Statistical standard for sexual identity

Contents

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Purpose

The purpose of the statistical standard for sexual identity is to:

- standardise concepts and definitions for sexual identity data

- improve accessibility, interpretability, and comparability of data

- reduce duplication of effort across the New Zealand data system

- enable policy-makers to produce data and analysis of matters of importance affecting sexual identity groups

- meet human rights requirements for data collection and to support the legal requirements of the Human Rights Act 1993

- ensure people have the same experience when providing sexual identity information.

Background

There is an increasing awareness among policy-makers, both internationally and nationally, that there is a need for sexual orientation statistics. In New Zealand, some sexual orientation information is available but there is no standardised approach for collecting or reporting this information.

Research shows that sexual minority youth are more likely to experience direct violence, bullying, alienation, and have limited access to effective health and mental health care (Lucassen et al, 2014). To develop effective policies and programmes that address inequalities for sexual minority groups, policy-makers need high-quality, timely, and accurate information about sexual orientation. This requires government agencies and other organisations to define, collect, organise, and report this information in a consistent way.

Sexual identity is personal and there must be a clear need for the information before it is asked for. A person's privacy, safety, confidentiality, and comfort are of the upmost importance.

To achieve consistency in collecting and reporting sexual orientation information, a sexual orientation framework and this statistical standard for sexual identity have been approved by the Government Statistician for use in New Zealand's data system.

Sexual identity is one component of sexual orientation. Research shows sexual identity is often considered an appropriate aspect of sexual orientation to measure because it is related to experiences of disadvantage and discrimination (Haseldon & Joloza, 2009). Sexual identity is self-perceived and is the most favourable aspect of sexual orientation to collect and report on in social surveys or administrative settings. Questions on sexual behaviour and sexual attraction are seen as more personal.

Concept definition

Sexual identity – how a person thinks of their own sexuality and which terms they identify with. Sexual identity terms include lesbian, gay, straight, asexual, takatāpui, bisexual, or pansexual, among others.

Sexual identity, along with sexual attraction and sexual behaviour, is one component of sexual orientation.

Sexual orientation framework defines and explains the complexity of this concept.

Related concepts

This section provides information on the related concepts of sex, gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

Care needs to be taken to ensure the correct concept/term is used, which depends on the context, collection, and dissemination method. The terms are not interchangeable.

Gender

Gender is the social and cultural construction based on the expectation of what it means to be a man and/or a woman, including roles, expectations, and behaviour.

Gender identity

Gender identity is an individual's internal sense of being wholly female, wholly male, or having aspects of female and/or male.

Sex

Sex is the distinction between males and females based on the biological differences in sexual characteristics.

Note: Most people can classify themselves as either male or female. In some circumstances a third category may be required for individuals whose biological sex cannot be determined as male or female.

Sexual attraction

Sexual interest in another person. Sexual attraction is having sexual feelings towards someone.

A person may be attracted to one specific sex or gender, to more than one sex or gender, or to no-one.

Sexual behaviour

How a person behaves sexually. It is whether they have sexual partners of another sex or gender, the same sex or gender, or refrain from sexual behaviour.

Sexual identity

How a person thinks of their own sexuality and the terms they identify with. Sexual identity terms include lesbian, gay, straight, asexual, takatāpui, bisexual, or pansexual, among others.

Sexual orientation

An umbrella term that covers three key aspects of sexuality: sexual attraction, sexual behaviour, and sexual identity.

Sexual identity statistical classification

Statistical classifications help to collect and organise information on a topic, such as sexual identity, in a consistent and meaningful way. This section outlines the scope and description of the sexual identity statistical classification.

Classification scope

The classification aims to be fully inclusive – covering all sexual identities.

The classification provides categories that are meaningful and it groups like responses together.

All sexual identity responses can be coded to the classification categories by using the synonym report. This means use of the classification can be more flexible and responsive to changes in terminology over time.

The criterion used to classify a person's sexual identity is self-defined – it is the sexual identity the person provides.

Classification description

The statistical standard classification of sexual identity is a flat classification with nine categories.

Classification of sexual identity

01   Heterosexual

02   Homosexual

03   Bisexual

09   Sexual identity not elsewhere classified

44   Don't know

55   Refused to answer

77   Response unidentifiable

88   Response outside scope

99   Not stated

Concept	Sexual identity / Sexual orientation
Classification	Statistical classification of sexual identity
Abbreviation	SCSI
Version	V1.0

Effective date	19 February 2019

A general review of the statistical standard for sexual identity is scheduled to take place in three years (2022), subject to resourcing.

Guidelines for collecting sexual identity information

Sexual identity information should only be collected if there is a clear need for the information.

It is important that information about sexual identity is collected in a consistent way. Using a consistent collection approach improves both data quality and the experience of people answering a question on sexual identity. It also ensures that sexual identity information is comparable.

This section provides guidelines for collecting sexual identity information.

Self-identification

Collecting information on a person's sexual identity is through self-identification. A person selects their own social and historical labels to identify themselves, which reflects their own perception and meaning about their sexuality (adapted from Pega et al, 2013). Sexual identity is not specifically about sexual behaviour or sexual attraction, although these aspects might relate to forming an identity. A person can have a sexual identity while not being sexually active.

Age to ask sexual identity

Sexual identity is self-defined. The age at which a person can provide their own response will be determined by the protocols of the data collection and should be consistent with the collection of other similar information. There is an expectation that teenagers are generally able to self-define their sexual identity. Note: a person can have a sexual identity while not being sexually active.

As a guide, our public consultation (Stats NZ, 2018) found that age 15 years was the most acceptable age for asking a sexual identity question in general demographic collections. However, some data collections may require a different target age (eg younger ages for youth surveys and older ages for some household interview surveys); this relies on the purpose of the data collection and the need for the information.

Collecting sexual identity information for gender identity and sex

Sexual identity is not to be confused with gender identity; they are different concepts (see glossary). However, gender identity can influence how a person reports their sexual identity. Some people view their sexual identity in terms of their sex and will answer a sexual identity question accordingly. For others, their gender identity (which may differ from their sex) will influence how they answer a question about their sexual identity. Sexual identity is self-defined, and both are valid responses.

Sexual identity changing over time and with context

Sexual identity can be fluid, changing over time or across social contexts. Longitudinal surveys and administrative data collections need to allow for sexual identity changing. This is because a person's sexual orientation journey, and how information is collected, may influence how and whether a

person will identify their sexual orientation. It is possible that a person may give different responses depending on the context.

These are some situations where this may occur.

- The reason the information is being sought; for example, medical questionnaire versus social research.

- Who will see the information; for example, the respondent may be concerned about the level of knowledge and understanding the people who see the responses will have about sexual identity, and the overriding confidentiality of the data collection.

- Whether there is potentially an adverse risk to the person if they disclose their sexual identity.

- The social and/or cultural setting may influence an individual's response.

Note: data collected provides a snapshot of a person's sexual identity – at that particular point in time.

Sexual identity collection by proxy response

A proxy response is an answer supplied by a person (the proxy) on behalf of a respondent who is unable to respond directly themselves. Research indicates that a sexual identity question is considered too personal and subjective for respondents to answer on behalf of others. For these reasons it is generally advised that a sexual identity question should not be answered by proxy. (Haseldon & Joloza, 2009)

Cultural considerations

Society and culture influence sexual identity. Some cultural groups are more familiar than others with the concept of sexual identity. Māori, for example, may often adopt sexual identities such as straight/heterosexual, gay, lesbian, and bisexual, but may also adopt the Māori-specific sexual identity takatāpui.

Other cultures, for example Pacific and Asian people, may use different terms that do not fit into western sexual identities. Guidance in coding cultural terms is in the synonym list.

Questionnaire module

This section offers guidance on how to design and ask a question to collect sexual identity information.

Question requirements

A sexual identity question is required to:

- cater for all sexual identities. A question should be all-inclusive and at a minimum allow for the capture of: heterosexual or straight, gay or lesbian, bisexual, and 'other'

- elicit a single response.

Points to consider when developing a sexual identity question

When asking a sexual identity question, the aspects below should be considered.

Provide information about the collection

When a sexual identity question is asked, information about the collection's need to ask must be available to respondents. It is good practice to provide information on why the information is being collected, how it will be stored, how the information will be used, and an outline of the privacy and confidentiality rules that the data collection will adhere to.

Privacy, safety, confidentiality, and comfort considerations

A person's privacy, safety, confidentiality, and comfort are important. A question on sexual identity should not be asked in a way that potentially compromises a person in any of these ways. There must be a purpose for collecting sexual identity information; it must also be necessary to collect this information to satisfy that purpose.

Type of collection/collection mode has more information about privacy and questionnaire mode.

Write-in responses

It is preferable for a person to be able to write in their sexual identity, to fully describe their sexual identity. Choosing from a pre-determined list may prevent people from fully expressing their sexual identity.

A partial write-in question is the preferred question option because listing response categories helps respondents understand the question.

However, a full write-in question is the least preferred option when collecting sexual identity information for statistical or administrative purposes and should be used with caution.

Indigenous identities

Indigenous terms, such as takatāpui, can be included as question categories. The term takatāpui encompasses all Māori who identify with diverse genders and sexualities. When takatāpui is asked in a sexual orientation context, it is referring to sexual identity only.

Option for people who don't want to disclose their sexual identity

It is preferable that people have the option to opt out of answering a question on sexual identity. Some respondents may not feel safe or comfortable answering such a question. A 'prefer not to say' option allows respondents to opt out of answering while still providing a response.

Option for people who don't know their sexual identity

A 'don't know' option may be included as a question category. This is especially suitable for respondents who are questioning/forming their sexual identity.

Type of collection/collection mode

Collecting sexual identity information is appropriate for written or electronic self-administered questionnaires, and for interviewer-administered collections. When designing a sexual identity question, collection mode needs to be considered. Collection mode can influence what question categories are included.

Self-administered collections

Self-administered modes of survey collection, whether on paper or online questionnaire, by default offer the respondent a high degree of privacy compared with interviewer-administered collection.

When sexual identity is asked as a self-complete question, an 'other, please specify' write-in option may be included to allow the respondent to privately provide their written answer. Research (Haseldon & Joloza, 2009) has indicated that the inclusion of a 'prefer not to say' option is recommended in self-complete forms, for respondents who may not feel comfortable disclosing their sexual identity.

A helpful hint: When using a self-administered online questionnaire to collect sexual identity information, embed an 'as-you-type' list into the response area. This auto-suggests sexual identities as the person begins typing and can reduce burden and speed up processing.

The [synonym report](#) for this topic can be used to create an auto-suggest list.

Interviewer-administered collections

Within an interviewer-administered collection, privacy can be an issue for sensitive questions – response can depend on the privacy of the location. However, there are measures that can be implemented to maximise respondent confidentiality and privacy during interviewer-administrated surveys. These are two approaches.

1. Include a self-administered section in the questionnaire for sensitive or demographic questions. This could be as computer-assisted self-interview (CASI) or paper and pencil self-administered questionnaire.
2. Administer the question so respondents report their response without having to say the response category description aloud. This can be by using showcards – where the respondent answers by saying the number or letter on the showcard that corresponds to their answer. If electronic showcards are used, the respondent can report their answer by selecting their response using a touch-screen device linked to the interviewer laptop. For telephone interviews the respondent may say 'stop' when the interviewer reads out the relevant response categories.

The 'other, please specify' write-in option is desirable for meeting the need for sexual minority groups to see themselves reflected in the data collection. However, it may not always be practical to implement this in an interviewer-administered survey, due to privacy concerns (the respondent may be overheard). An explicit write-in option should only be provided if it is clear to the respondent that further detail is optional and depends on how comfortable they feel in the interview setting.

Where to place a sexual identity question

A question asking for sexual identity information is best placed with other identity questions such as sex, and gender identity, within the demographic section of the questionnaire. It is recommended that a sexual identity question be at the end of the demographic section, unless the specific needs of the survey indicate that placing it earlier (or later) would be more suitable.

Some reasons for placing sexual identity at the end of the demographic section.
- Interviewer rapport has been established before asking sensitive questions.

- Respondent has already invested time in answering questions and a break-off is less likely at this stage.

- Placement with other standard demographic questions helps to normalise a question on sexual identity; research indicates respondents may find the question more acceptable if it's seen as part of the standard demographics in a social survey content.

Care should also be taken to separate a sexual identity question from questions that have negative overlaps; for example, questions about crime, harassment, and mental health could have direct links to a person's sexual identity and should be placed apart from the sexual identity question in the survey.

Question examples

The following examples comply with the requirements of this standard and offer possible options on question wording and structure. Questions developed to suit individual needs and modes of collection may vary from these examples, but they must conform to the requirements.

The examples explicitly exclude the terms 'sexual orientation' or 'sexual identity' from the question wording as these terms may be confusing to some respondents. Instead, the respondent is left to interpret the meaning of the question from the response categories.

Note: some respondents may have difficulty understanding the terms listed in a sexual identity question. For example, some ethnicities or older respondents may be unfamiliar with the sexual identity terms listed. As a result, these respondents may select 'other' or not respond due to difficulty interpreting the response options.

A full write-in question is the least preferred option when collecting sexual identity information for statistical or administrative purposes and should be used with caution. Preliminary testing conducted by Stats NZ indicated that the New Zealand public had variable understanding of the terms 'sexual orientation' and/or 'sexual identity'. Therefore, we have not given a full write-in question example.

If a collection requires a full write-in question, please consider the terms used in the question – will they be understood by the population – and if possible list examples of potential answers. Greater understanding of the question is gained when possible answer examples are listed.

Example 1

Which of the following options best describes how you think of yourself?

[ ] Heterosexual or straight
[ ] Gay or lesbian
[ ] Bisexual
[ ] Other
[ ] Don't know
[ ] Choose not to answer

Note: this question is currently in use in the New Zealand data system.

Example 2

Which of the following options best describes how you think of yourself?

[ ] Heterosexual or straight
[ ] Gay or lesbian
[ ] Bisexual
[ ] Other, please state _____
[ ] Don't know

[ ] Prefer not to say

Note: this question is proposed for testing in a self-complete module in Stats NZ.

Stats NZ is working on interviewer-administered question options. These will be added to this statistical standard when available.

Classifying responses

After responses to the sexual identity question have been collected, they must be placed into classification categories. However, there are potential difficulties with placing a person's sexual identity in the correct classification category. The responses can include differences in spelling and new identities not yet categorised.

This section provides information on common points to consider when classifying responses to a question in sexual identity.

Multiple responses

When asking a sexual identity question a single response is preferred. In some cases a person may identify with more than one sexual identity. If multiple responses are given, classify each sexual identity to the relevant detailed classification category. Where this is not possible multiple responses are classified to 'sexual identity not elsewhere classified'.

Opting out

For some people, the sexual identity question may be too personal, and they may refuse to answer. A refusal/opt out response is recorded under the residual category response 'refused to answer'. If the question is unanswered and left blank, then the response is recorded under the residual category 'not stated'. Residual categories are applied as part of the operational coding practice.

Imputation and substitution

Imputation occurs when information is substituted into missing responses.

Stats NZ does not yet have any plans to impute sexual identity variables. However, when full coverage is required, Stats NZ can provide guidance on this matter.

Synonym report

Stats NZ maintains a synonym report/list for sexual identity. A synonym report is used to code sexual identity responses to the correct classification categories. It is a list of probable responses and the classification categories to which they are coded. For example, the synonym report for sexual identity lists all variations of sexual identities, and popular and similar sexual identity terms used by the population. This includes abbreviations, slang, and some common misspellings.

Where possible, store responses to the sexual identity question at the response/synonym level rather than at the classification or output level. Doing this allows information to be reported using standard statistical reports and self-defined reports. If it is not possible to store sexual identity responses in the response-level format, store them at the lowest level possible.

The sexual identity terms listed in the synonym report are popular today and may be superseded in the future by new terms. To keep up to date, we will review the synonym report and classification periodically.

Appendix 1 contains the synonym report.

Standard output

The standard output for sexual identity can be the same as the classification categories or can use alternative labels as outlined in Output labels (below). Subject to the collection's confidentiality requirements, no individual shall be identified, and an individual response should not be identifiable. Output categories may be combined to protect confidentiality. The combined category should be appropriately labelled to indicate its composition.

Privacy, security, and confidentiality of survey data on the Stats NZ website has more information.

Output labels

- Heterosexual / Straight
- Homosexual / Gay or lesbian
- Bisexual
- Sexual identity not elsewhere classified.

Residual categories for output – where full coverage of sexual identity is not required.
- Don't know
- Refused to answer
- Response unidentifiable
- Response outside scope
- Not stated.

The residual categories can be output separately or combined. Where a combination of residuals is used in output, this item should be labelled 'Not elsewhere included' and should have a footnote indicating its composition.

See Residual categories for definitions of residual terms.

Related standards

Statistical standard for sex (Stats NZ, 1995)

Statistical standard for gender identity (Stats NZ, 2015)

Glossary

Asexual: A person who experiences a persistent lack of sexual attraction or desire for sexual activity. Asexuality is distinct from celibacy, which is the deliberate abstention from sexual activity.

Bisexual: A person who is sexually attracted to more than one sex or gender, including their own.

Framework: Represents an agreed way of thinking about or mapping a topic. A framework describes the topic's scope and provides definitions for aspects that relate to the topic. Frameworks support consistent collecting and reporting of information.

Gay: A person who is sexually attracted to people of the same sex or gender. More commonly used in relation to males.

Gender: The social and cultural construction based on the expectation of what it means to be a man and/or a woman, including roles, expectations, and behaviour.

Gender identity: Gender identity is an individual's internal sense of being wholly female, wholly male, or having aspects of female and/or male.

Heterosexual: A person who is sexually attracted to people of a different sex or gender than their own. Straight is an alternative term.

Homosexual: A person who is sexually attracted to people of the same sex or gender. Alternative terms used are gay and lesbian.

Imputation: Imputation is a procedure for entering a value for a specific data item where the response is missing or unusable.

Lesbian: A woman who is sexually attracted to people of the same sex or gender.

Pansexual: A person who is sexually attracted to other people regardless of their sex or gender.

Sex: Sex is the distinction between males and females based on the biological differences in sexual characteristics. Sex is biologically determined and is based on chromosomal and physical attributes.

Sexual attraction: Sexual interest in another person. Sexual attraction is having sexual feelings towards someone.

Sexual behaviour: How a person behaves sexually. It is whether they have sexual partners of another sex or gender, the same sex or gender, or refrain from sexual behaviour.

Sexual identity: How a person thinks of their own sexuality and the terms they identify with.

Sexual orientation: A term that covers three key aspects: sexual attraction, sexual behaviour, and sexual identity. These are related – sexual orientation is generally based on sexual attraction; sexual attraction can result in different sexual behaviours and sexual identities. (Pega et al, 2013).

Statistical classification: A set of categories that may be assigned to one or more variables registered in statistical surveys or administrative files and used in the production and dissemination of statistics. The categories are defined in terms of one or more characteristics of a particular population of units of observation. A statistical classification may have a flat, linear structure or be hierarchical in structure. The categories at each level of the classification structure must be mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive of all objects in the population of interest.

Statistical standard: A statistical standard provides a comprehensive set of guidelines for surveys and administrative sources collecting information on a particular topic.

Straight: A person who is sexually attracted to people of a different sex or gender than their own. Heterosexual is an alternative term.

Takatāpui: A traditional term meaning 'intimate companion of the same sex'. It has been reclaimed to embrace all Māori who identify with diverse genders and sexualities such as whakawāhine, tangata ira tāne, lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, intersex, and transgender. (Tiwhanawhana Trust, 2015).

Appendix 1: Synonym report for sexual identity

A synonym report is a list of probable responses and the classification categories to which they are coded, to assist those collecting data on sexual identity to classify the text responses they may get. Note: common misspellings are included.

The list was generated from comments in our public consultation process, known responses to existing New Zealand and international surveys, and research into currently used terms. The inclusion of a term means only that at the time this standard was published, there was some evidence that the term was used to refer to a sexual identity. A term's inclusion is not intended to be a statement by Stats NZ, but simply a reflection of terms currently in use, gathered through public consultation. Over time new terms will be added as we identify changes in the language used to describe existing and emerging sexual identities.

Code	Descriptor	Synonym
01	Heterosexual	
01		Breeder
01		Cishet
01		Cissexual
01		Het
01		Hetero
01		Heterosexual
01		Hetro
01		Hetrosexual
01		Interested in the opposite sex
01		Interested in the other sex
01		Man who has sex with wife
01		Man who has sex with women
01		MSW
01		Opposite sex
01		Straight
01		Straight person
01		Strait
01		Woman who has sex with husband
01		Woman who has sex with men
01		WSM
02	Homosexual	
02		Butch
02		Femme
02		Gay

02		Gay female
02		Gay male
02		Gay man
02		Gay woman
02		Homo
02		Homosexual
02		Lesbian
02		Lesbo
02		Man loving man
02		Man who has sex with men
02		MSM
02		Same sex
02		Same sex attracted
02		Sapphic
02		Woman loving woman
02		Woman who has sex with women
02		WSW
03	**Bisexual**	
03		Ambisexual
03		Bi
03		Bi female
03		Bi male
03		Bisexual
03		Bisexual female
03		Bisexual male
03		Swing both ways
09	**Sexual identity not elsewhere classified**	
09		Abro
09		Abrosexual
09		Ace
09		Aegosexual
09		Aikāne
09		Akoi
09		Akoisexual
09		Allo
09		Allosexual
09		Andro
09		Androgynosexual
09		Androsexual
09		Asexual
09		Auto
09		Autochorissexual
09		Autosexual
09		Bicurious
09		Cetero
09		Ceterosexual

09	Cupiosexual
09	Demisexual
09	Duo
09	Duosexual
09	Fem
09	Femsexual
09	Fin
09	Finsexual
09	Fray
09	Fraysexual
09	Gray
09	Gray ace
09	Gray asexual
09	Gray-A
09	Graysexual
09	Grey
09	Grey ace
09	Grey asexual
09	Grey-A
09	Greysexual
09	Gyne
09	Gynesexual
09	Lith
09	Lithsexual
09	Merc
09	Mercsexual
09	Mono
09	Monosexual
09	Omni
09	Omnisexual
09	Pan
09	Pansexual
09	Poly
09	Polysexual
09	Pomo
09	Pomosexual
09	Queer
09	Robo
09	Robosexual
09	Sapio
09	Sapiosexual
09	Selfsexual
09	Skolio
09	Skoliosexual
09	Spectra
09	Spectrasexual

09		Takataapui
09		Takatāpui
44	**Don't know**	
44		Unsure
55	**Refused to answer**	
55		None of your business
77	**Response unidentifiable**	
77		All of the above
77		Anything goes
77		Celibate
77		Chaste
77		Christian
77		Fluid
77		Heteroflexible
77		Homoflexible
77		Human
77		Lesbigay
77		LGBT
77		Man
77		Married
77		Me
77		Metrosexual
77		Monogamous
77		No label
77		None
77		Normal
77		Not gay
77		Nothing
77		Ordinary
77		Religious
77		Single
77		Standard
77		Typical
77		Virgin
77		Woman
88	**Response outside scope**	
88		Aromantic
88		Biromantic
88		Heteroromantic
88		Homoromantic
88		Intersex
88		Panromantic
88		Trans
88		Transexual
88		Transgender
99	**Not stated**	

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