

# LESBIAN, GAY, & BISEXUAL

POVERTY & DISADVANTAGE IN NEW YORK CITY

POWERED BY THE ROBIN HOOD

POVERTY  
TRACKER

A SNAPSHOT OF WELLBEING USING POVERTY TRACKER DATA

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Commissioned by the NYC LGBTQ Poverty Initiative and Robin Hood

*New York City* has one of the largest Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) populations in the country (Newport and Gates, 2015). Using the latest Poverty Tracker (PT) data, we are able to look more closely at how LGB New Yorkers are faring with respect to a number of measures of wellbeing such as health, poverty, and hardship. The Poverty Tracker is a study carried out by Columbia University's Population Research Center (CPRC) and the Center on Poverty and Social Policy (CPSP) with funding from Robin Hood<sup>1</sup>, whose mission is to improve the living standard of low-income New Yorkers through the funding of poverty-fighting organizations such as food pantries, schools, job training centers, and other social services. With a sample of over 6,000 NYC households, and follow-up surveys every three months, the PT offers the ability to look closely at distinct groups of New Yorkers and how they are doing with respect to a number of measures of poverty and wellbeing.

### Key Findings:

- Overall differences between heterosexual-identified and LGB-identified New Yorkers on measures of poverty and wellbeing are small, and if anything favor the LGB population.
- However, these overall differences mask the fact that lesbian- and gay-identified New Yorkers appear to be doing better than heterosexual-identified New Yorkers, while bisexual-identified New Yorkers appear to be doing substantially worse.
- The lesbian- and gay-identified "advantage" can be largely explained by demographic factors – that is, these New Yorkers are older, more educated, and less likely to come from a racial or ethnic minority group. After controlling for these factors, lesbian- and gay-identified New Yorkers appear statistically similar to their heterosexual-identified counterparts.
- The bisexual-identified "disadvantage," on the other hand, cannot be explained simply by these demographic factors. Understanding the sources of this disadvantage is an important priority for future work.

Using PT data, this report attempts to answer the question of how sexual orientation is related to poverty and wellbeing, specifically in New York City. That is, how are those who identify as something other than heterosexual faring in terms of economic wellbeing, and what factors drive differences in rates of poverty, hardship, and health issues among these groups?

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.robinhood.org/>



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Before presenting the detailed results, we first discuss some key limitations to consider when interpreting the findings. A key limitation in these analyses is sample size. PT data lacks a large sample of gay, lesbian, and bisexual New Yorkers, which limits the types of analyses that can be done, in particular the ability to look deeper at the different demographic groups, their sexual identifications, and the relationship with various hardships. For example, with a larger sample we would have been able to focus more on subgroups that might be more vulnerable such as racial minorities, those with little education, or young New Yorkers to see if those identifying as gay, lesbian, and bisexual faced unique and/or elevated hardships compared to their heterosexual counterparts. On a related note, there is some intriguing preliminary evidence (see the Appendix) that part of the apparent gay/lesbian “advantage” we see is primarily driven by gay/lesbian New Yorkers in Manhattan, particularly gay men in Manhattan. With increased sample size, we could further unpack differences across boroughs in the experiences of LGB New Yorkers. We are also unable to conclusively examine hardships and other forms of disadvantage within the LGB poor population in comparison to poor heterosexually-identified New Yorkers. For example, it is possible that even if overall poverty rates are similar across groups, the LGB poor may nevertheless be more disadvantaged and experience more acute forms of deprivation relative to their heterosexual poor counterparts. With larger sample sizes in the future, we will be better able to address these important questions.

Another limitation is the issue of self-reported status and reporting bias. Some respondents may not identify with the terms heterosexual, gay, lesbian or bisexual. In the future it would be interesting to expand analyses by asking New Yorkers sexual orientation questions in other ways, such as experiences of same-sex attraction or same-sex sexual experiences. Finally, the PT lacks data on those identifying as transgender, a group that may be particularly marginalized and disadvantaged both nationally and in New York City.

### Results

*Table 1* illustrates the distribution of self-identified sexual orientation in NYC. Note that the PT’s measure of sexual orientation only reflects respondents’ self-identified sexual orientation. Some New Yorkers may not self-identify into one of the PT’s sexual orientation categories, while still experiencing same-sex attraction or engaging in same-sex sexual behaviors. Self-identification is but one way to operationalize and measure sexual orientation status. Approximately 4% of New Yorkers identify as gay or lesbian, 2% identify as bisexual, 91% identify as heterosexual, and 2% identify as “something else”<sup>2</sup>. These LGBT numbers are slightly higher than reported for the US as whole. According to data from 2016, 4.1% of U.S. adults identify as LGBT<sup>3</sup>, lower than the 6% we found in NYC, which doesn’t include individuals who identify as transgender. This is consistent, however, with the fact that major surveys tend to find larger LGBT populations in major metropolitan areas (Newport and Gates, 2015). It is worth noting that this survey question only refers to self-identification, whereas other studies rely on other means of identifying the LGBT population such as same-

<sup>2</sup> Numbers do not total to 100% due to rounding. Those who said their sexual orientation was “something else” had the opportunity to specify what they meant. Those responses varied widely and are not included in the following analyses, with the exception of a handful of respondents who identified as “pansexual,” “queer,” “transsexual,” or “transgender,” who are included in Figure 1 below as non-heterosexually-identified.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.gallup.com/poll/201731/lgbt-identification-rises.aspx>

sex sexual behavior or experiences of same-sex sexual attraction. In the remainder of this brief, we refer to those identifying as heterosexual as “heterosexual,” those identifying as lesbian or gay identified as “lesbian or gay” and the bisexual-identified group as “bisexual.”

**Table 1: Self-Identified Sexual Orientation Status of New York City Adults**

Sexual Orientation	Percent	Sample Frequency
Heterosexual	91%	4590
Gay or Lesbian	4%	205
Bisexual	2%	105
Something Else	2%	108
Total	100%	5008

Note that of the over 6,000 PT respondents across the two panels, not all were asked the sexual-orientation question, as in the first PT panel the question was fielded in the last survey after some PT respondents had attrited from the sample.

With a substantial percent of the population identifying as gay/lesbian or bisexual, it is important to understand more about these groups and the types of issues they face living in NYC. This report focuses on the different types and levels of disadvantage gay/lesbian and bisexual New Yorkers face compared to their heterosexual counterparts. We start by looking at four measures of disadvantage, as defined using the PT data:

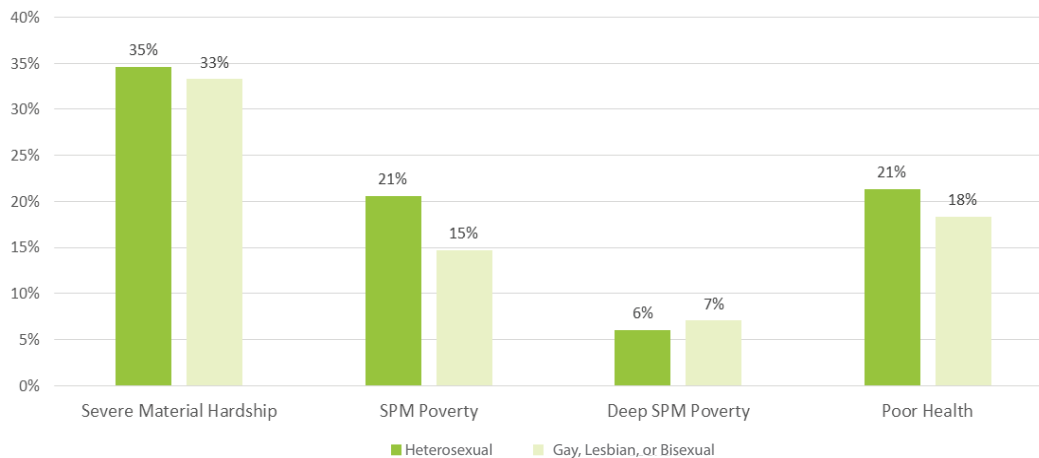
- *Severe Material Hardship* - Respondent reported, in the past year, often running out of money between paychecks, not having enough food, having utilities shut off, moving in with others or staying in a shelter, or the inability to afford medical care.
- *Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM)* - The Supplemental Poverty Measure is a more comprehensive measure of income poverty than the Official Poverty Measure (OPM). In particular, it accounts for the high-cost of living in New York City, and includes non-cash benefits like food stamps and tax credits in the definition of income. Its construction is defined in our first PT report<sup>4</sup>, published in Spring of 2014.
- *Deep Supplemental Poverty Measure* - Defined as household income below half the SPM poverty line.
- *Poor Health* - Respondent reported that they were in poor health or had a chronic health condition that limited their ability to work.

### *Disadvantage in the Gay/Lesbian and Bisexual Populations*

When comparing heterosexual and non-heterosexual respondents, we see that non-heterosexual New Yorkers report the same or slightly lower levels of disadvantage compared to heterosexual New Yorkers for various measures. Non-heterosexual New Yorkers demonstrate slightly lower levels of severe material hardship, poverty, and poor health. Figure 1 shows the rates of disadvantage with respect to these measures. Approximately 35% of heterosexual New Yorkers report a severe material hardship, compared to 33% of non-heterosexual New Yorkers. Similarly 21% of heterosexual respondents report poor health, compared to 18% of non-heterosexual respondents. Twenty-one percent of heterosexual respondents faced income poverty compared to 15% of non-heterosexual respondents, while deep poverty was virtually identical between the two groups.

<sup>4</sup> [http://povertytracker.robinhood.org/download/RobinHood\\_PovertyTracker\\_Spring14.pdf](http://povertytracker.robinhood.org/download/RobinHood_PovertyTracker_Spring14.pdf)

**Figure 1: Disadvantage by Sexual Orientation**



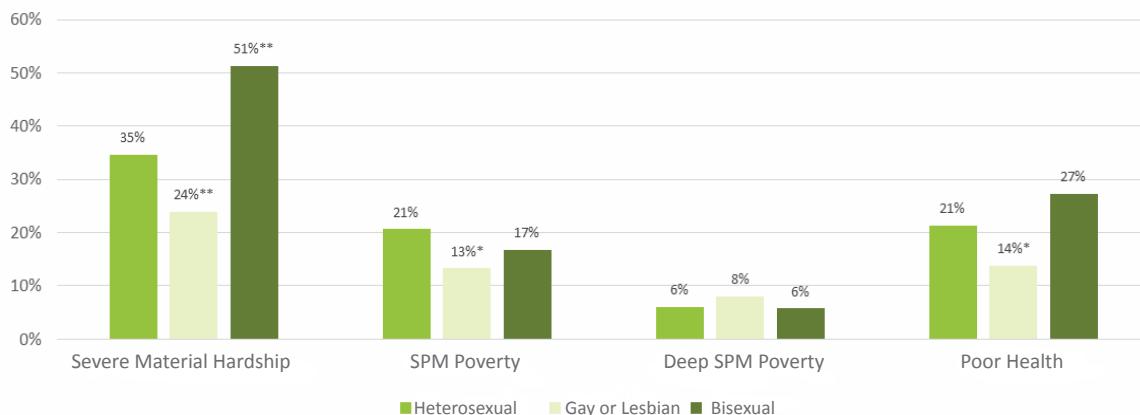
Note: †  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; statistical significance levels refer to comparisons to the heterosexual disadvantage rate. None of the differences in Figure 1 reached conventional levels of statistical significance.

Looking at gay/lesbian and bisexual New Yorkers separately demonstrates much starker differences. Figure 2 highlights results for the four measures of disadvantage. The graph shows that bisexual individuals are much more likely than both gay/lesbian and heterosexual individuals to report a severe material hardship, or that they are in poor health. Fifty-one percent of bisexual respondents report a severe material hardship, compared to 35% of heterosexual respondents and only 24% of the gay/lesbian identified. Twenty-seven percent report that they were in poor health compared to 21% of heterosexual and 14% of gay or lesbian New Yorkers. Both gays/lesbians and bisexuals report lower levels of poverty than heterosexuals (though only the gay/lesbian poverty rate is significantly lower than that for heterosexuals), while have very similar rates of deep poverty.

The patterns described in Figure 2 differ somewhat from those found in national data. Most statistics on poverty in the LGB population come from select samples (Badgett, Durso, & Shneebaum, 2013). For example, the American Community Survey and other Census datasets are only able to identify LGB couples, while data from the Gallup organization's Daily Tracking Poll are restricted to adults living alone. Data from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), which include both couples and singles, are nevertheless restricted to adults aged 18-44. These national studies, however, tend to find higher poverty rates among the LGB population. For example, according to data from the NSFG, when splitting the groups by gender, gay men and lesbian women were more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to face poverty. Bisexual respondents, both male, and female, were the most likely to face poverty. Differences in rates between PT data and data from NSFG likely reflect differences in the demographic make-ups of these groups in NYC compared to the US as a whole. That is, the LGB population in New York City may be substantially different demographically (e.g., more educated, more affluent) than the LGB population nationally. Interestingly, data from California, another high-cost area with a more accepting social policy context for LGB people, also shows lower poverty rates in the LGB population<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> The data cited in this paragraph can all be found in: <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/LGB-Poverty-Update-Jun-2013.pdf>

**Figure 2: Disadvantage by Sexual Orientation**



Note: †  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; statistical significance levels refer to comparisons to the heterosexual disadvantage rate.

## Demographic Makeup of the Gay/Lesbian and Bisexual Populations in NYC

It seems surprising that, while bisexual respondents are more likely to face a severe material hardship and poor health<sup>6</sup>, gay/lesbian respondents are less likely to face these issues (compared to heterosexual respondents). This prompts the question of who makes up these distinct groups in terms of demographics such as age, race, and education level. Table 2 highlights the fact that the gay/lesbian group looks similar to populations often associated with higher levels of advantage. They are more likely to be white, male, and college educated compared to heterosexual and bisexual New Yorkers. They are also the least likely to fall in the youngest age category, 18-29 years old. In comparison, bisexual respondents are more likely to be Hispanic, under 30, and female, demographic groups that tend to be more socioeconomically disadvantaged than other groups. The lesbian and gay group in New York City is also much more likely to live in Manhattan, New York’s most expensive borough, suggesting that the lesbian/gay population in New York City may indeed be a rather select group relative to the lesbian/gay population nationally. Though sample sizes are too small to be definitive, exploratory analyses (see Figures A1-A3 and Table A1 in the Appendix), suggests that any apparent lesbian/gay “advantage” is largely confined to Manhattan, and particular to gay men in Manhattan. Among New Yorkers outside of Manhattan, these differences appear less pronounced. Gay New Yorkers are more likely to be male, and the majority of male gay New Yorkers live in Manhattan (51%).

<sup>6</sup> The difference between bisexual and heterosexual New Yorkers for poor health is not statistically significant, however. Note that the bisexual difference, while not statistically significant here, is consistent with other research such as Gorman, Bridget K., Justin T. Denney, Hilary Dowdy, and Rose Anne Medeiros (2015). “A new piece of the puzzle: sexual orientation, gender, and physical health status.” *Demography* 52, 1357-1382.

**Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of the Heterosexual, Gay/Lesbian, and Bisexual Populations in New York City**

Demographics				
	Heterosexual	Gay or Lesbian	Bisexual	NYC
<i>Race</i>				
White	37%	63%	32%	36%
Black	25%	18%	15%	23%
Hispanic	26%	10%	38%	28%
Other	12%	9%	15%	13%
<i>Age</i>				
18-29	21%	17%	53%	22%
30-39	16%	22%	18%	16%
40-49	17%	17%	10%	16%
50-59	20%	31%	11%	20%
60+	25%	14%	7%	25%
<i>Gender</i>				
Male	43%	79%	39%	44%
Female	57%	21%	61%	56%
<i>Spouse or Partner</i>				
No	56%	63%	64%	55%
Yes	44%	37%	35%	45%
<i>Education</i>				
Less than HS	16%	6%	22%	18%
HS Graduate	20%	7%	24%	21%
Some College/Votech	26%	17%	29%	25%
College Graduate	37%	69%	25%	36%
<i>Manhattan Resident</i>				
No	78%	53%	83%	78%
Yes	22%	47%	17%	22%
<i>Immigrant</i>				
No	66%	79%	74%	63%
Yes	34%	21%	27%	37%
<i>Has Child Under 18 Years Old</i>				
No	73%	96%	79%	74%
Yes	27%	4%	21%	26%

These findings indicate that heterosexual, gay/lesbian, and bisexual individuals in NYC belong to very different demographic groups, which helps explain the different levels of hardship they face. In the next section, we test whether the relative advantages and disadvantages of the lesbian/gay and bisexual groups persist after holding these demographic characteristics constant.

### *Is the Relationship between Sexual Orientation and Hardship Explained by Differences in Demographics?*

*Figures 3-5* illustrate the predicted percent of New Yorkers facing each type of disadvantage before and after controlling for demographics, based on logistic regression models<sup>7</sup>. These models ask the question: Among New Yorkers who look similar with regard to education, race/ethnicity, age, and other characteristics, do lesbian/gay and/or bisexual New Yorkers still demonstrate higher or lower disadvantage?

In *Figure 3*, it is clear that gay and lesbian New Yorkers' lower levels of severe hardship are much less apparent after controlling for other demographics. Before including demographics in the model, there is a 11% difference between the predicted values for those identifying as heterosexual compared to gay/lesbian; this shrinks to 2% after adding controls. This suggests that most of the difference between heterosexual and gay/lesbian New Yorkers is due to demographic differences between the two groups.

While the elevated levels of hardship reported by bisexuals relative to heterosexuals are also reduced after controlling for demographics, there is still quite a large difference (14 percentage points) even after introducing these controls. This indicates there is some relationship between having a severe material hardship and identifying as bisexual that is not fully explained by the demographics included in the model.

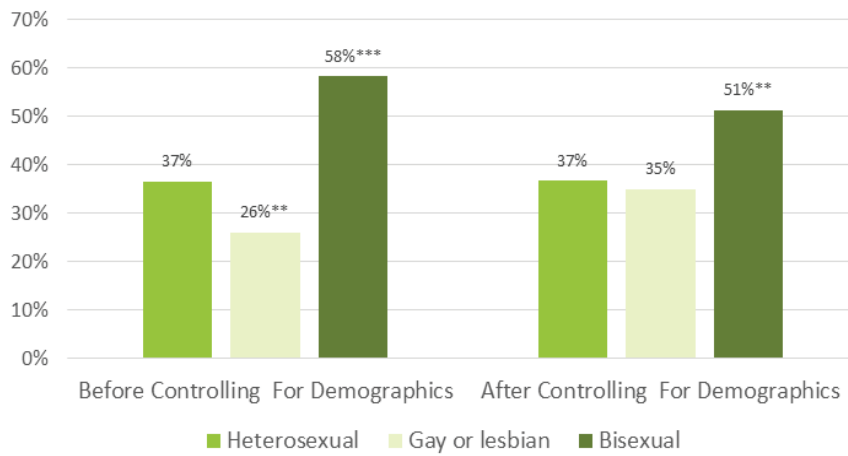
*Figure 4* shows that when controlling for demographics, those identifying as gay/lesbian are slightly more likely to indicate they are in poverty, though this difference is small and not statistically significant. Those identifying as bisexual have a similar poverty rate as individuals identifying as heterosexual after controlling for demographics.

*Figure 5* highlights a similar pattern to that found in *Figure 3*. While the heterosexual and gay/lesbian groups have very similar predicted rates of health problems after controlling for demographics (24% vs. 23%), the bisexual group still has a somewhat higher rate of 31% (though this difference is only marginally statistically significant).

The pattern from *figures 3-5* thus tell a consistent story, that the lesbian/gay apparent "advantage" is largely driven by differences in the relative demographics between groups. The bisexual "disadvantage" on the other hand, is not explained by these demographic differences. We return to why this might be the case at the end of the brief.

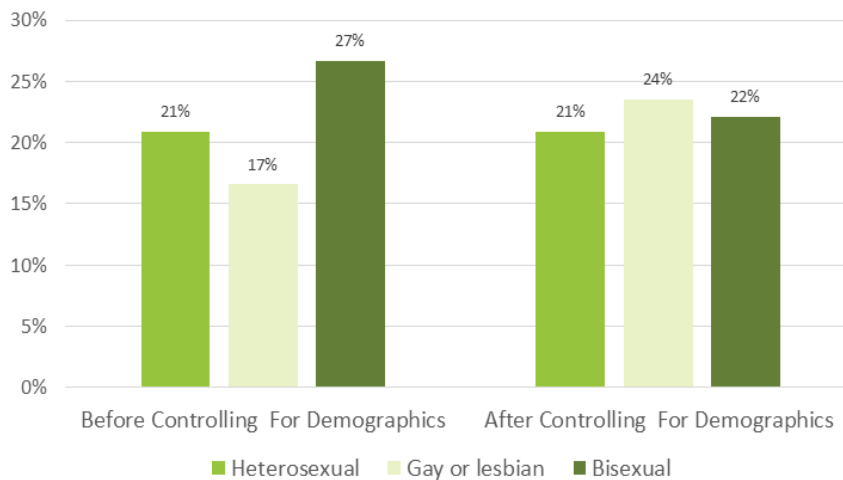
<sup>7</sup> The demographic characteristics controlled for in the models are: gender, age, age-squared, race/ethnicity, education, immigrant status, number of adults in the family, presence of a spouse or partner, whether respondent has a child, whether respondent lives with a parent, SPM resources, and SPM income to needs ratio (last two aren't included in models predicting poverty).

**Figure 3: Severe Material Hardship by Sexual Orientation**



Note: †  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; statistical significance levels refer to comparisons to the heterosexual disadvantage rate.

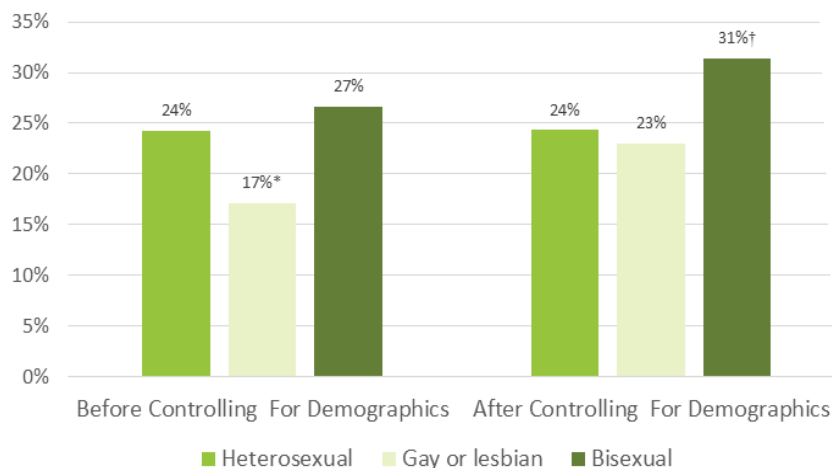
**Figure 4: SPM Poverty by Sexual Orientation**



Note: †  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; statistical significance levels refer to comparisons to the heterosexual disadvantage rate. None of the differences between LGB New Yorkers and Heterosexual New Yorkers in Figure 4 reached conventional levels of statistical significance.



**Figure 5: Health Problem by Sexual Orientation**



Note: †  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; statistical significance levels refer to comparisons to the heterosexual disadvantage rate.

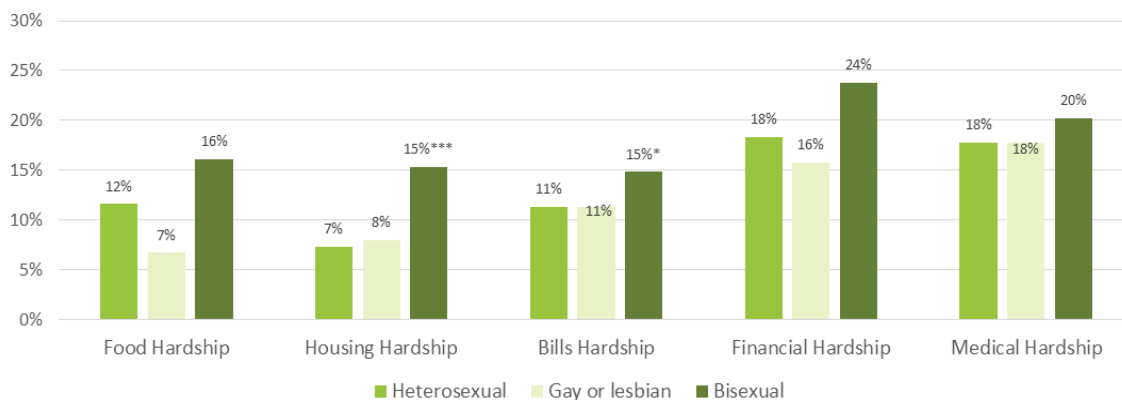
Given the striking results for hardship, we'd like to know if they are driven by a specific type of hardship. As mentioned earlier, experiencing a severe material hardship indicates an experience of at least 1 of 5 different types of hardship. They are defined as:

- *Food Hardship* - In the past year respondent often did not have enough to eat, often worried about running out of food, or food often didn't last.
- *Housing Hardship* – In the past year respondent moved in with someone else, stayed at a shelter, or somewhere not meant for regular housing.
- *Bills Hardship* – In the past year respondent's phone gas or electricity was shut off because there wasn't enough money to pay the bills.
- *Financial Hardship* - In the past year respondent often ran out of money.
- *Medical Hardship* - In the past year respondent didn't see a doctor or dentist because they couldn't afford it.

Figure 6 shows the predicted rates of these hardships after controlling for demographics. For every type of material hardship, those identifying as bisexual have a higher rate than those identifying as gay/lesbian or heterosexual, though these differences are only statistically significant at conventional levels for housing and bills hardships<sup>8</sup>. This suggests that no one specific type of hardship is driving the relationship between bisexual identification and experiences of hardship. When controlling for demographics, those identifying as gay/lesbian are predicted to face slightly lower rates though again these relationships are relatively small, with the only exception being food hardship, and possibly financial hardship.

<sup>8</sup> Differences between bisexual status and both food and financial hardship approach marginal levels of statistical significance, likely reflecting the limited statistical power of the models given the small sample size of bisexual New Yorkers.

**Figure 6: Material Hardships by Sexual Orientation**



Note: †  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; statistical significance levels refer to comparisons to the heterosexual disadvantage rate.

### Conclusion

Using Poverty Tracker data this report provides a detailed look into the gay/lesbian and bisexual population in NYC. It highlights the degrees and types of disadvantages that these groups face in relation to one another and to heterosexual New Yorkers. We find that, in terms of material hardship and health problems, gay and lesbian New Yorkers are doing somewhat better than might be expected, facing these disadvantages at lower rates than other New Yorkers. On the other hand, bisexual-identified New Yorkers are facing significantly higher levels of hardship and disadvantage across the board.

These differences in hardship between heterosexual and lesbian/gay New Yorkers seem to be largely a function of who identifies as part of this group. That is, PT data indicates that those identifying as gay or lesbian tend to come from groups often associated with higher levels of wellbeing; they are more likely to be white, male, and educated. This pattern was less evident in the case of the bisexually-identified. While bisexuals tend to be younger, Hispanic, and female, bisexual New Yorkers still exhibit elevated levels of disadvantage even after controlling for these factors. Thus, these demographic differences more fully account for the lesbian and gay “advantages” we see than they account for the bisexual “disadvantages” we see. Additional analyses may shed light on why these different groups are more or less likely to identify with a particular sexual orientation. We also must better understand why disadvantages persist among the NYC bisexual population even after accounting for demographic differences between this group and other New Yorkers. As the PT continues to collect data from additional cohorts of New York City residents, we will be better able to address these unanswered questions.

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to thank Juan Battle, Antonio Pastrana, Jr., Carla Sutherland, and Helen Koh for helpful comments on earlier versions of this report.

## Appendix

Figures A1-A3 indicate that the differences in apparent “advantage” between homosexuals and heterosexuals is largely confined to Manhattan. While those outside of Manhattan still see different rates of disadvantage, those differences are much more pronounced within Manhattan.

Figure A1: SPM Poverty by Borough

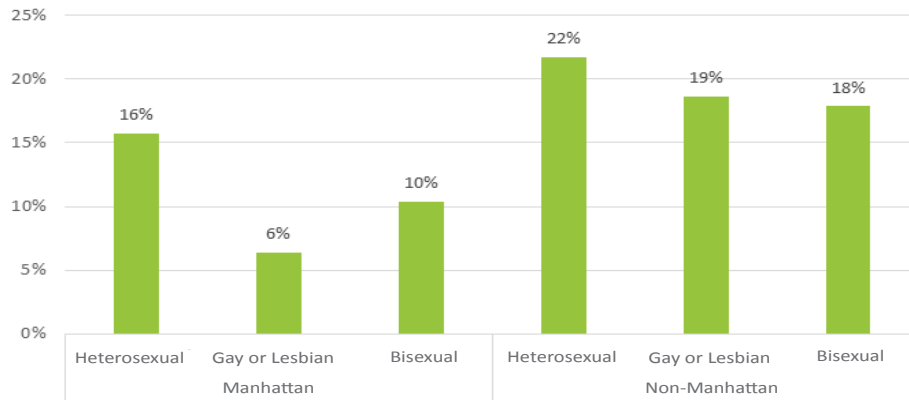


Figure A2: Severe Material Hardship by Borough

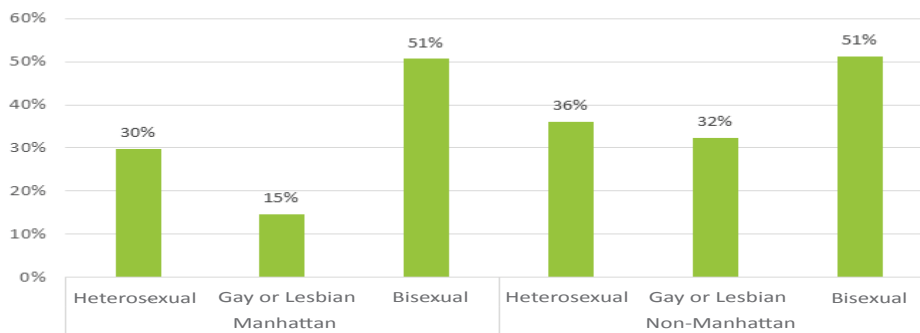
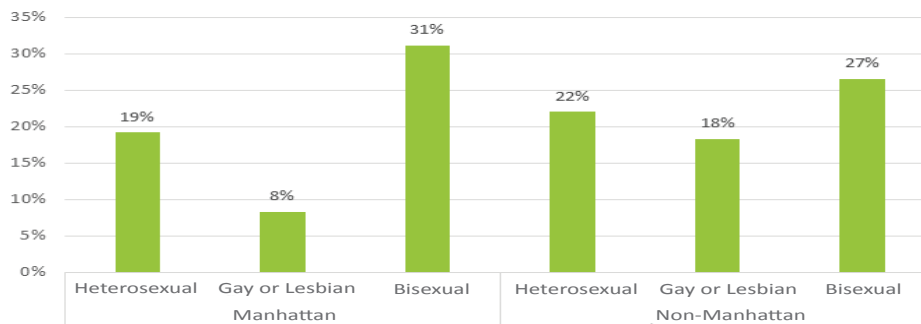


Figure A3: Health Problem by Borough



## Lesbian, Gay, & Bisexual Poverty & Disadvantage In New York City

*Table A1* highlights the demographic breakup of men and women by their sexual orientation. These findings show that gay men are more likely to be white, educated, and live in Manhattan than any other group. This is less true for lesbian women.

<i>Demographics</i>						
	Men			Women		
	Heterosexual	Gay	Bisexual	Heterosexual	Gay	Bisexual
<i>Race</i>						
White	40%	67%	30%	33%	40%	24%
Black	22%	12%	18%	25%	45%	13%
Hispanic	25%	12%	34%	29%	12%	41%
Other	13%	9%	18%	13%	3%	22%
<i>Spouse/Partner</i>						
No	49%	63%	69%	61%	72%	60%
Yes	51%	37%	31%	39%	28%	40%
<i>Age</i>						
18-29	21%	15%	38%	21%	22%	63%
30-39	14%	24%	18%	18%	14%	18%
40-49	16%	18%	17%	17%	11%	6%
50-59	21%	30%	15%	20%	36%	9%
60 +	28%	13%	12%	24%	18%	4%
<i>Education</i>						
Less than HS	15%	5%	16%	17%	10%	28%
HS Graduate	21%	6%	23%	20%	11%	24%
Some College	26%	15%	32%	26%	23%	27%
College Graduate	37%	73%	29%	37%	56%	22%
<i>Manhattan Resident</i>						
No	77%	49%	81%	78%	70%	84%
Yes	23%	51%	19%	22%	30%	16%
<i>Immigrant</i>						
No	67%	77%	66%	66%	87%	78%
Yes	33%	23%	34%	34%	13%	22%
<i>Has Child Under 18 Years Old</i>						
No	80%	99%	88%	68%	73%	65%
Yes	20%	1%	12%	32%	27%	35%