

8 May 2009Coverage
United Kingdom

New guidance on measuring sexual identity in social surveys

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) today publishes new guidance on how best to measure sexual identity in social surveys. This will be a useful tool to ensure a consistent and acceptable approach to measuring self-perceived sexual identity.

A question on sexual identity was introduced to all ONS social surveys in January this year to support the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2007. The Act aims to tackle discrimination in the provision of goods, facilities and services on grounds of sexual orientation.

The data obtained in this way can be used to provide benchmark population estimates, which can then help monitor equality of opportunity in such areas as employment, education and the provision of services such as housing.

The user guide is aimed at researchers in central government, local government, private research organisations and academics commissioned to carry out social survey research on behalf of government. There is a section for analysts to help them in interpreting sexual identity data and ensure that ethical consideration is taken throughout the survey process.

Karen Dunnell, the National Statistician, said:

“It is my responsibility to ensure that there is statistical information to support the legislation. The purpose of this guidance is to ensure that estimates of how many people in the population are lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) are consistent across different sources. It will also ensure that researchers and analysts always adhere to ethical responsibilities at all times.”

ONS also undertook research in order to compile the guidance and is publishing today results of a pilot study looking at how best to ask

Issued by
Office for National Statistics
Government Buildings
Cardiff Road
Newport
NP10 8XG

Contact
Media Office 0845 604 1858

Email
Richard.miles@ons.gov.uk

www.statistics.gov.uk

the sexual identity question in social surveys. The study was not designed itself to provide estimates of the size of the LGB populations. These will become available in 2010 from the ONS Integrated Household Survey.

Notes for editors

Why ask about sexual identity?

Public sector organisations, academics, charities, research organisations and private sector organisations have all shown increasing interest, in recent years, in collecting data on sexual orientation (of which sexual identity is one component). There have been a number of reasons for this interest; key amongst these has been the increasing need for data on sexual orientation in order to meet current and future legislative requirements. The Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2007 extends the prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation to the provision of goods, facilities and services and exercise of public duties.

Why measure sexual identity rather than sexual orientation?

No single question would capture the full complexity of sexual orientation. A suite of questions would be necessary to collect data on the different dimensions of sexual orientation, including attraction, behaviour and identity, and to examine consistency between them at the individual level. Although legislation refers to sexual orientation, research during question development deemed sexual identity the most relevant dimension of sexual orientation to investigate given its relation to experiences of disadvantage and discrimination. Testing showed that respondents were not in favour of asking about sexual behaviour in a social survey context, nor would it be appropriate in general purpose government surveys.

Further information about the user guidance on measuring sexual identity can be found at:

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/measuring-equality/sexual-identity-project/guidance/index.html>

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/measuring-equality/index.html>

Further information on the pilot study:

The total sample size involved in the study was 7297. This comprised respondents aged 16 or over and the respondents had to be able to answer the question in person. For the sake of confidentiality and reliability of answers, respondents could not answer the question on behalf of family members.

As this was a split sample pilot, the sample was split into two groups and there were no significant response rate differences observed between the two groups.

The purpose of the study was not to measure the estimates of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people in the population. As such, the LGB proportions in the report should not be considered as national statistics.

The report from the pilot study along with other relevant information can be found at

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/measuring-equality/index.html>