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# WE ARE HERE: UNDERSTANDING THE SIZE OF THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY

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LGBTQ+ people exist everywhere in the United States. We are in every state, every zip code and every community. We live in apartments in big cities and in farmhouses in rural communities. We exist across races and ethnicities, incomes and experiences. Available demographic data from surveys of the United States population tells us this is the case. New data show that more people in the United States may be openly identifying as LGBTQ+ than ever before; **at least 20 million adults in the United States could be lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people.** Millions more could be another identity that is more expansive than these four terms. Let's look at the data.

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## USING SURVEYS TO UNDERSTAND THE POPULATION

The Decennial Census is perhaps the most well known source of demographic data — or data that tells us about a population of people such as their age, gender, race and sexual orientation. Administered by the Census Bureau, the Census provides an accurate count of how many people live in the United States, as well as demographic data about the United States population. Unfortunately, the Census and many other sources of demographic data do not currently include accurate counts of LGBTQ+ people. However, new data from the Household Pulse Survey, a new national household probability survey administered by the Census Bureau, is inclusive of LGBTQ+ identities in its questions about demographics. Data on LGBTQ+ respondents in this survey suggests that at least 20 million adults in the United States could be LGBTQ+ people.

Studies like the Census, which surveys everyone in America, are extremely valuable. But they are enormously challenging to field. Researchers use probability surveys, or a survey where every person has a chance of being randomly selected to take the survey, in order to make estimates about a population's size, behaviors or opinions. These surveys are widely used by researchers and cited by journalists to describe a population, say, "people in America 55 years or older" even though not every person 55 years of age or older actually responded to these surveys.

Some of the most often utilized sources of probability data to estimate the size of the LGBTQ+ population are PRRI's [American Values Atlas](#), the CDC's [Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System](#), NORC's [General Social Survey](#), Gallup's [Daily Tracker](#), and the CDC's [Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System](#).



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## THE HOUSEHOLD PULSE SURVEY AND LGBTQ+ PEOPLE

While the exact number of LGBTQ+ people living in the United States is unknown, recent data from the [Household Pulse Survey](#), a national household probability survey administered by the Census Bureau, would suggest that roughly 20 million adults in the United States could be lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people. Millions more could identify with terms more expansive than these four, but it's still unknown exactly how they identify.

- Approximately 8% of respondents to the Household Pulse Survey self-selected that they were lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. This suggests that 20 million adults identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.
  - + An additional 2% of participants identify with a sexual orientation that is something else other than lesbian, gay, bisexual or straight. These individuals may identify as pansexual, asexual, or a host of many other identities, but it remains unclear.
- The data on transgender participants also suggest that more than 2 million adults (more than 1%) in America could identify as transgender, a number higher than [previous estimates](#) of 1.4 million.
  - + An additional 2% of participants said that none of the terms “cisgender male,” “cisgender female” or “transgender” described their gender. We could suspect that some individuals identify as non-binary, genderqueer or genderfluid, though we don't know exactly.
- Similar to previous research, bisexual people comprised the largest contingent of LGBTQ+ people, representing about 4% of participants, next to gay and lesbian adults who comprise 3% of Household Pulse Survey participants.
- LGBTQ+ people live in every community across every state. Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Texas have the largest number of LGBTQ+ people who responded to the survey residing in their states.
- California (approximately 2.6 million LGBTQ+ adults) and Texas (approximately 1.7 million LGBTQ+ adults) are the two states with the largest number of LGBTQ+ people who responded to the survey.

However, less populated states overall, such as Arizona, had roughly 600,000 LGBTQ+ people in their sample, representing larger overall percentages of their population. LGBTQ+ adults in Arizona made up 10% of participating Arizonians in the Household Pulse Survey, compared to a more populated state like Florida where they make up 7% of participants.

The Census Bureau provides [data tables](#) and a [public-use file](#) with results and data from the Household Pulse Survey, and has [produced previous analysis](#) on experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people during the pandemic. While these data are not perfect, they provide some information about the status of the LGBTQ+ population. Furthermore, these data tables provide analysis from the Census Bureau on a variety of topics by demographic characteristics. The Household Pulse Survey primarily collects data on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on American households. HRC Foundation analyzed data on sexual orientation and gender identity by using full-sample calculations and averaging across each poll from August 11, 2021 to October 20, 2021, the only period of time in which the Household Pulse Survey collected sexual orientation and gender identity data.



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According to the Census Bureau, the data on sexual orientation and gender identity in this survey are experimental. Experimental data are those which are new or innovative. This is the first time in the history of the Census Bureau where questions about sexual orientation and gender identity were fielded in a survey, representing a historic milestone for the agency. On November 4, 2021 the Census Bureau released findings on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender respondents to the Household Pulse Survey. But like many probability surveys, it's likely still an underestimate of the community's size. As already noted, millions of individuals use terms to describe their sexual orientation or gender identity other than what was provided in the Household Pulse survey's questionnaire. We have speculated what many of these identities could be that would include members of the LGBTQ+ community who may, for example, identify as non-binary and not transgender or as pansexual and not bisexual. In addition, many LGBTQ+ people remain closeted in many areas of their life and do not disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity in surveys.

Underestimating the LGBTQ+ community's size is nothing new. For example, a working paper from 2013 from researchers at the National Bureau of Economic Research discusses how estimating "sexual orientation, behavior, and related opinions is difficult because responses are biased towards socially acceptable answers." While the Household Pulse Survey is not the final authority on the size of the LGBTQ+ community, it indicates that the community is likely much larger than previously understood.

We give enormous credit to the researchers who helped pave the way toward more LGBTQ+ inclusive data collection and also recognize that the community's sense of safety and visibility has shifted over the years. One of the earlier modern estimates of LGBTQ+ people in the United States was by Gary Gates in 2011 at the William's Institute. According to that research, roughly 3.5% of adults in the United States were identifying publicly as lesbian, gay or bisexual and about 0.3% of adults were identifying publicly as transgender. Before 2016, most probability surveys failed to include sexual orientation and gender identity questions in their questionnaires, leaving substantial gaps in research — especially for gender identity-based research.

In 2016, the Public Religious Research Institute's American Values Atlas suggested that roughly 4.4% of adults in the United States were lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. Similarly, Gallup released data from its 2017 tracker that suggested 4.5% of adults in the United States were lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. Gallup followed up this tracking in 2020 and saw an uptick in growth of people identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people to 5.4% of the adult population. While greater acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community may contribute to this uptick, Gallup noted that "the identity question asked in 2020 offers a greater level of detail than the question asked in previous years."

Furthermore, data from the General Social Survey, analyzed by the HRC Foundation, suggests that the LGBTQ+ population was roughly 5.5% in 2018. The General Social Survey asks a series of questions that allow for more detailed analysis of LGBTQ+ people than other data sources, which may explain the higher percentage located in the General Social Survey despite the two year gap between it and the 2020 Gallup data.

The Household Pulse Survey is not the final authority for the exact size of the LGBTQ+ population in the United States. It does, however, provide at least some evidence that



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the LGBTQ+ community is likely much larger than previously thought. Not only does the Household Pulse Survey have more detail in its question than previous probability studies, it also benefits from the Census Bureau's access to household information for more robust sampling practices.

Other researchers should take the lead of this emerging work from the Census Bureau and continue on the path to inclusive data collection of LGBTQ+ people. LGBTQ+ people are truly everywhere but far too often uncounted. The Experimental Data in the Household Pulse Survey are a triumph for data equity and call to action for all researchers to engage in designing, testing and implementing LGBTQ+ inclusive data collection practices that treat LGBTQ+ Americans with dignity and respect.

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### WHAT SHOULD RESEARCHERS DO?

- Read HRC's report "[LGBTQ+ Data Collection: A Life-Saving Imperative](#)"
- Study how the [American Values Atlas](#), the [Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System](#), the [General Social Survey](#), the [Gallup Daily Tracker](#), and the [Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System](#) ask questions for sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Review [this report](#) from the William's Institute on best practices for asking sexual orientation and gender identity survey questions.
- Read [this research article](#) by Greta Bauer on transgender-inclusive survey measures.