



Postsecondary National Policy Institute

LGBTQ+ 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 1990.⁶ 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-19.⁵ According to the September 2024 HPS, 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.⁵

ENROLLMENT

Although postsecondary enrollment by sexual orientation and gender identity is not recorded by traditional federal postsecondary data sources, it is collected by the High School Longitudinal Survey (HSLs). The following enrollment data are based on respondents to the HSLs who were high school freshmen in 2009 and responded to the follow-up surveys in 2013 and 2016.[^]

- As of 2016, 31.6% of respondents identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or a sexuality not listed had never enrolled in postsecondary education.⁴
- As of 2016, 40% of respondents identifying as transgender, genderqueer, or nonconforming had never enrolled in postsecondary education.⁴
- Among the students who had ever enrolled in postsecondary education by 2016, 8.2% identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or a sexuality not listed.⁴
 - 1.4% identified as transgender, genderqueer, or nonconforming.⁴

STUDENT DEBT

- A 2021 survey from the Williams Institute at UCLA found that 35.4% of LGBTQ adults ages 18 to 40 had federal student loans, compared with 23% of non-LGBTQ adults.³
 - 36% of lesbian, bisexual, or queer (LBQ) cisgender females reported having federal loans.³
 - 28% of gay, bisexual, or queer (GBQ) cisgender males reported having federal loans.³
- The Williams Institute estimates that there are 2.9 million LGBTQ federal student loan borrowers who collectively hold more than \$93.2 billion in federal student loans.³
 - Among these borrowers, 32.0% owed less than \$10,000 in federal student loans, 51.7% owed between \$10,000 and \$50,000, and 16.3% owed \$50,000 or more.³

* While the title of this factsheet is LGBTQ+, reported statistics mirror the terms used in each referenced study (e.g., LGBTQ+, LGBT, LBQ, GBQ, gay, lesbian, etc.).

[^] While the data presented here may appear outdated, they reflect the most recent public-use data released by the federal government for these measures.

COMPLETION/DEGREE ATTAINMENT

- The Williams Institute and Gallup found that 30% of LGBT people held a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 32% of non-LGBT people.⁷

EARNINGS AND WEALTH

- According to a nationally representative survey conducted by the Transamerica Center for Retirement Studies, LGBTQ+ respondents had lower average household incomes (\$77,000) than non-LGBTQ+ respondents (\$92,000).¹
 - 26% of LGBTQ+ respondents reported an annual household income of less than \$50,000, compared to 14% of non-LGBTQ+ respondents.¹
 - 43% of LGBTQ+ respondents reported an annual household income of more than \$100,000, compared to 52% of non-LGBTQ+ respondents.¹
- LGBTQ+ respondents reported having significantly less in total household retirement savings, an estimated median of \$43,000, compared to non-LGBTQ+ respondents with an estimated median of \$99,000.¹

POPULATION-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

- In 2021, sexual orientation was the second most motivating bias for hate crimes at postsecondary institutions.⁸
- 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.⁹
 - 65% of transgender students reported experiencing harassing behavior since they first enrolled in school.⁹
 - Transgender students (both undergraduate and graduate) were more likely to experience intimate partner violence and stalking than their peers.⁹
- LGBTQ students were more likely to have lived in campus housing while attending college (59.5%) than non-LGBTQ students (46.4%).²
- Fewer LGBTQ students felt a sense of belonging at their college or university (71.9%) than non-LGBTQ students (83.5%).²
 - 35.3% of LGBTQ students reported that their mental health was not good “most or all of the time that they were in college,” compared to 10.8% of non-LGBTQ students.²

DATA SOURCES

¹ [A Compendium of Findings About the Retirement Outlook of U.S. Workers](#). Transamerica Center for Retirement Studies, November 2021.

² [Experiences of LGBTQ People in Four-Year Colleges and Graduate Programs](#). The Williams Institute, UCLA, and the Point Foundation, May 2022.

³ [Federal Student Loan Debt Among LGBT People](#). The Williams Institute, UCLA, and the Point Foundation, July 2021.

⁴ [High School Longitudinal Study](#). National Center for Education Statistics, April 2024.

⁵ [Household Pulse Survey](#). U.S. Census Bureau, December 2024.

⁶ [How Accurate Are Counts of Same-Sex Couples?](#) Pew Research Center, August 2011

⁷ [LGBT Data & Demographics](#). The Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law, 2019.

⁸ [Office of Civil Rights](#). Department of Education, July 2024.

⁹ [Report on the AAU Campus Climate Survey](#). Association of American Universities, 2020.