

Many LGBTQ youth don't identify with traditional sexual identity labels

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A large proportion of sexual and gender minority youth do not identify with traditional sexual identity labels—such as gay, lesbian, and bisexual—but instead describe previously little understood sexual identities using emerging sexual identity labels such as pansexual, non-binary, or asexual, according to a new University of Connecticut study.

The findings, published in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, are based on a [national survey](#) on the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) teenagers.

"We need to ask and be open to what our teens' sexual identities are, because if we don't know they're out there, we don't know how to help them," said Ryan J. Watson, assistant professor of human development and family studies.

Watson led the study with co-authors Rebecca M. Puhl of UConn's Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity and Christopher W. Wheldon of the National Cancer Institute.

The study uses data from the LGBTQ National Teen Study that Watson and Puhl developed in collaboration with the Human Rights Campaign. The survey of 17,000 teens (4,720 M/12,373 F) was conducted online across a range of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic statuses, and found that 26 percent chose emerging sexual identity labels.

Watson discussed the study with UConn Today:

Q. Your major finding is that a large proportion of minority youth do not identify with traditional sexual identity labels, but instead describe their identity with emerging identity labels. Why is this significant?

A. A lot of effort in research is now asking youth to identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, in trying to figure out who this population is. Some people don't even ask. The 2020 United States Census is not even asking about sexual orientation. We're already missing who we know exists out there, and this study has showed us that it is not enough today to just ask about these traditional labels—lesbian, gay, bisexual. Instead, there's thousands—and if you extrapolate from this study, hundreds of thousands—of teenagers who identify with new identity labels that people don't even know what they mean; they have never heard of them before. This is vexing, given there are likely hundreds of thousands of youth who are using terms like pansexual and non-binary. It's important for researchers especially to capture what the nuanced experiences might be of these youth. We don't want to miss them. We want to make sure we capture what these youth want to be called; the identities they actually are identifying with. We think that's pretty important.

Q. The study notes there is a divergence in patterns of sexual identification, noting the complex interaction between sexual, gender, and ethno-racial identities. Could you explain that?

A. What we really wanted to do with the national teen survey was try to understand nuanced experiences within LGBTQ people. Before the study it was really hard to understand intersecting identities among this population in particular. We know all people have a sexual identity; everybody has a gender identity, and most people identify as male or female. But we see from the study that more and more teens are using different identity labels, other than male or female. We suspected that the patterns and how people use those terms to describe their sexual or gender identity might be different based on their ethnicity; so are Asian,

African American, or white kids more or less likely to use particular emerging terms? It's not enough, we are arguing, just to say this person is queer, LGBT. We want to know how else do they identify? Are pansexual youth more likely to be non-binary and African American? In our preliminary findings, the answer is yes. We know that might be a unique experience, a triple minority you might say, that could explain more detrimental health outcomes or a harder time at school being bullied. One of the findings we came across is that youth who are not cisgender—youth who do not identify as the sex they were given at birth—we might think of that as someone who is transgender, non-binary—those kids are far more likely to describe their sexual orientation with these emerging identity terms compared to cisgender teens. Most people know of 'lesbian, gay bisexual,' but there's something about kids today who are a little more advanced or are using new words to describe how they feel sexually in terms of orientation. To me that's a really novel, intriguing finding in terms of how do we best serve kids who are transgender? I think it's useful just knowing the patterns of sexual and gender identities for people who are growing up right now in our country.

Q. This seems to speak about millennials and how they view the world. They are more accepting of variation, diversity, mixed culture, and orientation than previous generations.

A. That's a great point. When I was a post-doc at the University of British Columbia, we went out to high schools and surveyed students. We asked them how they identified their sexual orientation. At the time, just a few years ago, those kids were critical of the ways we were asking the question. They were ahead of the curve. You're right that these emerging identity labels, as we're calling them, are driven by teens, shared through new social media outlets like Reddit, Facebook, or Instagram. Adults can be out of the loop—even renowned professors or people who study the population aren't caught up with the labels. If we're

going to try and understand why teens are unhealthy or where teens need help the most and we don't know where to reach them, what identities describe them, we are out of touch. It might be more difficult to do our research.

Q. What do the findings of the study mean for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers you include as stakeholders in the data as to how they should use this information?

A. One of the biggest problems I see is that young people—and adults - who are LGBTQ are not being recognized and counted. If we don't know that this population exists and we don't count them, they're not included in our efforts. The diversity we found shows the need for those in power who are doing the Census or national surveys to start asking at least for youth to write in or give them more options for describing who they are. What the initial findings from the research shows, it's not just that LGBTQ people are doing worse than straight people and cisgender people, but it matters what subgroup of LGBTQ person you are. Pansexual people have different experiences than gay people. Those labels matter and are associated with different outcomes. We should be mindful to ask the identities of our participants because it matters for their health and their experiences. The other thing folks can do is just ask and be open about changing terms. What we see is a growing number of young people and adults coming out and feeling free to tell other people about their sexual identity. We need to ask and be open to what our teens' sexual identities are, because if we don't know they're out there, we don't know how to help them.

Q. One of the major conclusions is that this is just the first major study of its type, and further research is important. What do you want to see happen to advance this knowledge?

A. In the 10 years I've done this, and the decades others have done this,

we consistently find that this population as a whole faces more health problems, harder experiences to deal with at school, and more bullying. We know there is this gap in disparity for the population. What we haven't been able to know until now is how folks who have multiple identities that are repressed, folks who are using emerging terms, how they might suffer or thrive in different ways than their peers who are also somewhat like them. I hope this research will continue in ways that will replicate this. We can ask these questions again to see: Was this emerging [label](#) more popular this time? Do we see a continual progression of more emerging labels or more youth using these labels? Or are youth going to go back to traditional labels?

This study is one of the first to be able to look at enough data among small minorities to start to see patterns in their experiences. With old data, we haven't been able to say: what does it look like for an African American gay transgender boy in the United States who lives in the south? We didn't have enough data to look at that. Now with this data moving forward, we'll start to be able to identify what does that individual experience look like? What does it mean for a young person who shares multiple, repressed identities? How might we best support them? What identity is most salient? Which repressed [identity](#) needs most attention? Never have we been able to explore that with data, because we haven't had the availability of data that robust before. I'm looking forward to further exploring that. It's exciting.

More information: *Journal of Research on Adolescence* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/jora.12488](https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12488)

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