

Human Services for Low-Income and At-Risk LGBT Populations:

Research Recommendations on Income Support and Self-Sufficiency Programs

This brief presents recommendations created as part of the Research Development Project on the Human Service Needs of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Populations. The project identified the knowledge base and research needs related to LGBT people's socioeconomic circumstances and risk factors, their current participation in human services funded by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and strategies for serving these populations effectively. Its methods included a literature review, analyses of secondary data sources, and consultations with experts and service providers.

In the area of income support and self-sufficiency programs, the project addressed three topics:

1. The prevalence of poverty and economic vulnerability among LGBT populations
2. LGBT populations' receipt of income supports, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and potential barriers to service access
3. Strategies for providing income support services and employment assistance effectively to LGBT people

For each topic, the project team identified research needs and recommended key questions and possible approaches for future research. Table 1 summarizes these recommendations.

A companion report to this brief, *Human Services for Low-Income and At-Risk LGBT Populations: An Assessment of the Knowledge Base and Research Needs* (Burwick et al. 2014), available at www.acf.hhs.gov/opre, provides details on existing research related to these topics.

A Note on Data Sources for Studying LGBT Populations and Human Services

The Research Development Project identified a general need to increase the number of population-based surveys and administrative data sources on human services that include measures of sexual orientation and gender identity. Implementing many of the research recommendations presented in this brief would require new data collection or the addition of items on sexual orientation and gender identity to existing federal and state surveys and administrative systems.

The collection and analysis of data on sexual orientation and gender identity pose a range of challenges. These challenges include the willingness of respondents to accurately report their sexual orientation or gender identity, differences in conceptualization of sexual orientation and gender identity across racial and ethnic groups and age cohorts, and small sample sizes when such data are available. Nevertheless, researchers in a range of disciplines have successfully implemented sexual orientation and gender identity measures in surveys and other data collection efforts.

Table 1. Income Support and Self-Sufficiency Programs: Recommended Questions and Possible Approaches for Future Research

Research question	Possible approaches
Topic 1: Prevalence of poverty and economic vulnerability among LGBT populations	
How do poverty rates differ for LGBT and non-LGBT individuals and among LGBT subpopulations?	▪ Analysis of national and state population-based surveys^a
What factors contribute to observed differences in economic vulnerability between LGBT and non-LGBT populations?	▪ Analysis of national and state population-based surveys^a ▪ Longitudinal survey including LGBT people ▪ Focus groups/interviews with low-income LGBT people
Do economic experiences differ for LGBT people in places with or without legal protections against employment discrimination?	▪ One-time survey of LGBT people
Does access to legal marriage for same-sex couples affect eligibility for and participation in programs targeting low-income people?	▪ Analysis of national and state population-based surveys^a
Topic 2: Access to income supports among LGBT populations	
Does the use of income support programs among eligible people differ by sexual orientation or gender identity?	▪ Analysis of national and state population-based surveys^a
Do LGBT people experience distinctive barriers in accessing income support services?	▪ Focus groups/interviews with low-income LGBT people
How can administrative data collection be improved to measure service use by LGBT people?	▪ One-time survey of agencies providing income support services ▪ Focus groups/interviews with staff at agencies providing income support services
Topic 3: Strategies for providing services	
What are the characteristics of self-sufficiency interventions targeting LGBT people?	▪ Focus groups/interviews with service providers ▪ Demonstration evaluation^b
How effective are self-sufficiency interventions that target LGBT people?	▪ Demonstration evaluation^b

^aAssumes surveys include or add items to identify the sexual orientation and/or gender identity of respondents.

^bIncluding implementation and impact studies.

TOPIC 1: POVERTY AND ECONOMIC VULNERABILITY OF LGBT POPULATIONS

Research Need:

Extent of poverty among LGBT populations and individual factors that affect poverty risk

Analyses of nationally representative surveys and other data sources suggest that LGBT people are more likely to face economic difficulties than are non-LGBT people, but findings related to poverty vary across analyses focusing on couples or individuals and for LGBT subpopulations. Analyses focusing on couples and controlling for demographic characteristics have found that same-sex couples are more likely to be poor than are married different-sex couples. Analyses focusing on individual adults have found that bisexuals (but not gay men or lesbians) are significantly more likely to be poor than heterosexuals (without controlling for other demographic characteristics). Additional research is needed to identify LGBT subpopulations that are at highest risk of poverty and improve our understanding of the reasons that LGBT people may be economically disadvantaged.

Questions and Possible Approaches for Future Research

- ***How do poverty rates differ for LGBT and non-LGBT individuals and among LGBT subpopulations?***

Researchers could continue to explore the extent of poverty among LGBT individuals and subpopulations by analyzing national and state surveys with population-based samples. Key federal surveys that gather information about the economic circumstances of respondents, such as the American Community Survey (ACS) and the Current Population Survey (CPS), currently allow for the identification of same-sex couples but do not include questions on sexual orientation and gender identity. The addition of such questions to population-based surveys with large samples could facilitate analyses focusing on LGBT subpopulations that may be at highest risk of poverty, including bisexuals, people of color, and transgender people. Statistical controls for other factors that may be related to poverty would be an important element of these analyses.

- ***What factors contribute to observed differences in poverty rates and economic vulnerability between LGBT and non-LGBT populations? Do such factors as social stigma, discrimination, social isolation, and health disparities affect poverty risk?***

A qualitative study including in-depth interviews and focus groups could improve understanding of how experiences of stigma, social isolation, and discrimination among LGBT populations may affect life choices in areas that may affect economic security, such as education, employment, and personal relationships. These studies could explore differences among LGBT subpopulations and the influence of social factors across the life span (for example, whether adverse experiences related to LGBT status early in life have implications for poverty risk among older LGBT people). Longitudinal studies including LGBT people could also explore these questions using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Finally, these topics might be addressed through analyses of data from the National Health Interview Survey, which includes questions on sexual orientation as of 2013.



Research Need:

Effects of legal protections on economic circumstances of LGBT populations

Policies designed to protect LGBT individuals, such as prohibitions against discrimination in employment and housing or legal recognition of same-sex relationships, may reduce the effects of stigma and alter eligibility for programs designed to serve low-income populations. Additional study is needed to assess whether and how such policies influence economic outcomes for LGBT populations.

Questions and Possible Approaches for Future Research

- ***Do wages, workplace experiences, or other circumstances that affect economic vulnerability differ for LGBT people in states and local jurisdictions with or without laws to prohibit employment discrimination based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity?***

Development of a national survey of LGBT individuals focusing on workplace experiences could provide detailed information about the experiences of discrimination and workplace environment that existing literature shows are associated with either negative or positive economic outcomes. Sample sizes would need to be sufficient for comparisons between LGBT individuals in states and local jurisdictions with and without workplace sexual orientation and/or gender identity discrimination protection. Analyses of LGBT subpopulations, including specific sexual orientation or gender identities, age cohorts, and racial and ethnic minorities, could explore potential differences across those groups.

- ***Does access to marriage for same-sex couples affect their eligibility for and participation in federal programs targeting low-income populations?***

This question could be explored through analyses of population-based data sources that allow for identification of legally married same-sex couples and their families, along with information necessary to assess program eligibility and participation. Existing federal surveys, such as the ACS, CPS, and the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), could be used with adoption of new strategies currently being tested by the Census Bureau to improve the validity and accuracy of information collected about legal marriage status among same-sex couples. (However, the SIPP data may have sample size limitations for these analyses.)

TOPIC 2: RECEIPT OF ASSISTANCE AND POTENTIAL BARRIERS TO SERVICE ACCESS FOR LGBT POPULATIONS

Research Need:

Access to income supports among LGBT populations

Analyses of nationally representative data sources indicate that same-sex couples and bisexual adults are more likely to receive cash assistance and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits than their heterosexual counterparts when controlling for other demographic factors. Nevertheless, the proportion of eligible LGBT people who receive assistance is unknown, and disparities in service access may exist between LGBT and non-LGBT people. Additional research could explore whether eligible LGBT individuals face unique barriers in applying for and receiving assistance.

Questions and Possible Approaches for Future Research

- ***Does the use of income support programs among eligible people differ by sexual orientation or gender identity? Are there differences across LGBT subgroups?***

Quantitative analyses could examine the “take-up rate” for income support services among eligible LGBT people. These analyses would rely on national- and state-level population-based data sources that include information on sexual orientation and gender identity, income, and receipt of public benefits. Currently, key federal surveys addressing income and benefit receipt, such as the ACS, the CPS, and the Survey of Income and Program Participation, allow for the identification of same-sex couples but do not include questions on sexual orientation and gender identity. Such questions would need to be added to these surveys or new surveys on these topics would need to be developed and fielded. In addition, sample sizes in these analyses would need to be sufficient to detect differences between LGBT and non-LGBT people and among LGBT subpopulations.

- ***Do LGBT individuals who use income support and self-sufficiency programs experience distinctive barriers in accessing services?***

Focus groups and interviews with LGBT people who participate in income support programs, including TANF and child support, could provide qualitative data on program experiences. Analyses might address how these individuals experience application processes, interactions with case managers, and key program services. Researchers might also identify potential steps for improving service delivery to LGBT populations.

- ***How can administrative data collection be improved to measure service use among LGBT people?***

Key informant interviews with staff of public and private agencies providing income support services could explore potential opportunities and barriers associated with collecting information on client sexual orientation and gender identity. These discussions might address processes for asking questions about demographic characteristics, technical issues regarding changes to administrative data systems, and potential uses for demographic data on sexual orientation and gender identity in the context of income support and self-sufficiency programs. Research might also identify existing models for administrative data collection on sexual orientation and gender identity and develop recommendations for implementing changes.

TOPIC 3: STRATEGIES FOR PROVIDING EFFECTIVE INCOME SUPPORT AND EMPLOYMENT ASSISTANCE TO LGBT PEOPLE

Research Need:

Implementation and effectiveness of employment assistance targeting LGBT people

Surveys of LGBT people suggest that large proportions encounter workplace challenges related to their sexual orientation or gender identity. A small number of service providers offer employment assistance designed specifically for LGBT people, especially transgender people. Studies are needed to document the operation of these interventions and whether they improve employment or other outcomes related to self-sufficiency.

Questions and Possible Approaches for Future Research

- ***What are the characteristics of self-sufficiency interventions that target low-income LGBT people? How are these programs implemented?***

An initial research effort could include a scan to identify employment and self-sufficiency interventions for LGBT people and implementation studies to document key service components or strategies. This research might involve data collection through interviews with providers, reviews of program materials, focus groups with participants, and management information systems. Studies could identify distinctive practices among programs targeting LGBT populations and programs in areas with different characteristics, such as the presence or lack of employment protections for LGBT people. Studies also could explore program characteristics that administrators and participants perceive to be associated with positive employment outcomes.

- ***How effective are self-sufficiency interventions that target low-income LGBT people?***

Evaluations using experimental or quasi-experimental designs could establish treatment and control groups of low-income LGBT individuals that differ based on participation in an LGBT-specific self-sufficiency program. These evaluations would follow participants over time to assess differences in employment, income, and other measures. Data sources could include surveys and administrative data, such as wage records. Ideally, analyses would explore differences in outcomes for participants in LGBT-specific and non-LGBT-specific programs. (Program demand would need to be large enough to generate treatment and control group sizes sufficient for an impact evaluation.)



REFERENCE

Burwick, Andrew, Gary Gates, Scott Baumgartner, and Daniel Friend. (2014). *Human Services for Low-Income and At-Risk LGBT Populations: An Assessment of the Knowledge Base and Research Needs*. OPRE Report # 2014-79. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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