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##### Gender issues in vulnerable population groups

## Update on the U.S. Progress in Measuring Gender Identity

Note by the United States Bureau of the Census\*

### *Abstract*

About 1.4 million people, or 0.6 per cent of the U.S. population, identifies as transgender. Studying sexual and gender minorities in general, and the transgender population in particular, is multifaceted and complex. Practiced researchers use techniques to minimize the effects on small sample sizes like this one. However, the challenges introduced in measuring an individual's (developing) gender identity in the midst of changing gender concepts and terminology is harder to anticipate and much less well researched. Sensitivity concerns and the requirement for a programmatic and/or legislative need to collect data are additional challenges.

This paper will summarize some of the work currently underway to collect information on this population in the U.S. Federal data system. In March 2015, the Office of Management and Budget established an Interagency Working Group on Measuring Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. In this paper I will discuss findings of the Interagency Working Group in terms of Federal surveys that do currently collect gender identity information along with some initial research outcomes.

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1. About 1.4 million people, or 0.6 percent of the U.S. population, identify as transgender<sup>1</sup>. While a few U.S. Federal agencies have collected information describing sexual and gender minority (SGM)<sup>2</sup> populations for over a decade, some aspects of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) have been less routinely studied than others. Studying the SOGI population in general, is multifaceted and complex. For instance, while researchers have techniques to minimize the effects of small sample sizes, there are other multidimensional challenges such as measuring an individual's (developing) gender identity in the midst of changing gender concepts and terminology. Sensitivity and confidentiality are additional concerns along with the programmatic and/or legislative need to justify the data collection. Some challenges are harder to anticipate and, thus, much less well researched.
2. This paper will summarize some of the work currently underway to collect information on this population in the U.S. Federal data system. In March 2015, the Office of Management and Budget established an Interagency Working Group on Measuring Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. In this paper I will discuss findings of the Interagency Working Group in terms of Federal surveys that do currently collect gender identity information along with some initial research outcomes. Additionally, I will describe two other important research efforts that have provide additional insights into SOGI data collection.
3. A variety of domestic and international studies have quantified the transgender population, as well as outlined "best practices" for asking SOGI questions<sup>3,4,5,6</sup>. In 2017 the Williams Institute used survey data<sup>7</sup> to estimate that 0.6 percent of U.S. adults identified as transgender. This research implemented a unique methodology to arrive at state estimates. Results showed that the percent transgender varied substantially between states, ranging from 0.3 in North Dakota to 0.8 in Hawaii. The District of Columbia had the highest percentage at 2.8 percent. Additionally the estimates showed that the youngest age groups, 18-24 year olds, were more likely than older age groups to identify as transgender. An estimated 0.7 percent of adults between ages 18-24 years identified as transgender compared to 0.6 percent of those age 25-64 years and 0.5 percent of those age 65 or older.
4. It is expected that a variety of factors aside from sheer population growth account for the near doubling of the transgender population since the 2011 research in which Gary J. Gates estimated it at about 700,000. While the 2017 study has greatly expanded on earlier methods, social acceptance and visibility may account for the larger share of the growth explanation, again pointing to the unique challenges associated with studying this population. Research efforts are underway in the United States to highlight Federal survey that do collect information on sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as outline concepts and terminology.

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<sup>1</sup> Flores, A.R., Herman, J.L., Gates, G.J., & Brown, T.N.T. (2016). *How Many Adults Identify as Transgender in the United States?* Los Angeles, CA: The Williams Institute.

<sup>2</sup> This paper refers to the population of interest as sexual and gender minority (SGM) rather than the more commonly used reference as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT). This is done because SGM is more inclusive as it would include persons not specifically referenced by LGBT as genderqueer, non-binary and gender nonconforming, among others.

<sup>3</sup> See footnote 1.

<sup>4</sup> The GenIUSS Group. (2014). *Best Practices for Asking Questions to Identify Transgender and Other Gender Minority Respondents on Population-Based Surveys*. J.L. Herman (Ed.). Los Angeles, CA: The Williams Institute.

<sup>5</sup> The SMART Team. (2009). *Best Practices for Asking Questions about Sexual Orientation on Surveys*. Lee Badgett and Naomi Goldberg (Editors). Los Angeles, CA: The Williams Institute.

<sup>6</sup> Brown, T.N.T., Herman, J.L., Park, A.S. (2017). *Exploring International Priorities and Best Practices for the Collection of Data about Gender Minorities, Report of Meeting*. Los Angeles, CA: The Williams Institute.

<sup>7</sup> For methodological information see <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/research/how-many-adults-identify-as-transgender-in-the-united-states/>.

5. To date the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Interagency Working Group (IWG) on Measuring SOGI has published three papers which survey current SOGI measures, provide an evaluation of current SOGI measures in Federal surveys, and outline a future research agenda with findings, recommendations and next steps<sup>8</sup>. The work of the IWG is important because it provides a coordinated data collection effort focused on an often ignored population. The work of the IWG is ongoing and aims to address the dearth of data on sexual and gender minority populations and to identify methodological issues which challenge data collection.
6. The IWG found that eleven U.S. Federal Surveys and one Federal study collect data on SOGI<sup>9</sup>. All of them collection information on sexual orientation; six collect information on gender identity. There are two general approaches for collecting information on gender identity. The first approach is a one question format, usually asking about one's gender with transgender as one of the response options. The other more common way is to use a two-step approach first asking for sex assigned at birth and then gender identity. A follow-up question is often used to confirm the questions were answers as intended. While selecting the concepts to measure and the best question(s) to ask are the first considerations, they are only the beginning of the many factors which must be deliberated. Other important factors are the impact of one's age and development on one's SOGI response, cultural and racial/ethnic understandings, geography, language and the possibility for proxy reporting.
7. An outgrowth of the IWG is research that has focused on proxy reporting on sexual orientation and gender identity questions and its impact on measurement error<sup>10</sup>. The aim of this research was to provide empirical evidence for U.S. Federal Statistical Agencies regarding strategies to optimize self and proxy responses and reduce measurement error to SOGI questions on a voluntary, online household survey. A crowd source method was used to collect information using a single household respondent to answer questions on behalf of all household members. While the survey results were not representative of the entire U.S. population for a variety of reasons, there were a number of useful outcomes. In general, item non-response rates were low overall for self- and proxy-responses. Findings show that item nonresponse rates to the sexual orientation questions were significantly higher for proxy- versus self-responses. On the other hand, there were no significant differences in nonresponse rates by self- and proxy-reporting to the gender identity questions. Finally, results show that the rates of item nonresponse to SOGI questions were lower than the rates for earning and income questions, addressing concerns about sensitivity.
8. SOGI questions were recently added to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) and thus provide useful insights. The NCVS, which is sponsored by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), introduced SOGI questions in June 2016<sup>11</sup>. The NCVS is one of two main sources of data on crime in the United States. From the NCVS data national rates and levels of violent and property victimization, information on the characteristics of crimes and victims, and consequences of

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<sup>8</sup> The IWG's papers, "Current Measures of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Federal Surveys", "Evaluations of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity", and "Towards a Research Agenda for Measuring Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Federal Surveys: Findings, Recommendations, and Next Steps" can be found here: <https://fcsf.sites.usa.gov/reports/interagency-reports/>.

<sup>9</sup> See P4 in current measures list surveys

<sup>10</sup> Jennifer Ortman et al., 2017. "Optimizing Self and Proxy Response to Survey Questions on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity." Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America, Chicago, IL.

<sup>11</sup> See NCVS Survey News, Volume 4, Issue 6, April 2016. "New Socio-demographic Questions in the NCVS" at <https://www.census.gov/people/news/issues/vol4issue6.html> and NCVS Survey News, Volume 4, Issue10, August 2016. "New Gender Identity Question in the NCVS." at <https://www.census.gov/people/news/issues/vol4issue10.html>.

victimization can be measured and monitored. Therefore, once fully implemented the NCVS will be an important source of information to measure victimization among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. Focus groups and targeted interviews were conducted by the Census Bureau for BJS and initial results show that the SOGI questions performed well and that there were few refusals on the questions. Once a full year of data have been collected, BJS will determine how to disseminate estimates of victimization by sexual orientation and gender identity after assessing sample sizes, prevalence of crime, and overall precision

9. Finally, starting in 2016 the Department of Labor, the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau worked together to explore the feasibility of adding SOGI questions to the Current Population Survey (CPS). The research emphasis was to examine asking SOGI questions in the context of an employment survey and via proxy reporting. Over 100 cognitive interviews were conducted both with LGBT respondents and with those who were not. Four focus groups were conducted with transgender respondents. Respondents were recruited to represent a range of demographic characteristics, as well as, geographic locations. Results show that respondents understood the SOGI questions and that when compared to other CPS questions (income, employment and disability) there were generally not more issues observed. Mixed results were found when looking at proxy reporting. The cognitive interviews (among LGBT respondents) suggested that proxy reporting may be effective for SOGI questions, with respondents generally being willing and able to answer the questions about other household members. However, results from the transgender focus groups showed that transgender respondents were opposed to having someone report gender identity on their behalf and did not want to do so for others in the household. Respondents suggested that not everyone in their household would necessarily know or be willing to report their true gender identity status. The Executive Summary reports<sup>12</sup>, “This study did not identify any significant issues that would make collecting SOGI information in the CPS infeasible, though there are many outstanding issue in the full study reports that must be studied and addressed prior to any implementation efforts.” (p. 3).
10. While it is clear that studying SOGI is challenging in a number of ways, information is being collected on a variety of U.S. Federal surveys and research is being conducted currently through online surveys and via cognitive interviews and focus groups. Through all of these methods much information is being gleaned about the characteristics of the SGM population in general. Through this work we continue to learn about social and demographic variations, geographic differences, and how and where respondents see themselves in the data. Methodological challenges around having representative samples and recruiting respondents exist even when best practices are employed. Challenges related to question response options, concepts and terminology persist. Working within the IWG has given visibility to this research and fostered awareness and collaboration across Federal agencies. With these efforts we can continue to learn about the SOGI population and work toward minimizing the methodological issues known to challenge data collection for this group.

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<sup>12</sup> U.S. Census Bureau 2017. Assessing the Feasibility of Asking about Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in the Current Population Survey: Executive Summary.” [https://www.bls.gov/osmr/pdf/cps\\_sogi\\_executive\\_summary.pdf](https://www.bls.gov/osmr/pdf/cps_sogi_executive_summary.pdf)