Dear Alice,

How common is homosexuality in the United States?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Your question doesn’t have a simple answer! In reality, there’s no specific way to determine the exact proportion of individuals who fall under the category of “homosexual.” It's unclear whether you're asking about sexual identity or sexual behavior, which are two separate concepts (more on this in a bit). The concept of sexual identity continues to expand and shift, and “gay” and “straight” don’t really cut it when it comes to the diverse and ever-changing nature of human sexuality. Sexual and gender identity are fluid, so it’s difficult to place individuals in any particular category, and they may not fully describe the behaviors in which people engage. That being said, over time, it’s becoming more common for people to identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ+).

Sometimes people confuse sexual identity with gender identity — sexual identity has to do with who you’re attracted to and gender identity is the personal sense of your own gender, which can be defined as man, woman, gender non-conforming, trans, and a variety of other identities. Your question seems to focus on sexuality and sexual identity.

Generally speaking, there are three components to human sexuality: attraction (the sexual, emotional, and spiritual feelings people have towards others), behaviors (the ways people choose to act on those feelings), and identity (how people define themselves in terms of sexuality). These three components may align perfectly for some, but for many they don’t match up. Additionally, some people may experience all forms of attraction towards one gender, while others feel one sort of attraction towards one gender and a different sort of attraction towards another. For even more on this topic, check out My girlfriend can’t get over that I experimented with men [2].

Sexuality is fluid — people’s attractions can change and shift throughout their lives, and many folks find that labels are restrictive or don’t adequately encapsulate their experience. For those
who do choose to define their sexual preferences using one or multiple labels, here’s a short description of some of them:

- People whose sexual identities lie outside of the dominant, heterosexual realm might refer to themselves as queer.
- People who are attracted to the same gender as the gender with which they themselves identify may define themselves as gay or homosexual.
- People who are attracted to a different gender from how they identify sometimes define themselves as straight or heterosexual.
- People who are attracted to two different genders may identify as bisexual.
- People who are attracted to more multiple genders sometimes choose the label of pansexual.
- People who don’t experience sexual attraction to any gender may identify as asexual.

List adapted from Planned Parenthood [3].

Sexual identity is complex and difficult to nail down and quantify. Not only that, due to the violence and discrimination that’s still directed towards LGBTQ+ individuals, some people choose not to disclose their sexual identities as a matter of self-protection. These complexities can cause misrepresentation in statistical results and limits data on the subject. Additionally, while some organizations do try to measure the numbers of LGBTQ+ people in the United States, sexual identity is often excluded from data collection. Not only does this prevent an understanding of how many people may be LGBTQ+, it prevents an understanding of their needs and concerns.

Ultimately, there’s no perfect science to determine the percentage of the population that identifies as homosexual or how many people have sex with people of the same sex. Instead, think of sexuality as a fluid construct, shaped by a myriad of complex variables. Sometimes it’s best to just go with the flow!

Cheers,

Alice!

Category:
Relationships [4]
Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, Queer, and Questioning (LGBTQ+) [5]

Related questions
Rumor control [6]
How do I know if I'm gay? [7]
Help — My roommate’s a lesbian! [8]

Published date:
Sep 14, 2012
Last reviewed on:
Dec 07, 2018