

Human sexuality ^[1]

Dear Alice,

How common is homosexuality in the United States?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Above all, it is important to remember that sexuality is a complicated issue! In reality, there is no specific way to determine the exact proportion of individuals that fall under the category of ?homosexual.? While some people identify as either gay or straight consistently throughout their lives, a sizeable proportion of people do not. As a result, classifications such as ?heterosexual? and ?homosexual,? confine individuals into categories and do not fully describe the diverse and ever-changing nature of human sexuality.

The Kinsey scale ^[2] was developed in the 1950s to better understand human sexuality. Researcher Eli Coleman last updated the scale for use in clinical studies in the 1980s. Coleman's research broke new ground in understanding human sexuality, showing that while many individuals rate themselves as bisexual on questions of desire (or near a three on Kinsey's scale), many maintain exclusively gay or straight relationships. In addition, some people identify as a certain sexual identity at one point in their lives, and another later on. In other words, sexual behavior and identity are not written in stone, and may shift as we encounter new people or life circumstances.

Research surveys such as the General Social Survey ^[3] and the National Health and Social Life Survey ^[4] have attempted to identify the percentage of individuals who identify as homosexual. After combining results from almost ten years of surveying, these reports indicate varying percentages of self-identifying homosexuals based on the following definitions:

- Percentage of people with at least one same-sex partner since age 18: 4.7% for men, and 3.6% for women
- Percentage of people with more same-sex than opposite-sex partners since age 18: 3.1% for men, and 1.8% for women
- Percentage of people with exclusively same-sex sex partners over the last year: 2.5% for men, and 1.4% for women
- Percentage of people with exclusively same-sex partners over the last five years: 2.6% for men, and 1.5% for women

Despite these results, only 1.8% of men and 0.6% of women in the survey self-identified as gay or lesbian. These results illustrate the misalignment that often occurs between sexual behavior and identity. For example, while 2.6% of men surveyed have slept exclusively with other men for the past five years, only 1.8% of this same group of men identify as ?homosexual.? As explained in ?[My girlfriend can't get over that I experimented with men?](#) ^[5], there are three components to human sexuality: attraction, behaviors, and identity. These three components may align perfectly for some, but for many they do not match up. These complexities can cause misrepresentation in statistical results.

Ultimately, there is no exact way to determine the percentage of the population that identifies as homosexual. Instead, think of sexuality as a fluid construct, shaped by a myriad of complex variables. Sometimes you just have to go with the flow!

Cheers,

Alice!

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