

LGBTQ Persons in Latin America and the Caribbean: What Does the Evidence Say about Their Situation?

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→ LGBTQ+ persons in Latin America and the Caribbean: What does the evidence say about their situation?

Despite the progress that has been made in the region toward closing the gaps and inequalities that affect people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, and despite the efforts of some countries to prevent and punish gender-based harassment and violence, barriers persist: stigma and discrimination continue to affect social inclusion and full citizenship of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and other (LGBTQ+) people. For example, while same-sex marriage is partially or fully legal in nine countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), many others still criminalize consensual adult same-sex relationships.^[1] Even in countries with more robust regulatory frameworks recognizing the rights of LGBTQ+ people, homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia,¹ as well as cases of extreme violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity, are still prevalent.^{[2] [3]}

To address the inequalities faced by LGBTQ+ people in the region, analytical evidence is needed to inform policy design. Several recent [studies](#) supported by the IDB Group provide valuable insights into issues of social attitudes, measuring the size of this population, and their experiences of discrimination. This policy brief summarizes their main findings.

1. Homophobia, biphobia and transphobia are forms of rejection, discrimination or even hatred towards homosexual, bisexual, and transgender people, respectively.

→ What factors affect attitudes toward LGBTQ+ people?

Achieving gender equality before the law is desirable not only from a rights perspective, but also because of its potential to shape existing social norms and enhance agency². Analytical evidence for countries outside the region points in this direction: **legal reforms that expand the rights of LGBTQ+ people can improve a society's attitudes**^{[4] [5]} **and/or perceptions.**^[6] Although the literature on this topic is still incipient in the region, descriptive survey data for six Latin American countries suggest a positive correlation between acceptance of same-sex marriage and legal recognition of same-sex couples.^[7]

Legal reforms can improve societal attitudes and perceptions, but additional actions are necessary to eliminate stigma and discrimination



However, legal reforms alone are not enough to eradicate the stigmatization of LGBTQ+ people and exposure of them to different forms of discrimination and violence. **To change the attitudes and beliefs that underlie these behaviors, deeper transformations are needed, including in the way these persons are portrayed by the mass media, as shown in a [quasi-experimental study conducted in fourteen countries in the region.](#)**^[8] The study's results indicate that exposure to soap operas with stereotypical portrayals of LGBTQ+ persons (especially in comedies) reduces, in the short term, the public's tolerance towards them. This effect is more marked in individuals that are traditionally more conservative, such as men, older people, people living in rural areas, and people who frequently attend religious services.

2. Understood as people's capacity to freely make decisions based on the goals or values they consider important.

→ How can measurements of the number of LGBTQ+ persons be improved?

Quality statistical information on the size of the LGBTQ+ population and their experiences of discrimination in the region remains scarce and almost non-existent.^[9] Although recent efforts to incorporate questions on sexual orientation and gender identity are noteworthy, very few countries include questions for direct measurement in national representative surveys. Even those that do may be ending up with biased measures of the real size of the population due to a variety of factors, including the way in which sexual minorities are classified, how the questions are formulated, or a lack of strategies for creating safe spaces in which people can refer to their sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as mechanisms that guarantee the confidentiality of the information.

In fact, **evidence shows that measurement methods that guarantee privacy and anonymity can influence the veracity of sexual orientation and gender identity reporting.**^[10] As shown in a study of Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, the proportion of people who self-identify as LGBTQ+ tends to be higher when questions are self-administered (i.e., when they are completed directly by respondents rather than by survey facilitators).^[11] Of note in the region are Mexico's efforts to increase privacy in nationally representative surveys through the National Survey on Sexual and Gender Diversity (ENDISEG), which was launched in 2021 to measure the size of the LGBTQ+ population. This survey uses pre-recorded questions on sensitive topics that respondents listen to and answer directly on the tablets, increasing privacy and anonymity. According to this survey, about 5% of the population aged 15 and older identify as LGBTQ+.^[12]



An [experimental study focused on Colombia](#)^[13] and a similar one in [Mexico](#)^[14] sought to document whether there were differences in LGBTQ+ population size estimates when information is obtained from direct questions, like those included in household surveys, versus using indirect questions. Both studies used list experiments, a methodology designed to mitigate the social-desirability bias that emerges when questions on sensitive topics are asked, to increase respondents' perception of anonymity and privacy by indirectly asking about their sexual orientation and gender identity. Specifically, [the Colombia study, focused on Bogota](#) explored an alternative approach to identifying and measuring the LGBT population by implementing this method and compared it with the direct method used in the survey Gran Encuesta Integrada de Hogares. The results obtained through the indirect method suggest that the percentage of the population self-identifying as LGBT in Bogotá could be almost ten times the percentage obtained using the direct reporting methodology for this survey.

The statistical visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals is essential to understand the barriers they face and to design policies that can address them

The [Mexico study](#) used different measures of self-identification and explored their relationship with age and labor market status through direct and indirect questions asked using a list experiment. The results of this study reveal that, when asked direct questions, younger people tend to be more likely to self-identify as non-heterosexual compared to older people. However, when asked indirectly, the negative relationship between age and self-identification disappears. Also, regardless of the method of measurement, young people tend to be more likely to report being sexually attracted to a person of the same sex at some point in their lives. The difference in the estimates obtained in both the Colombia and Mexico studies highlights the challenges of accurately identifying this population using traditional measurement methods.





What do we know about LGBTQ+ persons' experiences of discrimination?

Existing quantitative evidence for the countries of the region reveals that LGBTQ+ persons face inequalities in education, employment, and access to decent housing.



ACCESS TO EDUCATION

Bullying based on sexual orientation and gender identity is a global problem with significant implications for the overall well-being of students. The evidence available for the countries of the region also points in this direction. For example, descriptive data from the self-administered survey [Convivencia y Discriminación en la Enseñanza Media de Uruguay \(2019\)](#) show that the proportion of students who reported having experienced some situation of bullying or aggression in the school environment during the last year was 11 percentage points higher for LGBTQ+ youth compared to their heterosexual peers.^[15] Perceived insecurity in educational centers was also higher for this population (8.6 percentage points compared to heterosexual students) and found to be well above the overall average in the classroom, in physical education or gym classes, and in corridors and stairways.

Homophobic and transphobic violence in schools negatively affects students' academic performance, mental health, and future opportunities.^[16] A descriptive review by UNESCO finds that students with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities tend to drop out of school more and perform worse compared to their heterosexual peers in several countries in the region.^[17]

Data from a national school environment survey conducted in the United States also point in this direction: LGBTQ+ students who experienced higher levels of bullying in school reported being more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression, having lower academic performance, missing more days of school, and being less likely to pursue higher education, compared to LGBTQ+ students who reported lower levels of bullying.^[18]

On the other hand, [evidence from a field experiment conducted in Colombia](#) **suggests that discrimination in the educational sphere also extends to the children of homosexual spouses.**^[19]

In this study, fake requests were made to visit private educational centers in the country, with the names of the spouses selected at random to convey information about the couple's sexual orientation (gay, lesbian, and heterosexual). The experiment found that, on average, schools were 12 percentage points less likely to respond to a request sent by a homosexual couple than one sent by a heterosexual couple. In the context of this study, discrimination against same-sex couples occurred more frequently in schools of lower socioeconomic status, lower-quality schools (as measured by standardized test scores), religious schools, and schools with male principals.



LABOR MARKETS

Discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity also extends to the workplace.^[20]

A recent quantitative study^[21] used a field experiment to measure the extent of discrimination in hiring rates in the labor market of Quito, Ecuador. In this experiment, human resource recruiters were engaged to conduct a simulated hiring process among peers who had similar observable characteristics, except for the self-reported trait of membership in an LGBTQ+ subgroup. The results showed a small discriminatory bias against male LGBTQ+ candidates and a strong pattern of discrimination in favor of female LGBTQ+ candidates compared to heterosexual candidate profiles. This outcome has been found in similar studies outside the region and may reflect employers' association of lesbian women with a low risk of childbirth compared to heterosexual women.^[22]

Discrimination is not exclusive to the hiring process. In fact, **data for some countries in the region show that LGBTQ+ people face greater adversity in the workplace.** For example, representative data for Mexico (ENDISEG, 2021) show that people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities self-report higher levels of social rejection at work, including unequal treatment in terms of job benefits or harassment and teasing, compared to non-LGBTQ+ people.^[23] Interviews conducted through focus groups in Ecuador^[24] and Costa Rica^[25] find transgender people self-report being especially vulnerable to severe forms of aggression in their workplaces, including derogatory comments, harassment, and intimidation. This discrimination perpetuates systemic inequality and undermines the principles of fairness and equality in the workplace.



RENTAL REAL ESTATE MARKET

Discrimination against these persons extends beyond the social sphere to permeate the housing market. [Correspondence research outcomes for four countries in the region lean in this direction.](#)^[26] The study consisted of sending personalized scripts to property managers, varying the type of couple (heterosexual, gay, and transgender) and socioeconomic status. The results revealed discriminatory behavior against heterosexual couples in which the female partner was transgender, resulting in a 19% lower response rate, with 27% fewer positive responses and 23% fewer invitations to view the property than for heterosexual couples composed of cis-gender individuals. Discrimination against transgender couples appeared to stem from statistical discrimination, as the response rate, positive response rate, and invitation rate increased when socioeconomic status was disclosed. The study highlights the presence of discrimination against transgender people in the rental housing market, affecting not only their housing opportunities but also their overall well-being.

→ How can we move forward?

Over the past several decades, academic research has contributed rigorous evidence toward understanding the impact of stigma and discrimination on different aspects of LGBTQ+ persons' well-being. However, despite the growing interest in studying these issues, there are still very few analytical studies addressing the gaps affecting this population in the countries of the region. The experimental studies highlighted in this review show the potential in terms of methodology and access to data for expanding research in this area.

In this sense, it highlights the need for more and better representative data to make visible the specific needs of LGBTQ+ people and thus inform the design of policies and programs capable of addressing them. As shown in this review, measuring the size of the population poses a major challenge, in terms of both sampling and questionnaire design. To address this, more evidence is needed on cost-effective methodologies to more accurately identify LGBTQ+ people and their socioeconomic status, as well as granular data that raise awareness as to what these persons experience when their sexual orientation, and gender identities interact with their race, ethnicity, age, or immigration status.

It also highlights the need for more solid evidence to estimate the discrimination and gaps faced by this population using experimental methods. In recent years, the number of studies using this type of methodology has increased significantly. However, they are still concentrated in a handful of countries outside the region. The studies included in this document broaden the scope for producing more causal (and not only self-reported) evidence to provide solid indicators of the barriers faced by LGBTQ+ persons in the region.



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