

'Youth-at-Risk' –2009 Sexual Orientation & Health Risks

RI Public High School Students



RI Departments of Health and Elementary & Secondary Education
~November 2010~



Introduction: This report presents Rhode Island (RI) rates for 30 health-risk indicators for public high school students identifying themselves as either heterosexual or lesbian, gay, bisexual or unsure (LGBU). Data are from RI's 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS).

About the YRBS: The YRBS is a bi-annual, anonymous, voluntary survey of a random sample of public high school students in the country. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention developed the YRBS to monitor risk behaviors related to the major causes of mortality, disease, and injury in the U.S.

RI's YRBS: In the spring of 2009, 3,213 RI 9th to 12th grade students participated in the YRBS. The findings in this report are representative of public high school students statewide (excluding self-contained ESL and special education classes), and may be used to inform policy and programs alike regarding health-risk behaviors.

Sexual orientation: Students were asked "Which of the following best describes you? 1) heterosexual; 2) lesbian or gay; 3) bisexual, or 4) not sure." The responses were then parsed into two categories, students self-reporting either #1 (heterosexual), or #s 2, 3 or 4 (LGBU).

Understanding the data: This report presents bar charts showing percentages of students engaging in risky behaviors, along with the 95% confidence intervals (CIs provide the range of values among which the actual or 'true' value lies 95% of the time). Because survey data are estimates, the CIs are used to determine if there is any statistically significant difference between two (or more) groups. If the CIs overlap, one may not say with any certainty that the values between the two groups differ.

2009 Highlights

LGBU students were at greater risk for 25 of the 30 behaviors in this report than were heterosexual students, and there was a very strong (positive) correlation between a LGBU identity and engaging in risky behaviors ($r = 0.869$).

- Nine percent (9%) of RI public high school students identified themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual or unsure (LGBU), and female students and those with physical, emotional or learning disabilities were more likely than their peers to identify as LGBU.
- Violence was more common to LGBU students, as 25% had been bullied (vs. 16% of heterosexual students), 35% had been in a physical fight (vs. 24%), and 19% had been hit by their boyfriend/girlfriend (vs. 10%) within the past 12 months. Sixteen percent (16%) of LGBU students were forced into sex (vs. 6%).
- 'Depression' rates were almost double among LGBU students (44% vs. 23%), and they were almost 4 times more likely than their heterosexual peers to have attempted suicide (22% vs. 6%).
- Tobacco use was higher among LGBU students, with current cigarette smoking at 28% (vs. 12% for heterosexual students), and any tobacco use at 29% (vs. 18%).
- LGBU students were more likely than heterosexual students to currently smoke marijuana (35% vs. 25%), have used cocaine (18% vs. 4%), sniffed inhalants (24% vs. 7%), or abused painkillers (36% vs. 15%). There was no difference in current alcohol drinking (34%).
- Recent sexual intercourse was more prevalent among LGBU than heterosexual students (44% vs. 31%), and LGBU students were more likely to have multiple (4+) partners (24% vs. 10%) and to engage in unsafe practices (i.e., without a condom, 56% vs. 37%).
- Obesity rates were higher among LGBU than heterosexual students (40% vs. 26%), with insufficient physical activity a possible contributing factor (71% vs. 54%), and they were more inclined to fast to maintain or reduce weight (21% vs. 10%).

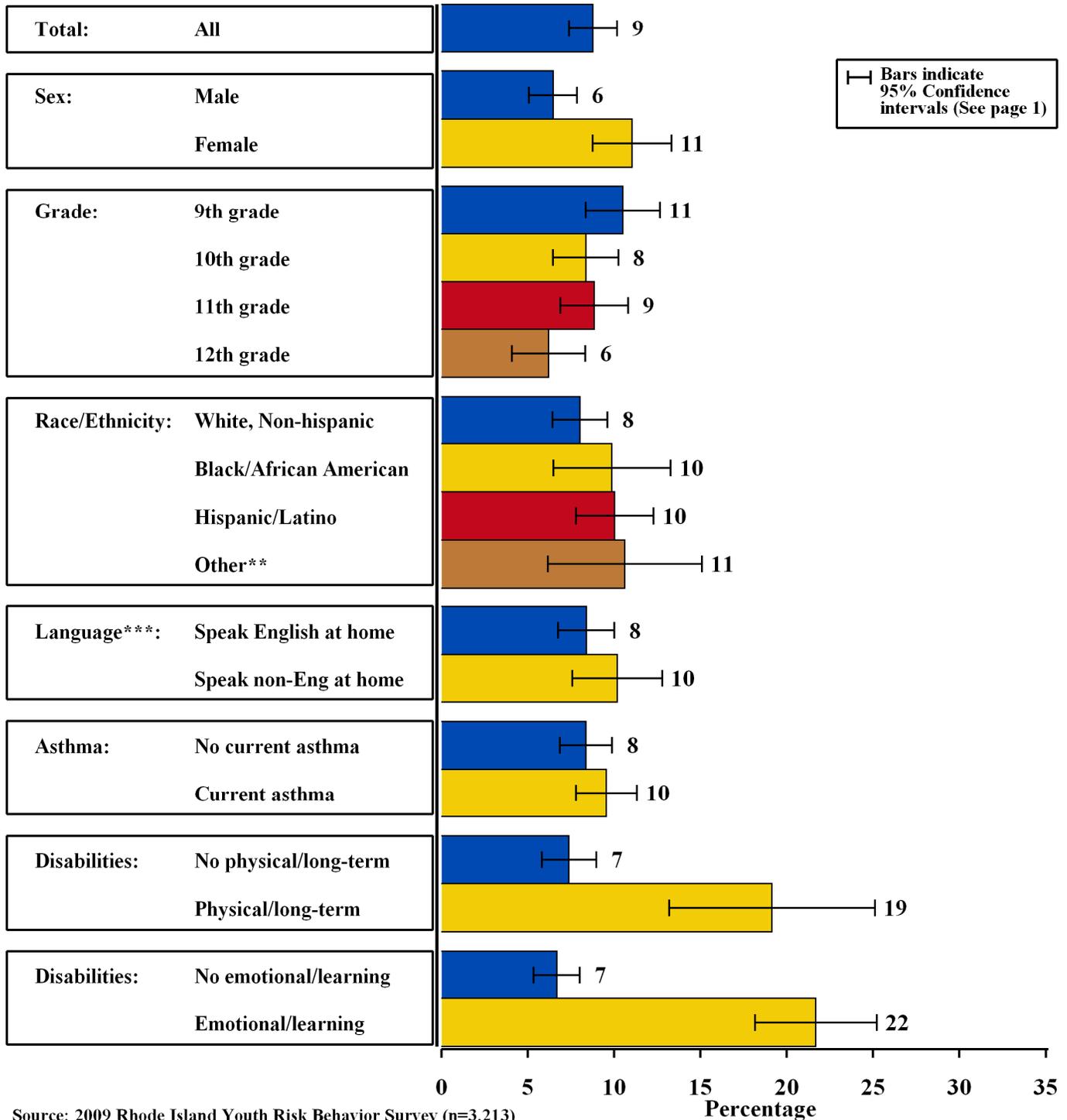
Recommendations

These data show that LGBU students are much more likely to engage in risky behaviors than their heterosexual peers. Research also demonstrates that schools that focus on health and safety can dramatically increase academic performance. Consequently, the following recommendations are offered:

- Support policies and programs promoting self-esteem and diversity
- Adopt interventions addressing youth behavioral healthcare needs
- Integrate LGBU issues into academics
- Enforce LGBU anti-discrimination policies
- Increase screening and referral of at-risk LGBU youth

Acknowledgements: The RI Departments of Health; Elementary and Secondary Education; Behavioral Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals; and the Office of Health and Human Services provided funding and other support for the YRBS. **Contact information:** RI Dept. of Health (401-222-5111), <http://www.health.ri.gov/data/youthriskbehaviorsurvey/>, or <http://www.thriveri.org/>. **Prepared by:** Bruce Cryan, MBA, MS, Donald Perry, MPA, Yongwen Jiang, PhD (RI-DoH), and Anne Marie Silvia, MPA (RI-DoE)

Figure 1
LGB/Unsure* Among RI Public High Schools
(Grades 9-12 students) within demographic subgroups -- 2009



Source: 2009 Rhode Island Youth Risk Behavior Survey (n=3,213)

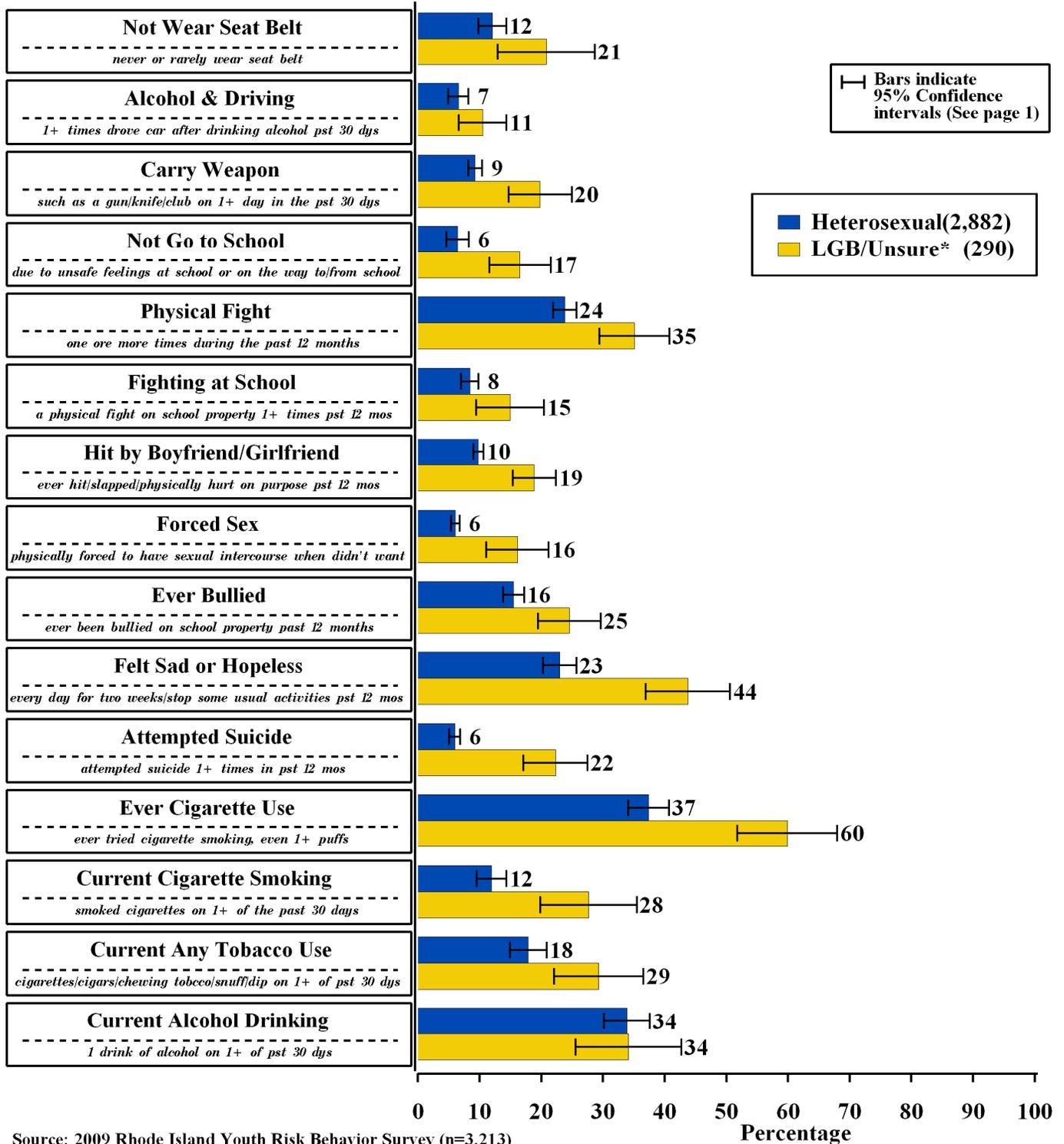
* LGB/Unsure: Students who describe their sexual orientation as Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Unsure

** Other: includes American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander, multiple races

*** Primary Language: Students usually speak at home (English/Spanish/Portuguese/Cape Verdean Creole/Other)

Figure 2

Risk Behaviors Among RI Public High Schools (Grades 9-12 students) by sexual orientation -- 2009

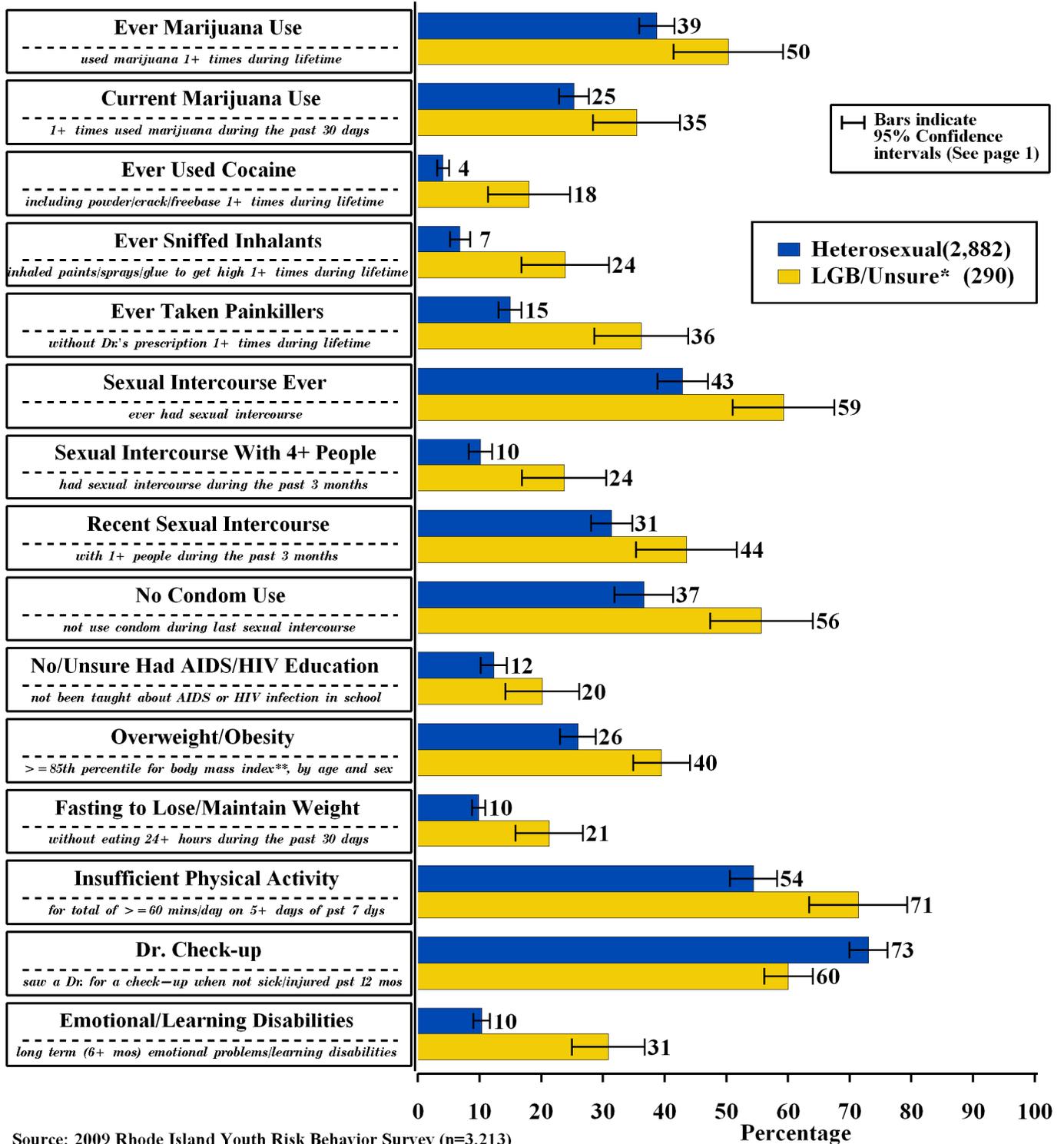


Source: 2009 Rhode Island Youth Risk Behavior Survey (n=3,213)

* LGB/Unsure: Students who describe their sexual orientation as Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Unsure

Figure 3

Risk Behaviors Among RI Public High Schools (Grades 9-12 students) by sexual orientation -- 2009



Source: 2009 Rhode Island Youth Risk Behavior Survey (n=3,213)

* LGB/Unsure: Students who describe their sexual orientation as Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Unsure

** Body Mass Index = weight in kilograms / (height in meters)²