

Update on the U.S. Progress in Measuring Gender Identity¹

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ABSTRACT: In a variety of ways the sexual and gender minority (SGM)² population in the United States is becoming more visible. While a few U.S. Federal agencies have collected information describing the SGM populations for over a decade, some aspects of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) have been less routinely studied than others. For instance, relatively little is known about their population size, demographic characteristics and well-being. While studying the SOGI population is multifaceted and complex, more representative and better quality data can contribute to meeting the needs of this population.

About 1.4 million people, or 0.6 percent of the U.S. population are estimated to identify as transgender. Information is being collected on a variety of U.S. Federal surveys and research is being conducted through online surveys and via cognitive interviews and focus groups. Through this work we continue to learn about social and demographic variations, geographic differences, and how and where transgender respondents see themselves in the data. Methodological best practices are being employed which have fostered awareness and collaboration across Federal agencies and beyond. This paper provides an update on some work currently underway to better understand the measurement of gender identity, in general, and aspects of the transgender population.

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² This paper refers to the population of interest as sexual and gender minority (SGM) rather than the more commonly used reference as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT). This is done because SGM is more inclusive as it would include persons not specifically referenced by LGBT such as genderqueer, non-binary and gender nonconforming, among others.

About 1.4 million people, or 0.6 percent of the U.S. population are estimated to identify as transgender. Studying sexual and gender minorities in general, and the transgender population in particular, is multifaceted and complex. The Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology (FCSM) Research Group on Measuring Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) is currently working to explore best practices related to SOGI measurement in U.S. Federal information collections.

According to the Research Group's charter, "The collection of accurate SOGI survey data, however, does present a number of measurement and methodological challenges. The comparatively small population of LGBT persons in the United States suggests that relatively small sampling or reporting errors can lead to significant errors in description and estimation, requiring an emphasis on precision and accuracy in the measurement of SOGI. Furthermore, the constructs of gender identity and sexual orientation are becoming more fluid in the U.S. and some of the terms used by individuals to describe themselves are changing at a rapid rate. Finally, gender and sexuality can be sensitive topics, and the privacy and confidentiality of respondents and respondent data must be handled with care."³

In terms of current data collections, eleven U.S. Federal Surveys and one Federal study collect data on SOGI. All of them collect information on sexual orientation; six collect information on gender identity. These data collections are primarily funded under the Department of Health and Human Services and their partners. Two surveys are funded by the Department of Justice partnered with the Bureau of Justice Statistics. The six Federal surveys that collect information on gender identity are the Population Assessment of Tobacco and Health (PATH) Survey, the Health Center Patient Survey (HCPS), the National Tobacco Survey (NATS), the National Inmate Survey (NIS), the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) and the Behavior Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS).

These surveys/studies follow two general approaches for collecting information on gender identity. The first approach is a one question format, usually asking about one's gender with transgender as one of the response options. The NIS and the HCPS use this approach. The other more common way is to use a two-step approach first asking for sex assigned at birth and then gender identity. The NATS and NCVS ask similar two-part questions. A follow-up question is often used to confirm that the questions were answered as intended, such as in the NCVS.⁴

The work of the Research Group is important because it provides a coordinated data collection effort across the U.S. Federal data system. One example is work by the Department of Labor, the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau to explore the feasibility of adding SOGI questions to the Current Population Survey (CPS). The research tested asking SOGI questions in the context of an employment survey and via proxy reporting. Over 100 cognitive interviews were conducted both with LGBT respondents and with those who were not. Four focus groups were conducted with transgender respondents representing a range of demographic characteristics, as well as, geographic locations. Results showed that respondents understood the SOGI questions and that when compared to other CPS questions (income, employment and disability) there were generally not more issues observed. Mixed results were found when looking at proxy reporting. The cognitive interviews (among LGBT respondents) suggested that proxy reporting may be effective for SOGI questions, with respondents generally being willing and able to answer the questions about other household

³ FCSM Measuring SOGI Research Group charter.

⁴ The FCSM Measuring SOGI Research Group builds on the three previously issued reports: 1) Current Measures of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Federal Surveys, 2016; 2) Evaluations of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Survey Measures: What Have We Learned?, 2016, and 3) Towards a Research Agenda for Measuring Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Federal Surveys; Findings, Recommendations, and Next Steps, 2016 which can be found here <<https://fcsm.sites.usa.gov/reports/interagency-reports/>>.

members. However, results from the transgender focus groups showed that transgender respondents were opposed to having someone report gender identity on their behalf and did not want to do so for others in the household. Respondents suggested that not everyone in their household would necessarily know or be willing to report their true gender identity status. The Executive Summary⁵ reports, “This study did not identify any significant issues that would make collecting SOGI information in the CPS infeasible, though there are many outstanding issue in the full study reports that must be studied and addressed prior to any implementation efforts.” (p. 3).

Recently the Research Group has identified several important areas for future research related to SOGI measurement in Federal Surveys. These are: 1) question terminology related to gender identity; 2) proxy reporting; 3) translation of SOGI concepts/questions into other languages, and 4) collecting SOGI information from youth. As such a Research Subgroup has been designated to focus on each topic. Additionally, the Research Group joined together with researchers in France, Greece, the Netherlands, and Sweden to propose the addition of SOGI questions in the European Social Survey household grid and Family, Work and Well-being module.

In terms of proxy reporting, responses to a SOGI question administered in a voluntary, online household survey showed that in general, item non-response rates were low overall for self- and proxy-responses. Findings show that item nonresponse rates to the sexual orientation questions were significantly higher for proxy- versus self-responses. On the other hand, there were no significant differences in nonresponse rates by self- and proxy-reporting to the gender identity questions. Finally, results showed that the rates of item nonresponse to SOGI questions were lower than the rates for earning and income questions, addressing concerns about sensitivity. The survey was administered using a crowd source method to collect information using a single household respondent to answer questions on behalf of all household members. While the survey results were not representative of the entire U.S. population for a variety of reasons, there were a number of useful outcomes.⁶ The goal of the Subgroup is to find additional testing opportunities to determine if these findings hold in larger scale field tests.

The Terminology Subgroup is looking broadly at the field of data collection on sexual orientation and gender identity as it continues to evolve. Research to include discussions on how terminology varies by respondent characteristics and by method of data collection are underway. Additionally the group is looking into data collections that include a follow-up or clarifying question with a response option such as “something else”. The Census Bureau’s recently conducted the 2020 Census Barriers, Attitudes and Motivators Survey (CBAMS) nationwide and a series of focus groups. This effort may yield information useful to the Subgroup as the sexual orientation survey question included a “something else” response option with a box for providing a specific response. In general, this research may provide insights into gender identity responses such as “fluid”, “non-binary” and “gender-queer” and specific “something else” responses when indicating one’s sexual orientation.

While it’s clear that studying the SGM population is challenging in a number of ways, much information is being gleaned to improve measurement in Federal surveys. Through this work we continue to learn about social and demographic variations, geographic differences, and how and where respondents find themselves in the data. The Research Group has given visibility to this research and fostered awareness and collaboration across Federal agencies.

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau 2017. Assessing the Feasibility of Asking about Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in the Current Population Survey: Executive Summary.” https://www.bls.gov/osmr/pdf/cps_sogi_executive_summary.pdf

⁶ Jennifer Ortman et al., 2017. “Optimizing Self and Proxy Response to Survey Questions on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity.” Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America, Chicago, IL.