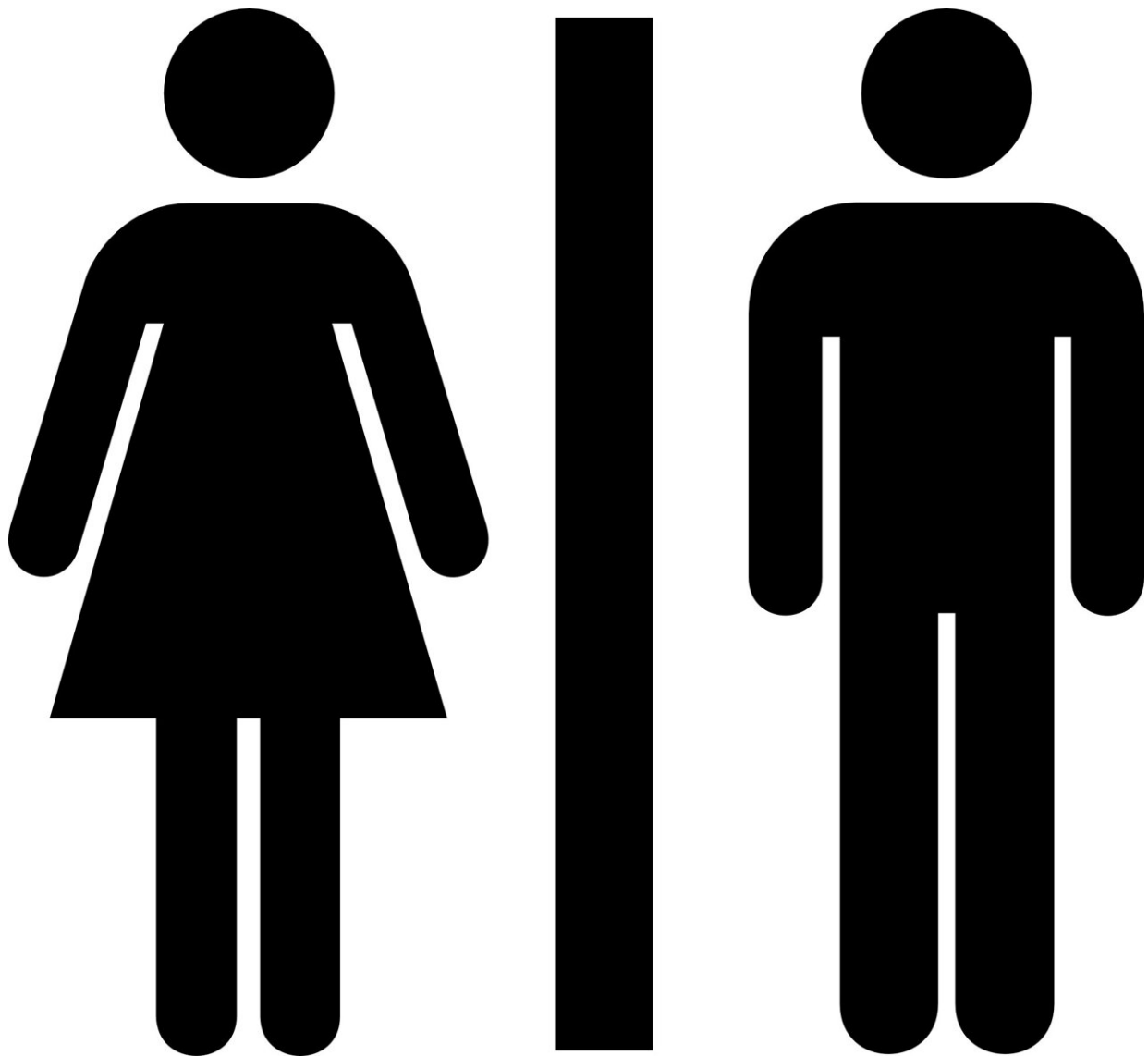


More than 6% of people changed their reported sexual identity over a six-year period, UK survey finds

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More than 6% of the U.K. population aged 16 and over—that is one in 15—changed their reported sexual identity over a six-year period, according to new research led by Lancaster University.

Analyzing data from a [national survey](#) (the United Kingdom Household Longitudinal Study), this research provides new [population](#)-wide evidence of [sexual identity](#) mobility—change and continuity in individuals' [sexual orientation](#) identification—in the U.K.

Of the 22,673 individuals who were each observed twice in 2011–2013 and 2017–2019, a significant [minority](#) of 6.6% changed their reported sexual orientation.

The research, "Sexual Orientation Identity Mobility in the United Kingdom," by Professor Yang Hu, of Lancaster University, and Assistant Professor Nicole Denier, of the University of Alberta in Canada, is published in the journal *Demography*.

"The idea that sexual identity is fluid is not new but, up until now, we know relatively little about just how fluid it is in the population and how the fluidity varies across different demographic groups," says lead author Professor Yang Hu.

The study's key findings show:

- Sexual identity mobility is higher among young people aged 16–24 (7.9%) and [older adults](#) aged 65 and over (7.4%), compared with those aged 25–64 (5.0–6.2%).
- Sexual identity mobility is 10.3% less likely among men (5.7%)

than women (6.3%).

- Sexual identity mobility is three times more likely among non-white ethnic minority individuals (15.5%) than among [white people](#) (5.0%).
- Sexual identity mobility is more likely among the less educated.
- Sexual identity mobility is more prevalent among those who self-identified as bisexual, had other sexual identities, and preferred not to disclose their identity, compared with those who self-identified as heterosexual, gay or lesbian.

"An increasing range of social policies, [public health](#) and welfare programs are rolled out to support equality for and the well-being of sexual minority individuals," says Professor Hu, "our findings show that the sexual minority population is not static, and identities and partnership practices may change over the course of people's lives.

"As the composition of the sexual minority population may shift, policymakers must be attuned to the changing characteristics and needs of the population."

The findings also challenge the assumption that sexual identity mobility declines over the life course. It actually finds that sexual identity mobility is as prevalent among over-65s as among [young people](#) aged 16–24.

"The relatively high mobility rate among [older people](#) is largely driven by their heightened likelihood of moving into a heterosexual identity and forgoing an unwillingness to disclose their sexual identity," explains Professor Hu.

"Our research establishes the scale and patterns of sexual identity mobility in the U.K. It does not explore the complex reasons for the mobility, but our analysis does show that changes in individuals' sexual

identification are closely associated with changes in their partnership status and partner's sex."

People who moved into a same-sex relationship are about 7 times (43.3% vs. 5.9%) more likely to change their sexual identity to report that they are gay or lesbian than those who have not experienced such relationship changes.

The study also compared the prevalence and patterns of sexual identity mobility as captured by self-reported sexual identity versus a partner's sex.

"The 2021 U.K. Census has started to collect data on people's sexual identity, and many other countries are moving to collect data on sexual minority populations, including the 2020 U.S. Census", said Professor Denier, "but sexual identity has been measured in different ways internationally.

"Our findings show that inferring one's sexual identity from one's partner's sex, the type of information available in the 2020 U.S. Census, would substantially underestimate the sexual minority population and sexual identity mobility compared with measuring it based on individuals' self-reported identification as in the 2021 U.K. Census or with surveys that follow people over time."

The findings from the research highlight the importance of capturing sexual identity as fluid rather than fixed in major data collection initiatives, and urge governments and practitioners to incorporate sexual fluidity as a key consideration into policymaking and their work with sexual minority populations.

More information: Yang Hu et al, Sexual Orientation Identity Mobility in the United Kingdom: A Research Note, *Demography* (2023).

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Provided by Lancaster University

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