

# A CLOSER LOOK: BISEXUAL OLDER ADULTS

September 2017



IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:



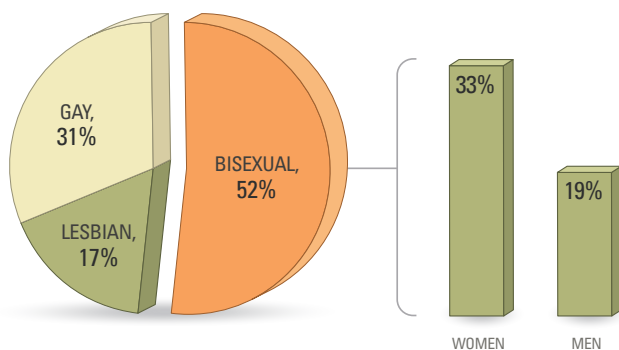
## INTRODUCTION

America's population is aging: by 2050, the number of people over the age of 65 will double to 83.7 million (from 43.1 million in 2012).<sup>1</sup> And while the public perception of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people is largely one of a young community, there are actually more than 2.7 million LGBT adults ages 50 or older living in communities across the country.<sup>2</sup> Many LGBT older adults are bisexual. This report takes a closer look at bisexual older adults: who they are, their unique disparities and resilience, and recommendations for competently serving the community of bisexual older adults.

Bisexual people make up more than half of the adult LGBT population,<sup>3</sup> although among older adults, fewer people identify as bisexual. According to a 2015 YouGov poll, 1% of respondents ages 65 and older said they identified as bisexual, while 3% said they identified as gay or lesbian.<sup>4</sup> See the infographic below. Many bisexual older adults are parents and partners. Perhaps unsurprisingly, among respondents to the National Health Aging, and Sexuality/ Gender Study, bisexual women were most likely of all LGBT people to have ever been in a different-sex marriage (70%) and very likely to have had children (52%).<sup>5</sup>

## BI THE NUMBERS

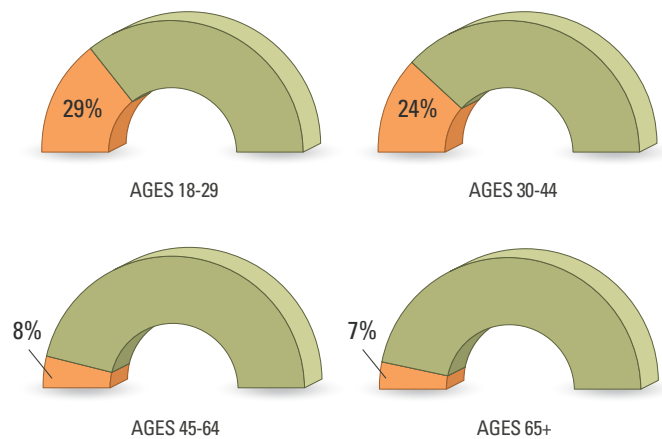
### WITHIN THE LGBT COMMUNITY



Source: Gary J. Gates, "How Many People Are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender?" (The Williams Institute, April 2011), <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/research/census-lgbt-demographics-studies/how-many-people-are-lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transgender>.

### BY AGE

PERCENT OF PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT ENTIRELY GAY OR LESBIAN OR HETEROSEXUAL



Source: Peter Moore. 2015. "A Third of Young Americans Say They Aren't 100% Heterosexual." YouGov. August 20. <https://today.yougov.com/news/2015/08/20/third-young-americans-exclusively-heterosexual>.

Note: Figures may not total 100% due to rounding.

## Definitions

The term “bisexual” refers to a person’s sexual orientation and describes people who can be attracted to individuals of more than one gender. “Behaviorally bisexual” refers to people who may not identify as bisexual but who have experienced attraction to and/or sexual contact with people of more than one gender. The terms “lesbian” and “gay” refer to a person’s sexual orientation and describe people who are attracted to individuals of the same gender. The term “transgender” refers to a person’s gender identity and describes individuals whose sex assigned at birth is different from the gender they know they are on the inside. At some point in their lives, many transgender people decide they must live their lives as the gender they have always known themselves to be, and transition to living as that gender. These identities are not mutually exclusive—someone can identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual and transgender.

of respondents under 45 (see *Figure 1*).<sup>6</sup> Among gay and lesbian adults, around 70% of both older and younger adults reported that the important people in their lives knew their sexual orientation.<sup>7</sup> Social isolation can lead to poorer mental and physical health, to elder abuse, and to other negative outcomes for older adults.<sup>8</sup>

## Economic Insecurity

Bisexual older adults have faced years of discrimination: legal discrimination such as the lack of marriage equality and the criminalization of same-sex relationships, and interpersonal discrimination like housing and employment discrimination. The cumulative impact of this discrimination over a lifetime is an increased risk for poverty.

Bisexuals ages 65 and older have shocking poverty rates: 47% of bisexual older men and 48% of bisexual women live at or below 200% of the federal poverty level.<sup>9</sup> And transgender older adults have similar rates to bisexual older adults. One study found that 48% of transgender older adults live at or below 200% of the federal poverty level.<sup>10</sup> This is higher than for older LGBT adults as a whole. Nearly one-third of LGBT older adults ages 65 and older live at or below 200% of the federal poverty level, lower than for bisexual and transgender older adults, but still high when compared to only a quarter of non-LGBT older adults who live at or below 200% of the federal poverty level (see *Figure 2* on the next page).<sup>11</sup> (This percentage rises to 40% of LGBT older adults 80 and older.)

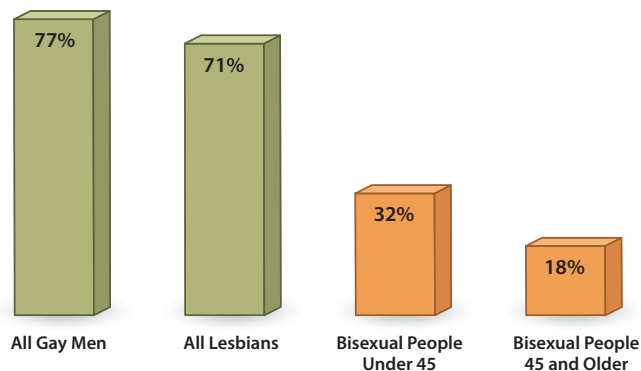
Importantly, research shows that older bisexual people with the same educational attainment as their gay and lesbian peers still had significantly lower income levels, though all groups fair worse than their heterosexual counterparts due to a lifetime of employment discrimination.<sup>12</sup>

## Health

An analysis of the Caring and Aging with Pride study of LGBT older adults found that bisexual older adults have significantly poorer physical health than gay, lesbian, and heterosexual older adults, including increased limitations due to physical problems, lower physical functioning, general health, vitality, and bodily pain.<sup>13</sup> Bisexual older adults also reported poorer mental health than gay, lesbian, and heterosexual older adults, including increased role limitations due to emotional problems, and poorer social functioning, and mental health.<sup>14</sup> One survey of LGBT older adults found that one-third of bisexual respondents have moderate to severe depression, likely because of inadequate emotional support and more negative interactions with family members.<sup>15</sup>

**Figure 1: Bisexual Older Adults are Much Less Likely to be Out Than Their Younger Counterparts**

% of Respondents Who Said They Were Out to the Important People in Their Lives



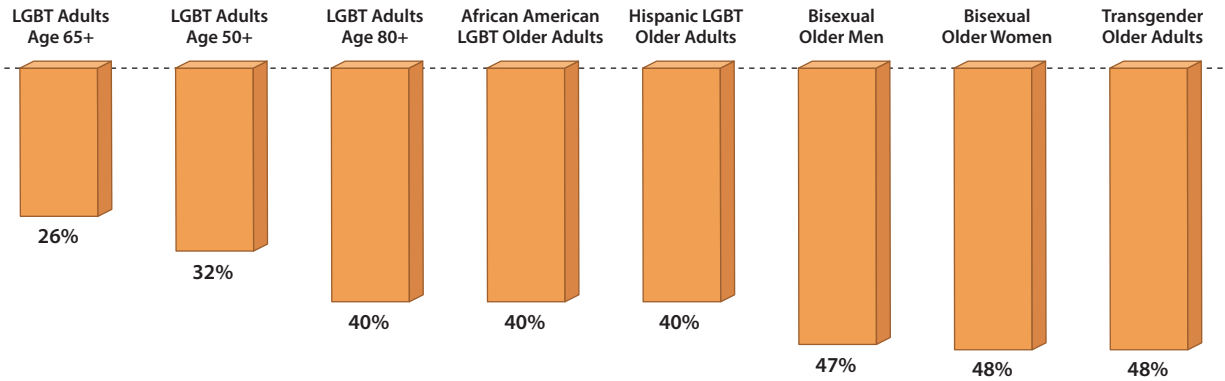
Source: “A Survey of LGBT Americans, Chapter 3: The Coming Out Experience” (Pew Research Center, June 13, 2013), <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/06/13/chapter-3-the-coming-out-experience>.

## Invisibility and Social Isolation

Research finds that bisexual older adults face unique challenges compared to their gay and lesbian peers. For example, the social isolation faced by LGBT older adults is compounded for bisexual older adults, who are less likely to be “out” about their sexual orientation. According to Pew Research, only 18% of bisexual respondents ages 45 and older said that the most important people in their life knew they were bisexual, compared to 32%

**Figure 2: LGBT Older Adults are More Likely to Live in Poverty**

% of Older Adults Who Live at or Below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level, by Population



Source: Charles A. Emler, "Social Economic, and Health Disparities Among LGBT Older Adults," *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging* 40, no. 2 (2016).

### In Their Own Words: Bisexual Older Adults



Social isolation and invisibility of elders in U.S. society is common. Bisexual elders within the LGBT and mainstream elder communities, senior services, and facilities are socially marginalized, stigmatized, and isolated. I am worried about the emotional well-being of my community and disheartened by the casual

and sometimes callous disregard shown by people and agencies who serve us. Coming out, staying out, and speaking out are a constant reality for bi+ people of all ages.

- Lani Ka'ahumanu

## Recommendations

Bisexual people face discrimination and stigma from the LGBT community and from non-LGBT people. In everyday life, this causes myriad disparities for bisexual people, including economic insecurity, increased violence, and poorer health.<sup>17</sup> For bisexual older adults, discrimination can mean the difference between successful and unsuccessful aging. Because bisexual older adults have specific needs and disparities, they deserve, competent, tailored care, including mental health care, starting with the acknowledgment that they exist. It is important that this care not reinforce stereotypes about bisexuality, which can compound invisibility for bisexual older adults, and lead to further mental and physical health disparities.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

Mounting data points to a clear picture of the lives of bisexual older adults: social isolation and invisibility, economic insecurity, and poorer health. Both the LGBT community and the aging network can and should do more to ensure that bisexual older adults feel welcome both in LGBT spaces and in the aging network's provision of critical services and supports.

Bisexual older people are also more likely to exhibit more sexual risk behaviors than other older adults or younger bisexual people. For example, a large-scale study found that older bisexual men used condoms at lower rates than younger bisexual men.<sup>16</sup>

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Jennifer M. Ortman, Victoria A. Velkoff, and Howard Hogan, "An Aging Nation: The Older Population in the United States," Current Population Reports (U.S. Census Bureau, May 2014), <https://www.census.gov/prod/2014pubs/p25-1140.pdf>.
- <sup>2</sup> Karen I. Fredriksen-Goldsen, "The Future of LGBT+ Aging: A Blueprint for Action in Services, Policies, and Research," *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging* 40, no. 2 (2016).
- <sup>3</sup> Movement Advancement Project, "Invisible Majority: The Disparities Facing Bisexual People and How to Remedy Them," accessed May 17, 2017, <http://lgbtmap.org/policy-and-issue-analysis/invisible-majority>.
- <sup>4</sup> Peter Moore, "A Third of Young Americans Say They Aren't 100% Heterosexual," YouGov, August 20, 2015, <https://today.yougov.com/news/2015/08/20/third-young-americans-exclusively-heterosexual>.
- <sup>5</sup> Karen I. Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., "The Unfolding of LGBT Lives: Key Events Associated With Health and Well-Being in Later Life," *The Gerontologist* 57, no. S1 (2017), doi:10.1093/geront/gnw212.
- <sup>6</sup> "A Survey of LGBT Americans, Chapter 3: The Coming Out Experience" (Pew Research Center, June 13, 2013), <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/06/13/chapter-3-the-coming-out-experience>.
- <sup>7</sup> "A Survey of LGBT Americans, Chapter 3: The Coming Out Experience" (Pew Research Center, June 13, 2013), <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/06/13/chapter-3-the-coming-out-experience>.
- <sup>8</sup> Mark Brennan-Ing et al., "Is There a Greater Risk of Depression among Sexual Minority Elders Who Identify as Bisexual?," *American Society on Aging*, September 22, 2014, <http://asaging.org/blog/there-greater-risk-depression-among-sexual-minority-elders-who-identify-bisexual>.
- <sup>9</sup> Charles A. Emler, "Social Economic, and Health Disparities Among LGBT Older Adults," *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging* 40, no. 2 (2016).
- <sup>10</sup> Charles A. Emler, "Social Economic, and Health Disparities Among LGBT Older Adults," *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging* 40, no. 2 (2016).
- <sup>11</sup> Charles A. Emler, "Social Economic, and Health Disparities Among LGBT Older Adults," *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging* 40, no. 2 (2016).
- <sup>12</sup> Karen Fredriksen-Goldsen, et al., "Health Equity and Aging of Bisexual Older Adults: Pathways of Risk and Resilience," *Journals of Gerontology: Social Science* 72, no 3 (2016).
- <sup>13</sup> Karen Fredriksen-Goldsen, et al., "Health Equity and Aging of Bisexual Older Adults: Pathways of Risk and Resilience," *Journals of Gerontology: Social Science* 72, no 3 (2016).
- <sup>14</sup> Karen Fredriksen-Goldsen, et al., "Health Equity and Aging of Bisexual Older Adults: Pathways of Risk and Resilience," *Journals of Gerontology: Social Science* 72, no 3 (2016).
- <sup>15</sup> Mark Brennan-Ing et al., "Is There a Greater Risk of Depression among Sexual Minority Elders Who Identify as Bisexual?," *American Society on Aging*, September 22, 2014, <http://asaging.org/blog/there-greater-risk-depression-among-sexual-minority-elders-who-identify-bisexual>.
- <sup>16</sup> Phillip Schnarrs, Joshua Rosenberger, and David Novak, "Differences in Sexual Health, Sexual Behaviors, and Evaluation of the Last Sexual Event Between Older and Younger Bisexual Men," *Journal of Bisexuality* 16, no. 1 (2016).
- <sup>17</sup> Movement Advancement Project, "Invisible Majority: The Disparities Facing Bisexual People and How to Remedy Them," <http://lgbtmap.org/policy-and-issue-analysis/invisible-majority>.
- <sup>18</sup> Tim Johnston, "Bisexual Aging and Cultural Competency Training: Responses to Five Common Misconceptions," *Journal of Bisexuality* 16, no. 1 (2016).

---

### This report was authored by:

#### **Movement Advancement Project**

The Movement Advancement Project (MAP) is an independent think tank that provides rigorous research, insight, and analysis that help speed equality for LGBT people. MAP works collaboratively with LGBT organizations, advocates and funders, providing information, analysis and resources that help coordinate and strengthen efforts for maximum impact. MAP's policy research informs the public and policymakers about the legal and policy needs of LGBT people and their families. Learn more at [www.lgbtmap.org](http://www.lgbtmap.org).

#### **BiNetUSA**

As America's oldest advocacy organization for bisexual, pansexual, fluid, queer-identified and unlabeled people, BiNet USA facilitates the development of a cohesive network of independent bisexual and bi-friendly communities; promotes bisexual and bi-inclusive visibility; and collects and distributes educational information regarding sexual orientation and gender identity with an emphasis on bisexual, pansexual, fluid, queer (bi+) communities. Learn more at [www.binetusa.org](http://www.binetusa.org).

#### **Bisexual Organizing Project**

BOP (Bisexual Organizing Project) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit registered in Minnesota that serves the Upper Midwest. We are committed to building the bisexual, pansexual, fluid, queer, and unlabeled (bi+) community through regular events and the yearly national BECAUSE conference. BOP is welcoming and inclusive of everyone, including but not limited to people of all gender identities, sexual orientations, sexes, relationship orientations, ethnicities, abilities, religions, and political

affiliations. BOP works in partnership with other groups and individuals in the Upper Midwest who are organizing events serving bisexual and other non-monosexual communities as well as collaborating on national initiatives and programs. Learn more at [www.bisexualorganizingproject.org](http://www.bisexualorganizingproject.org).

#### **Bisexual Resource Center**

The Bisexual Resource Center envisions a world where love is celebrated, regardless of sexual orientation or gender expression. Because bisexuals today are still misunderstood, marginalized and discriminated against, the BRC is committed to providing support to the bisexual community and raising public awareness about bisexuality and bisexual people. Learn more at [www.biresource.org](http://www.biresource.org).

#### **SAGE**

SAGE is the country's largest and oldest organization dedicated to improving the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) older adults. Founded in 1978 and headquartered in New York City, SAGE is a national organization that advocates for public policy changes that address the needs of LGBT older people. SAGE also offers supportive services and consumer resources to LGBT older adults and their caregivers, provides education and technical assistance for aging providers and LGBT organizations through its National Resource Center on LGBT Aging, and cultural competence training through SAGECare. With staff located across the country, SAGE coordinates a growing network of affiliates across the country. Learn more at [sageusa.org](http://sageusa.org).