



This is “Sexual Orientation and Inequality”, chapter 5 from the book [A Primer on Social Problems \(index.html\)](#) (v. 1.0).

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Chapter 5

Sexual Orientation and Inequality

Social Problems in the News

“Miami Beach to Fire Two Officers in Gay Beating at Park,” the headline said. City officials in Miami Beach, Florida, announced that the city would fire two police officers accused of beating a gay man two years earlier and kicking and arresting a gay tourist who came to the man’s defense. The tourist said he called 911 when he saw two officers, who were working undercover, beating the man and kicking his head. According to his account, the officers then shouted antigay slurs at him, kicked him, and arrested him on false charges. The president of Miami Beach Gay Pride welcomed the news of the impending firing. “It sets a precedent that you can’t discriminate against anyone and get away with it,” he said. “[The two officers] tried to cover it up and arrested the guy. It’s an abuse of power. Kudos to the city. They’ve taken it seriously.”

Source: Smiley & Rothaus, 2011 Smiley, D. & Rothaus, S. (2011, July 25). Miami Beach to fire two officers in gay beating at park. *The Miami Herald*. Retrieved from <http://miamiherald.typepad.com/gaysouthflorida/2011/07/miami-beach-to-fire-two-cops-who-beat-falsely-arrested-gay-man-at-flamingo-park.html>.

From 1933 to 1945, Adolf Hitler’s Nazi regime exterminated 6 million Jews in the Holocaust, but it also persecuted millions of other people, including gay men. Nazi officials alleged that these men harbored what they termed a “degeneracy” that threatened Germany’s “disciplined masculinity.” Calling gay men “antisocial parasites” and “enemies of the state,” the Nazi government arrested more than 100,000 men for violating a law against homosexuality, although it did not arrest lesbians because it valued their child-bearing capacity. At least 5,000 gay men were imprisoned, and many more were put in mental institutions. Several hundred other gay men were castrated, and up to 15,000 were placed in concentration camps, where most died from disease, starvation, or murder. As the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (2011) United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. (2011). Nazi persecution of homosexuals 1933–1945. Retrieved August 14, 2011, from <http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/hsx/>. summarizes these events, “Nazi Germany did not seek to kill all homosexuals. Nevertheless, the Nazi state, through active persecution, attempted to terrorize German homosexuals into sexual and social conformity, leaving thousands dead and shattering the lives of many more.”

This terrible history reminds us that sexual orientation has often resulted in inequality of many kinds, and, in the extreme case of the Nazis, inhumane treatment that included castration, imprisonment, and death. The news story that began this chapter makes clear that sexual orientation still results in violence, even if this violence falls short of what the Nazis did. Although the gay rights movement has achieved much success, sexual orientation continues to result in other types of inequality as well. This chapter examines the many forms of inequality linked to sexual orientation today. It begins with a conceptual discussion of sexual orientation before turning to its history, explanation, types of inequality, and other matters.

5.1 Understanding Sexual Orientation

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define sexual orientation and gender identity.
2. Describe what percentage of the US population is estimated to be LGBT.
3. Summarize the history of sexual orientation.
4. Evaluate the possible reasons for sexual orientation.

Sexual orientation¹ refers to a person's preference for sexual relationships with individuals of the other sex (*heterosexuality*), one's own sex (*homosexuality*), or both sexes (*bisexuality*). The term also increasingly refers to *transgender* (also *transgendered*) individuals, those whose behavior, appearance, and/or **gender identity**² (the personal conception of oneself as female, male, both, or neither) departs from conventional norms. Transgendered individuals include *transvestites* (those who dress in the clothing of the opposite sex) and *transsexuals* (those whose gender identity differs from their physiological sex and who sometimes undergo a sex change). A *transgender woman* is a person who was born biologically as a male and becomes a woman, while a *transgender man* is a person who was born biologically as a woman and becomes a man. As you almost certainly know, *gay* is the common term now used for any homosexual individual; *gay men* or *gays* is the common term used for homosexual men, while *lesbian* is the common term used for homosexual women. All the types of social orientation just outlined are often collectively referred to by the shorthand *LGBT* (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender). As you almost certainly also know, the term *straight* is used today as a synonym for heterosexual.

Counting Sexual Orientation

We will probably never know precisely how many people are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered. One problem is conceptual. For example, what does it mean to be gay or lesbian? Does one need to actually have sexual relations with a same-sex partner to be considered gay? What if someone is attracted to same-sex partners but does not actually engage in sex with such persons? What if someone identifies as heterosexual but engages in homosexual sex for money (as in certain forms of prostitution) or for power and influence (as in much prison sex)? These conceptual problems make it difficult to determine the extent of homosexuality (Gates, 2011). Gates, G. J. (2011). *How many people are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender?* Los Angeles, CA: Williams Institute.

1. Preference for sexual relationships with individuals of the opposite sex, the same sex, or both sexes.
2. The personal conception of oneself as female, male, both, or neither.

A second problem is empirical. Even if we can settle on a definition of homosexuality, how do we then determine how many people fit this definition? For better or worse, our best evidence of the number of gays and lesbians in the United States comes from surveys that ask random samples of Americans various questions about their sexuality. Although these are anonymous surveys, some individuals may be reluctant to disclose their sexual activity and thoughts to an interviewer. Still, scholars think that estimates from these surveys are fairly accurate but also that they probably underestimate by at least a small amount the number of gays and lesbians.



It is difficult for several reasons to know exactly how many people are LGBT.

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During the 1940s and 1950s, sex researcher Alfred C. Kinsey carried out the first notable attempt to estimate the number of gays and lesbians (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953). Kinsey, A. C., Pomeroy, W. B., & Martin, C. E. (1948). *Sexual behavior in the human male*. Philadelphia, PA: W. B. Saunders; Kinsey, A. C., Pomeroy, W. B., Martin, C. E., & Gebhard, P. H. (1953). *Sexual behavior in the human female*. Philadelphia, PA: W. B. Saunders. His project interviewed more than 11,000 white women and men about their sexual experiences, thoughts, and attractions, with each subject answering hundreds of questions. While most individuals had experiences and feelings that were exclusively heterosexual, a significant number had experiences and feelings that were either exclusively homosexual or both heterosexual and homosexual in varying degrees. These findings led Kinsey to reject the popular idea back then that a person is necessarily either heterosexual or homosexual (or straight or gay, to use the common modern terms). As he wrote, “It is a characteristic of the human mind that tries to dichotomize in its classification of phenomena...Sexual behavior is either normal or abnormal, socially acceptable or unacceptable, heterosexual or homosexual; and many persons do not want to believe that there are gradations in these matters from one to the other extreme” (Kinsey et al., 1953, p. 469). Kinsey, A. C., Pomeroy, W. B., Martin, C. E., & Gebhard, P. H. (1953). *Sexual behavior in the human female*. Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders. Perhaps Kinsey’s most significant and controversial finding was that gradations did, in fact, exist between being exclusively heterosexual on the one hand and exclusively homosexual on the other hand. To reflect these gradations, he developed the well-known *Kinsey Scale*, which ranks individuals on a continuum ranging from 0 (exclusively heterosexual) to 6 (exclusively homosexual).

In terms of specific numbers, Kinsey found that (a) 37 percent of males and 13 percent of females had had at least one same-sex experience; (b) 10 percent of males had mostly homosexual experiences between the ages of 16 and 55, while up

to 6 percent of females had mostly homosexual experiences between the ages of 20 and 35; (c) 4 percent of males were exclusively homosexual after adolescence began, compared to 1–3 percent of females; and (d) 46 percent of males either had engaged in both heterosexual and homosexual experiences or had been attracted to persons of both sexes, compared to 14 percent of females.

More recent research updates Kinsey’s early findings and, more important, uses nationally representative samples of Americans (which Kinsey did not use). In general, this research suggests that Kinsey overstated the numbers of Americans who have had same-sex experiences and/or attractions. A widely cited survey carried out in the early 1990s by researchers at the University of Chicago found that 2.8 percent of men and 1.4 percent of women self-identified as gay/lesbian or bisexual, with greater percentages reporting having had sexual relations with same-sex partners or being attracted to same-sex persons (see [Table 5.1 "Prevalence of Homosexuality in the United States"](#)). In the 2010 General Social Survey (GSS), 1.8 percent of men and 3.3 percent of women self-identified as gay/lesbian or bisexual. In the 2006–2008 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) conducted by the federal government (Chandra, Mosher, Copen, & Sionean, 2011), Chandra, A., Mosher, W. D., Copen, C., & Sionean, C. (2011). *Sexual behavior, sexual attraction, and sexual identity in the United States: Data from the 2006–2008 national survey of family growth* (National Health Statistics Reports: Number 36). Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhsr/nhsr036.pdf>. 2.8 percent of men self-identified as gay or bisexual, compared to 4.6 percent of women (ages 18–44 for both sexes).



An estimated 3.8 percent of the US adult population identifies as LGBT. This figure amounts to about 9 million people.

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Table 5.1 Prevalence of Homosexuality in the United States

Activity, attraction, or identity	Men (%)	Women (%)
Find same-sex sexual relations appealing	4.5	5.6
Attracted to people of same sex	6.2	4.4
Identify as gay or bisexual	2.8	1.4
At least one sex partner of same sex during past year among those sexually active	2.7	1.3

Activity, attraction, or identity	Men (%)	Women (%)
At least one sex partner of same sex since turning 18	4.9	4.1

Source: Data from Laumann, E. O., Gagnon, J. H., Michael, R. T., & Michaels, S. (1994). *The social organization of sexuality*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

These are all a lot of numbers, but demographer Gary J. Gates (2011) Gates, G. J. (2011). *How many people are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender?* Los Angeles, CA: Williams Institute. drew on the most recent national survey evidence to come up with the following estimates for adults 18 and older:

- 3.5 percent of Americans identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and 0.3 percent are transgender; these figures add up to 3.8 percent of Americans, or 9 million people, who are LGBT.
- 3.4 percent of women and 3.6 percent of men identify as LGB.
- 66.7 percent of LGB women identify as bisexual, and 33.3 percent identify as lesbian; 33.3 percent of LGB men identify as bisexual, and 66.7 percent identify as gay. LGB women are thus twice as likely as LGB men to identify as bisexual.
- 8.2 percent of Americans, or 19 million people, have engaged in same-sex sexual behavior, with women twice as likely as men to have done so.
- 11 percent of Americans, or 25.6 million people, report having some same-sex sexual attraction, with women twice as likely as men to report such attraction.

The overall picture from these estimates is clear: Self-identified LGBT people comprise only a small percentage of the US population, but they amount to about 9 million adults and undoubtedly a significant number of adolescents. In addition, the total number of people who, regardless of their sexual orientation, have had a same-sex experience is probably at least 19 million, and the number who have had same-sex attraction is probably at least 25 million.

Sexual Orientation in Historical Perspective

Based on what is known about homosexuality in past societies, it should be no surprise that so many people in the United States identify as gay/lesbian or have had same-sex experiences. This historical record is clear: Homosexuality has existed since ancient times and in some societies has been rather common or at least fully accepted as a normal form of sexual expression.

In the great city of Athens in ancient Greece, male homosexuality (to be more precise, sexual relations between a man and a teenaged boy and, less often, between a man and a man) was not only approved but even encouraged. According to classical scholar K. J. Dover (1989, p. 12), Dover, K. J. (1989). *Greek homosexuality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Athenian society “certainly regarded strong homosexual desire and emotion as normal,” in part because it also generally “entertained a low opinion of the intellectual capacity and staying-power of women.” Louis Crompton (2003, p. 2), Crompton, L. (2003). *Homosexuality and civilization*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press. who wrote perhaps the definitive history of homosexuality, agrees that male homosexuality in ancient Greece was common and notes that “in Greek history and literature...the abundance of accounts of homosexual love overwhelms the investigator.” He adds,

Greek lyric poets sing of male love from almost the earliest fragments down to the end of classical times...Vase-painters portray scores of homoerotic scenes, hundreds of inscriptions celebrate the love of boys, and such affairs enter into the lives of a long catalogue of famous Greek statesmen, warriors, artists, and authors. Though it has often been assumed that the love of males was a fashion confined to a small intellectual elite during the age of Plato, in fact it was pervasive throughout all levels of Greek society and held an honored place in Greek culture for more than a thousand years, that is, from before 600 B.C.E. to about 400 C.E.

Male homosexuality in ancient Rome was also common and accepted as normal sexuality, but it took a different form from than in ancient Greece. Ancient Romans disapproved of sexual relations between a man and a freeborn male youth, but they approved of relations between a slave master and his youthful male slave. Sexual activity of this type was common. As Crompton (2003, p. 80) Crompton, L. (2003). *Homosexuality and civilization*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press. wryly notes, “Opportunities were ample for Roman masters” because slaves comprised about 40 percent of the population of ancient Rome. However, these “opportunities” are best regarded as violent domination by slave masters over their slaves.

By the time Rome fell in 476 CE, Europe had become a Christian continent. Influenced by several passages in the Bible that condemn homosexuality, Europeans considered homosexuality a sin, and their governments outlawed same-sex relations. If discovered, male homosexuals (or any men suspected of homosexuality) were vulnerable to execution for the next fourteen centuries, and many did lose their lives. During the Middle Ages, gay men and lesbians were stoned, burned at the stake, hanged, or beheaded, and otherwise abused and mistreated. Crompton (2003, p. 539) Crompton, L. (2003). *Homosexuality and civilization*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press. calls these atrocities a “routine of terror” and a “kaleidoscope of horrors.” Hitler’s persecution of gay men several centuries after the Middle Ages ended had ample precedent in European history.

In contrast to the European treatment of gay men and lesbians, China and Japan from ancient times onward viewed homosexuality much more positively in what Crompton (2003, p. 215) Crompton, L. (2003). *Homosexuality and civilization*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press. calls an “unselfconscious acceptance of same-sex relations.” He adds that male love in Japan during the 1500s was “a national tradition—one the Japanese thought natural and meritorious” (Crompton, 2003, p. 412) Crompton, L. (2003). *Homosexuality and civilization*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press. and very much part of the *samurai* (military nobility) culture of preindustrial Japan. In China, both male and female homosexuality were seen as normal and even healthy sexual outlets. Because Confucianism, the major Chinese religion when the Common Era began, considered women inferior, it considered male friendships very important and thus may have unwittingly promoted same-sex relations among men. Various artistic and written records indicate that male homosexuality was fairly common in China over the centuries, although the exact numbers can never be known. When China began trading and otherwise communicating with Europe during the Ming dynasty, its tolerance for homosexuality shocked and disgusted Catholic missionaries and other Europeans. Some European clergy and scientists even blamed earthquakes and other natural disasters in China on this tolerance.

In addition to this body of work by historians, anthropologists have also studied same-sex relations in small, traditional societies. In many of these societies, homosexuality is both common and accepted as normal sexual behavior. In one overview of seventy-six societies, the authors found that almost two-thirds regarded homosexuality as “normal and socially acceptable for certain members of the community” (Ford & Beach, 1951, p. 130). Ford, C. S., & Beach, F. A. (1951). *Patterns of sexual behavior*. New York: Harper and Row. Among the Azande of East Africa, for example, young warriors live with each other and are not allowed to marry. During this time, they often have sex with younger boys. Among the Sambia of New Guinea, young males live separately from females and have same-sex relations for at least a decade. It is felt that the boys would be less masculine if they continued to live with their mothers and that the semen of older males helps young boys become strong and fierce (Edgerton, 1976). Edgerton, R. (1976). *Deviance: A cross-cultural perspective*. Menlo Park, CA: Cummings Publishing.

This brief historical and anthropological overview provides ready evidence of what was said at its outset: Homosexuality has existed since ancient times and in some societies has been rather common or at least fully accepted as a normal form of sexual expression. Although Western society, influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition, has largely condemned homosexuality since Western civilization began some 2,000 years ago, the great civilizations of ancient Greece and ancient China and Japan until the industrial age approved of homosexuality. In these civilizations, male homosexuality was fairly common, and female homosexuality was far from unknown. Same-sex relations are also fairly common in many of the societies that

anthropologists have studied. Although Western societies have long considered homosexuality sinful and unnatural and more generally have viewed it very negatively, the historical and anthropological record demonstrates that same-sex relationships are far from rare. They thus must objectively be regarded as normal expressions of sexuality.

In fact, some of the most famous individuals in Western political, literary, and artistic history certainly or probably engaged in same-sex relations, either sometimes or exclusively: Alexander the Great, Hans Christian Andersen, Marie Antoinette, Aristotle, Sir Francis Bacon, James Baldwin, Leonard Bernstein, Lord Byron, Julius Caesar, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Frederick the Great, Leonardo de Vinci, Herman Melville, Michelangelo, Plato, Cole Porter, Richard the Lionhearted, Eleanor Roosevelt, Socrates, Gertrude Stein, Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Tennessee Williams, Oscar Wilde, and Virginia Woolf, to name just a few. Regardless or perhaps in some cases because of their sexuality, they all made great contributions to the societies in which they lived.

Explaining Sexual Orientation

We have seen that it is difficult to determine the number of people who are gay/lesbian or bisexual. It is even more difficult to determine why some people have these sexual orientations while most do not, and scholars disagree on the “causes” of sexual orientation (Engle, McFalls, Gallagher, & Curtis, 2006; Sheldon, Pfeffer, Jayaratne, Feldbaum, & Petty, 2007). Engle, M. J., McFalls, J. A., Jr., Gallagher, B. J., III, & Curtis, K. (2006). The attitudes of American sociologists toward causal theories of male homosexuality. *The American Sociologist*, 37(1), 68–76; Sheldon, J. P., Pfeffer, C. A., Jayaratne, T. E., Feldbaum, M., & Petty, E. M. (2007). Beliefs about the etiology of homosexuality and about the ramifications of discovering its possible genetic origin. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 52(3/4), 111–150. Determining the origins of sexual orientation is not just an academic exercise. When people believe that the roots of homosexuality are biological or that gays otherwise do not choose to be gay, they are more likely to have positive or at least tolerant views of same-sex behavior. When they believe that homosexuality is instead merely a personal choice, they are more likely to disapprove of it (Sheldon et al., 2007). Sheldon, J. P., Pfeffer, C. A., Jayaratne, T. E., Feldbaum, M., & Petty, E. M. (2007). Beliefs about the etiology of homosexuality and about the ramifications of discovering its possible genetic origin. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 52(3/4), 111–150. For this reason if for no other, it is important to know why some people are gay or bisexual while most are not.

Studies of the origins of sexual orientation focus mostly on biological factors and on social and cultural factors, and a healthy scholarly debate exists on the relative importance of these two sets of factors.

Biological Factors

Research points to certain genetic and other biological roots of sexual orientation but is by no means conclusive. One line of research concerns genetics. Although no “gay gene” has been discovered, studies of identical twins find they are more likely to have the same sexual orientation (gay or straight) than would be expected from chance alone (Kendler, Thornton, Gilman, & Kessler, 2000; Santtila et al., 2008).Kendler, K. S., Thornton, L. M., Gilman, S. E., & Kessler, R. C. (2000). Sexual orientation in a US national sample of twin and nontwin sibling pairs. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 157, 1843–1846; Santtila, P., Sandnabba, N. K., Harlaar, N., Varjonen, M., Alanko, K., & Pahlen, B. v. d. (2008). Potential for homosexual response is prevalent and genetic. *Biological Psychology*, 77, 102–105. Because identical twins have the same DNA, this similarity suggests, but does not prove, a genetic basis for sexual orientation. Keep in mind, however, that any physical or behavioral trait that is *totally* due to genetics should show up in both twins or in neither twin. Because many identical twins do *not* have the same sexual orientation, this dissimilarity suggests that genetics are far from the only cause of sexual orientation, to the extent they cause it at all. Several methodological problems also cast doubt on findings from many of these twin studies. A recent review concluded that the case for a genetic cause of sexual orientation is far from proven: “Findings from genetic studies of homosexuality in humans have been confusing—contradictory at worst and tantalizing at best—with no clear, strong, compelling evidence for a distinctly genetic basis for homosexuality” (Sheldon et al., 2007, p. 114).Sheldon, J. P., Pfeffer, C. A., Jayaratne, T. E., Feldbaum, M., & Petty, E. M. (2007). Beliefs about the etiology of homosexuality and about the ramifications of discovering its possible genetic origin. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 52(3/4), 111–150.

Another line of research concerns brain anatomy, as some studies find differences in the size and structure of the hypothalamus, which controls many bodily functions, in the brains of gays versus the brains of straights (Allen & Gorski, 1992).Allen, L. S., & Gorski, R. A. (1992). Sexual orientation and the size of the anterior commissure in the human brain. *PNAS*, 89, 7199–7202. However, other studies find no such differences (Lasco, Jordan, Edgar, Petito, & Byne, 2002).Lasco, M. A., Jordan, T. J., Edgar, M. A., Petito, C. K., & Byne, W. (2002). A lack of dimorphism of sex or sexual orientation in the human anterior commissure. *Brain Research*, 986, 95–98. Complicating matters further, because sexual behavior can affect the hypothalamus (Breedlove, 1997),Breedlove, M. S. (1997). Sex on the brain. *Nature*, 389, 801. it is difficult to determine whether any differences that might be found reflect the influence of the hypothalamus on sexual orientation, or instead the



influence of sexual orientation on the hypothalamus (Sheldon et al., 2007). Sheldon, J. P., Pfeffer, C. A., Jayaratne, T. E., Feldbaum, M., & Petty, E. M. (2007). Beliefs about the etiology of homosexuality and about the ramifications of discovering its possible genetic origin. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 52(3/4), 111–150.

Despite scholarly speculation, sexual orientation does not appear to be affected by the level of prenatal hormones.

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A third line of biological research concerns hormonal balance in the womb, with scientists speculating that the level of prenatal androgen affects which sexual orientation develops. Because prenatal androgen levels cannot be measured, studies typically measure it only indirectly in the bodies of gays and straights by comparing the lengths of certain fingers and bones that are thought to be related to prenatal androgen. Some of these studies suggest that gay men had lower levels of prenatal androgen than straight men and that lesbians had higher levels of prenatal androgen than straight women, but other studies find no evidence of this connection (Martin & Nguyen, 2004; Mustanski, Chivers, & Bailey, 2002). Martin, J. T., & Nguyen, D. H. (2004). Anthropometric analysis of homosexuals and heterosexuals: Implications for early hormone exposure. *Hormones and Behavior*, 45, 31–39; Mustanski, B. S., Chivers, M. L., & Bailey, J. M. (2002). A critical review of recent biological research on human sexual orientation. *Annual Review of Sex Research*, 13, 89–140. A recent review concluded that the results of the hormone studies are “often inconsistent” and that “the notion that non-heterosexual preferences may reflect [deviations from normal prenatal hormonal levels] is not supported by the available data” (Rahman, 2005, p. 1057). Rahman, Q. (2005). The neurodevelopment of human sexual orientation. *Neuroscience Biobehavioral Review*, 29(7), 1057–1066.

Social and Cultural Factors

Sociologists usually emphasize the importance of socialization over biology for the learning of many forms of human behavior. In this view, humans are born with “blank slates” and thereafter shaped by their society and culture, and children are shaped by their parents, teachers, peers, and other aspects of their immediate social environment while they are growing up.

Given this standard sociological position, one might think that sociologists generally believe that people are gay or straight not because of their biology but because they learn to be gay or straight from their society, culture, and immediate social environment. This, in fact, was a common belief of sociologists about a generation ago (Engle et al., 2006). Engle, M. J., McFalls, J. A., Jr., Gallagher, B. J., III, & Curtis, K. (2006). The attitudes of American sociologists toward causal theories of male homosexuality. *The American Sociologist*, 37(1), 68–76. In a 1988 review article,

two sociologists concluded that “evidence that homosexuality is a social construction [learned from society and culture] is far more powerful than the evidence for a widespread organic [biological] predisposition toward homosexual desire” (Risman & Schwartz, 1988, p. 143).Risman, B., & Schwartz, P. (1988). Sociological research on male and female homosexuality. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 14, 125–147. The most popular introductory sociology text of the era similarly declared, “Many people, including some homosexuals, believe that gays and lesbians are simply ‘born that way.’ But since we know that even heterosexuals are not ‘born that way,’ this explanation seems unlikely...Homosexuality, like any other sexual behavior ranging from oral sex to sadomasochism to the pursuit of brunettes, is learned” (Robertson, 1987, p. 243).Robertson, I. (1987). *Sociology*. New York, NY: Worth.

However, sociologists’ views of the origins of sexual orientation have apparently changed since these passages were written. In a recent national survey of a random sample of sociologists, 22 percent said male homosexuality results from biological factors, 38 percent said it results from both biological and environmental (learning) factors, and 39 percent said it results from environmental factors (Engle et al., 2006).Engle, M. J., McFalls, J. A., Jr., Gallagher, B. J., III, & Curtis, K. (2006). The attitudes of American sociologists toward causal theories of male homosexuality. *The American Sociologist*, 37(1), 68–76. Thus 60 percent (= 22 + 38) thought that biology totally or partly explains male homosexuality, almost certainly a much higher figure than would have been found a generation ago had a similar survey been done.

In this regard, it is important to note that 77 percent (= 38 + 39) of the sociologists still feel that environmental factors, or socialization, matter as well. Scholars who hold this view believe that sexual orientation is partly or totally learned from one’s society, culture, and immediate social environment. In this way of thinking, we learn “messages” from all these influences about whether it is OK or not OK to be sexually attracted to someone from our own sex and/or to someone from the opposite sex. If we grow up with positive messages about same-sex attraction, we are more likely to acquire this attraction. If we grow up with negative messages about same-sex attraction, we are less likely to acquire it and more likely to have heterosexual desire.

It is difficult to do the necessary type of research to test whether socialization matters in this way, but the historical and cross-cultural evidence discussed earlier provides at least some support for this process. Homosexuality was generally accepted in ancient Greece, ancient China, and ancient Japan, and it also seemed rather common in those societies. The same connection holds true in many of the societies that anthropologists have studied. In contrast, homosexuality was condemned in Europe from the very early part of the first millennium CE, and it

seems to have been rather rare (although it is very possible that many gays hid their sexual orientation for fear of persecution and death).

So where does this leave us? What are the origins of sexual orientation? The most honest answer is that we do not yet know its origins. As we have seen, many scholars attribute sexual orientation to still unknown biological factor(s) over which individuals have no control, just as individuals do not decide whether they are left-handed or right-handed. Supporting this view, many gays say they realized they were gay during adolescence, just as straights would say they realized they were straight during their own adolescence; moreover, evidence (from toy, play, and clothing preferences) of future sexual orientation even appears during childhood (Rieger, Linsenmeier, Bailey, & Gyax, 2008). Rieger, G., Linsenmeier, J. A. W., Bailey, J. M., & Gyax, L. (2008). Sexual orientation and childhood gender nonconformity: Evidence from home videos. *Developmental Psychology, 44*(1), 46–58. Other scholars say that sexual orientation is at least partly influenced by cultural norms, so that individuals are more likely to identify as gay or straight and be attracted to their same sex or opposite sex depending on the cultural views of sexual orientation into which they are socialized as they grow up. At best, perhaps all we can say is that sexual orientation stems from a complex mix of biological and cultural factors that remain to be determined.

The official stance of the American Psychological Association (APA) is in line with this view. According to the APA, “There is no consensus among scientists about the exact reasons that an individual develops a heterosexual, bisexual, gay, or lesbian orientation. Although much research has examined the possible genetic, hormonal, developmental, social, and cultural influences on sexual orientation, no findings have emerged that permit scientists to conclude that sexual orientation is determined by any particular factor or factors. Many think that nature and nurture both play complex roles; most people experience little or no sense of choice about their sexual orientation” (American Psychological Association, 2008, p. 2). American Psychological Association. (2008). *Answers to your questions: For a better understanding of sexual orientation and homosexuality*. Washington, DC: Author.

Although the exact origins of sexual orientation remain unknown, the APA’s last statement is perhaps the most important conclusion from research on this issue: Most people experience little or no sense of choice about their sexual orientation. Because, as mentioned earlier, people are more likely to approve of or tolerate homosexuality when they believe it is not a choice, efforts to educate the public about this research conclusion should help the public become more accepting of LGBT behavior and individuals.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- An estimated 3.8 percent, or 9 million, Americans identify as LGBT.
- Homosexuality seems to have been fairly common and very much accepted in some ancient societies as well as in many societies studied by anthropologists.
- Scholars continue to debate the extent to which sexual orientation stems more from biological factors or from social and cultural factors and the extent to which sexual orientation is a choice or not a choice.

FOR YOUR REVIEW

1. Do you think sexual orientation is a choice, or not? Explain your answer.
2. Write an essay that describes how your middle school and high school friends talked about sexual orientation generally and homosexuality specifically.

5.2 Public Attitudes about Sexual Orientation

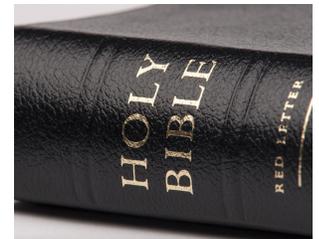
LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the extent and correlates of heterosexism.
2. Understand the nature of public opinion on other issues related to sexual orientation.
3. Describe how views about LGBT issues have changed since a few decades ago.

As noted earlier, views about gays and lesbians have certainly been very negative over the centuries in the areas of the world, such as Europe and the Americas, that mostly follow the Judeo-Christian tradition. There is no question that the Bible condemns homosexuality, with perhaps the most quoted Biblical passages in this regard found in Leviticus:

- “Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable” (Leviticus 18:22).
- “If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads” (Leviticus 20:13).

The important question, though, is to what extent these passages should be interpreted literally. Certainly very few people today believe that male homosexuals should be executed, despite what Leviticus 20:13 declares. Still, many people who condemn homosexuality cite passages like Leviticus 18:22 and Leviticus 20:13 as reasons for their negative views.



The Bible contains several passages that appear to condemn homosexuality.

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This is not a theology text, but it is appropriate to mention briefly two points that many religious scholars make about what the Bible says about homosexuality (Helminiak, 2000; Via & Gagnon, 2003). Helminiak, D. A. (2000). *What the Bible really says about homosexuality*.

Tajique, NM: Alamo Square Press; Via, D. O., & Gagnon, R. A. J. (2003). *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two views*.

Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. First, English translations of the Bible’s antigay passages may distort their original meanings, and various contextual studies of the

Bible suggest that these passages did not, in fact, make blanket condemnations about homosexuality.

Second, and perhaps more important, most people “pick and choose” what they decide to believe from the Bible and what they decide not to believe. Although the Bible is a great source of inspiration for many people, most individuals are inconsistent when it comes to choosing which Biblical beliefs to believe and about which beliefs not to believe. For example, if someone chooses to disapprove of homosexuality because the Bible condemns it, why does this person not also choose to believe that gay men should be executed, which is precisely what Leviticus 20:13 dictates? Further, the Bible calls for many practices and specifies many penalties that even very devout people do not follow or believe. For example, most people except for devout Jews do not keep kosher, even though the Bible says that everyone should do this, and most people certainly do not believe people who commit adultery, engage in premarital sex, or work on the Sabbath should be executed, even though the Bible says that such people should be executed. Citing the inconsistency with which most people follow Biblical commands, many religious scholars say it is inappropriate to base public views about homosexuality on what the Bible says about it.

We now turn our attention to social science evidence on views about LGBT behavior and individuals. We first look at negative attitudes and then discuss a few other views.

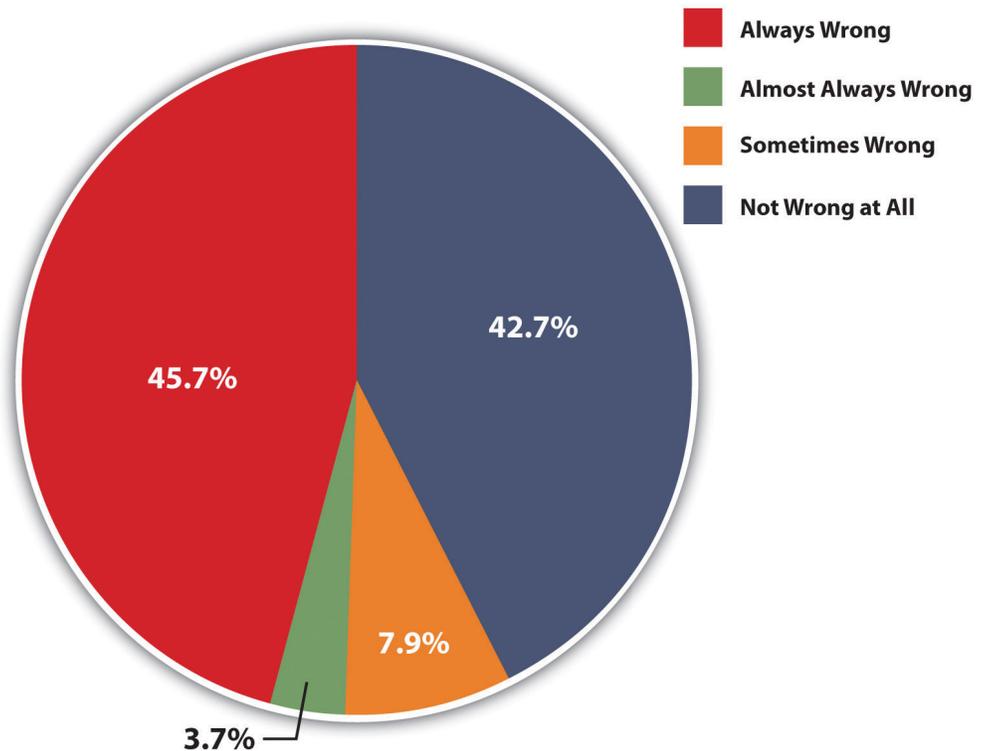
The Extent of Heterosexism in the United States

We saw in earlier chapters that *racism* refers to negative views about, and practices toward, people of color, and that *sexism* refers to negative views about, and practices toward, women. **Heterosexism**³ is the analogous term for negative views about, and discriminatory practices toward, LGBT individuals and their sexual behavior.

There are many types of negative views about LGBT and thus many ways to measure heterosexism. The General Social Survey (GSS), given regularly to a national sample of US residents, asks whether respondents think that “sexual relations between two adults of the same sex” are always wrong, almost always wrong, sometimes wrong, or not wrong at all. In 2010, almost 46 percent of respondents said same-sex relations are “always wrong,” and 43 percent responded they are “not wrong at all” (see [Figure 5.1 "Opinion about “Sexual Relations between Two Adults of the Same Sex,” 2010"](#)).

3. Negative views about, and discriminatory practices toward, LGBT individuals and their sexual behavior.

Figure 5.1 Opinion about “Sexual Relations between Two Adults of the Same Sex,” 2010



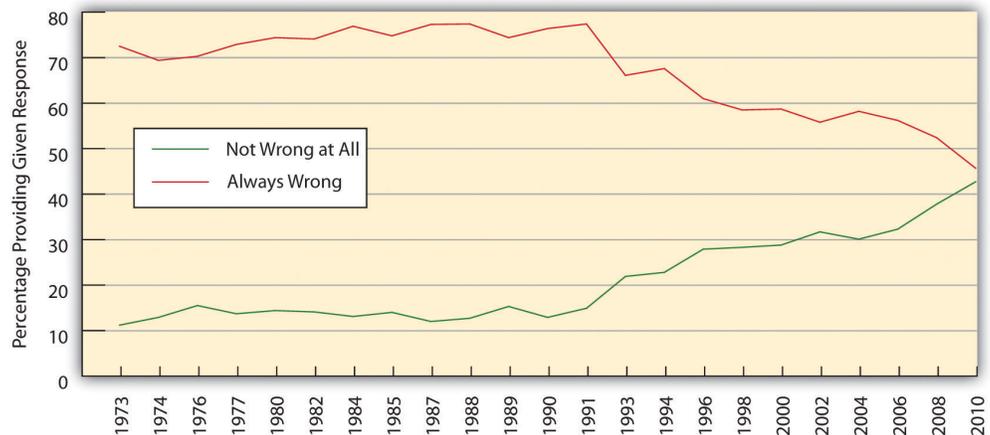
Source: Data from General Social Survey. (2010). Retrieved from <http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harcsda+gss10>.

As another way of measuring heterosexism, the Gallup poll asks whether “gay or lesbian relations” are “morally acceptable or morally wrong” (Gallup, 2011). Gallup. (2011). Gay and lesbian rights. *Gallup*. Retrieved September 4, 2011, from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1651/gay-lesbian-rights.aspx>. In 2011, 56 percent of Gallup respondents answered “morally acceptable,” while 39 percent replied “morally wrong.”

Although [Figure 5.1 "Opinion about “Sexual Relations between Two Adults of the Same Sex,” 2010"](#) shows that 57.3 percent of Americans (= 45.7 + 3.7 + 7.9) think that same-sex relations are at least sometimes wrong, public views regarding LGBT have notably become more positive over the past few decades. We can see evidence of this trend in [Figure 5.2 "Changes in Opinion about “Sexual Relations between Two Adults of the Same Sex,” 1973–2010"](#), which shows that the percentage of GSS respondents who say same-sex relations are “always wrong” has dropped considerably since the GSS first asked this question in 1973, while the percentage

who respond “not wrong at all” has risen considerably, with both these changes occurring since the early 1990s.

Figure 5.2 Changes in Opinion about “Sexual Relations between Two Adults of the Same Sex,” 1973–2010



Source: Data from General Social Surveys. (1973–2010). Retrieved from <http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harcstda+gss10>.

Trends in Gallup data confirm that public views regarding homosexuality have become more positive in recent times. Recall that 56 percent of Gallup respondents in 2011 called same-sex relations “morally acceptable,” while 39 percent replied “morally wrong.” Ten years earlier, these percentages were 40 percent and 53 percent, respectively, representing a marked shift in public opinion in just a decade.

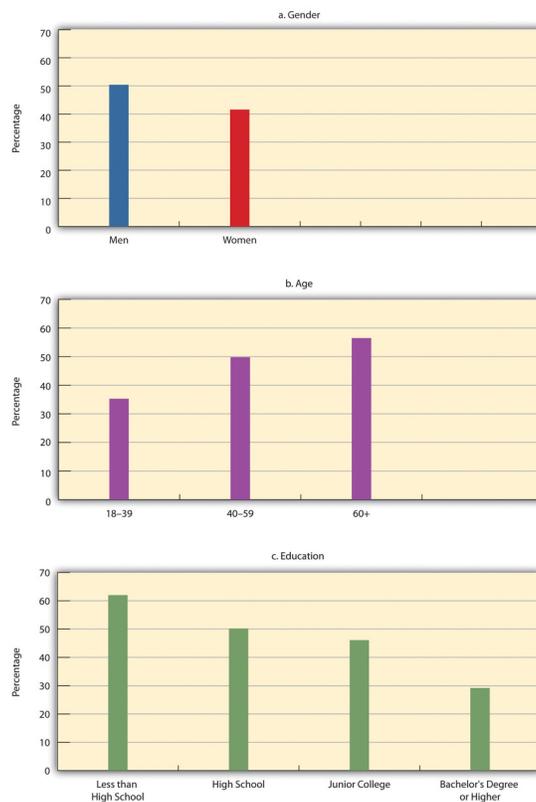
Correlates of Heterosexism

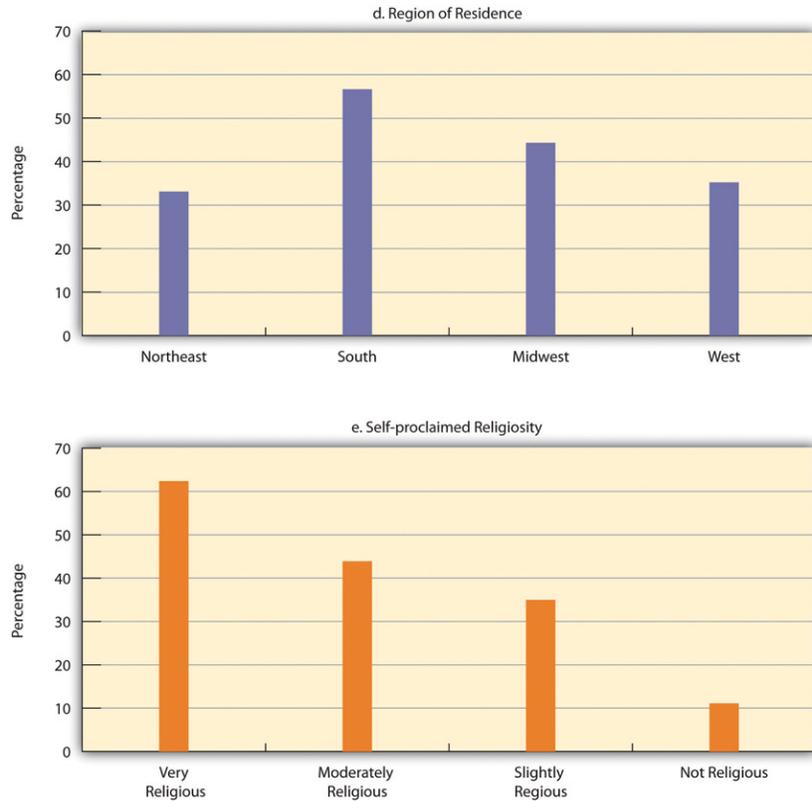
Scholars have investigated the sociodemographic factors that predict heterosexist attitudes. Reflecting the sociological axiom that our social backgrounds influence our attitudes and behavior, several aspects of our social backgrounds influence views about gays and lesbians. Among the most influential of these factors are gender, age, education, region of residence, and religion. We can illustrate each of these influences with the GSS question on whether same-sex relations are wrong, using the response “always wrong” as a measure of heterosexism.

- **Gender.** Men are somewhat more heterosexist than women (see part a of Figure 5.3 “Correlates of Heterosexism (Percentage Saying That Same-Sex Relations Are “Always Wrong”)”).

- **Age.** Older people are considerably more heterosexist than younger people (see part **b** of Figure 5.3 "Correlates of Heterosexism (Percentage Saying That Same-Sex Relations Are “Always Wrong”)").
- **Education.** Less educated people are considerably more heterosexist than more educated people (see part **c** of Figure 5.3 "Correlates of Heterosexism (Percentage Saying That Same-Sex Relations Are “Always Wrong”)").
- **Region of residence.** Southerners are more heterosexist than non-Southerners (see part **d** of Figure 5.3 "Correlates of Heterosexism (Percentage Saying That Same-Sex Relations Are “Always Wrong”)").
- **Religion.** Religious people are considerably more heterosexist than less religious people (see part **e** of Figure 5.3 "Correlates of Heterosexism (Percentage Saying That Same-Sex Relations Are “Always Wrong”)").

Figure 5.3 *Correlates of Heterosexism (Percentage Saying That Same-Sex Relations Are “Always Wrong”)*





Source: Data from General Social Survey. (2010). Retrieved from <http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harcsta+gss10>.

The age difference in heterosexism is perhaps particularly interesting. Many studies find that young people—those younger than 30—are especially accepting of homosexuality and of same-sex marriage. As older people, who have more negative views, pass away, it is likely that public opinion as a whole will become more accepting of homosexuality and issues related to it. Scholars think this trend will further the legalization of same-sex marriage and the establishment of other laws and policies that will reduce the discrimination and inequality that the LGBT community experiences (Gelman, Lax, & Phillips, 2010). Gelman, A., Lax, J., & Phillips, J. (2010, August 22). Over time, a gay marriage groundswell. *New York Times*, p. WK3.



Because young people are especially likely to be accepting of homosexuality, attitudes about LGBT issues should continue to improve as the older population passes away.

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Opinion on the Origins of Sexual Orientation

Earlier we discussed scholarly research on the origins of sexual orientation. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the US public is rather split over the issue of whether sexual orientation is in-born or instead the result of environmental factors, and also over the closely related issue of whether it is something people are able to choose. A 2011 Gallup poll asked, “In your view, is being gay or lesbian something a person is born with, or due to factors such as upbringing and environment?” (Jones, 2011). Jones, Jeffrey M. (2011). Support for legal gay relations hits new high. Retrieved from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/147785/Support-Legal-Gay-Relations-Hits-New-High.aspx>. Forty percent of respondents replied that sexual orientation is in-born, while 42 percent said it stems from upbringing and/or environment. The 40 percent in-born figure represented a sharp increase from the 13 percent figure that Gallup obtained when it first asked this question in 1977. A 2010 CBS News poll, asked, “Do you think being homosexual is something people choose to be, or do you think it is something they cannot change?” (CBS News, 2010). CBS News. (2010, June 9). CBS News poll: Views of gays and lesbians. Retrieved from http://www.cbsnews.com/htdocs/pdf/poll_gays_lesbians_060910.pdf. About 36 percent of respondents replied that homosexuality is a choice, while 51 percent said it is something that cannot be changed, with the remainder saying they did not know or providing no answer. The 51 percent “cannot change” figure represented an increase from the 43 percent figure that CBS News obtained when it first asked this question in 1993.

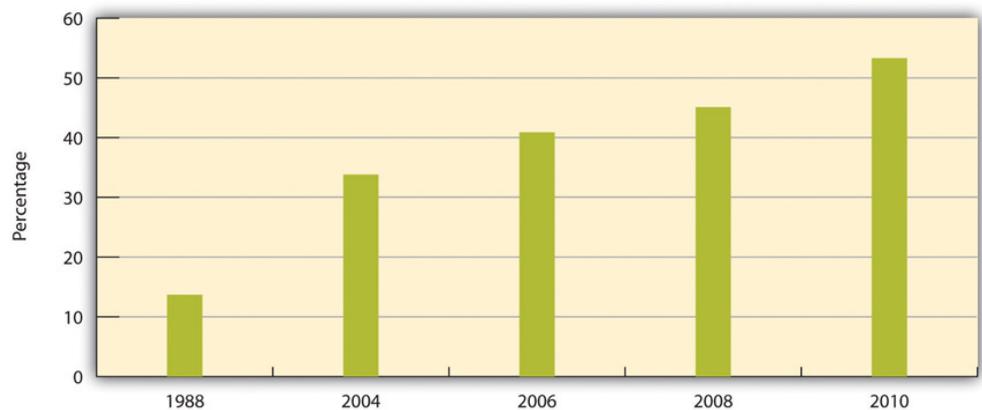
Other Views

The next section discusses several issues that demonstrate inequality based on sexual orientation. Because these issues are so controversial, public opinion polls have included many questions about them. We examine public views on some of these issues in this section.

A first issue is same-sex marriage. The 2010 GSS asked whether respondents agree that “homosexual couples should have the right to marry one another”: 53.3 percent of respondents who expressed an opinion agreed with this statement, and 46.7 percent disagreed, indicating a slight majority in favor of legalizing same-sex marriage (SDA, 2010). SDA. (2010). GSS 1972–2010 cumulative datafile. Retrieved from http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harc_sda+gss10. In 2011, an ABC News/ Washington Post poll asked about same-sex marriage in a slightly different way: “Do you think it should be legal or illegal for gay and lesbian couples to get married?” A majority, 51 percent, of respondents replied “legal,” and 45 percent replied “illegal” (Langer, 2011). Langer, Gary. (2011). Support for gay marriage reaches a milestone. Retrieved from <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/support-gay-marriage-reaches-milestone-half-americans-support/>

[story?id=13159608#.T66_kp9YtQp](#). Although only bare majorities now favor legalizing same-sex marriage, public views on this issue have become much more positive in recent years. We can see dramatic evidence of this trend in [Figure 5.4 "Changes in Opinion about Same-Sex Marriage, 1988–2010 \(Percentage Agreeing That Same-Sex Couples Should Have the Right to Marry; Those Expressing No Opinion Excluded from Analysis\)"](#), which shows that the percentage agreeing with the GSS question on the right of same-sex couples to marry has risen considerably during the past quarter-century.

Figure 5.4 Changes in Opinion about Same-Sex Marriage, 1988–2010 (Percentage Agreeing That Same-Sex Couples Should Have the Right to Marry; Those Expressing No Opinion Excluded from Analysis)



Source: Data from General Social Surveys. (1988–2010). Retrieved from <http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harcsda+gss10>.

In a related topic, public opinion about same-sex couples as parents has also become more favorable in recent years. In 2007, 50 percent of the public said that the increasing number of same-sex couples raising children was “a bad thing” for society. By 2011, this figure had declined to 35 percent, a remarkable decrease in just four years (Pew Research Center, 2011).
 Pew Research Center. (2011). 35%—Disapprove of gay and lesbian couples raising children. Retrieved from <http://pewresearch.org/databank/dailynumber/?NumberID=1253>.

A second LGBT issue that has aroused public debate involves the right of gays and lesbians to serve in the military, which we discuss further later in this chapter. A 2010 ABC News/Washington Post poll asked whether “gays and lesbians who do not publicly disclose their sexual orientation should be allowed to serve in the military” (Mokrzycki, 2010).
 Mokrzycki, Mike. (2010). Support for gays in the military crosses ideological, party lines. Retrieved from <http://abcnews.go.com/PollingUnit/poll-support-gays-military-crosses-ideological-party-lines/>

[story?id=9811516#.T67A659YtQo](http://www.gallup.com/poll/108115/americans-evenly-divided-morality-homosexuality.aspx). About 83 percent of respondents replied they “should be allowed,” up considerably from the 63 percent figure that this poll obtained when it first asked this question in 1993 (Saad, 2008). Saad, Lydia. (2008). Americans evenly divided on morality of homosexuality. Retrieved from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/108115/americans-evenly-divided-morality-homosexuality.aspx>.

A third issue involves the right of gays and lesbians to be free from job discrimination based on their sexual orientation, as federal law does *not* prohibit such discrimination. A 2008 Gallup poll asked whether “homosexuals should or should not have equal rights in terms of job opportunities.” About 89 percent of respondents replied that there “should be” such rights, and only 8 percent said there “should not be” such rights. The 89 percent figure represented a large increase from the 56 percent figure that Gallup obtained in 1977 when Gallup first asked this question.

Two Brief Conclusions on Public Attitudes

We have had limited space to discuss public views on LGBT topics, but two brief conclusions are apparent from the discussion. First, although the public remains sharply divided on various LGBT issues and much of the public remains heterosexist, views about LGBT behavior and certain rights of the LGBT community have become markedly more positive in recent decades. This trend matches what we saw in earlier chapters regarding views concerning people of color and women. The United States has without question become less racist, less sexist, and less heterosexist since the 1970s.

Second, certain aspects of people’s sociodemographic backgrounds influence the extent to which they do, or do not, hold heterosexist attitudes. This conclusion is not surprising, as sociology has long since demonstrated that social backgrounds influence many types of attitudes and behaviors, but the influence we saw earlier of sociodemographic factors on heterosexism was striking nonetheless. These factors would no doubt also be relevant for understanding differences in views on other LGBT issues. As you think about your own views, perhaps you can recognize why you might hold these views based on your gender, age, education, and other aspects of your social background.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Views about LGBT behavior have improved markedly since a generation ago. More than half the US public now supports same-sex marriage.
- Males, older people, the less educated, Southerners, and the more religious exhibit higher levels of heterosexism than their counterparts.

FOR YOUR REVIEW

1. Reread this section and indicate how you would have responded to every survey question discussed in the section. Drawing on the discussion of correlates of heterosexism, explain how knowing about these correlates helps you understand why you hold your own views.
2. Why do you think public opinion about LGBT behavior and issues has become more positive during the past few decades?

5.3 Inequality Based on Sexual Orientation

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the behavioral, psychological, and health effects of bullying and other mistreatment of the LGBT community.
2. Evaluate the arguments for and against same-sex marriage.
3. Provide three examples of heterosexual privilege.

Until just a decade ago, individuals who engaged in consensual same-sex relations could be arrested in many states for violating so-called sodomy laws. The US Supreme Court, which had upheld such laws in 1986, finally outlawed them in 2003 in *Lawrence v. Texas*, 539 US 558, by a 6–3 vote. The majority opinion of the court declared that individuals have a constitutional right under the Fourteenth Amendment to engage in consensual, private sexual activity.

Despite this landmark ruling, the LGBT community continues to experience many types of problems. In this regard, sexual orientation is a significant source of social inequality, just as race/ethnicity, gender, and social class are sources of social inequality. We examine manifestations of inequality based on sexual orientation in this section.



Until the Supreme Court's Lawrence v. Texas ruling just a decade ago, individuals who engaged in consensual same-sex relations could be arrested in many states.

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Bullying and Violence

The news story that began this chapter concerned the reported beatings of two gay men. Bullying and violence against adolescents and adults thought or known to be gay or lesbian constitute perhaps the most serious manifestation of inequality based on sexual orientation.

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2011), Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2011). *Crime in the United States, 2010*. Washington, DC: Author. 1,277 hate crimes (violence and/or property destruction) against gays and lesbians occurred in 2010, although this number is very likely an underestimate because many hate crime victims do not report their victimization to the police. An estimated 25 percent of gay men have been physically or sexually assaulted because of their sexual orientation (Egan, 2010), Egan, P. J. (2010, spring). Within reach: Reducing LGBT inequality in the age of

Obama. *Pathways: A Magazine on Poverty, Inequality, and Social Policy*, 22–25. and some have been murdered. Matthew Shepard was one of these victims. He was a student at the University of Wyoming in October 1998 when he was kidnapped by two young men who tortured him, tied him to a fence, and left him to die. When found almost a day later, he was in a coma, and he died a few days later. Shepard's murder prompted headlines around the country and is credited with winning public sympathy for the problems experienced by the LGBT community (Loffreda, 2001). Loffreda, B. (2001). *Losing Matt Shepard: Life and politics in the aftermath of anti-gay murder*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Gay teenagers and straight teenagers thought to be gay are very often the targets of taunting, bullying, physical assault, and other abuse in schools and elsewhere (Denizet-Lewis, 2009). Denizet-Lewis, B. (2009, September 27). Coming out in middle school. *New York Times Magazine*, p. MM36ff. Survey evidence indicates that 85 percent of LGBT students report being verbally harassed at school, and 40 percent report being verbally harassed; 72 percent report hearing antigay slurs frequently or often at school; 61 percent feel unsafe at school, with 30 percent missing at least one day of school in the past month for fear of their safety; and 17 percent are physically assaulted to the point they need medical attention (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010). Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Diaz, E. M., & Bartkiewicz, M. J. (2010). *The 2009 national school climate survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth in our nation's schools*. New York, NY: Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network.

The bullying, violence, and other mistreatment experienced by gay teens have significant educational and mental health effects. The most serious consequence is suicide, as a series of suicides by gay teens in fall 2010 reminded the nation. During that period, three male teenagers in California, Indiana, and Texas killed themselves after reportedly being victims of antigay bullying, and a male college student also killed himself after his roommate broadcast a live video of the student making out with another male (Talbot, 2010). Talbot, M. (2010, October 25). Pride and prejudice. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from <http://www.newyorker.com>.

In other effects, LGBT teens are much more likely than their straight peers to skip school; to do poorly in their studies; to drop out of school; and to experience depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Mental Health America, 2011). Mental Health America. (2011). Bullying and gay youth. Retrieved from <http://www.nmha.org/index.cfm?objectid=CA866DCF-1372-4D20-C8EB26EEB30B9982>. These mental health problems tend to last at least into their twenties (Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011). Russell, S. T., Ryan, C., Toomey, R. B., Diaz, R. M., & Sanchez, J. (2011). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender adolescent school victimization: implications for young adult health and adjustment. *Journal of School Health*, 81(5),

223–230. According to a 2011 report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), LGBT teens are also much more likely to engage in risky and/or unhealthy behaviors such as using tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs, having unprotected sex, and even not using a seatbelt (Kann et al., 2011). Kann, L., Olsen, E. O. M., McManus, T., Kinchen, S., Chyen, D., Harris, W. A., et al. (2011). Sexual Identity, Sex of Sexual Contacts, and Health-Risk Behaviors Among Students in Grades 9–12—Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance, Selected Sites, United States, 2001–2009. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 60(June 10), 1–133. Commenting on the report, a CDC official said, “This report should be a wake-up call. We are very concerned that these students face such dramatic disparities for so many different health risks” (Melnick, 2011). Melnick, M. (2011, June 6). CDC: Why gay and bisexual teens are more likely to risk their health. *Time*. Retrieved from <http://healthland.time.com/2011/2006/2006/cdc-gay-and-bisexual-teens-are-more-likely-to-risk-their-health/>.

Ironically, despite the bullying and other mistreatment that LGBT teens receive at school, they are much more likely to be disciplined for misconduct than straight students accused of similar misconduct. This disparity is greater for girls than for boys. The reasons for the disparity remain unknown but may stem from unconscious bias against gays and lesbians by school officials. As a scholar in educational psychology observed, “To me, it is saying there is some kind of internal bias that adults are not aware of that is impacting the punishment of this group” (St. George, 2010). St. George, D. (2010, December 6). Gay and lesbian teens are punished more at school, by police, study says. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/12/06/AR2010120600035.html>.



This candlelight vigil honored the memory of Matthew Shepard, a gay college student, who was tortured, tied, to a fence, and left to die in Wyoming in 1998. He was in a coma when he was found and died a few days later.

Image courtesy of Elvert Barnes, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/perspective/15010502/>.

Children and Our Future

The Homeless Status of LGBT Teens

Many LGBT teens are taunted, bullied, and otherwise mistreated at school. As the text discusses, this mistreatment affects their school performance and psychological well-being, and some even drop out of school as a result. We often think of the home as a haven from the realities of life, but the lives of many gay teens are often no better at home. If they come out (disclose their sexual orientation) to their parents, one or both parents often reject them. Sometimes they kick their teen out of the home, and sometimes the teen leaves because the home environment has become intolerable. Regardless of the reason, a large number of LGBT teens become homeless. They may be living in the streets, but they may also be living with a friend, at a homeless shelter, or at some other venue. But the bottom line is that they are not living at home with a parent.

The actual number of homeless LGBT teens will probably never be known, but a study in Massachusetts of more than 6,300 high school students was the first to estimate the prevalence of their homelessness using a representative sample. The study found that 25 percent of gay or lesbian teens and 15 percent of bisexual teens are homeless in the state, compared to only 3 percent of heterosexual teens. Fewer than 5 percent of the students in the study identified themselves as LGBT, but they accounted for 19 percent of all the homeless students who were surveyed. Regardless of their sexual orientation, some homeless teens live with a parent or guardian, but the study found that homeless LGBT teens were more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to be living without a parent.

Being homeless adds to the problems that many LGBT teens already experience. Regardless of sexual orientation, homeless people of all ages are at greater risk for victimization by robbers and other offenders, hunger, substance abuse, and mental health problems.

The study noted that LGBT teen homelessness may be higher in other states because attitudes about LGBT status are more favorable in Massachusetts than in many other states. Because the study was administered to high school students, it may have undercounted LGBT teens, who are more likely to be absent from school.

These methodological limitations should not obscure the central message of the study as summarized by one of its authors: “The high risk of homelessness among sexual minority teens is a serious problem requiring immediate attention. These teens face enormous risks and all types of obstacles to succeeding in school and are in need of a great deal of assistance.”

Sources: Connolly, 2011; Corliss, Goodenow, Nichols, & Austin, 2011; Connolly, C. (2011, July 21). 1 in 4 gay/lesbian high school students are homeless. *EurekaAlert*. Retrieved September 8, 2011, from http://www.eurekaalert.org/pub_releases/2011-07/chb-1i4072111.php; Corliss, H. L., Goodenow, C. S., Nichols, L., & Austin, S. B. (2011). High burden of homelessness among sexual-minority adolescents: Findings from a representative Massachusetts high school sample. *American Journal of Public Health*, 101, 1683–1689.

Employment Discrimination

Federal law prohibits employment discrimination based on race, nationality, sex, or religion. Notice that this list does *not* include sexual orientation. It is entirely legal under federal law for employers to refuse to hire LGBT individuals or those perceived as LGBT, to fire an employee who is openly LGBT or perceived as LGBT, or to refuse to promote such an employee. Twenty-one states do prohibit employment discrimination based on sexual orientation, but that leaves twenty-nine states that do not prohibit such discrimination. Employers in these states are entirely free to refuse to hire, fire, or refuse to promote LGBT people (openly LGBT or perceived as LGBT) as they see fit. In addition, only fifteen states prohibit employment discrimination based on gender identity (transgender), which leaves thirty-five states in which employers may practice such discrimination (Human Rights Campaign, 2011). Human Rights Campaign. (2011). Laws: Employment non-discrimination act. Retrieved September 5, 2011, from <http://www.hrc.org/>.

The Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), which would prohibit job discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, has been proposed in Congress but has not come close to passing. In response to the absence of legal protection for LGBT employees, many companies have instituted their own policies. As of March 2011, 87 percent of the *Fortune* 500 companies, the largest 500 corporations in the United States, had policies prohibiting sexual orientation discrimination, and 46 percent had policies prohibiting gender identity discrimination (Human Rights Campaign, 2011). Human Rights Campaign. (2011). Laws: Employment non-discrimination act. Retrieved September 5, 2011, from <http://www.hrc.org/>.

National survey evidence shows that many LGBT people have, in fact, experienced workplace discrimination (Sears & Mallory, 2011). Sears, B., & Mallory, C. (2011). *Documented evidence of employment discrimination & its effects on LGBT people*. Los Angeles, CA: Williams Institute. In the 2008 GSS, 27.1 percent of LGB respondents said they had been verbally harassed at work during the past five years, and 7.1 percent said they had been either fired or not hired during the same period (SDA, 2008). SDA. (2008). GSS 1972–2010 cumulative datafile. Retrieved from <http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harcsda+gss10>. In other surveys that are not based on nationally representative samples, the percentage of LGB respondents who report workplace harassment or discrimination exceeds the GSS's figures. Not surprisingly, more than one-third of LGB employees say they conceal their sexual orientation in their workplace. Transgender people appear to experience more employment problems than LGB people, as 78 percent of transgender respondents in one study reported some form of workplace harassment or discrimination. Scholars have also conducted field experiments in which they send out resumes or job applicants to prospective employers. The resumes are identical except that some mention the applicant is LGB, while the others do not indicate sexual orientation. The job applicants similarly either say they are LGB or do not say this. The LGB resumes and applicants are less likely than their non-LGB counterparts to receive a positive response from prospective employers.

LGBT people who experience workplace harassment and discrimination suffer in other ways as well (Sears & Mallory, 2011). Sears, B., & Mallory, C. (2011). *Documented evidence of employment discrimination & its effects on LGBT people*. Los Angeles, LA: Williams Institute. Compared to LGBT employees who do not experience these problems, they are more likely to have various mental health issues, to be less satisfied with their jobs, and to have more absences from work.

Applying Social Research

How Well Do the Children of Same-Sex Couples Fare?

Many opponents of same-sex marriage claim that children are better off if they are raised by both a mother and a father and that children of same-sex couples fare worse as a result. As the National Organization for Marriage (National Organization for Marriage, 2011) National Organization for Marriage. (2011). Same-sex marriage: Answering the toughest questions. Retrieved September 8, 2011, from http://www.nationformarriage.org/site/c.omL2KeN0LzH/b.4475595/k.566A/Marriage_Talking_Points.htm. states, “Two men might each be a good father, but neither can be a mom. The ideal for children is the love of their own mom and dad. No same-sex couple can provide that.”

Addressing this contention, social scientists have studied the children of same-sex couples and compared them to the children of heterosexual parents. Although it is difficult to have random, representative samples of same-sex couples’ children, a growing number of studies find that these children fare at least as well psychologically and in other respects as heterosexual couples’ children.

Perhaps the most notable published paper in this area appeared in the *American Sociological Review*, the preeminent sociology journal, in 2001. The authors, Judith Stacey and Timothy J. Biblarz, reviewed almost two dozen studies that had been done of same-sex couples’ children. All these studies yielded the central conclusion that the psychological well-being of these children is no worse than that of heterosexual couples’ children. As the authors summarized this conclusion and its policy implications, “Because every relevant study to date shows that parental sexual orientation per se has no measurable effect on the quality of parent-child relationships or on children’s mental health or social adjustment, there is no evidentiary basis for considering parental sexual orientation in decisions about children’s ‘best interest.’”

Biblarz and Stacey returned to this issue in a 2010 article in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, the preeminent journal in its field. This time they reviewed almost three dozen studies published since 1990 that compared the children of same-sex couples (most of them lesbian parents) to those of heterosexual couples. They again found that the psychological well-being and social adjustment of same-sex couples’ children was at least as high as those of

heterosexual couples' children, and they even found some evidence that children of lesbian couples fare better in some respects than those of heterosexual couples. Although the authors acknowledged that two parents are generally better for children than one parent, they concluded that the sexual orientation of the parents makes no difference overall. As they summarized the body of research on this issue: "Research consistently has demonstrated that despite prejudice and discrimination children raised by lesbians develop as well as their peers. Across the standard panoply of measures, studies find far more similarities than differences among children with lesbian and heterosexual parents, and the rare differences mainly favor the former."

This body of research, then, contributes in important ways to the national debate on same-sex marriage. If children of same-sex couples indeed fare well, as the available evidence indicates, concern about these children's welfare should play no part in this debate.

Same-Sex Marriage

Same-sex marriage has been one of the most controversial social issues in recent years. Nearly 650,000 same-sex couples live together in the United States (Gates, 2012). Gates, G. J. (2012). Same-Sex Couples in Census 2010: Race and Ethnicity. *Williams Institute*. Retrieved May 29, 2012, from <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Gates-CouplesRaceEthnicity-April-2012.pdf>. Many of them would like to marry, but most are not permitted by law to marry. In May 2012, President Obama endorsed same-sex marriage.

We saw earlier that a narrow margin of Americans now favors the right of same-sex couples to marry, and that public opinion in favor of same-sex marriage has increased greatly in recent times. As of June 2012, same-sex marriage was legal in seven states (Connecticut, Iowa, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Vermont, and Washington) and the District of Columbia. Nine other states permitted same-sex couples to form civil unions or domestic partnerships, which provide some or many of the various legal benefits that married spouses enjoy. In the remaining thirty-five states, same-sex couples may not legally marry or form civil unions or domestic partnerships. The federal Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), passed in 1996 (and under legal dispute at the time of this writing), prohibits federal recognition of same-sex marriage. This means that even when same-sex couples legally marry because their state allows them to, they do not enjoy the various federal tax, inheritance, and other benefits that married couples enjoy. Most of the states that do not allow same-sex marriage also have laws that prohibit recognition of same-sex marriages performed in the states that allow them.



The issue of same-sex marriage has aroused much controversy in recent years. As of June 2012, same-sex couples could marry in only seven states and the District of Columbia.

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Arguments against same-sex marriage. Opponents of same-sex marriage make at least three central points (Emrich, 2009; National Organization for Marriage, 2011). Emrich, B. (2009, September 2). Same-sex marriage would be harmful to society. *Bangor Daily News*. Retrieved from <http://bangordailynews.com/2009/2009/2001/opinion/samesex-marriage-would-be-harmful-to-society/>; National Organization for Marriage. (2011). Marriage talking points. Retrieved September 5, 2011, from http://www.nationformarriage.org/site/c.omL2KeN0LzH/b.4475595/k.566A/Marriage_Talking_Points.htm. First, and in no particular order, marriage is intended to procreate the species, and same-sex couples cannot reproduce. Second, the children that same-sex couples do have through adoption or artificial means experience various psychological problems because their parents are gay or lesbian and/or because they do not have both a father and a mother. Third, allowing gays and lesbians to marry would undermine the institution of marriage.

Arguments for same-sex marriage. In reply, proponents of same-sex marriage make their own points (Barkan, Marks, & Milardo, 2009; Human Rights Campaign, 2009). Barkan, S., Marks, S., & Milardo, R. (2009, September 22). Same-sex couples are families, too. *Bangor Daily News*. Retrieved from <http://www.bangordailynews.com/detail/121751.html>; Human Rights Campaign.

(2009). *Answers to questions about marriage equality*. Washington, DC: Human Rights Campaign. First, many heterosexual couples are allowed to marry even though they will not have children, either because they are not able to have them, because they do not wish to have them, or because they are beyond childbearing age. Second, studies show that children of same-sex couples are at least as psychologically healthy as the children of opposite-sex couples (see [Note 5.12 "Children and Our Future"](#)). Third, there is no evidence that legalizing same-sex marriage has weakened the institution of marriage in the few states and other nations that have legalized it (see [Note 5.14 "Lessons from Other Societies"](#)).

Lessons from Other Societies

Same-Sex Marriage in the Netherlands

At the time of this writing, same-sex marriage was legal in ten nations: Argentina, Belgium, Canada, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, South Africa, and Sweden. All these nations have legalized it since 2001, when the Netherlands became the first country to do so. Because more than a decade has passed since this notable event, it is informative to examine how, if at all, legalization has affected the lives of gays and lesbians and the institution of marriage itself in the Netherlands.

One thing is clear: There is no evidence that the institution of marriage in the Netherlands has in any respect become weaker because same-sex couples have been allowed to marry since 2001. Heterosexual couples continue to marry, and the institution appears at least as strong as it was before 2001. It also seems clear that same-sex marriages are working and that same-sex married couples' unions are accepted as normal features of contemporary Dutch life. As Vera Bergkamp, a gay rights leader in the Netherlands said, "Gay marriage is Holland's best export because we have shown that it is possible."

In an interesting development, same-sex couples have not exactly rushed to marry. There was an initial spurt in 2001, and many such couples have married since. However, the Dutch government estimates that only 20 percent of same-sex couples have married compared to 80 percent of heterosexual couples.

Three reasons may account for this disparity. First, there is less pressure from family and friends for same-sex couples to marry than for heterosexual couples to marry. As Bergkamp put it, "For heterosexuals, it's normal when you're in a steady relationship for more than a year, that a lot of people start asking, 'well when are you getting married?'" With two women or two men you don't get that yet." Second, fewer same-sex couples than heterosexual couples decide to marry in order to have children. Third, gays and lesbians in the Netherlands are thought to be somewhat more individualistic than their heterosexual counterparts.

The same-sex couples who have married in the Netherlands seem happy to have done so, at least according to anecdotal evidence. As one same-sex spouse

reflected on her marriage, “It was a huge step. For me it was incredible...I’d been to my brother’s wedding and my sister’s wedding and their spouses were welcomed into the family. Now finally I was able to have my family take my partner in. The moment we got married there was a switch, she was now one of us.”

The experience of the Netherlands is mirrored in the other nine nations that have legalized same-sex marriage. Legalization seems to be working from all accounts, and the institution of marriage seems to be thriving at least as well as in other nations. As the first openly gay member of the Dutch parliament who played a key role in legalization wryly described its outcome, “Heterosexual couples did not turn away from the institution of marriage, and nor did the world isolate my country. After the Netherlands acted, civilization as we know it didn’t end.” As the United States continues to debate same-sex marriage, it has much to learn from the Netherlands and the other nations that have legalized this form of marriage.

Sources: Ames, 2011; Badgett, 2009; Dittrich, 2011; Ames, P. (2011, April 20). Dutch gays don’t take advantage of opportunity to marry. *GlobalPost*. Retrieved from <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/europe/benelux/110419/netherlands-gay-rights-same-sex-marriage>; Badgett, M. V. L. (2009). *When gay people get married: What happens when societies legalize same-sex marriage*. New York, NY: New York University Press; Dittrich, B. O. (2011, April 17). Gay marriage’s diamond anniversary: After the Netherlands acted, civilization as we know it didn’t end. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/apr/17/opinion/la-oe-dittrich-gay-marriage-20110417>.

Although the children of same-sex couples fare at least as well as those of heterosexual couples, it is still difficult in many states for same-sex couples to adopt a child. Two states at the time of this writing, Mississippi and Utah, prohibit adoptions by same-sex couples, but half of the other states make it very difficult for these adoptions to occur (Tavernise, 2011). Tavernise, S. (2011, July 14). Adoptions rise by same-sex couples, despite legal barriers. *New York Times*, p. A11. For example, in some states social workers are required to prefer married heterosexual couples over same-sex couples in adoption decisions. Moreover, several states require that a couple must be married to be adopted; in these states, a single gay or lesbian may adopt, but not a same-sex couple. Still, adoptions by same-sex couples have become more numerous in recent years because of the number of children

waiting for adoption and because public opinion about gays and lesbians has become more favorable.

Costs of the Illegality of Same-Sex Marriage

Marriage provides many legal rights, benefits, and responsibilities for the two spouses. Because same-sex couples are not allowed to marry in most states and, even if they do marry, are currently denied federal recognition of their marriage, they suffer materially in numerous ways. In fact, there are more than 1,000 federal rights that heterosexual married couples receive that no married same-sex couple is allowed to receive (Shell, 2011). Shell, A. (2011, July 22). Legal gay marriage doesn't end money headaches. *USA Today*. Retrieved from <http://www.usatoday.com/money/perfi/index>.

We have space here to list only a few of the many costs that the illegality of same-sex marriage imposes on same-sex couples who cannot marry and on the same-sex couples whose marriages are not federally recognized (Human Rights Campaign, 2009): Human Rights Campaign. (2009). *Answers to questions about marriage equality*. Washington, DC: Author.

- Spouses have visitation rights if one of them is hospitalized as well as the right to make medical decisions if one spouse is unable to do so; same-sex couples do not have these visitation rights.
- Same-sex couples cannot file joint federal tax returns or joint state tax returns (in the states that do not recognize same-sex marriage), potentially costing each couple thousands of dollars every year in taxes they would not have to pay if they were able to file jointly.
- Spouses receive Social Security survivor benefits averaging more than \$5,500 annually when a spouse dies; same-sex couples do not receive these benefits.
- Many employers who provide health insurance coverage for the spouse of an employee do not provide this coverage for a same-sex partner; when they do provide this coverage, the employee must pay taxes on the value of the coverage.
- When a spouse dies, the surviving spouse inherits the deceased spouse's property without paying estate taxes; the surviving partner of a same-sex couple must pay estate taxes.

Notice that many of these costs are economic. It is difficult to estimate the exact economic costs of the illegality of same-sex marriage, but one analysis estimated that these costs can range from \$41,000 to as much as \$467,000 over the lifetime of a same-sex couple, depending on their income, state of residence, and many other

factors (Bernard & Leber, 2009). Bernard, T. S., & Leber, R. (2009, October 3). The high price of being a gay couple. *New York Times*, p. A1.

Military Service

LGBT individuals traditionally were not permitted to serve in the US military. If they remained in the closet (hid evidence of their sexual orientation), of course, they could serve with impunity, but many gays and lesbians in the military were given dishonorable discharges when their sexual orientation was discovered. Those who successfully remained in the closet lived under continual fear that their sexual orientation would become known and they would be ousted from the military.

As a presidential candidate in 1992, Bill Clinton said he would end the ban on LGBT people in the military. After his election, his intention to do so was met with fierce opposition by military leaders, much of the Congress, and considerable public opinion. As a compromise, in 1993 the government established the so-called don't-ask, don't-tell (DADT) policy. DADT protected members of the military from being asked about their sexual orientation, but it also stipulated that they would be discharged from the military if they made statements or engaged in behavior that indicated an LGBT orientation. Because DADT continued the military ban on LGBT people, proponents of allowing them to serve in the military opposed the policy and continued to call for the elimination of any restrictions regarding sexual orientation for military service.

In response to a lawsuit, a federal judge in 2010 ruled that DADT was unconstitutional. Meanwhile, Barack Obama had also called for the repeal of DADT, both as a presidential candidate and then as president. In late 2010, Congress passed legislation repealing DADT, and President Obama signed the legislation, which took effect in September 2011. Official discrimination against gays and lesbians in the military has thus ended, and they may now serve openly in the nation's armed forces. It remains to be seen, however, whether they will be able to serve without facing negative experiences such as verbal and physical abuse.

Physical and Mental Health

It is well known that HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) and AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) racked the LGBT community beginning in the 1980s. Many gays and lesbians eventually died from AIDS-related complications, and HIV and AIDS remain serious illnesses for gays and straights alike. An estimated 1.2 million Americans now have HIV, and about 35,000 have AIDS. Almost 50,000 Americans are diagnosed with HIV annually, and more than half of these new cases are men who have had sex with other men. Fortunately, HIV can now be controlled

fairly well by appropriate medical treatment (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011).Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2011). Basic information about HIV and AIDS. Retrieved September 6, 2011, from <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/basic/index.htm>.

It is less well known that LGBT adults have higher rates than straight adults of other physical health problems and also of mental health problems (Frost, Lehavot, & Meyer, 2011; Institute of Medicine, 2011).Frost, D. M., Lehavot, K., & Meyer, I. H. (2011). *Minority stress and physical health among sexual minorities*. Los Angeles, CA: Williams Institute; Institute of Medicine. (2011). *The health of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people: Building a foundation for better understanding*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press. These problems are thought to stem from the stress that the LGBT community experiences from living in a society in which they frequently encounter verbal and physical harassment, job discrimination, a need for some to conceal their sexual identity, and lack of equal treatment arising from the illegality of same-sex marriage. We saw earlier that LGBT secondary school students experience various kinds of educational and mental health issues because of the mistreatment they encounter. By the time LGBT individuals reach their adult years, the various stressors they have experienced at least since adolescence have begun to take a toll on their physical and mental health.

Because stress is thought to compromise immune systems, LGBT individuals on the average have lower immune functioning and lower perceived physical health than straight individuals. Because stress impairs mental health, they are also more likely to have higher rates of depression, loneliness, low self-esteem, and other psychiatric and psychological problems, including a tendency to attempt suicide (Sears & Mallory, 2011).Sears, B., & Mallory, C. (2011). *Documented evidence of employment discrimination & its effects on LGBT people*. Los Angeles, LA: Williams Institute. Among all LGBT individuals, those who have experienced greater levels of stress related to their sexual orientation have higher levels of physical and mental health problems than those who have experienced lower levels of stress. It is important to keep in mind that these various physical and mental health problems do not stem from an LGBT sexual orientation in and of itself, but rather from the experience of living as an LGBT individual in a *homophobic* (disliking LGBT behavior and individuals) society.



The stress of being LGBT in a society that disapproves of this sexual orientation is thought to account for the greater likelihood of LGBT people to have physical and mental health problems.

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Despite the health problems that LGBT people experience, medical students do not learn very much about these problems. A recent survey of medical school deans

found that one-third of medical schools provide no clinical training about these health issues, and that students in the medical schools that do provide training still receive only an average of five hours of training (Obedin-Maliver et al., 2011). Obedin-Maliver, J., Goldsmith, E. S., Stewart, L., White, W., Tran, E., Brenman, S., et al. (2011). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender-related content in undergraduate medical education. *JAMA*, 306(9), 971–977. The senior author of the study commented on its findings, “It’s great that a lot of schools are starting to teach these topics. But the conversation needs to go deeper. We heard from the deans that a lot of these important LGBT health topics are completely off the radar screens of many medical schools” (White, 2011). White, T. (2011). LGBT health issues not being taught at medical schools, Stanford study finds. *EurekaAlert*. Retrieved September 7, 2011, from http://www.eurekaalert.org/pub_releases/2011-09/sumc-lhi083111.php.

Heterosexual Privilege

In earlier chapters, we discussed the related concepts of *white privilege* and *male privilege*. To recall, simply because they are white, whites can go through their daily lives without worrying about or experiencing the many kinds of subtle and not-so-subtle negative events that people of color experience. Moreover, simply because they are male, men can go through their daily lives without worrying about or experiencing the many kinds of subtle and not-so-subtle negative events that women experience. Whether or not they are conscious of it, therefore, whites and men are automatically privileged compared to people of color and women, respectively.

An analogous concept exists in the study of sexual orientation and inequality. This concept is **heterosexual privilege**⁴, which refers to the many advantages that heterosexuals (or people perceived as heterosexuals) enjoy simply because their sexual orientation is not LGBT. There are many such advantages, and we have space to list only a few:

- Heterosexuals can be out day or night or at school or workplaces without fearing that they will be verbally harassed or physically attacked because of their sexuality or that they will hear jokes about their sexuality.
- Heterosexuals do not have to worry about not being hired for a job, about being fired, or not being promoted because of their sexuality.
- Heterosexuals can legally marry everywhere in the United States and receive all the federal, state, and other benefits that married couples receive.

4. The many advantages that heterosexuals (or people perceived as heterosexuals) enjoy simply because their sexual orientation is not LGBT.

- Heterosexuals can express a reasonable amount of affection (holding hands, kissing, etc.) in public without fearing negative reactions from onlookers.
- Heterosexuals do not have to worry about being asked why they prefer opposite-sex relations, being criticized for choosing their sexual orientation, or being urged to change their sexual orientation.
- Heterosexual parents do not have to worry about anyone questioning their fitness as parents because of their sexuality.
- Heterosexuals do not have to feel the need to conceal their sexual orientation.
- Heterosexuals do not have to worry about being accused of trying to “push” their sexuality onto other people.

People Making a Difference

Improving the Family Lives of LGBT Youth

Many organizations and agencies around the country aim to improve the lives of LGBT teens. One of them is the Family Acceptance Project (FAP) at San Francisco State University, which focuses on the family problems that LGBT teens often experience. According to its website, FAP is “the only community research, intervention, education and policy initiative that works to decrease major health and related risks for [LGBT] youth, such as suicide, substance abuse, HIV and homelessness—in the context of their families. We use a research-based, culturally grounded approach to help ethnically, socially and religiously diverse families decrease rejection and increase support for their LGBT children.”

To accomplish its mission, FAP engages in two types of activities: research and family support services. In the research area, FAP has published some pioneering studies of the effects of school victimization and of family rejection and acceptance on the physical and mental health of LGBT teens during their adolescence and into their early adulthood. In the family support services area, FAP provides confidential advice, information, and counseling to families with one or more LGBT children or adolescents, and it also has produced various educational materials for these families and for professionals who deal with LGBT issues. At the time of this writing, FAP was producing several documentary videos featuring LGBT youth talking about their family situations and other aspects of their lives. Its support services and written materials are available in English, Spanish, and Cantonese.

Through its pioneering efforts, the Family Acceptance Project is one of many organizations making a difference in the lives of LGBT youth. For further information about FAP, visit <http://familyproject.sfsu.edu>.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Bullying, taunting, and violence are significant problems for the LGBT community.
- LGBT people are at greater risk for behavioral and physical and mental health problems because of the many negative experiences they encounter.
- Federal law does not protect LGBT individuals from employment discrimination.
- The children of same-sex couples fare at least as well as children of heterosexual couples.

FOR YOUR REVIEW

1. Do you know anyone who has ever been bullied and taunted for being LGBT or for being perceived as LGBT? If so, describe what happened.
2. Write a brief essay in which you summarize the debate over same-sex marriage, provide your own view, and justify your view.

5.4 Improving the Lives of the LGBT Community

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Understand which measures show promise of reducing inequality based on sexual orientation.

The inequality arising from sexual orientation stems from long-standing and deep-rooted prejudice against nonheterosexual attraction and behavior and against the many people whose sexual orientation is not heterosexual. We have seen in this chapter that attitudes about and related to same-sex sexuality have become markedly more positive since a generation ago. Reflecting this trend, the number of openly gay elected officials and candidates for office has increased greatly since a generation ago, and the sexual orientation of candidates appears to be a nonissue in many areas of the nation (Page, 2011).Page, S. (2011, July 20). Gay candidates gain acceptance. *USA Today*. Retrieved from <http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/index>. In a 2011 Gallup poll, two-thirds of Americans said they would vote for a gay candidate for president, up from only one-fourth of Americans in 1978 (Page, 2011).Page, S. (2011, July 20). Gay candidates gain acceptance. *USA Today*. Retrieved from <http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/index>. Also in 2011, the US Senate confirmed the nomination of the first openly gay man for a federal judgeship (Milbank, 2011).Milbank, D. (2011, July 18). In a “quiet moment,” gay judge makes history. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/>. To paraphrase the slogan of a nationwide campaign aimed at helping gay teens deal with bullying and other mistreatment, it is getting better.

Much of this improvement must be credited to the gay rights movement that is popularly thought to have begun in June 1969 in New York City after police raided a gay bar called the Stonewall Inn and arrested several people inside. A crowd of several hundred people gathered and rioted in protest that night and the next night. The gay rights movement had begun.

Despite the advances this movement has made and despite the improvement in public attitudes about LGBT issues, we have seen in this chapter that LGBT people continue to experience many types of inequality and other problems. As with inequality based on race and/or ethnicity, social class, and gender, there is much work still to be done to reduce inequality based on sexual orientation.

For such inequality to be reduced, it is certainly essential that heterosexuals do everything possible in their daily lives to avoid any form of mistreatment of LGBT individuals and to treat them as they would treat any heterosexual. Beyond this, certain other measures should help address LGBT inequality. These measures might include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Parents should make clear to their children that all sexual orientations are equally valid. Parents whose child happens to be LGBT should love that child at least as much as they would love a heterosexual child.
2. School programs should continue and strengthen their efforts to provide students a positive environment in regard to sexual orientation and to educate them about LGBT issues. Bullying and other harassment of LGBT students must not be tolerated. In 2011, California became the first state to require the teaching of gay and lesbian history; other states should follow this example.
3. Federal law should prohibit employment discrimination against LGBT people, and same-sex marriages should become legal throughout the United States. In the meantime, new legislation should provide same-sex couples the same rights, responsibilities, and benefits that heterosexual married couples have.
4. Police should continue to educate themselves about LGBT issues and should strengthen their efforts to ensure that physical attacks on LGBT people are treated at least as seriously as attacks on heterosexual people are treated.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Although the gay rights movement has made significant advances, many types of inequality based on sexual orientation continue to exist.
- Several measures should be begun or continued to reduce inequality based on sexual orientation.

FOR YOUR REVIEW

1. Is there a gay rights advocacy group on your campus? If so, what is your opinion of it?
2. How do you think parents should react if their teenaged daughter or son comes out to them? Explain your answer.

5.5 End-of-Chapter Material

SUMMARY

1. Sexual orientation refers to a person's preference for sexual relationships with individuals of the other sex, one's own sex, or both sexes. The term also increasingly refers to *transgender* individuals, whose behavior, appearance, and/or gender identity departs from conventional norms.
2. According to national survey evidence, almost 4 percent of American adults identify as LGBT (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender), a figure equivalent to 9 million adults. Almost 20 million have engaged in same-sex relations.
3. Male homosexuality in ancient Greece and Rome seems to have been accepted and rather common, but Europe, the Americas, and other areas influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition have long viewed homosexuality very negatively. In many societies studied by anthropologists, homosexuality is rather common and considered a normal form of sexuality.
4. Scholars continue to debate whether sexual orientation is more the result of biological factors or social and cultural factors. Related to this debate, the public is fairly split over the issue of whether sexual orientation is a choice or something over which people have no control.
5. Heterosexism in the United States is higher among men than among women, among older people than younger people, among the less educated than among the more highly educated, among Southerners than among non-Southerners, and among more religious people than among less religious people. Levels of heterosexism have declined markedly since a generation ago.
6. Sexual orientation is a significant source of inequality. LGBT individuals experience bullying, taunting, and violence; they may experience employment discrimination; and they are not allowed to marry in most states. Because of the stress of living as LGBT, they are at greater risk than heterosexuals for several types of physical and mental health problems.

USING WHAT YOU KNOW

You're working in a medium-sized office and generally like your coworkers. However, occasionally you hear them make jokes about gays and lesbians. You never laugh at these jokes, but neither have you ever said anything critical about them. Your conscience is bothering you, but you also know that if you tell your supervisor or coworkers that their joking makes you feel uncomfortable, they may get angry with you and even stop talking to you. What do you decide to do?

WHAT YOU CAN DO

To help reduce inequality based on sexual orientation, you may wish to do any of the following:

1. Start or join an LGBT advocacy group on your campus.
2. Write a letter to the editor in favor of same-sex marriage.
3. Urge your US Senators and Representative to pass legislation prohibiting employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.
4. Work for a social service agency in your local community that focuses on the needs of LGBT teens.