

## Health gaps found among valley's LGBT

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*FILE - Protester in Washington hold flags in front of the Supreme Court in Washington as the court hears arguments on gay marriage. Most participants in a recent, first-of-its-kind survey of the health of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender population in the Coachella Valley rated their health as 'good,' 'very good,' or 'excellent,' and almost all had health insurance. But the study also found significant health needs. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster, File) / AP*

### Survey numbers

#### Demographics

- There were 547 gay participants, 117 lesbians, 31 bisexuals and 20 transgendered people who filled out the survey.
- Over 80 percent were 50 or older.
- Over 90 percent were white, non-Hispanic.

#### Physical Fitness

- Participants are physically active 4-5 days each week.
- About half eat fast food one or more days per week.
- 64 percent are overweight or obese.

#### Substance Use

- Less than 15 percent smoke cigarettes.
- About 75 percent had alcohol in past month, but less than 10 percent engaged in binge drinking.
- About 22 percent had engaged in prescription drug abuse.

About 30 percent had used an illicit drug in the past year; 20 percent had used marijuana.

- About 11 percent had been treated for substance abuse.

#### Sexual Health

- More than 70 percent had been sexually active in the past year.
- Only 50 percent of gay males who had had sexual intercourse with multiple partners had regularly asked about STD/HIV status before doing so.
- 16 percent of these participants “always” use protection; 35 percent “never” do.

#### Violence

- About 22 percent had experienced physical violence from an intimate partner.
- Nearly 35 percent of lesbians had experienced this kind of violence.
- About 21 percent had experienced physical violence from someone else.
- About 6 percent had experienced sexual violence from an intimate partner; 11 percent had experienced sexual violence from someone else.

#### Chronic Illness

- Less than 20 percent have no chronic illness diagnoses.
- 48 percent high cholesterol diagnoses, 31 percent with arthritis, 21 percent with hepatitis, 19 percent with HIV, 9 percent with AIDS.

#### Mental Health

- About half had a mental health disorder diagnosis.
- Depression, anxiety and panic disorder 3 most common, same as valley population, but at higher rates.
- 41 percent had depression diagnosis, 8 percent in general population; 36 percent had anxiety, 6 percent in general population; 10 percent had panic disorder, 3 percent general population.
- 25 percent had considered suicide seriously, more than double the county and state rates.
- 35 percent who had considered suicide attempted it.

#### LGBT-Specific

- 82 percent out to siblings. 78 percent out to extended family. 59 percent out to work supervisors. 90 percent out to straight new friends. 37 percent out to religious community. More than 95 percent out to health care provider.
- 98 percent saw “extremely important” need for LGBT-specific, low-cost mental health services.
- “Positive aspects” of being LGBT: “authentic self and honesty” and “increased empathy and compassion for others.”

Most participants in a recent, first-of-its-kind survey of the health of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender population in the Coachella Valley rated their health

as “good,” “very good,” or “excellent,” and almost all had health insurance. But the study also found significant health needs.

More than half of the LGBT participants had been diagnosed with one or more mental health disorders, and about 40 percent had experienced some emotional, mental or behavioral problems that worried them in the past year, rates much higher than the general population but in keeping with limited statewide and national data, the sample showed. Forty-one percent had received a depression diagnosis, compared with 8 percent of the general valley population, 36 percent with anxiety compared with 6 percent, and 10 percent with a panic disorder, compared with 3 percent of the general public.

“It’s just historically this has been an underserved population that has been discriminated against and stigmatized; it’s what’s called minority stress,” said Jill Gover, director of counseling at the LGBT Community Center of the Desert. “When you’ve got discrimination and you have a population that’s stigmatized you have much higher mental health needs.”

“It’s chronically stressful to live and survive in an environment that’s not welcoming,” she said.

Palm Springs has a large population of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, estimated at 40 to 60 percent of the community make-up and visible in every segment of daily life. But in a place with the third-highest population of same-sex households in the nation and an openly gay mayor, little was known about their health. The study conducted by the LGBT Center through research from the Health Assessment Resource Center has helped to paint a clearer picture of the community and offer more details about their health needs, those involved say.

“It’s been so clear all the way through that data on the LGBT community specifically is lacking both at a local and on a national level,” said Jenna LeComte-Hinely, director of research and evaluation at the Health Assessment Resource Center, who worked on putting together the statistics. “This is really unique.”

“We have such a high population that identifies as LGBT here in the valley so you’d think it would’ve been done a long time ago,” she added.

There were some positive results. Ninety percent of the participants had health insurance. The community saw low levels of substance abuse, with less than 15 percent smoking cigarettes and less than 10 percent engaged in binge drinking. And the LGBT-specific questions found that high numbers were “out” to their family, with 82 percent out to siblings and 78 percent out to extended family. Many repeatedly tied “authentic self and honesty” and “increased empathy and compassion for others” to their LGBT status.

Gover thought the results confirmed some things, such as mental health issues, but there were also some surprises and unexpected concerns. For example, 64 percent of the sample was overweight or obese.

“We generally think about gay males in particular as having very low obesity rates; that’s kind of the myth that gay men are all buff and working out at the gym,” Gover said. “That stereotype obviously has some truth to it, but not everybody does that.”

But aside from that, when comparing apples to apples, the survey largely reflects other larger, national studies, she said.

The study also found that less than 20 percent of participants had no chronic illnesses, with 48 percent of respondents with high cholesterol, 31 percent with arthritis, 21 percent with hepatitis, 19 percent with HIV and 9 percent with AIDS. Most had more than one.

About 22 percent reported physical violence from an intimate partner, “distinctly higher than comparable rates in the county and state as a whole,” the report said. The numbers were higher among lesbians, with 35 percent having experienced it.

Seventy-four percent of those surveyed saw a need for LGBT-specific domestic violence treatment.

“Further review needs to be done to identify the nature of that violence so we can do a better job at preventing it,” said Glen Grayman, president of the board of directors for the Health Assessment Resource Center and the Desert Healthcare District, which funded the study with a \$69,138 grant.

Grayman and others said they were concerned about the domestic violence incidence, as well as sexual health. Just 50 percent of gay males who had had sexual intercourse with multiple partners in the past year had regularly asked about a partner’s STD or HIV status, and 35 percent “never” use protection, the study found.

“(The data) really speaks to the need to better understand the specifics of those issues and in particular to address them more confidently in a greater way in the valley,” Grayman said.

The survey also pointed out a major need for low-cost, LGBT-specific mental health services, with 98 percent of respondents saying that it was “extremely important.”

Gover hopes to use the new information to inform the Center’s future programming, particularly addressing the key needs the survey found: obesity, safe sexual practices, intimate partner violence, chronic illness and mental health. She said these will become a “focal point.”

She will also use the information to pursue grant funding opportunities that require specific data benchmarks.

“We didn’t have any (data) that was really specific to the Coachella Valley, so we now know when we’re looking at creating programs for Palm Springs and this area of the Coachella Valley, we can see from our sample size who is our audience really and have a better picture of that.”

The research was conducted using an anonymous online survey that any community member could take over a four-month period through September; a total of 769 people participated.

Although Gover said she tried hard to get people from a diverse cross-section of the community, participants generally skewed older and more gay than any of the other “Ls,” “Bs” and “Ts,” she said.

LeComte-Hinely said the Center had committed to sharing the report, so she’s hoping that a lot of community organizations that serve LGBT populations could use the information, such as local hospitals and primary care providers.

“Hopefully this will give them even more direction on what the community needs and wants so they can tailor them that way,” she said.

Mostly, the results mean that the community can better understand its own health.

“It might reflect what we thought, but we didn’t know,” Gover said. “Now we know at least we know.”