

# RESEARCH



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# FINDINGS

A collaboration of Cornell University, the University of Rochester, and Ulster BOCES

## How Do LGBT Youth in New York State Talk about Gender and Sexual Orientation?

*Results from the 2015 LGBT Health and Human Services Needs Assessment Survey*

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When most people think about gender, they think about male and female. When they think about sexual orientation, they think about “gay” and “straight.” However, our research shows that youth in New York State identify their genders and sexual orientations in a wider variety of ways. They use words that may be unfamiliar to non-LGBT people and those who are not youth themselves, such as “trans,” “genderqueer,” or “pansexual.”

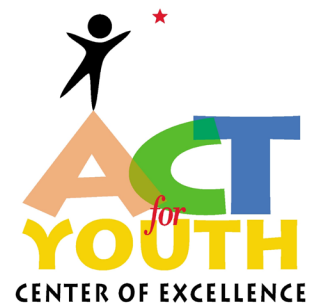
Using data drawn from the LGBT Health and Human Services Needs Assessment, this article describes the genders and sexual orientations that 524 LGBT youth (age 16-21) identified when asked to describe themselves. Youth could select from a range of identity labels all identities that applied to them, and could also write in answers that described their sexual orientation and gender identity. Participants were recruited online in New York State. While the data are not drawn from a population-based sample, and thus may not be representative of all sexual minority and transgender youth, this research provides examples of the ways that young people use identity labels to describe themselves.



### Background

The words that sexual minority youth use to describe their sexual orientation

**Strength in Numbers Consulting Group** is an LGBT-led consulting firm whose mission is to contribute to the strategy, growth, and effectiveness of nonprofits, foundations, and government organizations by providing high quality research, capacity building, philanthropic strategy, and evaluation services. Strength in Numbers is committed to combining rigorous, credible research processes with efforts to enhance community participation and representation. Visit Strength in Numbers at: [www.sinCG.com](http://www.sinCG.com)



identities change frequently. While there are no population-based data describing the current distribution of identities among sexual minority youth who identify with labels other than heterosexual, gay, lesbian, or bisexual, recent scholarship suggests that youth have embraced diverse sexual orientation labels as part of their identity development and that they may have access to a wider variety of labels as a result of identity exploration using the internet (Downing, 2013). While some young people use familiar descriptions such as “gay” and “straight,” others choose or design their own custom identity labels, or choose to forego label use entirely, because of the perceived inadequacy of the available labels to describe how they experience their own identity (van Anders, 2015).

Sexual orientation identity and sexual practices are not necessarily related in an intuitive way, as youth who identify as sexual minorities may have sex with opposite-sex partners and heterosexual youth may have sex with same-sex partners (Rosario, Scrimshaw, Hunter, & Braun, 2006). Throughout the lifespan, transgender people may go through a variety of labels and preferred pronouns for their gender identity as well as their sexual orientation (de Vries, Kreukels, Steensma, & McGuire, 2014; Kuper, Nussbaum, & Mustanski, 2011), even using multiple labels at the same time in different contexts (Arbeit & Dumont, in press).

The affirmation of these labels by professionals can contribute to the well-being and resilience of LGBT youth. For example, the presence of supportive adults helps make educational environments safe for LGBT youth and thereby boosts academic performance (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2013). Affirmation of specific identity labels is one important part of that process, as denial of particular identity labels can be taken as a subtle form of rejection of the legitimacy of sexual minority status (Galupo, Henise, & Davis, 2014; Nadal, Wong, Issa, Meterko, Leon, & Wideman, 2011), or as a sign of discomfort with sexual minority youth (Nadal, Issa, Leon, Meterko, Wideman, & Wong, 2011).

## Survey Sample

Data are drawn from a needs assessment survey of LGBT people in New York State, including 524 youth.

Just over one quarter (29%) of youth participants were age 16 or 17 and the remainder (71%) were age 18-21.

Seventy-six percent were white, with 14% Latino/Hispanic and 11% Black or African American.

Just over one in ten (11%) indicated that they were disabled. About one in four (26%) lived in New York City and 7% were foreign born.

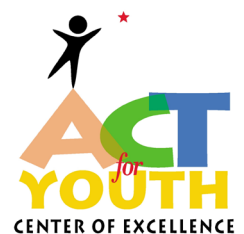
**“...Youth are questioning their gender and are also exploring genders that allow space for change and growth.”**

## Survey Results

### Gender Identity

Youth who answered this survey identified with binary genders such as female (43%) and male (36%), but large numbers also identified as transgender (21%) or gender nonconforming (23%). Among those who identified as transgender and gender nonconforming, 41% identified as transgender (and not gender nonconforming), 45% as gender nonconforming (and not transgender), and 13% as both transgender and gender nonconforming. Gender nonconforming included those who selected or wrote in “gender fluid,” “gender queer,” or “gender nonbinary.” Youth also wrote in responses such as “demiboy” and “demigirl,” “questioning,” and even “Amazonian Princess.” This suggests that youth are questioning their gender and are also exploring genders that allow space for change and growth.

Of those in the survey who identified as transgender or gender nonconforming, 41% identified as male only, 14% as female only, and 45% as both or neither.



## How do youth identify their sexual orientations?

The most common sexual orientation selected by youth participating in this survey was bisexual (31%), followed by pansexual (27%). Smaller numbers identified as gay (23%), queer (20%), or lesbian (13%). Examples of other sexual orientations youth wrote in included “demisexual,” “panromantic,” “polysexual,” “homoflexible,” “I don’t use labels,” “polyamorous & aromantic,” and “sapiosexual.”

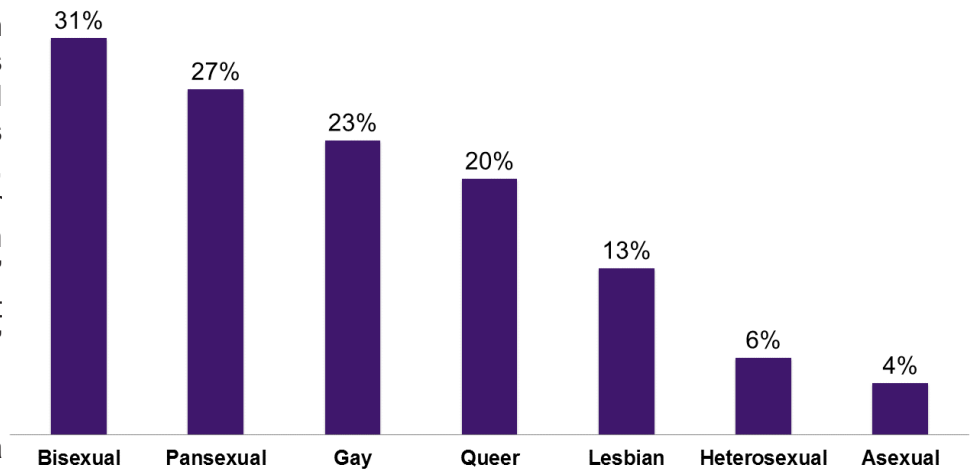
Some of these identities suggest a separation of sexuality from romance.

For example, one youth wrote

“panromantic homosexual,” suggesting a romantic attraction to many genders and sexual orientation towards people of the same gender. Youth also distinguished between being a completely sexual person and being “demisexual” (just a little bit sexual) or asexual (not sexual at all). Youth appear to be open to organizing sexuality around other principles, such as intelligence (“sapiosexual”), or around being involved with multiple people (“polyamorous,” “polysexual”) rather than around gender.

Transgender and gender nonconforming youth in this sample were more likely to identify their sexual orientations as pansexual, queer, or bisexual, compared to youth who are not transgender or gender nonconforming. They were also more likely to use creative

## How Participants Identified Their Sexual Orientation



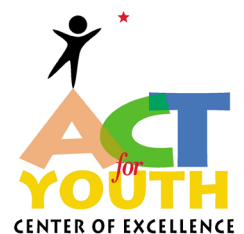
“...Youth are redefining what sexuality and gender mean to them and challenging conventional ways of organizing these principles.”

### A Note on Terminology

**Gender identity** refers to how a young person perceives him or herself as male, female, transgender, or some other gender. Gender identity is often differentiated from “sex assigned at birth,” especially for those individuals who do not identify with the expected gender identity following from their assigned sex (for example, a transgender woman who was assigned male at birth, or a gender nonconforming woman who may have been assigned female at birth but does not identify with stereotypically female traits).

**Sexual minority** youth are those whose sexual identity, orientation, or practices differ from the majority of the surrounding society. The term is primarily used to refer to lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals, but in this article also includes those who identify with other non-heterosexual sexual orientations, such as “asexual” or “pansexual.”

**Sexual orientation** refers to an enduring pattern of attraction and identities that may follow from those attractions such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, or queer. People do not need to be sexually active in order to have a sexual orientation. While sexual orientation is most frequently discussed in binary terms of opposite- or same-sex attraction, there are also sexual orientations that acknowledge genders other than male and female, such as “pansexual” and “queer.”



labels for their sexuality. Thirty-three transgender and gender nonconforming youth wrote in responses, compared with 15 youth who did not identify this way. This suggests that youth are redefining what sexuality and gender mean to them and challenging conventional ways of organizing these principles.

## Recommendations

These survey results depict a moment in time in a rapidly changing landscape. Perhaps the most important lesson to draw from this research is that we need to follow the lead of youth themselves when it comes to identity labels.

### Health Care Environment

Ask what words youth use to describe their sexual orientation separately from questions about sexual behavior, birth control needs, or prevention of sexually transmitted infections.

### All Providers

**Ask open-ended questions** about sexual orientation and gender identity. Understand that youth who identify as sexual minorities may use a variety of labels throughout their coming out process. Convey acceptance of all labels used for sexual orientation and gender identity.

**When discussing identity with transgender youth, ask what pronoun a young person prefers** and whether the young person uses that pronoun in all settings.

**Use preferred names, identity labels, and pronouns** consistently across all settings where a young person feels comfortable being known by those labels. ★

## About the LGBT Health and Human Services Needs Assessment

This article is part of a larger project to assess the health and human service experiences and needs of LGBT people in New York State. The project was funded by the AIDS Institute and the LGBT Health and Human Services Network, which is currently housed in the LGBT Community Center in New York City. The research was done by Strength in Numbers Consulting Group with an advisory body of diverse Network members to give input and approval.

Data sources for the needs assessment include (1) 22 focus groups with over 150 people, conducted from November 2014 to April 2015, (2) an online convenience sample survey of 3,792 LGBT people who live, work, or receive services in New York State, conducted June to August 2015, and (3) analyses of population-based secondary data.

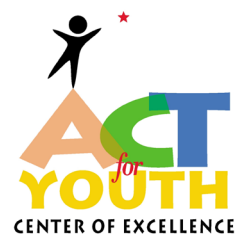
## Learn More

For the first ACT for Youth article drawn from this project, see **How are LGBT Youth Faring in New York State?**

[www.actforyouth.net/publications/results.cfm?t=rf\\_lgbt-nys\\_0716](http://www.actforyouth.net/publications/results.cfm?t=rf_lgbt-nys_0716)

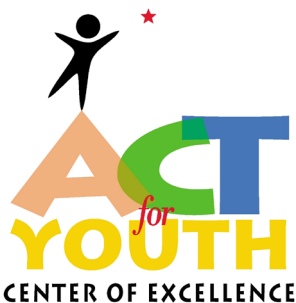
For regional fact sheets, a report on the full dataset, a full report on methodology, and a copy of the original survey instrument, visit Strength in Numbers Consulting Group:

[www.SiNCG.com/work-samples](http://www.SiNCG.com/work-samples)



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