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Technical Reports on Changes for the 2026 Census

Report on content changes for the 2026 Census of Population: Sexual orientation

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Report on content changes for the 2026 Census of Population: Sexual orientation

Why is this question asked?

Further to consultation and extensive testing, Statistics Canada has added a question to the 2026 Census of Population questionnaire to collect data on sexual orientation. The question will provide data on people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or of another sexual orientation than heterosexual (LGB+). These data will be used by governments, businesses, community groups, health care providers, researchers and a variety of organizations throughout the country to inform programs that provide equal opportunity for everyone to share in the social, cultural and economic life of Canada.

According to the latest data, the LGB+ population is estimated to account for 4.4% of the population aged 15 years and over in Canada.¹ The census is one of the only sources of data on the LGB+ population that can be disaggregated for small geographic areas and for many socioeconomic characteristics. Census data on sexual orientation will fill data gaps on the LGB+ population that other existing statistical programs cannot address at the level of detail required. By combining data on sexual orientation and gender diversity, it will also be possible to produce census data on people who are Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer, and those who use other terms related to gender or sexual diversity (2SLGBTQ+).²

Current trends and data gaps for this topic

Results from the [2026 Census of Population Content Consultation](#) indicated that data on sexual orientation was one of the most frequently reported perceived data gaps in census content by federal partners, academics and organizations. There remain gaps in the data to fully understand the specific issues faced by LGB+ people and to strengthen evidence-based decision making for programs, services and policies aimed at this population.

Within the last decade, the federal government took steps to address issues faced by the LGB+ population. Data on sexual orientation will inform current governmental priorities, including the [Federal 2SLGBTQI+ Action Plan](#) and the [Disaggregated Data Action Plan](#). In addition, a federal task force mandated to review Canada's [Employment Equity Act](#) (EEA) released a report in 2023 recommending the inclusion of people who are 2SLGBTQI+ as an equity group under this act.

Census data on sexual orientation can also be used in support of current legislation. This includes the [Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#) and the [Canadian Human Rights Act](#), stating sexual orientation as one of the prohibited grounds of discrimination. Data on sexual orientation can be used to monitor changes in socioeconomic outcomes for LGB+ people and the full 2SLGBTQ+ population in areas such as education, labour, poverty and housing.

1. [Canadian Community Health Survey](#), 2019 to 2021.

2. Whereas the Government of Canada adopted and encourages the use of the acronym 2SLGBTQI+ to refer to Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex people and those who use other terms related to gender or sexual diversity, Statistics Canada uses the acronym 2SLGBTQ+ for data analysis purposes as information is not yet specifically collected about intersex people.



| Changes evaluated in the 2024 Census Test | Resulting approach for the 2026 Census of Population |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">A question on sexual orientation was included. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">The long-form questionnaire now includes a question on sexual orientation for people aged 15 years and over. |

1. Introduction

The next Census of Population will take place in May 2026. To maintain the relevance of the census, Statistics Canada evaluates and reviews the questionnaire content in preparation for each census cycle. This includes several stages of consultative engagement, as well as testing and data evaluation, to recommend questionnaire content for the census.

Approximately 222,000 households from communities across the country were selected to participate in the 2024 Census Test. The test helped to determine whether new or modified questions under consideration could be easily understood and answered by Canadians. Testing census content ensures that high-quality data will be available from the 2026 Census of Population to support a wide variety of programs and services in communities across the country.

Census content is routinely adjusted to the current social and economic climate to ensure that data respond to the needs of decision makers and data users.

This series of reports provides an in-depth view of the changes in content for the 2026 Census of Population. This report details the steps taken to develop a new question capturing data on sexual orientation for the 2026 Census questionnaire.

2. Context and background

Since 2003, Statistics Canada has been collecting data on sexual orientation in various social surveys, including, but not limited to, the [Canadian Community Health Survey \(CCHS\)](#), the [Canadian Survey on Disability](#), the [Time Use Survey](#), the [General Social Survey – Canadians' Safety](#), the [Canadian Housing Survey](#), the [Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces \(SSPPS\)](#), and the [National Cannabis Survey](#). These data have provided information on the experiences and outcomes of LGB+ Canadians by sexual orientation. They highlight that LGB+ people experience poorer outcomes in a number of areas, including victimization, discrimination, health, labour and income. There is also evidence supporting the importance of intersectional analysis when looking at experiences and outcomes among LGB+ people, notably among racialized or immigrant populations.³

However, to further analyze LGB+ populations in Canada from an intersectional lens, more granular data are needed. Recently, Statistics Canada has made significant efforts to fill knowledge gaps to address data user needs. For example, data on sexual orientation were collected in large social surveys such as the 2018 SSPPS. Studies also pooled samples from multiple cycles of the CCHS to produce intersectional data. These strategies were applied to increase the sample size of LGB+ individuals, helping to address the challenge of collecting data on a relatively small population. While the later approaches produced valuable data, they did not produce a large enough sample to address existing data user needs.

3. Statistics Canada. 2023. "Ethnocultural diversity among lesbian, gay and bisexual people in Canada: An overview of educational and economic outcomes."



In recent years, Canada has taken steps to advance equity for LGB+ people. Key actions were taken by the federal government to promote equality and inclusivity for 2SLGBTQ+ people in Canada:

- In 2017, the *Canadian Human Rights Act* and the *Criminal Code of Canada* were amended to make it illegal to discriminate against or harass people on the basis of their gender identity or expression.
- In 2022, the Government of Canada launched the Federal 2SLGBTQI+ Action Plan, a whole-of-government approach to advance rights and equality for people who are Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, transgender or intersex, or who use other terms related to sexual or gender diversity. Among its objectives, the plan includes strengthening data and evidence-based policy making for 2SLGBTQI+ populations.
- In 2023, the *Employment Equity Act* Review Task Force mandated by the federal government recommended including 2SLGBTQI+ people as a designated group under the *EEA* in its final report, [A Transformative Framework to Achieve and Sustain Employment Equity - Report of the Employment Equity Act Review Task Force](#).

At this time, it is only possible to produce census-level data on gender-diverse populations in Canada. Including sexual orientation in the census will provide data that reflect the diverse experiences of LGB+ individuals. It will also provide data on the whole 2SLGBTQ+ population—information that is required by the federal government to develop and improve existing policies, programs and services aimed at this population.

This inclusion also reflects changes to census collection in other countries, notably England and Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and New Zealand, which already collect and release census data on sexual orientation, and Australia, which is set to include sexual orientation in its 2026 Census.

3. Data needs

While Statistics Canada data on sexual orientation are used by governmental and non-governmental partners to inform decision making and by academics for research, there are still gaps that cannot be addressed through existing data.

The Census of Population is the best source of information for small geographic areas and the only source of information for many socioeconomic characteristics that allow for intersectional analysis. The addition of sexual orientation data will help inform the development of inclusive policies, programs and legislation at the federal, provincial, territorial and municipal levels in many areas, including those relating to housing, labour market activity and immigration. It will also allow Statistics Canada to fill a significant gap, with the production of poverty and employment rates for the LGB+ population.

Census data on sexual orientation will be used to support current legislation. This includes the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which recognizes that individuals are equal before and under the law and have the right to equal protections and benefits of the law without discrimination based on sexual orientation. It also includes the *Canadian Human Rights Act*, which lists sexual orientation as one of the prohibited grounds of discrimination related to housing, employment, wages and other areas.

The information will be used to inform government and institutional priorities. These include Canada's [Federal 2SLGBTQI+ Action Plan](#), to strengthen national data on sexual and gender diverse populations, and the [Disaggregated Data Action Plan](#). This action plan is a whole-of-government initiative led by Statistics Canada to enhance the quality and availability of statistics on particular groups, including the 2SLGBTQ+ population, and of data specific to LGB+ people.

Further, the potential inclusion of 2SLGBTQI+ people as a designated group under the *EEA* will generate data needs that can be best addressed by the addition of sexual orientation to the census. For example, to calculate the labour market availability data, and in particular the workforce availability data, for federally regulated industries, information on the LGB+ population by occupational group and, in certain cases, citizenship, is required.



Based on consultations, federal departments and secretariats such as Employment and Social Development Canada, Women and Gender Equality Canada, the Public Health Agency of Canada, Veterans Affairs Canada, and the 2SLGBTQI+ Secretariat are likely to make extensive use of census data on LGB+ people and on 2SLGBTQ+ populations when available. Making such granular data available through the census will help internal and external data users develop programs, policies and services that address the needs of LGB+ people.

4. Definitions

In the spring of 2021, Statistics Canada conducted the Public Consultation on Gender and Sexual Diversity Statistical Metadata Standards. The purpose of the consultation was to seek feedback on the proposed updates to the agency's standard for gender of person and new standards for sexual orientation and LGBTQ2+ status. In response to the requests from users and the feedback heard through this consultation, a new standard on sexual orientation was released on June 13, 2023.

Sexual orientation is a complex and evolving subject for which there is no universally accepted definition. How people define their sexuality and the words they use to do so are affected by ongoing social change, making sexual orientation a difficult concept to define.

[Sexual orientation of person](#) refers to how a person describes their sexuality. For example, a person may describe their sexuality as heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual or pansexual.

Sexual orientation is closely related to two other concepts: sexual attraction and sexual behaviour. Sexual attraction refers to a person's feelings of sexual desire toward other people. Sexual behaviour refers to the sexual activities in which a person engages. While these three concepts are related in the sense that they each represent a different dimension of a person's sexuality, they do not necessarily correspond to each other. Note that in the context of this standard, sexual orientation is distinct from the concepts of gender and sex at birth.

Statistics Canada's standard definition, classification and question are closely aligned with those used by other countries that have already collected data on sexual orientation in their census (i.e., England and Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and New Zealand). Statistics Canada continues to work closely with its international partners to develop international standards and to provide recommendations on how to collect and measure these concepts in censuses and surveys.

For information on the results of the public consultation, refer to the [2021 Public Consultation on Gender and Sexual Diversity Statistical Metadata Standards - What We Heard Report](#). For information on the standards, refer to [Gender, sex at birth, sexual orientation, and related standards by variable](#).

5. Methodology and approach

In preparation for the 2026 Census cycle, Statistics Canada tested the addition of a question on sexual orientation through extensive engagement and several preparatory qualitative tests, including cognitive one-on-one interviews and focus groups, conducted across Canada in both official languages. Results from the qualitative testing indicated that the question was well understood overall and that respondents were generally comfortable answering the question for themselves and others in their household.

As part of the 2024 Census Test, Statistics Canada conducted a second phase of the mandatory content test, which took place from September 3 to October 13, 2024, to test the inclusion of a question on sexual orientation. The test involved 24,000 households to assess the impact of content changes from a quantitative perspective and was conducted through an electronic questionnaire. Half of the selected households received the control panel, which did not have the sexual orientation question, while the second half received the test questionnaire with the new sexual orientation question.

The sexual orientation question was placed at the beginning of the section for the population aged 15 years and over of the long-form test questionnaire. It asked respondents, "What is this person's sexual orientation?" The



response categories were heterosexual (i.e., straight), lesbian or gay, and bisexual or pansexual, along with an open text box that allowed respondents to provide a response in their own words.⁴

The objective of the census test was to evaluate specific areas that could be assessed only with quantitative testing, including

- whether the placement of the question had an impact on the following questions
- respondent behaviour on this question in a proxy environment, where responses are requested on behalf of other members of the household aged 15 years and over
- respondents' behaviour on the question in a census environment.

6. Key findings or results

The quantitative testing was designed to determine whether the proposed question was understood by respondents, whether they provided satisfactory response rates and whether they could provide estimates of acceptable quality for a census. These observations are solely used for evaluation purposes and are not intended to be used as official estimates of the size of the LGB+ population in Canada.

Results from the 2024 Census Test indicated that 98.7% of respondents provided an answer to the sexual orientation question. The placement of the question at the beginning of the section for the population aged 15 years and over of the long-form test questionnaire did not have an observed impact on subsequent questions. The drop-off rate was 0.0%, meaning that respondents continued to answer the following questions and did not quit the survey at the sexual orientation question.

The non-response rate for youth aged 15 to 17 years was low (1.3%), showing results similar to those of self-reported surveys such as the CCHS. At Statistics Canada, data on sexual orientation are currently collected only for people aged 15 years and over—which is the same minimum age for questions on marital status, labour and education as well as for the employment equity benchmarking requirement, which applies to members of the labour force aged 15 years and over.. Furthermore, internationally, the most commonly used minimum age for the collection of data on sexual orientation is 15 or 16.

Regarding the response options, results from the quantitative test showed that respondents used the open text box to provide responses not available in the response categories. These included sexual orientations that were not available in existing categories, as well as responses such as “Prefer not to say” or “I don’t know,” demonstrating that additional response categories are not necessary.

Comparability of results

The 2024 Census Test was the first time a question on sexual orientation was tested on the census questionnaire. Therefore, the test data collected were compared with data from combined cycles of the CCHS (2019 to 2021) that use a question on sexual orientation that is similar to the one used in the census test and that was also asked for the population aged 15 years and over.

The overall distributions for specific sexual orientations were similar between the 2024 Census Test and the 2019 to 2021 CCHS for the heterosexual, lesbian or gay, and bisexual or pansexual populations (see Table 6.1). Proportions of individuals who used the write-in section to report another sexual orientation, as well as responses such as “Prefer not to answer” and “I don’t know,” were also similar between the two (data not shown).

4. See [Appendix 1 2024 Census Test question on sexual orientation](#).



Table 6.1
Distribution of sexual orientation, Canada, 2024 Census Test and 2019 to 2021 Canadian Community Health Survey for the population aged 15 years and over

| Sexual orientation of person | 2024 Census Test (%) | | | 2019 to 2021 CCHS (%) | | |
|------------------------------|----------------------|----------|------|-----------------------|----------|------|
| | % | 95% C.I. | | % | 95% C.I. | |
| | | Low | High | | Low | High |
| Heterosexual | 93.0 | 91.5 | 94.4 | 92.8 | 92.5 | 93.1 |
| Lesbian or gay | 1.8 | 1.2 | 2.5 | 1.6 | 1.5 | 1.8 |
| Bisexual or pansexual | 1.8 | 1.3 | 2.6 | 2.2 | 2.1 | 2.4 |

CCHS = Canadian Community Health Survey

C.I. = confidence interval

Note: Data are not shown for sexual orientations not included elsewhere or for non-response.

Source: Statistics Canada, 2024 Census Test and 2019 to 2021 Canadian Community Health Survey.

There were no statistically significant differences between the estimates of the bisexual or pansexual population between the 2024 Census Test and the 2019 to 2021 CCHS for the total population 15 years and over. However, a significant difference was observed among those aged 15 to 24. A higher percentage of people aged 15 to 24 years reported being bisexual or pansexual in the 2019 to 2021 CCHS (7.2%) when compared with results from the 2024 Census Test (3.3%).

It is possible that sexual orientation data for individuals aged 15 to 24 are more frequently reported by proxy than for older age groups, as younger individuals are less likely to live alone. Proxy reporting depends on a person's knowledge of another's sexual orientation. Research in the United States has shown that bisexual individuals are less likely to be open about their sexual orientation compared with lesbian or gay people, in particular to friends and family (Pew Research, 2019).⁵

7. Discussion

Among people aged 15 years and over, no differences were observed in the prevalence of different responses to the sexual orientation question between the 2024 Census Test and the 2019 to 2021 CCHS. However, estimates for the bisexual and pansexual population aged 15 to 24 were lower in the 2024 Census Test than in the 2019 to 2021 CCHS. Key factors that may contribute to explaining this difference are that bisexual or pansexual individuals may be less likely to be open about their sexual orientation with the people closest to them, and younger people may be more likely to have their sexual orientation reported by proxy as they are less likely to be living alone than their older counterparts.

While these results specific to people aged 15 to 24 years indicate a potential proxy effect on response patterns, mitigation strategies have been identified to minimize the potential impact of proxy reporting. Statistics Canada will facilitate access to individual questionnaires by improving the availability of these questionnaires for respondents. If the 2026 Census results are indicative of a proxy effect, Statistics Canada will acknowledge limitations in its publication of census data on sexual orientation.

8. Conclusion

Overall, the results support the inclusion of a new question on sexual orientation on the 2026 Census to help fill critical data gaps for measuring inequities by analyzing disparities in areas such as employment, housing and income. Additionally, the sexual orientation data from the census would provide nuanced information on LGB+ populations by allowing for more granular disaggregation by various sociocultural characteristics, including gender

5. See [Bisexuals less likely than gay men, lesbians to be 'out' to people in their lives | Pew Research Center](#).



diversity, Indigenous identity, racialized groups and immigrant populations. This approach would enable a detailed understanding of outcomes and inequities from an intersectional perspective and at smaller geographic levels to inform programs and policies.

These data would also improve data quality from previous censuses, where the only variable that could be used to estimate potential differences between heterosexual and LGB+ individuals was the gender composition of couples. This presented significant limitations as this variable is not a proxy for sexual orientation and accounts only for partnered individuals.

After evaluating the results of testing and considering factors such as costs, operations, respondent relations and safeguards against quality loss, Statistics Canada recommended the addition of the sexual orientation question to the 2026 Census to the Cabinet of Canada for approval.



Appendix 1 – 2024 Census Test question on sexual orientation

Test version question (2024 Census Test)

This question collects information on sexual orientation to inform programs that promote equal opportunity for everyone living in Canada to share in its social, cultural and economic life.

36. What is this person's sexual orientation?

Sexual orientation refers to how a person describes their sexuality.

- Heterosexual (i.e., straight)
- Lesbian or gay
- Bisexual or pansexual
- Or please specify
 - Specify this person's sexual orientation

Help text (2024 Census Test)

How to answer question 36

Select the response that indicates the person's sexual orientation. The write-in response "Specify this person's sexual orientation" is included to allow people to self-identify in an inclusive and respectful way.

Respondents answering on behalf of other people in their household, such as parents answering on behalf of their children, should answer—to the best of their knowledge—what they think other household members would answer.

Reasons why we ask question 36

This question collects data that are used by governments, businesses, community groups, health care providers, researchers and a variety of organizations throughout the country to support programs that provide equal opportunity for everyone to share in the social, cultural and economic life of Canada. These data are also used to support legislation such as the *Canadian Human Rights Act* that includes sexual orientation as one of the prohibited grounds of discrimination.