#Out4MentalHealth

Creating Visibility:

Why and How You Should Collect Data on Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people experience numerous health disparities that frequently bring them into contact with mental and physical health providers, and yet those providers often do not collect—or are inadequately collecting—information on sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI). SOGI information has also not been included in many traditional forms of data collection, rendering LGBTQ populations invisible to policy makers and others who make decisions that affect our health. Creating visibility through SOGI[1] data collection has multiple benefits including the ability to measure and report disparities in healthcare access and outcomes, support the development of culturally appropriate interventions with LGBTQ individuals, justify the allocation of funds towards LGBTQ-specific services, and track improvements in community health for the achievement of health equity. Not only will collecting SOGI data improve programming and reduce disparities, it's also the law for many publicly-funded programs.

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[1]Holloway, I. W., & Jordan, S. P. (2018). Health disparities, HIV/AIDS, and framing a public health agenda. In M. P. Denato (Ed.), Social work practice with the LGBTQ Community: The intersection of history, health, mental health, and policy factors (pp. 494-513). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

How to gather SOGI data
using just three questions

CURRENT GENDER IDENTITY
(The person's current internal sense of gender.)

"How do you describe yourself?"

- Male
- Female
- Trans male / Trans man
- Trans female / Trans woman
- Genderqueer / Nonbinary
- Questioning or unsure of gender identity
- Another gender identity not listed (please fill in the blank): _____

SEX ASSIGNED AT BIRTH
(The sex perceived at birth based typically on genitalia and listed on their birth certificate.)

"What sex were you assigned at birth?"

- Male
- Female

SEXUAL ORIENTATION
(A person's romantic, relational, and sexual orientation toward one or multiple genders.)

"Do you think of yourself as:"

- Straight / Heterosexual
- Gay / Lesbian
- Bisexual / Pansexual / Sexually Fluid
- Queer
- Questioning or unsure
- Another sexual orientation not listed (please fill in the blank): _____

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When should I ask SOGI questions?

You should ask SOGI questions anytime you collect any other demographic information. Asking SOGI questions may be a specific requirement for recipients of state or county funds, such as programs that use Mental Health Services Act funding or are administered under the California Departments of Health Care Services, Social Services, Public Health, and/or Aging.

What if I have to ask the client SOGI questions face-to-face?

Some work environments require you to ask clients demographic questions face-to-face, or the client needs assistance in filling out their forms. In those situations, your agency should have trained you how to do this comfortably, including how to respond if the client is confused by any of the terms. You can find the recommended wording of the SOGI questions in this fact sheet. Make sure you look up any terms you do not understand before you begin asking clients the SOGI questions.

How do I make sure SOGI information is kept confidential?

HIPAA and confidentiality policies should guide all your data collection. If your agency has not done so already, ask them to develop procedures for effective SOGI data collection which also ensures that clients are not "outed" to other staff or the community. You and your colleagues should be trained how to comply with these procedures.

How should I ask SOGI questions?

The best practice for asking any demographic information, including SOGI questions, is to allow the client the ability to respond confidentially and anonymously. You can accomplish this by giving the client a paper form, a tablet, or a dedicated computer so the client can answer the questions themselves. Providing a safe and private environment increases the likelihood clients will answer the questions fully and honestly, and also ensures consistency in how the questions are asked.

What if asking SOGI questions offends the client?

Most clients will answer the question and move on: in fact, studies show that respondents are more sensitive to questions about income than SOGI. If a client responds in a negative way to a SOGI question (for example, "Don't I look like a man to you?!"), you should simply explain that you ask every person these questions and you do not assume how a person identifies based on their appearance. In fact, you really cannot be sure of a person's demographic information without asking. Therefore, you should never assume a client's identity or mark a demographic question as "declined to state" if you did not ask the client the question(s).

Who do I contact if I have any other questions?

If you have additional inquiries about or encounter issues with the inclusion of SOGI demographic questions in your agency, you can reach the #Out4MentalHealth Project Team directly at info@out4mentalhealth.org.

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