensions of development, but they have also increased the general understanding of the effectiveness of data collection techniques.

#### Health

Quantitative studies on the health status of same-sex attracted people, as well as self-identified sexual and gender minorities, can be found in every region of the world. Research examines health disparities face by marginalized populations, the effect of stigma and discrimination, the extent to which groups can access healthcare systems, and the effectiveness of specific public health interventions on health outcomes.<sup>20</sup>

#### Education

Educational attainment has a broad impact on future prospects and development outcomes. Research about the role of sexual orientation and gender identity include studies which seek to understand the extent and consequences of bullying and harassment in schools, exclusion and discrimination by educational institutions against LGBT students and their families, disparities in levels of learning and

---

<sup>19</sup> Some of the ongoing efforts include the International Social Survey Program, Ipsos, Pew Global Attitudes Survey, the World Values Survey, the LatinoBarometer, Eurobarometer, the European Social Survey, The European Values Survey, and the Gallup World Poll. Tom W. Smith, Jaesok Son, Jibum Kim, *Public Attitudes toward Homosexuality and Gay Rights across Time and Countries* (Los Angeles: The Williams Institute, November, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> Examples include Eric Julian Manalastas, "Sexual Orientation and Suicide Risk in the Philippines: Evidence from a Nationally Representative Sample of Young Filipino Men," *Philippine Journal of Psychology* 46, no. 1 (2013): 1-13; Martin Plöderl and Pierre Tremblay, "Mental Health of Sexual Minorities. A Systematic Review," *International Review of Psychiatry* 27, no. 5 (2015): 367-85 (The study included 199 studies which had a heterosexual comparison groups, twenty-six studies had nationally representative samples using clinical interviews); Daniela Barbeta Ghorayeb and Paulo Dalgalarondo, "Homosexuality: Mental Health and Quality of Life in a Brazilian Socio-Cultural Context," *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 57, no. 5 (2011): 496-500.

educational outcomes, as well as the extent and impact of curriculum which includes learning about sexual and reproductive health.<sup>21</sup>

## Employment and Poverty

Income and employment are central issues for human and economic development. Researchers have studied many aspects of the relationship between sexual orientation, gender identity and the workplace. For example, researchers have conducted surveys and examined census data to understand rates of unemployment and poverty,<sup>22</sup> wage disparities faced by gay and lesbian people,<sup>23</sup> harassment and discrimination in the workplace,<sup>24</sup> as well as the relationship between workforce diversity, legal protections, and economic growth.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, corporations are developing mechanisms to collect data from their LGBT employees through voluntary, anonymous, self-ID programs.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Examples of each of these are too numerous to catalogue. The following studies are typical of the kinds of work being undertaken by governments and researchers: Lynne Hillier et al., *Writing Themselves In 3 (WTi3): The Third National Study on the Sexual Health and Wellbeing of Same Sex Attracted and Gender Questioning Young People* (Melbourne: Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University, 2010); Liing Mian, *Report of the Online Survey on Homophobic and Transphobic Bullying at Educational Institutions* (Beijing: Aibai Culture & Education Center, 2013); R. Nagarajan, *First Count of Third Gender in Census* (The Times of India, 9 April 2014), 3 (revealing that only 46% of Hijra/third gender in India were literate compared to 74% among male and females); Pimpawun Boonmongkon et al., *Bullying Targeting Secondary School Students Who Are or Are Perceived to Be Transgender or Same-Sex Attracted: Types, Prevalence, Impact, Motivation and Preventive Measures in 5 Provinces of Thailand* (Mahidol University, Plan International Thailand, UNESCO Bangkok Office, 2014) (Fifty focus groups, a survey of 2,070 students, and 450 interviews revealed that 70% of effeminate boys faced bullying, rates of depression four times as high as others, and missed twice as much school.).

<sup>22</sup> Pankaj Masih, Gayatri Singh and Rishabh Mishra, *Ummeed Live 2012: Third Gender Leadership Development Project* (Raipur: UNDP, 2012); Peter A. Newman et al., "Determinants of Sexual Risk Behavior Among Men Who Have Sex with Men Accessing Public Sex Environments in Chennai India," *Journal of LGBT Health Research* 4, no. 2-3 (2008): 81-87 (surveys show high rates of poverty among sexual and gender minorities in India); Nagarajan, Rama, "First Count of Third Gender in Census: 4.9 lakh," *The Times of India*, May 30, 2014, <http://www.timesofindia.com/first-count-of-third-gender-in-census-4-9-lakh-20140530>. The 2011 Census of the Indian population revealed that 38% of third gender respondents were working, compared with 46% of the general population. However, those who were employed appeared to have less stable employment. Only 65% of the third gender workers were employed for at least six months of the year compared with 75% of the general employed population); Randy Albelda et al., *Poverty In the Lesbian, Gay Bisexual Community* (Los Angeles: The Williams Institute, 2009), ii, <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/research/census-lgbt-demographics-studies/poverty-in-the-lesbian-gay-and-bisexual-community/>.

<sup>23</sup> Marieka Klawitter, "Meta-Analysis of the Effects of Sexual Orientation on Earnings," *Industrial Relations* 54, no. 1 (2014): 4-32, 21 (A meta-analysis of studies of wage differences in the United States, Netherlands, UK, Sweden, Greece, France, and Australia, show that gay men make 11% less than their heterosexual counterparts).

<sup>24</sup> Mustafa Bilgehan Ozturk, "Sexual orientation discrimination: Exploring the experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual employees in Turkey," *Human Relations* 64, no. 8 (2011): 1099-1118; Emir Ozeren, "Sexual Orientation Discrimination in the Workplace: A Systematic Review of Literature," *Procedia-Sexual and Behavioral Sciences* 109, no. 8 (2014): 1203-1215; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *EU LGBT survey European Union lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender survey, 2013* (Belgium: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights) (a survey of 74,000 LGBT people in Europe).

<sup>25</sup> M. V. Lee Badgett et al., *The Business Impact of LGBT-Supportive Workplace Policies* (Los Angeles: The Williams Institute, May, 2013); M. V. Lee Badgett et al., *The Relationship between LGBT Inclusion and Economic Development: An Analysis of Emerging Economies* (Los Angeles: The Williams Institute, November 2014).

<sup>26</sup> LGBT Self-ID Community of Practice, *Where are our LGBT employees? Best practices for counting your workforce's gender identity and sexual orientation for recruitment, retention and productivity purposes and to maximize employee privacy* (Out and Equal, May 8, 2009).

#### **IV. RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Governments and researchers should examine current policies and programs to determine the need for empirical information about sexual orientation and gender identity.
2. Governments and researchers should consider adding components on sexual orientation and gender identity to current, ongoing research efforts.
3. Governments and researchers should consider establishing new research efforts to collect information about sexual orientation and gender identity.
4. Governments and researchers should, at all times, consider any safety consequences of research efforts.
5. Governments and researchers should, at all times, observe ethical standards and other standards related to research with human subjects.

**Author**

Andrew Park, Director, International Program, The Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law.  
Lecturer, Human Rights and Sexual Politics, UCLA School of Law.

**Acknowledgement**

Bianca Wilson, PhD., Rabbi Barbara Zacky Senior Scholar of Public Policy, The Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law, assisted in the conceptualization and review of this paper.

**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](http://www.law.ucla.edu/williamsinstitute)