UNDERSTANDING
ISSUES FACING BISEXUAL AMERICANS
This report was authored by:

Movement Advancement Project
The Movement Advancement Project (MAP) is an independent think tank that provides rigorous research, insight and analysis that help speed equality for LGBT people. MAP works collaboratively with LGBT organizations, advocates and funders, providing information, analysis and resources that help coordinate and strengthen their efforts for maximum impact. MAP also conducts policy research to inform the public and policymakers about the legal and policy needs of LGBT people and their families.

BiNetUSA
BiNet USA is America’s civil-rights & advocacy group for all bisexual, fluid, pansexual & queer-identified people and their families, friends & allies.

Bisexual Resource Center
Founded in 1985, the Bisexual Resource Center is the oldest national bisexual organization in the U.S. that advocates for bisexual visibility and raises awareness about bisexuality throughout the LGBT and straight communities. The BRC envisions a world where love is celebrated, regardless of sexual orientation or gender expression.

About this report:

The series of publications that includes UNDERSTANDING Issues Facing LGBT Americans is a primer that introduces the major areas in which LGBT Americans face legal barriers to fully participating in life and provides a summary of what advocates are doing to work for change. This report incorporates information current as of September 2014. Please see www.lgbtmap.org/understanding-lgbt-issues for more information.

Photos from Twitter project #WhatBiLooksLike (from left to right):

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Bottom row: @sarahDJOYmcd, J. Applebee and C. Gupta: Founders of Bis of Colour, James Boots Klawitter @Bi_Boots, Bisexual Women of Color: @BIWOC

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INTRODUCTION

There are over 9 million LGBT people in the United States. While more than half identify as bisexual (see Figure 1), the high poverty, discrimination, and poor physical and mental health outcomes within the bisexual population—often at rates higher than their lesbian and gay peers—point toward an urgent need to provide services and support for this segment of the community. This guide contains an introduction to the bisexual community, an overview of the economic and health disparities facing the community, and some recommendations for supporting bisexual people through advocacy, research, and programming.

TERMINOLOGY

The term bisexual (or bi) describes people who have the capacity for emotional, romantic and/or physical attraction to more than one sex or gender. Bisexual people can be in different-sex relationships, same-sex relationships, or single. Bisexuality is not dependent on how many relationships someone has had with people of each gender or how strong their feelings are. See Table 1 for terms to use and terms to avoid when speaking about the bisexual community.

COMMUNITY

Bisexual people live in every state and are ethnically and racially diverse. More women identify as bisexual than men. Bisexual people are parents, teachers, athletes, writers, politicians, musicians, and artists.

Bisexual people often face pervasive stereotypes and myths surrounding bisexuality. For example, when people come out as bisexual, it is often assumed that they are “confused” about or hiding their “real” sexual orientation. These stereotypes and myths can lead to discrimination or even “erasure” – that is, when people assume or claim that a bisexual person is straight or gay based on the gender of their current partner, or when someone refers to the “LGBT” or “gay” community and does not mean to include bisexual people.

This fear of being stereotyped manifests itself in a real way: research shows that bisexual people are six times more likely than gay men and lesbians to hide their sexual orientation. Data from the 2008 General Social Survey finds that one-quarter (25%) of bisexual people have never told anyone they are bisexual, compared to just 4% of gay men and lesbians.

<table>
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DISPARITIES

LGBT Americans face higher rates of poverty, unemployment, and negative health outcomes than straight Americans, but among LGB people, bisexuals face disproportionately higher rates of these negative outcomes than lesbians and gay men. This may be because bisexual people face discrimination from within the LGBT community as well as from non-LGBT people. Only 28% of bisexuals say that all the important people in their life know they are bisexual, compared to 77% of gay men and 71% of lesbians (see Figure 2).

Poverty

Approximately 25% of bisexual men and 30% of bisexual women live in poverty, compared to 15% and 21% of heterosexual men and women respectively and 20% and 23% of gay man and lesbians (see Figure 3).6 Bisexual women are more likely to depend on public financial assistance such as SNAP (food stamps).7

Employment

Bisexual people face discrimination in the workplace. While 20% of bisexuals report experiencing a negative employment decision based on their sexuality, almost 60% of bisexual people report hearing anti-bisexual jokes and comments on the job.8 Nearly half of bisexual people report that they are not out to any of their coworkers (49%), compared to just 24% of lesbian and gay people.9

Violence

Bisexual people experience higher rates of sexual and intimate partner violence than gay, lesbian, and straight people.10 Bisexual women experience significantly higher rates of violence both overall and by significant others, compared to lesbian and straight women: 46% of bisexual women have experienced rape, compared to 13% and 17% of lesbian and straight women, respectively. Sixty-one percent of bisexual women have experienced rape, physical violence and/or stalking by an intimate partner, compared to 43% and 35% of lesbian and straight women respectively (see Figure 4 on the next page).11 More than half of bisexual women who experienced violence by an intimate partner reported that they had missed a day of work or school, feared for their safety, or experience another negative impact.12 Bisexual men also report higher rates of sexual violence; nearly half of bisexual men (47%) report experiencing sexual violence other than rape in their lifetime.13

Many bisexual victims of violence are young: a majority of bisexual victims of rape report it occurred between the ages of 11 and 24.14 Bisexual survivors of violence are 2.3 times more likely to have an act of violence against them classified as a “hate crime” by the police. When bisexual survivors interact with police, however, they are three times more likely to experience police violence than people who are not bisexual.15
Health

Bisexual people have high rates of poor physical and mental health. Physical disparities include higher rates of hypertension, poor or fair physical health, smoking, and risky drinking than heterosexuals, lesbians, or gay men. In a study of women ages 50-79, bisexual women had a 17.6% lifetime prevalence of any cancer, compared to 11.9% for straight women and 14.2% for lesbian women.

One study comparing men’s sexual orientation to their health outcome found bisexual men reported higher rates of daily smoking (27.2% of bisexual men compared to 26.2% gay men and 21.1% of straight men) and risky drinking (16.3% of bisexual men compared to 11.1% of gay men and 13.3% of straight men) than their peers. Bisexual youth are also at higher risk for substance abuse than their peers.

Studies in Australia and Canada have shown deep disparities in mental health between bisexuals and their peers. According to the American Journal of Public Health, among women, bisexual women report the highest prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (of PTSD) (26.6% versus 6.6% of straight women), with high prevalence of PTSD setting the stage for poorer health throughout adulthood.

Bisexuals have higher suicidality rates: one study found bisexuals were four times more likely and lesbian and gay adults two times more likely to report attempted suicide than straight adults. Another study found that bisexual men were 6.3 times more likely to seriously consider suicide in their lifetime and gay men 4.1 times more likely than straight men. A recent study in the Journal of Adolescent Health found that bisexual teens who reported suicidal thoughts did not report a decrease in these thoughts as they aged into adulthood, unlike their straight peers.

Despite these disparities, and perhaps compounding them, bisexual people are less likely than gay men or lesbians to be out to their health care providers. The body of research on bisexual health is growing, but more data is always helpful when trying to show the health disparities facing bisexuals.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Cultural Competence

In order to fully support the whole lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community, it is vital that community organizations that support LGBT people are providing culturally competent care to their bisexual clientele. Bi-specific trainings for service providers can help providers feel comfortable working with bisexual clients and vice versa. For example, researchers recommend that “therapists must understand that the experiences of clients who identify as bisexual can be much different from the experiences of their lesbian and gay clients.”27

Visibility

Organizations that do serve the bisexual community should publicize the fact that they have bi-specific services and should consider ways their organizations can be visibly and openly affirming of bisexual identities. Health providers can create a welcoming environment by openly displaying pamphlets and other materials that are bi-specific. Organizations that serve the LGBT community as a whole, but who lack bi-specific programming should consider providing tailored services to the bisexual population.

Data Collection

There is conclusive data showing that bisexuals experience poverty, workplace discrimination, negative health outcomes, and violence at higher rates than lesbian, gay, and heterosexual Americans. But further data can only help build the case for culturally competent care for bisexual people. When researching LGBT people, it is important to distinguish bisexual people from their gay, lesbian, and straight peers. This can be achieved by allowing participants in polls and research to self-identify their sexual orientation, rather than categorizing individuals based on their current relationship status or sexual activity. And while using “different-sex” and “same-sex” is more precise than “gay and lesbian couples,” it may still fail to explicitly account for bisexual people. It is important to be precise about which population the data is referring to and which populations are excluded from the discussion.

It is also important to distinguish between sexual orientation and gender identity. Surveys that ask if a person identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender risk conflating a person’s gender identity with their sexual orientation. This confusion can lead to artificially inflated or lowered indicators, when parsing the community more precisely would reveal the higher...
risks facing bisexual and transgender people. Conflating gender identity and sexual orientation also fails to count transgender people who identify as bisexual, lesbian, gay or straight.

Funding for the development of more bisexual-focused research and support for researchers should be prioritized. Bi-specific studies can help showcase the importance of including bisexual people in bisexual-specific and general LGBT programming.

**CONCLUSION**

While they comprise more than half of the LGB community, bisexual people experience significant health, safety, and economic disparities. The failure to account for bisexual lives and experiences compounds lack of social support and keeps bisexual people in the closet. Cultural competence, deliberate and thoughtful visibility, and data collection will support the bisexual community and combat stigma and discrimination against bisexual people.