

Statistical bulletin

Sexual orientation, UK: 2018

Experimental statistics on sexual orientation in the UK in 2018 by region, sex, age, marital status, ethnicity and socio-economic classification.

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1 . Main points

- The proportion of the UK population aged 16 years and over identifying as heterosexual or straight decreased from 95.3% in 2014 to 94.6% in 2018.
- The proportion identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) increased from 1.6% in 2014 to 2.2% in 2018.
- In 2018, there were an estimated 1.2 million people aged 16 years and over identifying as LGB.
- Men (2.5%) were more likely to identify as LGB than women (2.0%) in 2018.
- Younger people (aged 16 to 24 years) were most likely to identify as LGB in 2018 (4.4%).
- Among English regions, people in London were most likely to identify as LGB (2.8%), with people in the North East the least likely (1.8%).
- More than two-thirds (68.7%) of people who identified as LGB were single (never married or in a civil partnership).

Statistician's comment

"People in their late teens and early twenties are more likely to identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) than older age groups.

"Meanwhile, more than two-thirds of the LGB population are single (never married or entered into a civil partnership). This reflects the younger age structure of this population, the changing attitudes of the general population to marriage and the fact that legal unions have only recently been available for same-sex couples."

Sophie Sanders, Population Statistics Division, Office for National Statistics.

Follow Population Statistics Division on Twitter [@RichPereira_ONS](https://twitter.com/RichPereira_ONS)

2 . Sexual orientation in the UK

In 2018, an estimated 94.6% of the UK population aged 16 years and over (53.0 million people) identified as heterosexual or straight. This represents a continuation of the decrease seen since 2014, when 95.3% of the population identified themselves as heterosexual or straight (Table 1).

Table 1: Most people in the UK identify themselves as heterosexual or straight
Sexual orientation, as a percentage, UK, 2014 to 2018

Sexual orientation	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Heterosexual or straight	95.3	95.2	95.0	95.0	94.6
Gay or lesbian	1.1	1.2	1.2	1.3	1.4
Bisexual	0.5	0.7	0.8	0.8	0.9
Other	0.3	0.4	0.5	0.6	0.6
Do not know or refuse	2.8	2.6	2.5	2.3	2.5

Source: Office for National Statistics – Annual Population Survey

Notes

1. The historical figures in this bulletin have been revised from previous publications. Information about these revisions is included in the Measuring the data section.
2. Quality measures (including confidence intervals and coefficient of variation) for the estimates are displayed within the reference tables.
3. Totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding. Lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) figures may differ from the sum of Gay or lesbian and Bisexual figures, as each figure has been calculated using unrounded estimates.

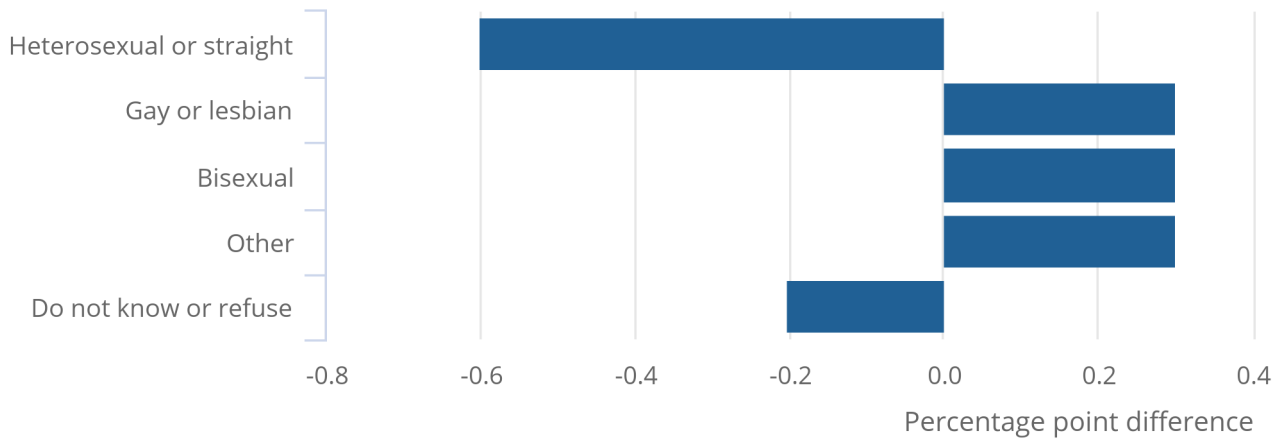
An estimated 2.2% of the population aged 16 years and over (1.2 million people) identified themselves as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) in 2018; this is comprised of 1.4% identifying as gay or lesbian and 0.9% as bisexual (see Table 1, note 3). The proportion of the population identifying as LGB increased from 1.6% in 2014 to 2.2% in 2018 (Figure 1).

Figure 1: A lower proportion of people identified as heterosexual and a higher proportion identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual in 2018

Change in self-identified sexual orientation, UK, 2014 to 2018

Figure 1: A lower proportion of people identified as heterosexual and a higher proportion identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual in 2018

Change in self-identified sexual orientation, UK, 2014 to 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics – Annual Population Survey

Notes:

1. Quality measures (including confidence intervals and coefficient of variation) for the estimates are displayed within the reference tables.
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A higher proportion of men than women identify as LGB

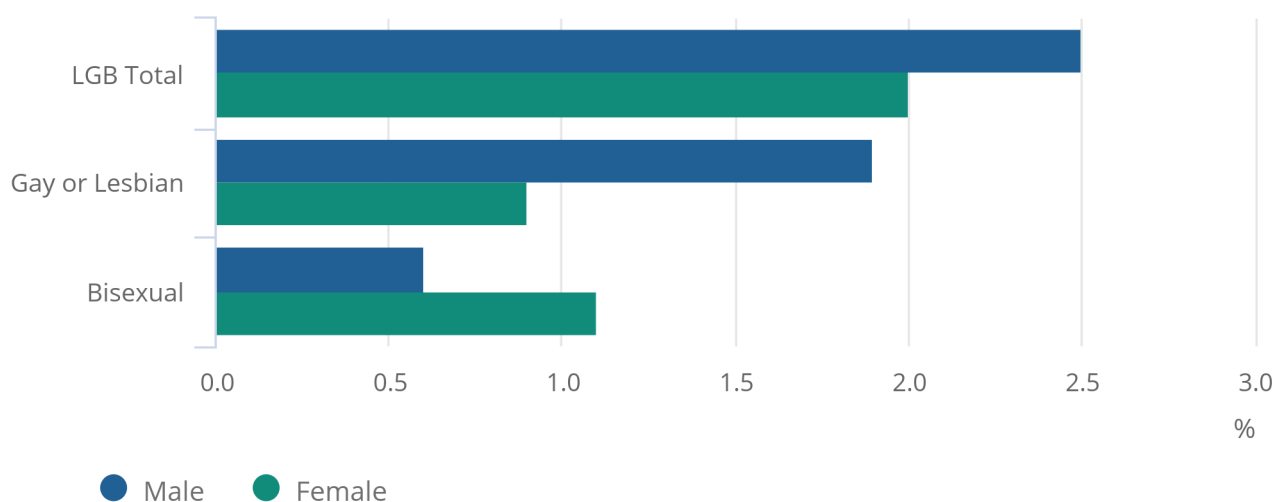
In 2018, 2.5% of men identified themselves as LGB, compared with 2.0% of women. More than twice the proportion of men (1.9%) compared with women (0.9%) identified as gay or lesbian (Figure 2). Conversely, a higher proportion of women than men identified as bisexual, at 1.1% and 0.6% respectively. This represents a continuation of a trend that has been observed back to 2014, where a higher proportion of men than women identify as gay or lesbian and a higher proportion of women than men identify as bisexual.

Figure 2: Men were more likely to identify as gay or lesbian, while women were more likely to identify as bisexual

Lesbian, gay or bisexual population by sex, UK, 2018

Figure 2: Men were more likely to identify as gay or lesbian, while women were more likely to identify as bisexual

Lesbian, gay or bisexual population by sex, UK, 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics – Annual Population Survey

Notes:

1. Quality measures (including confidence intervals and coefficient of variation) for the estimates are displayed within the reference tables.
2. Totals may not sum due to rounding.

3 . Sexual orientation by age

In 2018, people aged 16 to 24 years were more likely to identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) than other age groups.

People in each successively older age group were less likely to identify as LGB than those in the preceding younger age group in 2018 (Figure 3). Of the population aged 16 years and over, 20.9% of men and 23.4% of women are aged 65 years and over. However, only 6.7% of men and 7.4% of women who identified as LGB were aged 65 years and over. A possible reason for this pattern is that younger people could be more likely to explore their sexuality combined with more social acceptability of different sexual identities and the ability to express these today.

Figure 3: Younger people are more likely to identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual than older age groups

Lesbian, gay or bisexual population by age and sex, UK, 2018 and UK population by age and sex, 2018

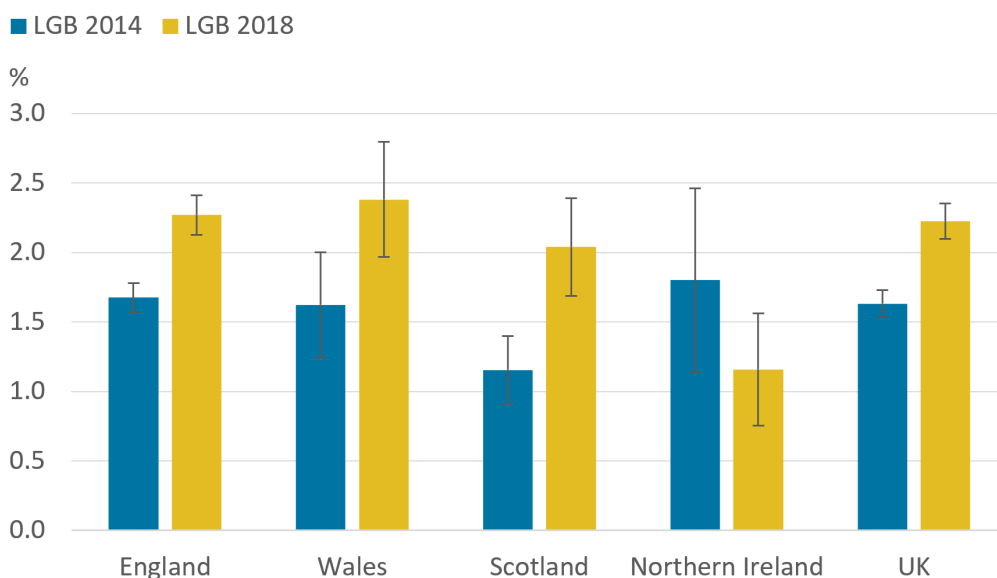
4. Sexual orientation by UK countries and English regions

In 2018, the percentage of people who identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) was similar for England (2.3%), Wales (2.4%) and Scotland (2.0%).

For Northern Ireland, the percentage of people identifying themselves as LGB in 2018 was 1.2%. The UK average in 2018 was 2.2%, which has increased from 1.6% in 2014 (Figure 4).

Figure 4: In 2018, a smaller proportion of people in Northern Ireland identified themselves as lesbian, gay or bisexual than in other UK countries

UK constituent countries by lesbian, gay or bisexual population, 2014 and 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics – Annual Population Survey

Notes:

1. Confidence intervals are presented on the graph to give an estimated range of values within which the actual value is likely to fall 95% of the time. Where confidence intervals do not overlap this means that the differences are statistically significant.
2. Figures for Northern Ireland are based on relatively small sample sizes, which produce less reliable findings. Further information on estimates of the population numbers and measures of quality (to show the levels of uncertainty associated with survey estimates) are presented in the datasets.
3. Totals may not sum due to rounding.

People in London are most likely to identify as LGB

In 2018, a higher proportion of people in London (2.8%) identified as LGB than in other regions of England. The North East had the lowest proportion (1.8%).

The higher proportion of people identifying as LGB in London may be explained by the younger age structure of the population. The median age of the population in London was 35.3 years in 2018, compared with 41.8 years in the North East of England.

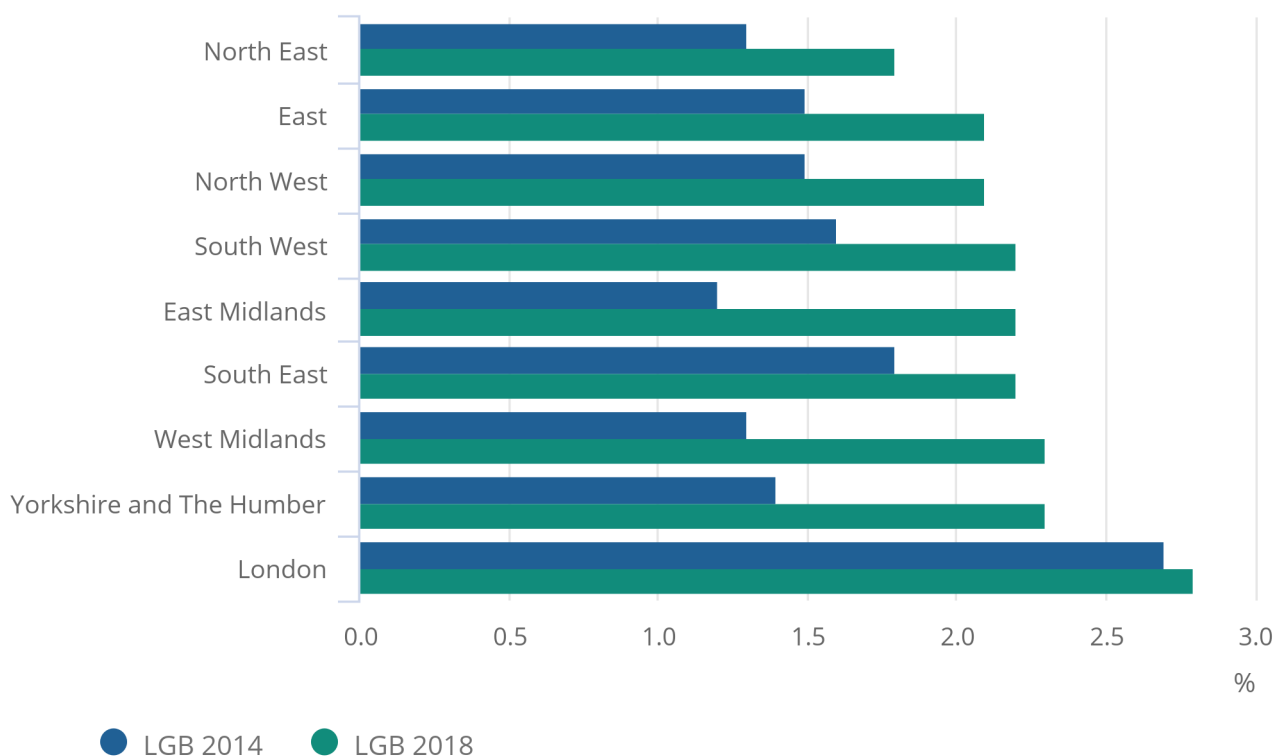
The East Midlands and West Midlands were the regions that saw the largest change in the proportion of people identifying as LGB over the last four years, with both increasing from 2014 to 2018 (from 1.2% to 2.2% and 1.3% to 2.3% respectively).

Figure 5: A larger proportion of people in London identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual than in other English regions

English regions by lesbian, gay or bisexual population, 2014 and 2018

Figure 5: A larger proportion of people in London identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual than in other English regions

English regions by lesbian, gay or bisexual population, 2014 and 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics – Annual Population Survey

Notes:

1. Quality measures (including confidence intervals and coefficient of variation) for the estimates are displayed within the reference tables.
2. Totals may not sum due to rounding.

5 . Sexual orientation by marital status

Among those identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) in 2018, more than two-thirds (68.7%) were single, meaning that they had never married or entered into a civil partnership. This is double the proportion of those who identified as heterosexual or straight and were single (34.2%). A possible reason for this difference is the younger age structure of the LGB population combined with the increase in the [average age of marriage](#).

Furthermore, legal unions for same-sex couples have only become available recently; civil partnerships were introduced for same-sex couples in the UK in December 2005, and same-sex marriage has been available in England, Wales and Scotland since 2014 and in Northern Ireland from 2020.

More couples are choosing to live together before or instead of marriage. Those with a legal marital status of single may live with a partner of the same or opposite sex. Same-sex cohabiting couples are the most common type of same-sex couple family, [accounting for just over half of same-sex families in 2019](#).

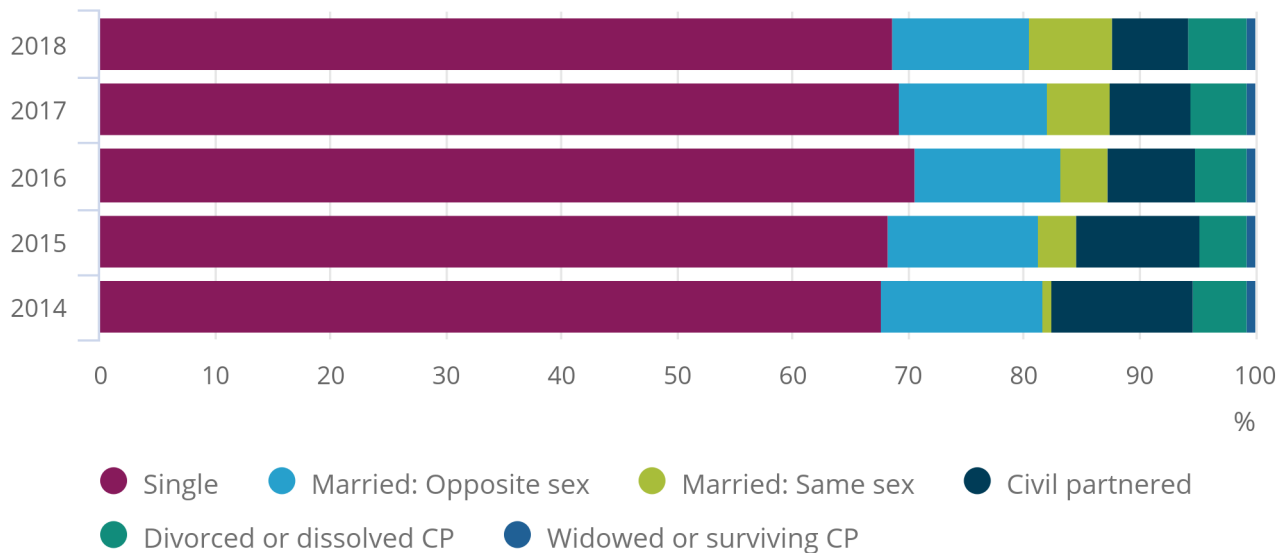
From 2014 to 2018, the proportion of people identifying as LGB who were in same-sex marriages increased from 0.8% to 7.3%, while those in civil partnerships decreased from 12.3% to 6.5% (Figure 6). This suggests that since its introduction in 2014, an increasing number of people who identify as LGB are choosing to enter a same-sex marriage rather than a civil partnership or to convert their civil partnership to a same-sex marriage.

Figure 6: People identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual are most likely to have a marital status of single (never married or civil partnered)

Lesbian, gay or bisexual population by legal marital status, UK, 2014 to 2018

Figure 6: People identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual are most likely to have a marital status of single (never married or civil partnered)

Lesbian, gay or bisexual population by legal marital status, UK, 2014 to 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics – Annual Population Survey

Notes:

1. The Marriages (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 made provision for the marriage of same-sex couples in England and Wales from 29th March 2014 onwards. The Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Act 2014 made provision for the marriage of same-sex couples in Scotland from 31 December 2014 onwards. The Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019 made provisions for the marriage of same-sex couples and civil partnerships of opposite sex couples from 13 January 2020 onwards.
2. The Civil Partnership Act 2004 made provision for civil partnerships of same-sex couples in the UK and was amended to make provision for civil partnerships of opposite sex couples in England and Wales from 31 December 2019 onwards.
3. Quality measures (including confidence intervals and coefficient of variation) for the estimates are displayed within the reference tables.
4. Totals may not sum due to rounding.

6 . Sexual orientation data

[Sexual orientation, UK](#)

Dataset | Released 6 March 2020

Sexual orientation in the UK from 2012 to 2018 by region, sex, age, marital status, ethnicity and National Statistics Socio-economic Classification.

7 . Glossary

Sexual orientation

“Sexual orientation” is an umbrella term that encompasses sexual identity, attraction and behaviour. It is a subjective view of oneself and may change over time and in different contexts.

Sexual identity

[The measurement of sexual identity \(PDF, 116KB\)](#) has been identified as the component of sexual orientation most closely related to experiences of disadvantage and discrimination. Sexual identity does not necessarily reflect sexual attraction and/or sexual behaviour, which are separate concepts not currently measured by the Annual Population Survey (APS).

Sexual orientation categorised as “other”

The “other” category captures people who do not consider themselves to fit into the heterosexual or straight, gay or lesbian, or bisexual categories. It might also include people who responded “other” for different reasons such as those who did not understand the terminology or who are against categorisation.

8 . Measuring the data

Sexual orientation estimates are based on data from the Annual Population Survey (APS), which collects information on self-perceived sexual identity from the household population aged 16 years and over in the UK. The household population excludes people living in communal establishments with the exception of those in NHS housing and students in halls of residence (sampled via the private households of their parents).

Revision

The estimates presented within this bulletin and the associated datasets for the reference years 2014 to 2018 have been revised and differ from previous publications. The estimates have been revised for two reasons. The first reason is to incorporate the re-weighting of the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and APS. The re-weighting process occurs periodically to take into account the latest population estimates and projections. The second reason is to incorporate an improvement made to the sexual orientation variables on the LFS and APS.

The improvement was made as a result of the detection of an issue in the data collection process relating specifically to the sexual identity question. This issue resulted in an artificially increased number of “don’t know or refuse” responses to interviews carried out by field interviews using a mobile phone. In the past, the number of these interviews was very small, but over time this has increased to try to improve overall LFS response rates. To adjust for this quality issue, we have removed cases where the interview was carried out by a field interviewer using a mobile phone. After removing these cases, we have re-weighted the responses to take into account the smaller sample size and new 2018 weights.

We have made this adjustment for the years 2014 to 2018. Because the variable used to identify field interviews carried out by mobile phone is not available for the sexual orientation data prior to 2014, estimates for the years 2012 and 2013 have not been revised. A comparable time series of estimates is therefore now available back to 2014.

This applies to estimates for the UK, England, Wales and Scotland only. Because Northern Ireland field interviews are all carried out face to face, sexual orientation data for Northern Ireland are unaffected by this. Estimates for Northern Ireland from 2012 to 2017 differ from previously published figures as they have been revised following the re-weighting of the APS, but they have not been subject to any further changes. As previously, a comparable time series of estimates for Northern Ireland is therefore available back to 2012.

Adjustments to future estimates

A solution has been implemented from January 2020, but because of the wave-based design of the survey this does not fully eliminate the presence of cases affected by this from the sexual orientation estimates until 2022. Therefore, in production of the 2019, 2020 and 2021 estimates, we will continue to apply this same adjustment to each new year of data.

More detailed information on the Sexual Identity question and design of the APS is available in the [LFS user guide](#).

Change of terminology

In 2019 (publication of the 2017 data), the terminology in this release changed from “sexual identity” to “sexual orientation” to align with legislation ([Equality Act 2010](#)); please see the [Glossary](#) for definitions.

Although the terminology changed, the data source and methodology used to produce the estimates were not changed and remained consistent with previous years.

Sexual orientation and Census 2021

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has recommended a new voluntary question on sexual orientation for those aged 16 years and over for Census 2021 in England and Wales. The data gathered will make it easier to monitor inequalities under the anti-discrimination duties of the [Equality Act 2010](#). Having an estimate of the size of the lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) community will allow charities and local and central government to target services effectively. For more information, see the government [white paper](#) that was published in December 2018.

National Records of Scotland (NRS) also plan to introduce a new voluntary question on sexual orientation for Census 2021 in Scotland, information about which is available in the NRS [Scotland’s Census 2021 Sexual Orientation Topic Report](#).

9 . Strengths and limitations

Sexual orientation estimates have a number of uses, both direct and indirect, informing policy decisions at a national level. The estimates are mainly used to provide evidence and to inform the monitoring of the [Equality Act 2010](#), alongside providing estimates of the lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) population for service providers.

This bulletin presents the sexual orientation estimates as percentages. Estimates of the population numbers and measures of quality (to show the levels of uncertainty associated with survey estimates) are presented in the datasets. Users are advised to consult the quality measures when interpreting the estimates as some estimates are based on a relatively small sample. As a result, these estimates are subject to uncertainty particularly when making comparisons, such as changes from one year to another. In this bulletin, such comparisons are [statistically significant](#) unless otherwise stated. This means that there is likely to have been a real change in the underlying population proportions and that the difference we are observing is unlikely to be a result of chance.

More quality and methodology information on strengths, limitations, appropriate uses, and how the data were created is available in the [Sexual orientation QMI](#).

10 . Related links

[Annual Population Survey user guide \(PDF, 689KB\)](#)

User guide | Released 2019

Further information on the Annual Population Survey (APS).

[Lesbian, gay, and bisexual people say they experience a lower quality of life](#)

Article | Released 5 July 2017

Analysis exploring the relationship between sexual identity and well-being.

[Integrated Household Survey \(Experimental Statistics\)](#)

Bulletin | Released 1 October 2015

Sexual identity, smoking prevalence and perceived general health using data from the Integrated Household Survey.