



## WHY DO FEDERAL AGENCIES ASK ABOUT SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY (SOGI) ON SURVEYS?

FCSM-21-01 | June 2021 | Prepared by Jennifer M. Ortman and Karen L. Parker

Some federal surveys collect data on the characteristics and well-being of sexual and gender minority (SGM) populations. Inclusion of questions about sexual orientation (SO) and gender identity (GI) on federal surveys allows for better understanding of SGM populations relative to the general or other population groups, including economic, housing, health, and other differences. These insights can lead to potential resources and interventions needed to better serve the community. Further, these data meet critical needs to understand trends within larger population groups.

For example, we have learned from federal surveys that:

- Suicide rates and reports of bullying are higher for sexual minority youth populations compared to non-sexual minority youth populations. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's [Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#) (YRBS), significant differences are found in suicidal ideation and behavior by sexual identity. 2019 YRBS data indicate that 14.5% of heterosexual youth had seriously considered attempting suicide in the past 12 months compared to 46.8% of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth. 30.4% of youth who indicated a sexual identity of "not sure" had seriously considered attempting suicide.<sup>i</sup>
- Victimization rates are higher for SGM populations. SGMs are 2.7 times more likely to be a victim of violent crime than non-SGMs. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics' [National Crime Victimization Survey](#) (NCVS), more SGMs experienced violence by a well-known offender (i.e., intimate partners, relatives, or other well-known persons) than non-SGMs and, among SGMs, the rate of violence by well-known offenders was significantly higher than the rate of violence by strangers.<sup>ii</sup>
- While current U.S. surveillance systems used to track COVID-19 do not capture information about sexual orientation, sexual minority adults (i.e., those who identify as "gay," "lesbian or gay," or "bisexual") have higher rates (compared to people who are heterosexual) of several conditions known to increase COVID-19-related adverse health outcomes. Health conditions with higher prevalence in sexual minority adults, by self-report, include but are not limited to cancer, kidney disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), heart disease (including myocardial infarction, angina, or coronary heart disease), obesity, smoking, diabetes, asthma, hypertension, and stroke.<sup>iii</sup>
- Lesbian, gay, and bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students in the U.S. are less likely to graduate from high school and attend college. Relatedly, LGBT students have lower educational expectations, a lower sense of school belonging, and are more likely to have been affected by discrimination.<sup>iv</sup>

---

*Sexual and gender minority (SGM) populations include, but are not limited to, individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, transgender, Two-Spirit, queer, and/or intersex. Individuals with same-sex or -gender attractions or behaviors and those with a difference in sex development are also included. These populations also encompass those who do not self-identify with one of these terms but whose sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or reproductive development is characterized by non-binary constructs of sexual orientation, gender, and/or sex.*

---

## FEDERAL EFFORTS & METHODS TO DEVELOP EFFECTIVE SOGI SURVEY QUESTIONS

Survey questions should be developed with care and consideration, with thorough testing to ensure they provide quality data without undue burden to respondents. Furthermore, when exploring whether to add SOGI questions to a new or existing survey, agencies should consider whether resulting data will be useful. For example, will there be sufficient sample size to make comparisons? Will it be feasible to use the results to target resources or to alter programs or services?

Each question about sexual orientation and gender identity administered on a survey from a federal statistical agency has undergone extensive and rigorous research and testing to ensure that quality measures are developed with the utmost care and consideration relative to the sensitivity of these topics for survey respondents (see the 2016 summary report on [evaluations of SOGI measures](#) for more information). Focus groups and cognitive testing methods are used to assess the degree of difficulty in responding as well as privacy and sensitivity issues for both SGM and non-SGM respondents. Federal statistical agencies also engage with stakeholder and advocacy groups to inform question development and implementation efforts.

Federal staff across Departments collaborate to learn from our collective experience and develop questions that can be used across data collections. The Office of Management and Budget convened the *Federal Interagency Working Group on Measuring Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity* (FIWG) in 2015 to address the dearth of data on SGM populations and the methodological considerations associated with the accurate measurement and effective collection of SOGI data. The FIWG published three highly-cited papers in 2016 documenting the [current SOGI measures](#) in federal surveys and the testing used to develop them, what federal agencies have learned from [evaluations](#) of SOGI measures, and recommendations for a [research agenda](#) to continue improvement and promotion of quality measures of SOGI in the federal government.

Federal staff continue to collaborate on the Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology's (FCSM) [Measuring Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity \(SOGI\) Research Group](#) which explores the measurement of SOGI, considering the differing dimensions of sex, gender, and sexuality. In 2020, the FCSM published a report that [examined recent sexual orientation and gender terminology](#) and identified areas for further research.

## NEXT STEPS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF EFFECTIVE SOGI SURVEY QUESTIONS

Representative and quality data are needed to better understand the diverse needs of SGM populations. To improve upon existing SOGI measures and facilitate expansion of these measures in other data collections, the FCSM has identified five (5) areas in critical need of research to improve existing SOGI measures and facilitate the expansion of these measures in other data collection opportunities:

- **Proxy Reporting:** Many household surveys, including those conducted by the federal government, use proxy reporting (i.e., asking one household member to respond to questions about themselves and other household members) because it tends to be a faster approach to data collection, have a lower cost, and increase response rates. If the data collection of SOGI expands to additional household surveys, proxy reporting is likely to be an important means of obtaining this information in households. To date, there have been few studies on the use of proxy reporting to collect SOGI information. Ability or willingness of household respondents to respond to SOGI questions for other household members is of central concern as we consider fielding these questions on household surveys with proxy response. In addition, given that some SGM individuals are not always open about their identities with household members, the issue of accuracy of proxy reports is always a consideration for reporting purposes.

- **Terminology:** SOGI constructs and terminology are fluid and constantly changing in how they are defined at both the individual and societal levels. The terminology that is relevant and appropriate for describing SGM groups varies across sub-populations, language and time. Other challenges include selecting terminology that accurately reflects the response of a member of an SGM group, while avoiding confusion among respondents in the general population who are not members of an SGM group.
- **Question Design:** Ongoing research is needed to ensure that survey questions contain appropriate and relevant wording for both the question and response options provided. Use of a write-in option should also be evaluated as a means for providing individuals who do not find a response option among those provided that pertains to them in a survey question. A write-in option might offer these respondents the opportunity to use their own language/terminology to self-identify in the way most appropriate for them.
- **Translation:** SOGI questions must be translated to other languages to facilitate response from all survey participants. Translating SOGI questions offers a particular challenge, as there are not only differences in terminology and phrasing across languages, but variability in cultural constructs, language and understanding of SOGI identities challenge our ability to develop questions that are understood in the same way across languages and therefore sub-populations. We must carry out research to develop translations of SOGI questions that are culturally and linguistically appropriate and successfully elicit the information we are seeking. Effective translation of SOGI questions is vital to ensuring all population groups are properly represented in the statistics derived from these surveys.
- **Youth:** Asking SOGI questions of younger populations (i.e., under 18 years of age) requires additional care and consideration to identify the most culturally and linguistically appropriate terms for diverse youth groups that also demonstrate acceptable standards of measurement properties and performance. Unique issues associated with conducting SOGI research or asking SOGI questions among youth include the potential need for parental consent and assent laws as well as designing and implementing sometimes costly data collection methods that protect respondent privacy. In addition, there are challenges with greater salience among younger populations, such as the degree of the respondent's "outness," fluidity of the respondent's identity over time, and status of uncertainty/questioning about one's own identity.

A shared federal commitment to collaborating on these research activities will increase the effectiveness of the questions produced through these efforts and yield increasingly more valid and accurate information about SGM populations.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ABOUT ASKING SOGI QUESTIONS

[National Institutes of Health Sexual & Gender Minority Research Office](#)

[Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services Sexual and Gender Minority Clearinghouse](#)

[National Academies Understanding the Well-Being of LGBTQI+ Populations Consensus Study Report \(2020\)](#)

[National Academies the Health of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People Consensus Study Report \(2011\)](#)

<sup>i</sup> Ivey-Stephenson AZ, Demissie Z, Crosby AE, et al. Suicidal Ideation and Behaviors Among High School Students — Youth Risk Behavior Survey, United States, 2019. *MMWR Suppl* 2020;69(Suppl-1):47–55. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.su6901a6>

<sup>ii</sup> Flores AR, Langton L, Meyer IH, Romero AP. Victimization rates and traits of sexual and gender minorities in the United States: Results from the National Crime Victimization Survey, 2017. *Science Advances* 2020;6(40). DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aba6910>

<sup>iii</sup> Heslin KC, Hall JE. Sexual Orientation Disparities in Risk Factors for Adverse COVID-19–Related Outcomes, by Race/Ethnicity — Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, United States, 2017–2019. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2021;70:149–154. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm7005a1>

<sup>iv</sup> Sansone, D. LGBT students: New evidence on demographics and educational outcomes. *Economics of Education Review*, Volume 73, December 2019, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2019.101933>