

# **Mental Health Disparities by Sexual Orientation in the U.S.: Current Patterns and Recent Trends\***

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## **Abstract**

In the past few decades, U.S. society has gradually become more accepting of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals (LGB). The recent nationwide legalization of same-sex marriage is a monumental example of that acceptance. Despite the progress in civil rights, population-based studies since the early 2000s have noted that LGB populations continue to exhibit poorer health outcomes compared to their heterosexual counterparts. According to minority stress theory, prejudice, discrimination, and violence directed at sexual minorities over the course of their lives accounts for this health inequality. Using representative data from the 2013-2016 National Health Interview Survey, the current study examines recent patterns of, and potential explanations for, mental health disparities

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by sexual orientation in the U.S. The study investigates whether mental health disparities have narrowed significantly since the introduction of marriage equality and whether younger LGB people experience fewer health disadvantages compared to older ones. Results show that LGB people continue to experience higher levels of mental distress than heterosexuals. Most of the health disadvantages faced by gay men and bisexual men and women cannot be explained fully by access to socioeconomic resources or marital status, whereas disadvantages faced by lesbian women are largely attributable to these factors. Moreover, not only do mental health disparities by sexual orientation persist in the years from 2013-2016, but the disparities are actually larger among younger people. These findings suggest that marriage equality is not a panacea for the mental health of sexual minorities and that much more effort is needed to address fundamental rights for sexual minorities.

**Key Words:** LGB, mental health, marriage equality, sexual orientation