

# Measuring Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

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The Committee on Measuring Sex, Gender Identity, and  
Sexual Orientation

*The Committee on National Statistics  
The Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education*

## Recommendation 2:

The panel recommends that the National Institutes of Health use the following question for assessing sexual orientation identity:

Which of the following best represents how you think of yourself? [Select ONE]:

- Lesbian or gay
- Straight, that is, not gay or lesbian
- Bisexual
- [If respondent is AIAN:] Two-Spirit
- I use a different term [free-text]

(Don't know)

(Prefer not to answer)

# Sexual Orientation Identity: Measure Characteristics

- Strengths

- Only measures identity
- Allows for enumeration of those who use other terms beyond a limited set
- Allows for culturally specific identification for American Indian and Alaska Native populations
- Tested within a diverse array of populations
- Tested within broad age range (ages 12-85)

- Weaknesses

- Response set does not reflect some aspects of current culture and terminology
- Write-in responses must be cleaned and coded
- Does not include response option that indicates uncertainty
- Uses negating language for straight category that is not conceptually accurate
- Response ordering does not reflect standard criteria

# Sexual Orientation Identity: Topics for Future Research

**RECOMMENDATION 3:** To further improve the quality and inclusivity of current measures of sexual orientation identity, the National Institutes of Health should fund and conduct research on the following topics:

- Alternate wording for the “straight” response option
- The ordering of response categories
- The addition of response options such as “queer,” “questioning,” and “same gender loving”
- Guidelines for measuring sexual orientation attraction and behavior
- Best practices for collecting sexual orientation information in adolescent populations
- Proxy reporting of sexual orientation identity

# Sex and Gender Measurement

- **Standard binary sex/gender question**
  - Male and female answer options only
  - Does not:
    - Distinguish cisgender and transgender people
    - Allow for nonbinary sex or gender
    - Identify the concept of interest
- **Identifying transgender people**
  - One-step: Single question asking explicitly whether respondents consider themselves transgender (or identify as male, female, or transgender)
  - Two-step: Two items used in tandem, usually sex assigned at birth and current gender identity

# Support for a Two-Step Approach

1. Previously recommended by the GeniUSS Group (2014) & the Federal Interagency SOGI Working Group (2016)
2. Testing has included feasibility studies, cognitive interviews & behavior coding, survey experiments
3. Nonresponse on the order of 1% or less in national surveys, response stability/reliability also higher than for other common demographic questions
4. Improves on existing one-step measures:
  - Enumerates both cisgender and transgender people
  - Accounts for both transgender experience and identity, recognizing that not all transgender people identify explicitly as transgender

## Recommendation 4:

The panel recommends that the National Institutes of Health use the following pair of questions assessing sex assigned at birth and gender identity:

Q1: What sex were you assigned at birth, on your original birth certificate?

- Female
- Male

(Don't know)

(Prefer not to answer)

Q2: What is your current gender?

[Mark only one]

- Female
- Male
- Transgender
- [If respondent is AIAN:] Two-Spirit
- I use a different term: [free text]

(Don't know)

(Prefer not to answer)

# Strengths of this Two-Step Measure

- Clearly distinguishes between sex assigned at birth and current gender
- Cross-tabulation allows enumeration of cisgender and transgender people
- Allows for culturally specific identification for Indigenous respondents
- Tested with a diverse array of U.S. populations
  - Cisgender and transgender people
  - English and Spanish speakers
  - Urban and rural residents
  - Broad age range (12-85)



# Cross tabulation of Two-Step Measure

- Cisgender women (female/female)
- Cisgender men (male/male)
- Transgender women (male/female)
- Transgender men (female/male)
- People who can be classified as transgender (trans men, trans women, people who identify using the term “transgender”)
- People with nonbinary gender identities (Two-spirit, write-ins)

# Weaknesses of this Two-Step Measure

- Identity response set is forced choice, but “female,” “male,” & “transgender” are not mutually exclusive
- Uses sex terms for gender identity and newer gender terminology (e.g., nonbinary) not included
- Write-in responses must be cleaned and coded
- Sex assigned at birth may be sensitive for some and inappropriate to include in some circumstances
- Sex assigned at birth also does not include nonbinary option (because framed as “original birth certificate”)

# Topics for Future Research

**RECOMMENDATION 5:** To improve the quality and inclusivity of the recommended two-step gender measure—sex assigned at birth and current gender—the National Institutes of Health should fund and conduct research on the following topics:

- Performance of a “select all that apply” approach for current gender
- Replacing or augmenting the gender response option “transgender” with “nonbinary”
- Categorization of nonbinary people vis-à-vis transgender status or identity
- The need for a “nonbinary” response option for sex assigned at birth
- Stability of responses over time
- Alternative measures that can be used in circumstances in which asking about sex assigned at birth is inappropriate
- Best practices for collecting sex and gender information from youth, people with limited English proficiency, and with proxy reporting