

The Harris Poll

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NUMBER OF GAY MEN MORE THAN 4 TIMES HIGHER THAN THE 1 PERCENT REPORTED IN A RECENT SURVEY

by Humphrey Taylor

A recently published survey concluded that about 1 percent of men are gay. This appears to be a substantial underestimate. A Harris survey conducted in 1988 found that the number of men with male sex partners -- arguably less than the total number of gay men -- was more than 4 percent.

In our nationwide, in-person survey of 739 men aged 16 to 50, fully 4.4 percent reported having had a male sex partner in the previous five years. The proportion of men in these age groups who reported having had male sex partners in the last one year was 3.8 percent and in the last month, 1.8 percent. Our survey was conducted for Project Hope as part of a three-nation study on AIDS-related issues.

Unlike the new study, the 1988 Harris survey also asked women about their sex partners. The sample of women was smaller, because the main focus of the survey was on AIDS, and therefore focused more on males than females. Four hundred and nine women were surveyed. The proportion of women who reported female sex partners was 3.6 percent in the last five years, 2.8 percent in the last year and 2.1 percent in the last month.

Because the Harris survey asked about both male and female sex partners, it also produced estimates of the number of sexually active heterosexuals. Among men aged 16 to 50, 83.7 percent had had female sex partners in the previous five years. Among women of these ages, 82.4 percent had had male sex partners.

Possible Sampling Errors

Because the proportions of gay men and lesbians are relatively small, the commonly used rules of thumb for sampling error do not apply. Using the normal 95 percent confidence levels, the theoretical margin of error for the 4.4 percent of sexually active men in a sample of 739 is plus or minus 1.5 percent. This means that the true proportion of sexually active gay men, if everyone was replying honestly to the questions, is somewhere between 2.9 percent and 5.9 percent (and probably closer to 4.4 percent than to either of these outer limits). Even at the lower level, however, the number is almost three times higher than the recent estimate.

For sexually active lesbians, the theoretical margin of error for 3.6 percent of a sample of 409 women is plus or minus 1.8 percent.

Why Such a Big Difference Between Surveys?

The reason why the Harris survey found a much higher proportion of sexually active males than the recent \$1.8 million survey, conducted by the Battelle Human Affairs Research Center, is almost certainly related to the way the questions were asked and how the survey was administered.

When we have asked samples of men in typical Harris surveys whether they are gay, we find about 1 percent who say they are. However, we have always assumed that many gay people feel too awkward or embarrassed to say they are gay in such interviews. There is a long history of surveys over-reporting socially acceptable behavior and under-reporting behavior that might be embarrassing or be seen as anti-social. Researchers at Battelle point out that the "1 percent" number which was given so much attention by the press was based on exclusively homosexual behaviour and excluded those who had had both male and female partners. The Battelle data actually showed 2.3 percent of men aged 20 to 39 having had a male sexual partner in the last ten years.

In our 1988 survey for Project Hope, we used a very different approach. All interviews were conducted in person, in people's homes, by interviewers of the same sex as the respondents. So men were interviewed by men. In the Battelle study, all the interviewers were female.

The first 20 minutes or so of the interview was about a range of health care and lifestyle issues but did not include any questions that would be potentially embarrassing. Having conducted the first interview, our interviewers handed the men and women surveyed a self-administered questionnaire to fill in the answers themselves.

This self-completion questionnaire included the questions about male and female sexual partners reported here. When the second questionnaire was completed, it was placed in a sealed envelope without the interviewer looking at it.

The use of this much more confidential self-completion questionnaire, following a 20 minute face-to-face interview that established some degree of trust between the interviewer and the respondent, encouraged more people to answer these questions honestly than do so in most other surveys.

It should also be noted, although this cannot account for the difference, that the Battelle survey was of men aged 20 to 39, while the Harris survey was of men and women aged 16 to 50.

Even the Harris Numbers May Underestimate the Number of Gay Men and Lesbians

While the Harris estimates are much higher than the Battelle estimates, it is more likely

that they are underestimates than overestimates of the numbers of gays and lesbians. It is probable that, even with the special steps we took, some people did not report their homosexual partners.

A second reason is that not all gay men and lesbians have sexual relationships with members of their own sex. David Eng of the Gay Men's Health Crisis was reported in The New York Times as saying that "sexuality is much more than just sexual behavior."

Whatever the true proportion of gay men, however, it is almost certainly closer to the 4.4 percent found in our survey than to the 1 percent estimate.

Humphrey Taylor is the President and C.E.O. of Louis Harris and Associates, Inc.

NUMBER OF PEOPLE WITH MALE AND FEMALE SEXUAL PARTNERS

Base: People aged 16 to 50

"How many male sexual partners have you had in the last month/year/five years?"

"How many female sexual partners have you had in the last month/year/five years?"

	Males %	Replies of: Females %
IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS		
No male partners	95.6	17.6
One or more male partners	4.4	82.4
No female partners	16.3	96.4
One or more female partners	83.7	3.6
IN LAST YEAR		
One or more male partners	3.5	79.8
One or more female partners	80.7	2.9
IN LAST MONTH		
One or more male partners	1.8	68.2
One or more female partners	71.8	2.1
BASE	739	409

METHODOLOGY

This Harris Poll was conducted in-person within the United States in 1988, among a nationwide cross section of 739 men aged 16 to 50 for Project Hope. Figures for age, sex, race and education were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population.

The issue of sampling error has been discussed above in the text of the column. In addition, unfortunately, there are several other possible sources of error in all polls or surveys that are probably more serious than theoretical calculations of sampling error. They include refusals to be interviewed (non-response), question wording and question order, interviewer bias, weighting by demographic control data and screening (e.g., for likely voters). It is difficult or impossible to quantify the errors that may result from these factors.

This statement conforms to the principles of disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls.

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Contact Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., Information Services, 630 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10111, (212) 698-9697, for complete demographic details for the questions in this release.

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