

The Trevor Project Research Brief: Diversity of Youth Sexual Orientation

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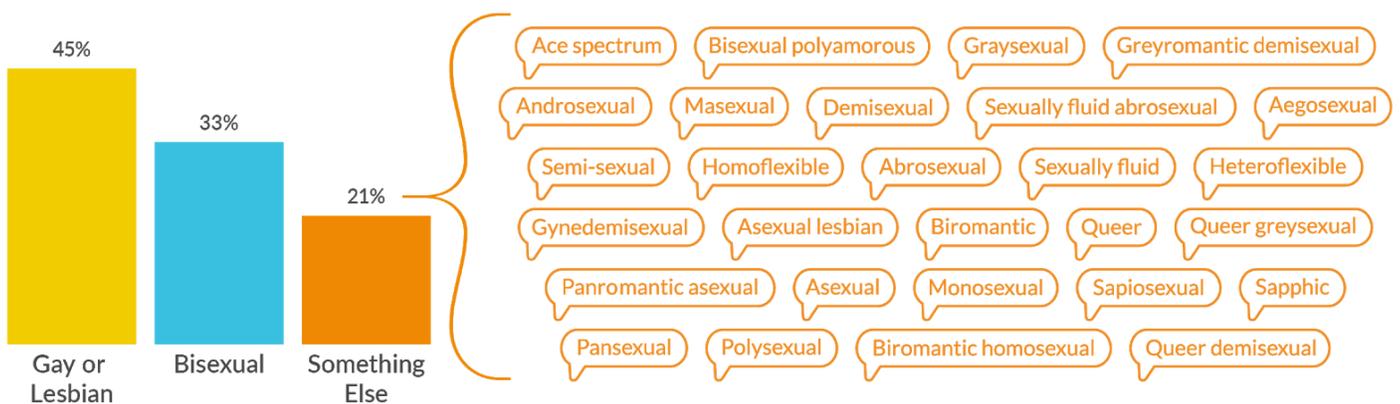
Summary

Sexual orientation is commonly defined as patterns of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to another person. Decades of research has demonstrated that sexual orientation falls on a continuum (Klein, Sepekoff, & Wolf, 1985; Savin-Williams, 2014) and can change over time (Katz-Wise, 2015; Katz-Wise & Hyde). However, research on sexual orientation has focused primarily on categorizing people based on whether they are attracted to a different gender (straight or heterosexual), the same gender (gay, lesbian), or two genders (bisexual). These fixed labels do not accurately capture the experiences of many LGBTQ youth. LGBTQ individuals, and youth in particular, seek to define their identity in increasingly-nuanced ways. In this research brief, we explore the ways LGBTQ youth described their sexual orientation using data from The Trevor Project’s [National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health](#) (The Trevor Project, 2019). Our findings show that when given more expansive and inclusive methods to describe their sexual orientation, youth provided more than 100 different terms.

Results

More than 1 in 5 LGBTQ youth described themselves as something other than gay, lesbian, or bisexual. While 78% responded that their sexual orientation was gay, lesbian, or bisexual, a full 21% selected the option for “something else.”

That majority of the 21% of youth who responded “something else” (18% of the full sample), indicated a different label to describe their gender identity. This includes 12% of the full sample who endorsed a follow-up item asking whether they used another LGBTQ identity such as “queer, trisexual, omnisexual, or pansexual,” and 6% of the full sample who opted to provide a write-in response.



The vast majority of youth who wrote in a sexual orientation provided one sexual orientation label. These included sexual orientations such as asexual, polysexual, abrosexual, graysexual, androsexual, bicurious, homoflexible, heteroflexible, masexual, omnisexual, sapiosexual, and two spirit, among others.

A substantial portion of the write-in responses also contained distinctions between sexual and romantic attractions. This was particularly true for youth who identified on the asexual spectrum and used this questions as an opportunity to also identify their romantic attractions (e.g. asexual aromantic, asexual panromantic, or asexual homoromantic). However, youth also responded with other combinations outside of the asexual spectrum such as “biromantic homosexual.”

There were also youth who provided a combination of two or more sexual orientations (e.g. pansexual and queer) or the combination of a sexual orientation and a relationship type (e.g. pansexual, polyamorous). These various combinations of attraction labels and relationship types suggest that some youth are able to both consider and articulate the different aspects of sexual orientation. In this sense, these write-in responses appear to be an attempt for youth to explain the complexity of sexual orientation in their own words, as one youth replied “I’m a [grayromantic] polyamorous homosexual.”

Methodology

A quantitative cross-sectional design was used to collect data through an online survey platform between February and September 2018. A sample of LGBTQ youth ages 13–24 who resided in the United States were recruited via targeted ads on social media. A total of 34,808 youth consented to complete The Trevor Project’s 2019 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health with a final analytic sample of 25,896. The current analyses focused on the 24,836 youth who provided a response to the sexual orientation question. Sexual orientation was assessed using the National Center for Health Statistics’ question: “Do you think of yourself as:” with the options 1) gay or lesbian, 2) straight, that is not gay or lesbian, 3) bisexual, 4) something else, and 5) don’t know. As a second step, youth who selected “something else” were asked a follow up question, “By something else do you mean that...” with options 1) you are not straight, but identity with another label such as queer, trisexual, omnisexual or pansexual, 2) you are transgender, transsexual, or gender variant¹ 3) you have not figured out your sexuality or are in the process of figuring it out, 4) you do not think of yourself as having a sexuality, 5) you do not use labels to identify yourself, 6) you made a mistake and did not mean to pick this answer, 7) you mean something else (write-in response).

Looking Ahead

These results show that youth-facing organizations have the opportunity to significantly improve their forms and questionnaires to best capture LGBTQ youths’ sexual orientation. By expanding labels of sexual identity beyond categories of straight, gay/lesbian, and bisexual, youth service providers will be better positioned to allow youth the opportunity to authentically describe themselves, which in turn provides others with information needed to respect the labels youth use.

These data also suggest that research initiatives should expand sexual orientation measures for youth beyond labels of gay, lesbian, and bisexual in order to best advance research on LGBTQ youth. The inclusion of an

¹ While transgender, transsexual or gender variant are gender identities and not sexual orientations this option was included to align with the National Center for Health Statistics standard question. Additionally, it is often the case that youth who are not cisgender find it difficult to choose a sexual orientation that centers around a partner of the same or the opposite gender.

additional label that incorporated more inclusive options such as pansexual and queer was able to capture 92% of LGBTQ youth compared to 78% using the standard options of lesbian, gay, and bisexual. Researchers should examine the feasibility and utility of inclusive measures of sexual orientation for youth populations.

The Trevor Project remains committed to advocating for inclusive measures of sexual orientation across research and clinical settings. Additionally, we provide training and education to ensure broader awareness of the diversity of LGBTQ youth identities as well as the importance of affirming the language youth use to describe themselves.

References

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