

Statistical bulletin

# Sexual orientation, UK: 2017

Experimental statistics on sexual orientation in the UK in 2017 by region, sex, age, marital status, ethnicity and socio-economic classification.

Contact:  
Paula Guy  
pop.info@ons.gov.uk  
+44 (0)1329 444661

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# 1 . Main points

- The proportion of the UK population aged 16 years and over identifying as heterosexual or straight has decreased from 94.4% in 2012 to 93.2% in 2017.
- Over the last five years, the proportion of the UK population identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) has increased from 1.5% in 2012 to 2.0% in 2017, although the latest figure is unchanged from 2016.
- In 2017, there were an estimated 1.1 million people aged 16 years and over identifying as LGB out of a UK population aged 16 years and over of 52.8 million.
- Males (2.3%) were more likely to identify as LGB than females (1.8%) in 2017.
- People aged 16 to 24 years were most likely to identify as LGB in 2017 (4.2%).
- Regionally, people in London were most likely to identify as LGB (2.6%), with people in the North East and East of England the least likely (both 1.5%).
- 69.4% of people who identified themselves as LGB had a marital status of single (never married or in a civil partnership).

## 2 . Statistician's comment

"We estimate that 4.2% of people aged 16 to 24 years identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual, a higher proportion than for other older age groups. Around 7 in 10 of the lesbian, gay or bisexual population are single and have never married or registered a civil partnership. This reflects the younger age structure of this population and that legal unions for same-sex couples are relatively new. "

Paula Guy, Population Statistics Division, Office for National Statistics.

Follow Population Statistics Division on Twitter @RichPereira\_ONS

## 3 . Things you need to know about this release

In 2019 (publication of the 2017 data), the terminology in this release changed from "sexual identity" to "sexual orientation" to align with legislation ([Equality Act 2010](#)); sexual orientation is an umbrella concept, which encapsulates sexual identity, behaviour and attraction.

Although the terminology has changed, the data source and methodology used to produce the estimates remain consistent with previous years, ensuring a comparable time series of data is available back to 2012.

Sexual orientation estimates are based on data from the Annual Population Survey (APS), which collects information on self-perceived sexual identity from the household population aged 16 years and over in the UK.

The measurement of sexual identity has been identified as the component of sexual orientation most closely related to experiences of disadvantage and discrimination<sup>1</sup>. Sexual identity does not necessarily reflect sexual attraction and/or sexual behaviour, which are separate concepts not currently measured by the Annual Population Survey.

The “other” category captures people who do not consider themselves to fit into the heterosexual or straight, bisexual, gay or lesbian categories. It might also include people who responded “other” for different reasons such as those who did not understand the terminology or who are against categorisation. There is currently no further breakdown of “other” collected in the Annual Population Survey so no assumptions can be made about the sexual orientation or gender identity of those responding “other”.

This bulletin presents the sexual orientation estimates as percentages. Estimates of the population numbers and measures of quality (to show the levels of uncertainty associated with survey estimates) are presented in the datasets. Users are advised to consult the quality measures when interpreting the estimates as some estimates are based on a relatively small sample.

Office for National Statistics has recommended a new voluntary question on sexual orientation for those aged 16 years and over for the England and Wales 2021 Census. The data gathered will make it easier to monitor inequalities under the anti-discrimination duties of the Equality Act 2010. Having an estimate of the size of the lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) community will allow charities, local and central government to target services effectively. For more information, see the Government [white paper](#) which was published in December 2018.

## Notes about: Things you need to know about this release

1. [Measuring sexual identity – A guide for social researchers, ONS, April 2009.](#)

## 4 . Most of the UK population identifies as heterosexual or straight

In 2017, an estimated 93.2% of the UK population (49.2 million people) identified as heterosexual or straight, continuing the decline from 2012 (94.4%).

An estimated 2.0% of the population (1.1 million people) identified themselves as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB). As shown in Table 1, this comprised 1.3% identifying as gay or lesbian and 0.7% identifying as bisexual. The percentage in 2017 remains at similar levels to 2016.

A further 0.6% identified as “other”, meaning that they did not consider themselves to fit into the heterosexual or straight, bisexual, gay or lesbian categories. This proportion has increased since 2012 (0.3%). A further 4.1% refused, or did not know how, to identify themselves.

Table 1: Sexual orientation, UK, 2015 to 2017

Sexual orientation	2015	2016	2017
Heterosexual or straight	93.7	93.4	93.2
Gay or lesbian	1.1	1.2	1.3
Bisexual	0.6	0.8	0.7
Lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB)	1.8	2.0	2.0
Other	0.4	0.5	0.6
Do not know or refuse	4.1	4.1	4.1

Source: Office for National Statistics - Annual Population Survey

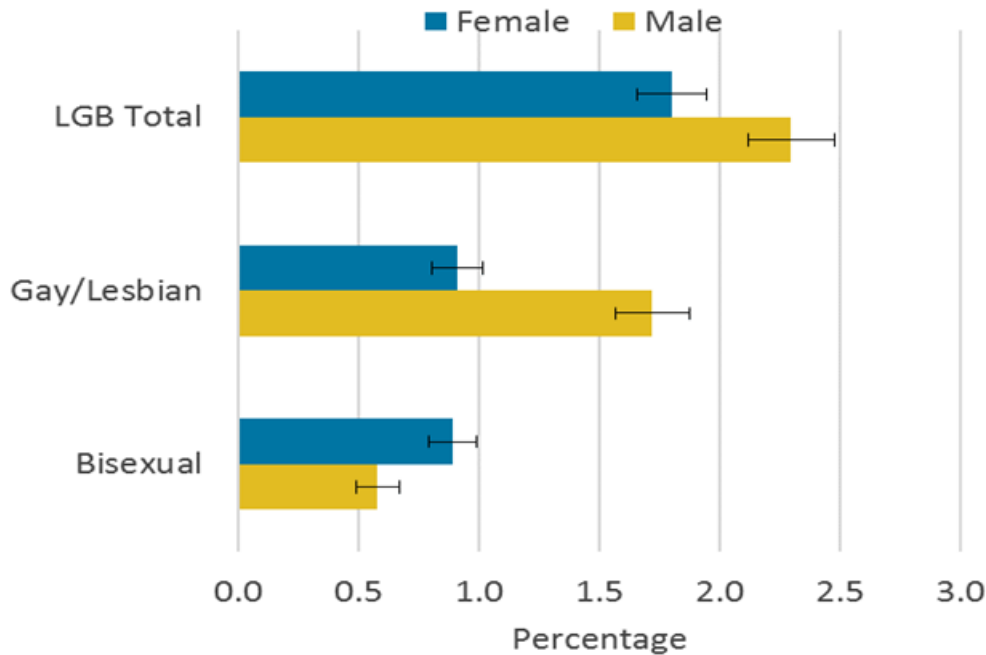
#### Notes

1. Quality measures (including confidence intervals and coefficient of variance) for the estimates are displayed within the reference tables. [Back to table](#)
2. Totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding. [Back to table](#)

## 5 . A higher proportion of men than women identify as gay or lesbian

Around 1.7% of males identified themselves as gay or lesbian in 2017 compared with 0.9% of females. Conversely, 0.9% of females identified themselves as bisexual compared with 0.6% of males (Figure 1) – no change for either sex on the percentage identifying as bisexual in 2016.

**Figure 1: Lesbian, gay or bisexual population by sex, UK, 2017**



Source: Office for National Statistics - Annual Population Survey

**Notes:**

1. Quality measures (including confidence intervals and coefficient of variance) for the estimates are displayed within the datasets.
2. Confidence intervals are presented on the graph to give an estimated range of values within which the actual value is likely to fall 95% of the time.
3. Totals may not sum due to rounding.

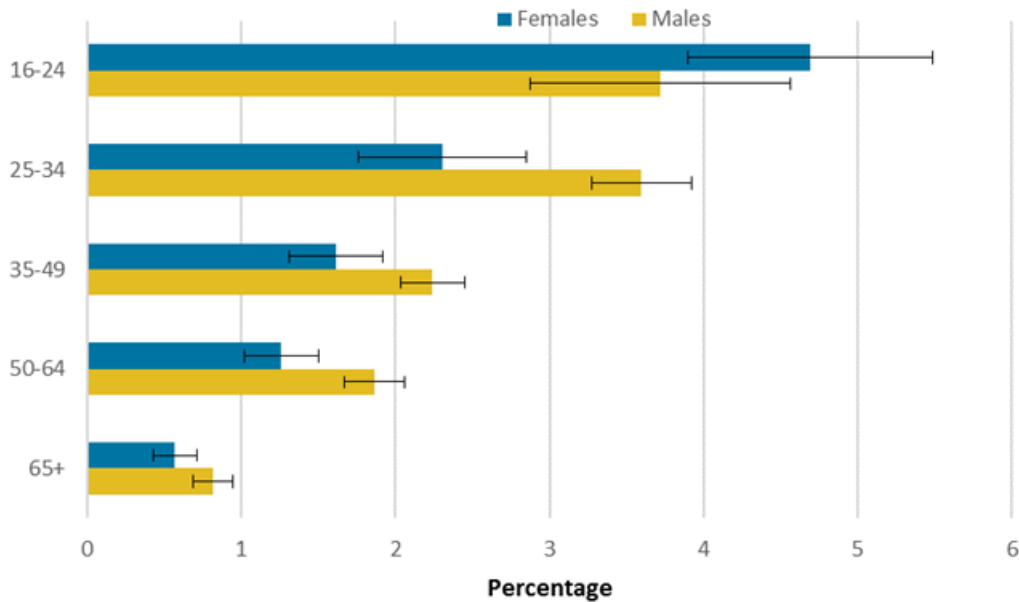
## 6 . Younger people are more likely to identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual than any other age group

In 2017 in the UK, 16- to 24-year-olds were the age group most likely to identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) (4.2%). This figure comprises 1.9% identifying as gay or lesbian and 2.3% identifying as bisexual. The youngest age group was the only age group to have a larger proportion identifying as bisexual than gay or lesbian. The 16- to 24-year-olds were the only age group for which more women (4.7%) identified as LGB than men (3.7%); this was driven by a larger proportion of women identifying as bisexual in this age group than in older age groups.

The 16 to 24 age group had the highest percentage of people identifying themselves in “other” (0.9%) and “don’t know or refuse” (5.3%) categories.

As in previous years, older age groups were more likely to identify as heterosexual or straight. Only 0.7% of the population aged 65 years and over identified as LGB in 2017 (Figure 2). One reason for this pattern may be that younger people could be more likely to explore their sexuality combined with more social acceptability of sexual identities today and the ability to express these.

**Figure 2: Lesbian, gay or bisexual population by age and sex, UK, 2017**



Source: Office for National Statistics - Annual Population Survey

**Notes:**

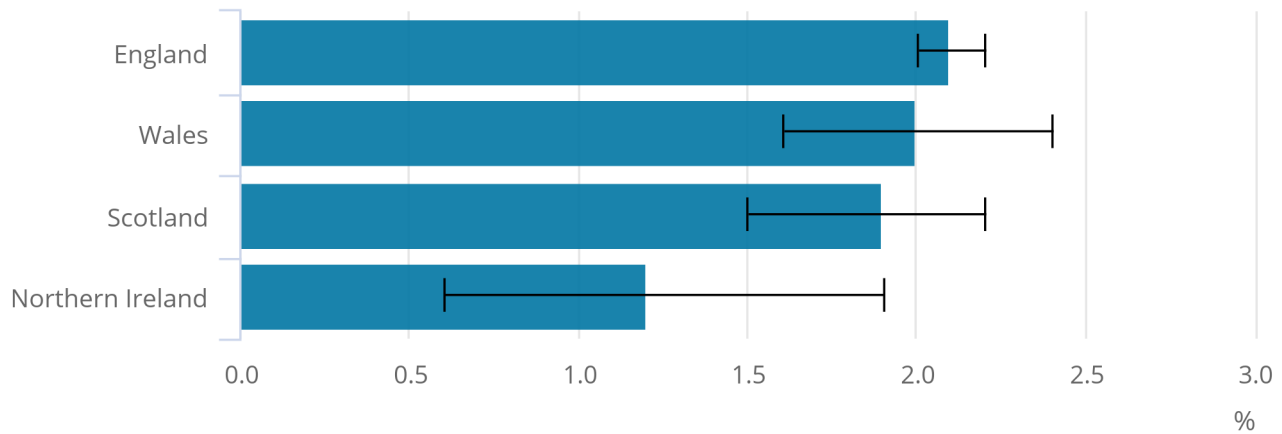
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2. Confidence intervals are presented on the graph to give an estimated range of values within which the actual value is likely to fall 95% of the time.
3. Totals may not sum due to rounding.

## 7 . People in London are most likely to identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual

In 2017, the percentage of people identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) was similar for England (2.1%), Scotland (1.9%) and Wales (2.0%). Northern Ireland had the lowest percentage of all UK countries with 1.2% of the household population identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: UK countries by lesbian, gay or bisexual population, 2017**

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**Source: Office for National Statistics - Annual Population Survey**

**Notes:**

1. Quality measures (including confidence intervals and coefficient of variance) for the estimates are displayed within the datasets.
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Over the last five years, the proportion of the UK household population identifying as LGB has increased from 1.5% in 2012 to 2.0% in 2017. The proportion in Wales increased by 0.7%, England and Scotland both increased by 0.5% and Northern Ireland by 0.1%. Of all these changes, only the increases seen for the UK, England and Wales were statistically significant.

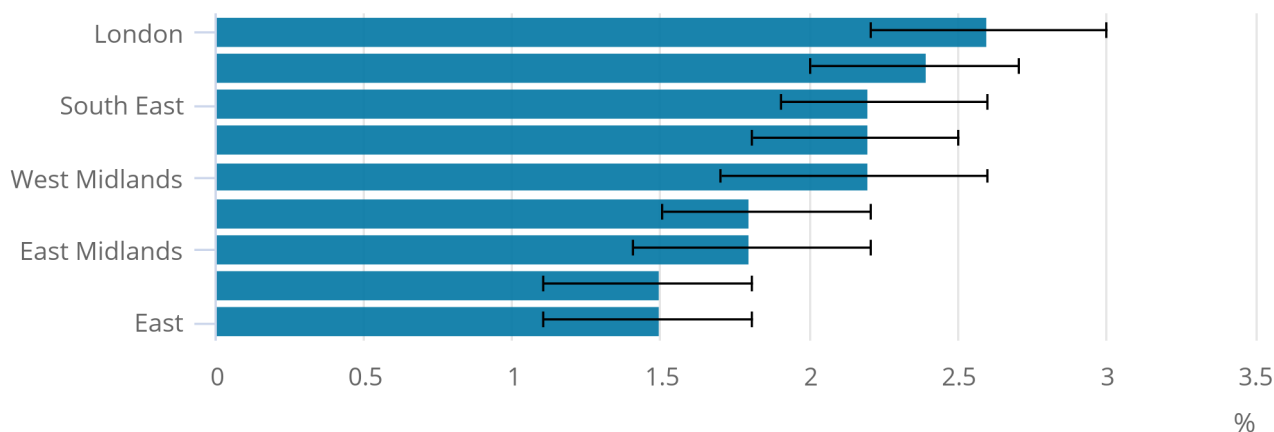
Regionally (Figure 4), London continued to have the highest proportion of people identifying as LGB in 2017 (2.6%). The North East and East of England both had the lowest proportion (1.5%).

The relatively high proportion of people identifying as LGB in London can be explained by the younger age structure and the diversity of the population. The median age of the population in London was 35.1 years in 2017, compared with 41.9 years in the North East and 41.6 years in the East of England.

The South West was the region that saw the largest change in the percentage identifying as LGB over the last five years, from 1.4% in 2012 to 2.4% in 2017.

**Figure 4: English regions by lesbian, gay or bisexual population, 2017**

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**Source: Office for National Statistics - Annual Population Survey**

**Notes:**

1. Quality measures (including confidence intervals and coefficient of variance) for the estimates are displayed within the datasets.
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## **8 . Population identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual are most likely to have a marital status of single (never married or civil partnered)**

In 2017, around 69% of those identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) stated they had never married or entered into a civil partnership (Figure 5). This is a higher percentage than those identifying as heterosexual or straight (34%). Reasons for this might include:

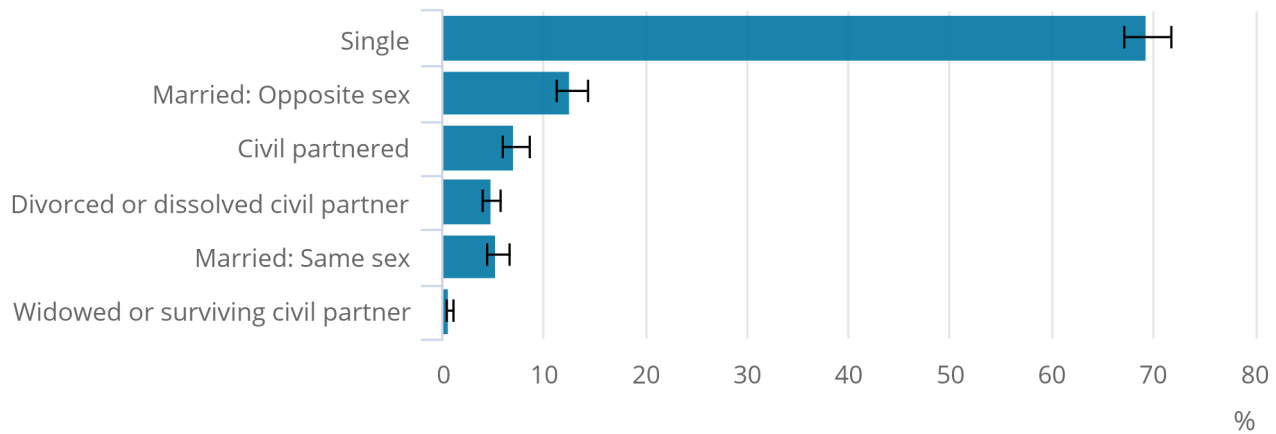
- those identifying as LGB having a younger age structure than those who identify as heterosexual or straight
- legal unions for same-sex couples having only become available relatively recently

Those who had a legal marital status of single may be in same-sex cohabiting couples. In the UK, [0.5% of families were same-sex cohabiting couple families](#) in 2017.



**Figure 5: Lesbian, gay or bisexual population by legal marital status, UK, 2017**

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**Source: Office for National Statistics - Annual Population Survey**

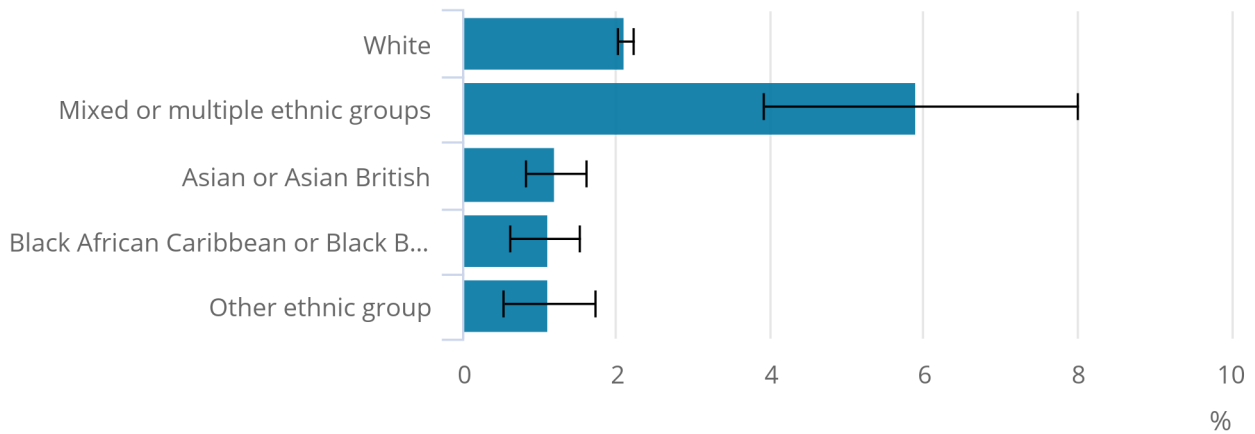
**Notes:**

1. Single, never married or civil partnered.
2. Married includes separated.
3. The Marriages (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 made provision for the marriage of same sex couples in England and Wales from 29th March 2014 onwards.
4. Civil Partnerships were introduced in England and Wales in December 2005. Includes separated.
5. Confidence intervals are presented on the graph to give an estimated range of values within which the actual value is likely to fall 95% of the time.

In 2017, of those from mixed or multiple ethnic groups, 6% identified themselves as gay or lesbian and bisexual (Figure 6). Due to small sample sizes, sexual orientation estimates by ethnic group have fluctuated year-on-year, with notable uncertainty around LGB estimates for all ethnic groups except White. Consequently, over the last five years, for the LGB population the only statistically significant change was for the White ethnic group, where the percentage identifying as LGB increased from 1.6% in 2012 to 2.1% in 2017.

**Figure 6: Lesbian, gay or bisexual population by ethnicity, UK, 2017**

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**Source: Office for National Statistics - Annual Population Survey**

**Notes:**

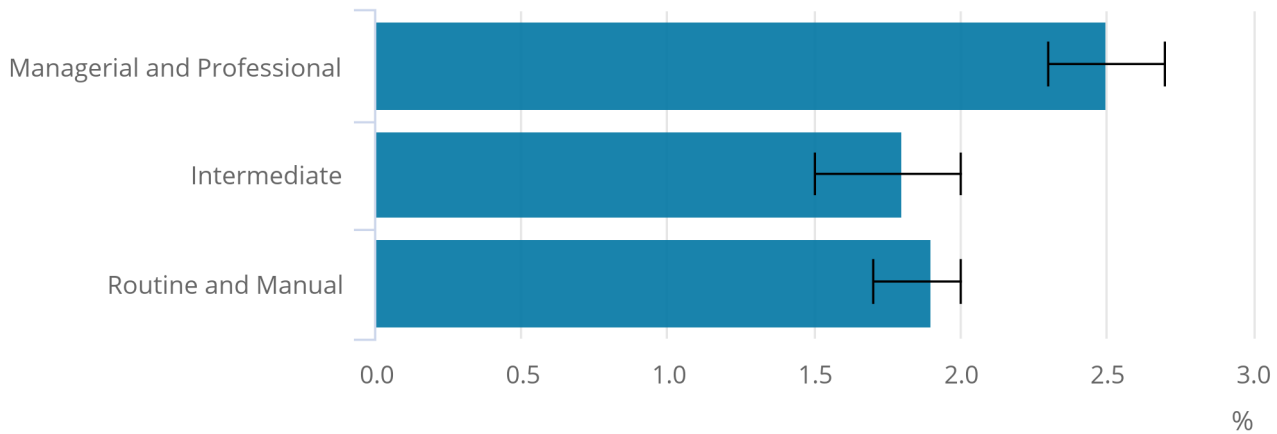
1. 0.1% of respondents to the Annual Population Survey did not have an ethnicity recorded, but no-one in this group identified themselves as lesbian, gay or bisexual.
2. Confidence intervals are presented on the graph to give an estimated range of values within which the actual value is likely to fall 95% of the time.

Figure 7 shows that those in managerial and professional occupations were more likely to identify as LGB (2.5%) compared with those in intermediate or routine and manual occupations.

A higher proportion in managerial and professional occupations (1.9%) identify as gay or lesbian but a lower proportion (0.5%) identify as bisexual than other [National Statistics Socio-economic Classification \(NS-SEC\)](#) groups.

**Figure 7: Lesbian, gay or bisexual population by occupation type, UK, 2017**

Figure 7: Lesbian, gay or bisexual population by occupation type, UK, 2017



**Source:** Office for National Statistics - Annual Population Survey

**Notes:**

1. NS-SEC is the “National Statistics – Socio-economic Classification”
2. Routine and Manual includes the “Never worked and long-term unemployed” category.
3. Examples of jobs for each category are: Routine and Manual: Labourers, bar staff. Intermediate: Bank staff, paramedics. Managerial and Professional: Doctors, Lawyers.
4. Confidence intervals are presented on the graph to give an estimated range of values within which the actual value is likely to fall 95% of the time.

## 9 . Links to related statistics

For further information on the Annual Population Survey see the [user guide \(PDF, 1.0MB\)](#).

For previous Integrated Household Survey (IHS) publications (including sexual identity estimates) see the [IHS release page](#).

This analysis explores [the relationship between sexual identity and well-being](#).

## 10 . What has changed within this publication?

In 2019 (publication of the 2017 data), the terminology in this release changed from “sexual identity” to “sexual orientation” to align with legislation ([Equality Act 2010](#)); sexual orientation is an umbrella concept, which encapsulates sexual identity, behaviour and attraction.

The publication includes estimates by age and sex for the first time.

## 11 . Quality and methodology

Sexual orientation estimates are based on data from the Annual Population Survey (APS), which collects information on self-perceived sexual identity from the household population aged 16 years and over in the UK. The sexual identity question is not asked by proxy. Proxy interviews are defined as those where answers are supplied by a third party, who is usually a member of the respondent’s household.

The sexual identity question is asked in both face-to-face and telephone interviews, at first personal contact. During the face-to-face interviews, adults were asked: "Which of the options on this show card best describes how you think of yourself?" For telephone interviews, a slightly different way of collecting the information was used: "I will now read out a list of terms people sometimes use to describe how they think of themselves". The list is read out to respondents twice. On the second reading, the respondent has to say "stop" when an appropriate term they identified with is read out. In both modes, the order in which the terms appeared, or are read out, is unique for each household’s respondent to ensure confidentiality.

The "other" option on the question is included to address the fact that not all people will consider they fall in the first three categories, that is, heterosexual or straight, gay or lesbian, or bisexual.

The APS covers the household population but excludes people living in communal establishments with the exception of those in NHS housing and students in halls of residence (sampled via the private households of their parents). Members of the armed forces are only included in the APS if they live in private accommodation.

This bulletin presents percentages. Estimates of the population numbers and measures of quality (to show the levels of uncertainty associated with survey estimates) are presented in the [datasets](#). Users are advised to consult the quality measures when interpreting the estimates as some estimates are based on a relatively small sample. As a result, these estimates are subject to uncertainty particularly when making comparisons, such as changes from one year to another. Therefore, annual changes and changes over five years identified in this report are described where appropriate as “statistically significant” – that means that there is likely to have been a real change in the underlying population proportions and that the difference we are observing is unlikely to be due to chance.

The Sexual orientation [Quality and Methodology Information report](#) contains important information on:

- the strengths and limitations of the data and how it compares with related data
- uses and users of the data
- how the output was created
- the quality of the output: including the accuracy of the data

Office for National Statistics (ONS) publishes sexual orientation estimates for the UK and constituent countries only. In April 2017, ONS published research findings from an experimental method to produce [subnational sexual identity estimates](#).

The [revisions policy](#) for population statistics is available.