



# Postsecondary National Policy Institute

## LGBTQ+<sup>1</sup> Students in Higher Education

### CENSUS OVERVIEW

Historically, sexual orientation and gender identity (beyond birth sex) have not been documented by the U.S. Census in [any products](#) beyond reporting on same-sex couples residing in the same household, which began in 1990. In 2021, the U.S. Census began [including questions](#) of sexual orientation and gender identity on the Household Pulse Survey (HPS, a survey begun in 2020 to monitor the effects of COVID-19). According to the [most recent HPS](#) (collected in September 2024), 8.3% of the population aged 18 or older identified as LGBT, with 2.9% identifying as gay or lesbian, 4.9% bisexual, 3.6% as an orientation not listed, and 0.7% transgender.

### ENROLLMENT

Though postsecondary enrollment by sexual orientation and gender identity is not recorded by traditional postsecondary federal data sources<sup>2</sup>, it is asked by the High School Longitudinal Survey (HSLs). The following enrollment data are based on respondents to the HSLs that were high school freshmen in 2009 and responded to the follow-up surveys in 2013 and 2016.

- As of 2016, [31.6%](#) respondents identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or a sexuality not listed had never enrolled in postsecondary education.
- As of 2016, 40% of respondents identifying as transgender, genderqueer, or nonconforming had never enrolled in postsecondary education.
- Among the students that had ever enrolled in postsecondary education by 2016, [8.2%](#) identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or a sexuality not listed.
  - [1.4%](#) identified as transgender, genderqueer, or nonconforming.

### FINANCIAL AID

- In the HSLs, respondents identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or a sexuality not listed were [more likely](#) to be offered grant aid<sup>3</sup> in 2013, including Pell, than respondents identifying as straight.
  - 48.2% of lesbian or gay respondents
  - 50.1% of bisexual respondents
  - 44.8% of respondents who identified as a sexuality not listed
  - Compared to 43.4% of straight respondents
- Transgender, genderqueer, or gender nonconforming respondents were less likely to be offered grant aid than respondents who were cisgender (37.5% vs. 43.7%).

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<sup>1</sup> While the title of this factsheet is LGBTQ+, reported statistics mirror the terms used in each referenced study (e.g., LGBTQ+, LGBT, gay, lesbian, etc.).

<sup>2</sup> Such as the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System or the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey (NPSAS). The most recent NPSAS includes the option of “genderqueer” in their gender question but does not include questions on sexual orientation or transgender status. Because of this, we use the HSLs.

<sup>3</sup> The HSLs does not disaggregate grant types, so we cannot determine the share of LGBTQ students who received a Pell grant, nor identify federal loans apart from their total loan amount. It also lists being *offered* grant aid, rather than *receiving* grant aid.

- Respondents identifying as lesbian or gay were [more likely](#) to be offered student loans than other sexual orientations (42.9% compared to 37.1% overall).
- Transgender, genderqueer, or gender nonconforming respondents were less likely to be offered student loans in 2013 than respondents who were cisgender (31.6% vs. 37.3%).

## COMPLETION/DEGREE ATTAINMENT

- The Williams Institute at UCLA and Gallup found that [30%](#) of LGBT people held a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 32% of non-LGBT people.

## EARNINGS AND WEALTH

- According to the [LGBT Financial Experience](#) report by Prudential, gay and lesbian respondents earned less than their straight counterparts, and the gender wage gap increased among bisexual respondents.
  - The average wages reported were:
    - Lesbian female respondents: \$45,606
    - Gay male respondents: \$56,936
    - Bisexual female respondents: \$35,980
    - Bisexual male respondents: \$85,084
    - Heterosexual female respondents: \$51,461
    - Heterosexual male respondents: \$83,469
  - LGBT respondents also were less likely to have savings accounts, employer sponsored retirement accounts, or individual retirement accounts (IRA).

## POPULATION-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

- [According to the National Center for Education Statistics \(NCES\)](#), sexual orientation was the second most motivating bias for hate crimes at postsecondary institutions.
- In a survey by the [Association of American Universities \(AAU\)](#), 60% of transgender college students reported that they feared for their physical safety due to their gender identity or their perceived sexual orientation.
  - 65% of transgender students reported experiencing harassing behavior since they first enrolled in school.
  - Transgender students (both undergraduate and graduate) were more likely to experience intimate partner violence and stalking than their peers.
- [The Williams Institute](#) found that 30.9% of LGBTQ students surveyed in 2021 experienced housing disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to 16.9% of their non-LGBTQ peers.
- LGBTQ college students disproportionately struggled with their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. [According to the US Department of Education:](#)
  - 74% of LGBTQ+ college students reported struggling with their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to 64% of heterosexual students.
  - 69% of LGBTQ+ college students reported feelings of loneliness or isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to 59% of heterosexual students.

## DATA SOURCES

[Household Pulse Survey](#). U.S. Census Bureau, December 2024.

[High School Longitudinal Survey](#). National Center for Education Statistics, April 2024.

[Office of Civil Rights](#). Department of Education. July 2024.

[Association of American Universities](#). 2020.

[The Williams Institute at UCLA Law School](#). 2019.

[Prudential](#). 2018.