

Gay Survey Raises a New Question

By DAVID W. DUNLAP

To the question of "How many homosexuals are there in America?" a new nationwide study has provided a striking range of numbers and an unanswered question of its own: What is a homosexual?

After all, there is no agreement whether homosexuality is a matter of self-identification, behavior, desire or a combination of these. Further, the study found pronounced differences between the numbers of gay men and women who live in cities and those in smaller communities, and between those with college educations and those without. There are hints, too, of racial distinctions, although these figures may be statistically insignificant.

The study of 3,432 Americans from 18 to 59 years of age was conducted by a team of researchers based at the University of Chicago and made public earlier this month. Since then, much attention has focused on its finding that 2.8 percent of the men and 1.4 percent of the women identified themselves as homosexual or bisexual.

For many years, the conventional wisdom was that 1 in 10 American men was homosexual, a number attributed to a 1948 Kinsey report. But in April 1993, a survey of male sexual behavior found that about 2 percent of the men had engaged in homosexual sex in the past decade.

The authors of the new study, "The Social Organization of Sexuality" (University of Chicago Press), are the first to say that theirs is not the last word.

"To fetishize 2.8 as if this is solid to that level of precision is a mistake," said Stuart Michaels, a researcher at the University of Chicago who is an author of the new report and the project manager of the survey. "And it is to miss the point."

"To quantify or count something requires unambiguous definition," Mr. Michaels and his co-authors wrote. "And we lack this in speaking of homosexuality."

Moreover, they said, estimates in the survey were likely to be lower than actual numbers, since many homosexuals were probably reluctant to report certain behaviors or feelings to the interviewers.

Even with those qualifications, the findings may explain why many people who live outside big cities never believed that 1 in 10 of their neighbors was homosexual, and why many city dwellers responded incredulously to reports that only 1

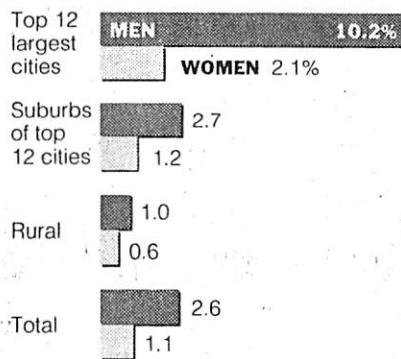
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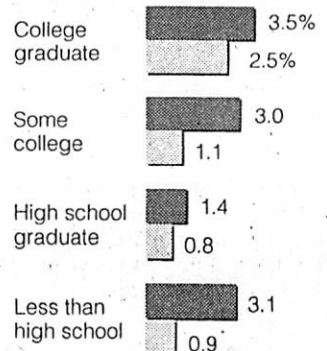
Differences in the Homosexual Population

Men and women who reported having sexual partners of the same sex in the last year.

By location



By education



Source: "The Social Organization of Sexuality," University of Chicago Press

man in 50 was homosexual.

"The reality in a big city like New York is different," said Robert T. Michael, dean of the Harris Graduate School of Public Policy Studies at the University of Chicago and another author of the study.

In the United States' dozen largest cities, 10.2 percent of the men and 2.1 percent of the women reported having had a sexual partner of their own sex in the last year. Asked about their entire adulthoods, 16.4 percent of the men and 6.2 percent of the women said they had had at least one sexual partner of their own sex.

In rural areas, 1 percent of the men and six-tenths of 1 percent of the women reported a sexual partner of the same sex in the last year. For their entire adulthoods, the figures were 1.5 percent for men and 2.8 percent for women.

Larger cities are magnets for migration, the authors suggested, because of their generally higher tolerance, less scrutiny by neighbors, more work and leisure opportunities and well-established gay groups and neighborhoods.

Educational levels seem to have a strong bearing on self-identification, the study concluded, particularly for women. For example, only four-tenths of 1 percent of women with less than a high school education identify themselves as lesbian. In contrast, 3.6 percent of those with a college degree do so.

Paula A. Brantner, interim legal director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights in San Francisco, said she was not surprised by the findings. Without the sense of security offered by a college degree, she said, many people "can't afford, both financially and psychologically, to come out."

Along racial lines, 1.5 percent of the black men surveyed identified themselves as homosexual or bisexual, as opposed to 3 percent of the white men; six-tenths of 1 percent of the black women did so, compared with 1.7 percent of the white women.

"To many African-Americans, 'gay' or 'lesbian' still have the ring of being white terms, tied up with white identity," said Donald Suggs, director of public affairs for the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, when asked about that finding. So too, he said, did the clinical-sounding word "homosexual."

"In certain inner cities, we know the pro-gay movement is stronger," Mr. Sheldon said. "But politically, the leverage is not there when you take the numbers and spread them across America."

Robert H. Knight, director of cultural studies for the Family Research Council in Washington, said, "The numbers show that Americans don't have to succumb to the idea that any and all forms of sexual expression are desirable."