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). 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. 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 LGB population, 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. 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%).

BI THE NUMBERS

WITHIN THE LGBT COMMUNITY

BISEXUAL, 52%
GAY, 31%
LESBIAN, 17%

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

AGES 18-29
29%
AGES 30-44
24%
AGES 45-64
8%
AGES 65+
7%


Note: Figures may not total 100% due to rounding.
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% of respondents under 45 (see Figure 1). 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. Social isolation can lead to poorer mental and physical health, to elder abuse, and to other negative outcomes for older adults.

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. 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. 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).

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.

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. 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. 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.
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.\textsuperscript{16}

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.\textsuperscript{17} 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.\textsuperscript{18}

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.
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.

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.

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.

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.