

New Canadian census report offers first-time insight on gender diversity

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Greta Bauer. Credit: University of Western Ontario

For the first time, the Canadian census gave a picture of how many cisgender men and women, transgender and non-binary people live in Canada.

The 2021 [census](#) was the first that enabled people to distinguish their lived [gender](#) from their sex at birth. Results of the census were released Wednesday April 27.

Data were reported for those aged 15 and older, with 100,185 individuals answering they identify as transgender or non-binary, out of more than 30.5 million Canadians counted. Respondents were not limited to just transgender or non-binary; terms included were two-spirit, agender, genderqueer, among other identities.

That translates to about 0.33 percent of the population or one in 300 people.

While the findings are significant, Western University's Greta Bauer said the entire picture is not yet being captured.

"I think some Canadians might be surprised to learn that one in 300 Canadians are trans or non-binary. I would say that seems a little low, but I think some people would be surprised it's that high," said Bauer, professor of epidemiology and biostatistics at the Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry.

As Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) Sex and Gender Science Chair, Bauer provided direct consultation with Statistics Canada on collecting information regarding people's sex and gender.

She said the numbers seen in the 2021 census will likely go up as people get more comfortable reporting this kind of information to their government.

"When Statistics Canada first added questions to surveys about [sexual orientation](#), for the first several iterations of those, they went up each time. The most common interpretation is that people were not

necessarily comfortable disclosing that information to the government, and so my expectation would be that these numbers will go up slightly in future census, and that will not be a big surprise."

While it may take some time for more Canadians to disclose their [gender identity](#), Bauer also noted there are entire populations that we cannot count.

"I think one thing that they missed is survival," she said.

The census found that Generation Z, those aged 17 to 24 years of age, were seven times more likely to identify as trans or non-binary than those who were aged 76 years and older.

Bauer noted that for [older generations](#), the access to gender-affirming [medical care](#), legal gender affirmation, and social acceptance were not as available as they are today.

"It's only part of the picture to say that [young people](#) are more likely to come out because I think there are people who should be with us at older ages, but who aren't with us because they didn't have access to that kind of support."

Bauer said there is no way to go back and count those people because we cannot count what we don't know.

"We don't have any reason to believe that people are being born now with more innate gender diversity than people were 50 years ago. What's different is the [life experience](#), and it is still rough for people, but we socially have carved out enough space for a lot of people to come out and identify as themselves and live as themselves. And that's something that really was just not there before," said Bauer.

The mandatory nature of the census also presents a complication to the recording of the data. Unlike regular surveys, the census is also proxy reported, meaning one person answers the questions for the household.

It is likely there are people who are unaware there is someone in their household who identifies as trans or non-binary, and so those people are also not getting counted.

"A lot of people who are trans know they are trans years before they come out and live their gender, so there is a question whether we are capturing those people," said Bauer.

Still, despite the complications with counting individuals' gender identity the collection of this data could prove to be beneficial going forward.

The census is used in policy making and it's also used as the backbone for other surveys, something Bauer calls "foundational data."

Perhaps the most important aspect of the data is helping Canadians realize just how many people out there identify as trans or non-binary.

"Having that kind of visibility is probably good in terms of people realizing they probably do know trans people and it's not this incredibly rare or unusual thing," said Bauer.

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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