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The Prevalence of LGBTQ+ Teachers in the U.S.

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Due to limited data, we know little about the prevalence of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) educators. Using the American Community Survey and Census Pulse, we examine the representation of LGBTQ+ individuals in PK-12 teaching. We find that 3.3-3.5 percent of LGBTQ+ individuals are teachers; in contrast, 4.4-4.9 percent of non-LGBTQ+ individuals are teachers. This new evidence highlights the need for data collection and research to explore why LGBTQ+ individuals are underrepresented in teaching, along with approaches to remedy this disparity, which likely has implications for LGBTQ+ students.

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Abstract

Due to limited data, we know little about the prevalence of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) educators. Using the American Community Survey and Census Pulse, we examine the representation of LGBTQ+ individuals in PK-12 teaching. We find that 3.3-3.5 percent of LGBTQ+ individuals are teachers; in contrast, 4.4-4.9 percent of non-LGBTQ+ individuals are teachers. This new evidence highlights the need for data collection and research to explore why LGBTQ+ individuals are underrepresented in teaching, along with approaches to remedy this disparity, which likely has implications for LGBTQ+ students.

Keywords: teachers, LGBTQ+ populations

Introduction

Teachers' sexuality and gender identity have long been public concerns. Historically, LGBTQ+ teachers were feared as potential sexual predators, although the biggest concern was their influence on impressionable youth. LGBTQ+ teachers, particularly if they were "out," were suspected of "encourag[ing] more homosexuality by inducing pupils into looking upon it as an acceptable lifestyle" (Anita Bryant in Harbeck, 1997). Therefore, public schools regularly screened out LGBTQ+ candidates and dismissed LGBTQ+ teachers (Blount, 2005). In an extreme attempt to root out LGBTQ+ teachers, Florida's Johns Committee investigated and revoked the credentials of LGBTQ+ teachers from 1957 to 1963 (Graves, 2009).

Currently, *Bostock v Clayton County* (2020) clarifies that hiring discrimination based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and is unlawful. However, religious exemptions may allow private schools to dismiss teachers on the basis of LGBTQ+ status. Additionally, new policies (e.g., Fla. H.B. 1069 (2023), commonly known as Florida's "Don't Say Gay" law) might allow public schools to dismiss LGBTQ+ teachers. Already, one Florida teacher was fired for using a gender-neutral title (Russell, 2023). Even if teachers succeed in challenging dismissals, these policies likely worsen working conditions and affect teacher behaviors. For example, LGBTQ+ teachers express reluctance to "come out" when state policies restrict instruction on controversial topics (Woo et al., 2023).

Limited data inhibit our understanding of how policies and surrounding debates affect LGBTQ+ participation in schools. Qualitative research and non-probabilistic surveys of LGBTQ+ teachers provide insights on stressors: LGBTQ+ teachers, particularly transgender teachers, fear losing their jobs if exposed and experience harassment (Connell, 2014; Suárez et al., 2022). These stressors likely lead to LGBTQ+ individuals finding teaching less hospitable than non-LGBTQ+ individuals. However, conditions vary based on local factors, such as administrative support (Wright & Smith, 2015), and may have improved over time (Wright, Smith, & Whitney, 2019).

In this context of limited data, we triangulate two (imperfect) nationally representative data sources to address one question: are LGBTQ+ individuals less likely to be employed as prekindergarten(PK)-12 teachers than non-LGBTQ+ individuals?

Data and Methods

We rely on two population-representative federal surveys. Using the American Community Survey (ACS), we identify PK-12 regular and special education teachers through occupational codes. We additionally identify whether respondents are in opposite-sex or same-sex cohabiting relationships based on household matrices (Badgett et al., 2021). We cannot identify single or non-cohabiting LGB teachers, bisexual teachers in opposite-sex relationships, or transgender teachers. In contrast, the Census Pulse (Pulse) asks about sexual and gender identity; however, we can only identify individuals who work or volunteer in-person in K-12 settings (not necessarily teachers). Thus, in the ACS, we identify teachers well but LGBTQ+ individuals less well - and vice versa in the Pulse. Comparing results across these two surveys allows us to understand the boundaries of credible estimates of LGBTQ+ representation in teaching.

We estimate the likelihood of individuals being teachers by comparing LGBTQ+ individuals to non-LGBTQ+ individuals. We examine probabilities by age and gender and sexual identity. To do so, we estimate logistic regressions that control for age and educational level. Supplemental materials contain more details on the identification of LGBTQ+ status and likely teachers, models, and robustness checks.

Results

We find that LGBTQ+ individuals are less likely to work as PK-12 teachers than non-LGBTQ+ individuals. In ACS, 3.5 percent of individuals in same-sex couples are PK-12 teachers, compared to 4.9 percent of individuals in opposite-sex couples. In Pulse, 3.3 percent of LGBTQ+ individuals are likely K-12 teachers, compared to 4.4 percent of non-LGBTQ+ individuals.

Figure 1 illustrates the differences in teaching rates by LGBTQ+ status and age. For most age groups, LGBTQ+ individuals are less likely to be teachers. Disparities appear narrower (and in Pulse, not statistically significant) for teachers 25- to 34-years-old (though larger for 18- to 24-year-olds). LGBTQ+ individuals who are 45 or older are much less likely to be teachers than their non-LGBTQ+ peers.

Figure 2 disaggregates estimates by gender and sexual identity. We find that transgender individuals are less than half as likely to be teachers as their cisgender peers.

Discussion

This study is the first, to our knowledge, to find that LGBTQ+ individuals are less likely to be employed as PK-12 teachers than non-LGBTQ+ individuals. Our results raise unresolved questions, including whether results are driven by differential pursuit of teaching as a career, differential hiring, or differential attrition.

Regardless, the underrepresentation of LGBTQ+ individuals in teaching has important implications, especially at a moment when increasing numbers of youth identify as LGBTQ+. Black and Latinx students experience better outcomes when exposed to teachers who share their race and/or ethnicity (for a review, see Redding, 2019); it seems plausible that LGBTQ+ students similarly benefit from exposure to LGBTQ+ teachers. First, LGBTQ+ teachers report more frequently engaging in practices to support LGBTQ+ students (Greytak et al., 2016). Additionally, LGBTQ+ teachers may improve campus climate for LGBTQ+ students through their interactions with non-LGBTQ+ teachers and serve as supports for one another. We note the low representation of transgender teachers mirrors survey evidence that high proportions of transgender teachers believe they were not hired - or fired - because of their gender identity (Suárez et al., 2022).

It is encouraging that the Pulse indicates 25- to 35-year-old LGBTQ+ individuals teach as frequently as their non-LGBTQ+ peers. This result may reflect improving climates for LGBTQ+ teachers; alternatively, LGBTQ+ individuals might enter teaching at similar rates to their non-LGBTQ+ peers but be

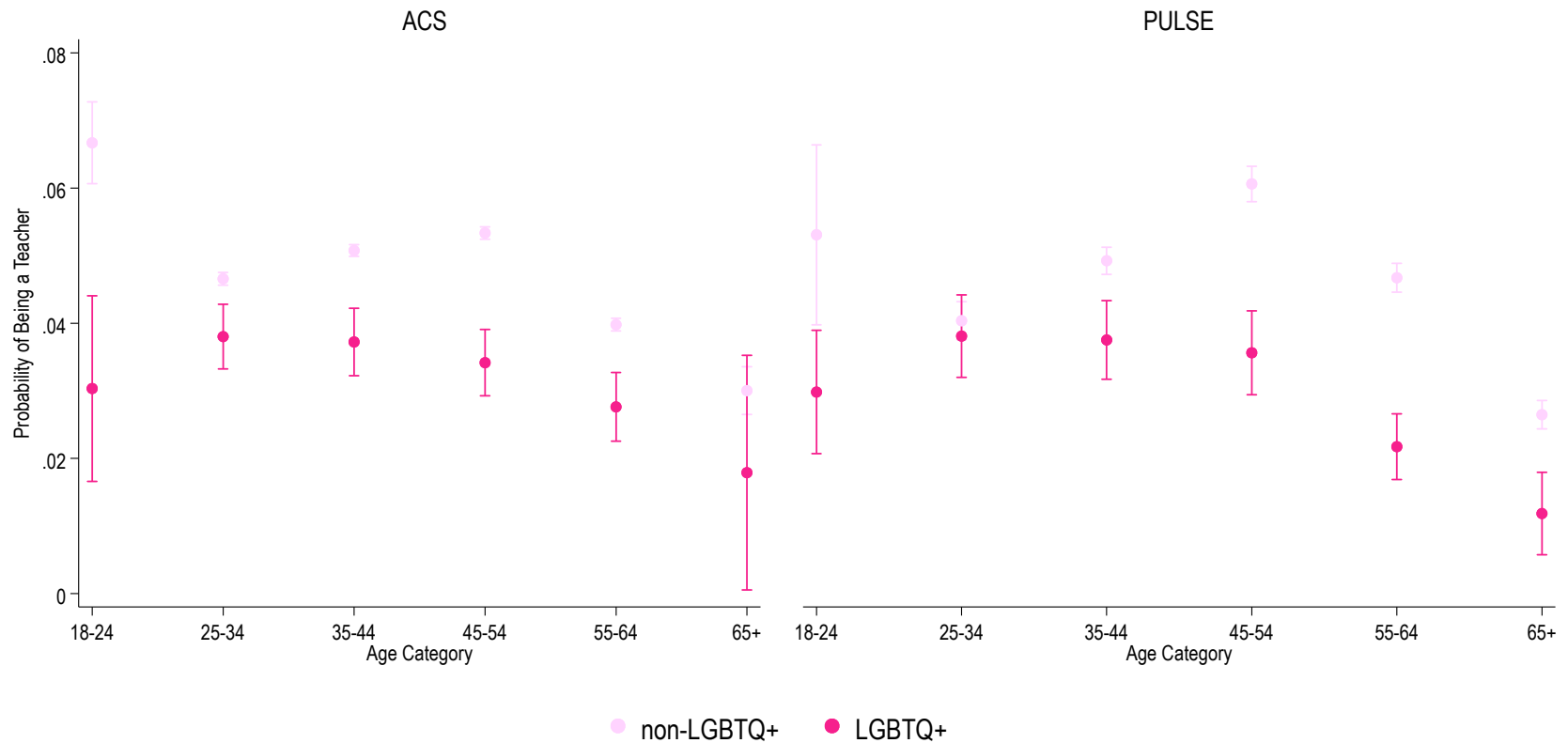
more likely to leave teaching. The recent swath of state laws restricting discussion of LGBTQ+ topics in schools may exacerbate differential attrition.

More data is needed to explore these questions and is available with updates to the National Teacher and Principal Survey. We encourage surveys of educators to include tested questions on sexual and gender identities. Additionally, to be powered to detect differences across groups, studies likely need to oversample LGBTQ+ teachers, as even large nationally representative samples of teachers contain few LGBTQ+ teachers (Greytak et al., 2016). Without such efforts, knowledge related to LGBTQ+ educators will remain limited.

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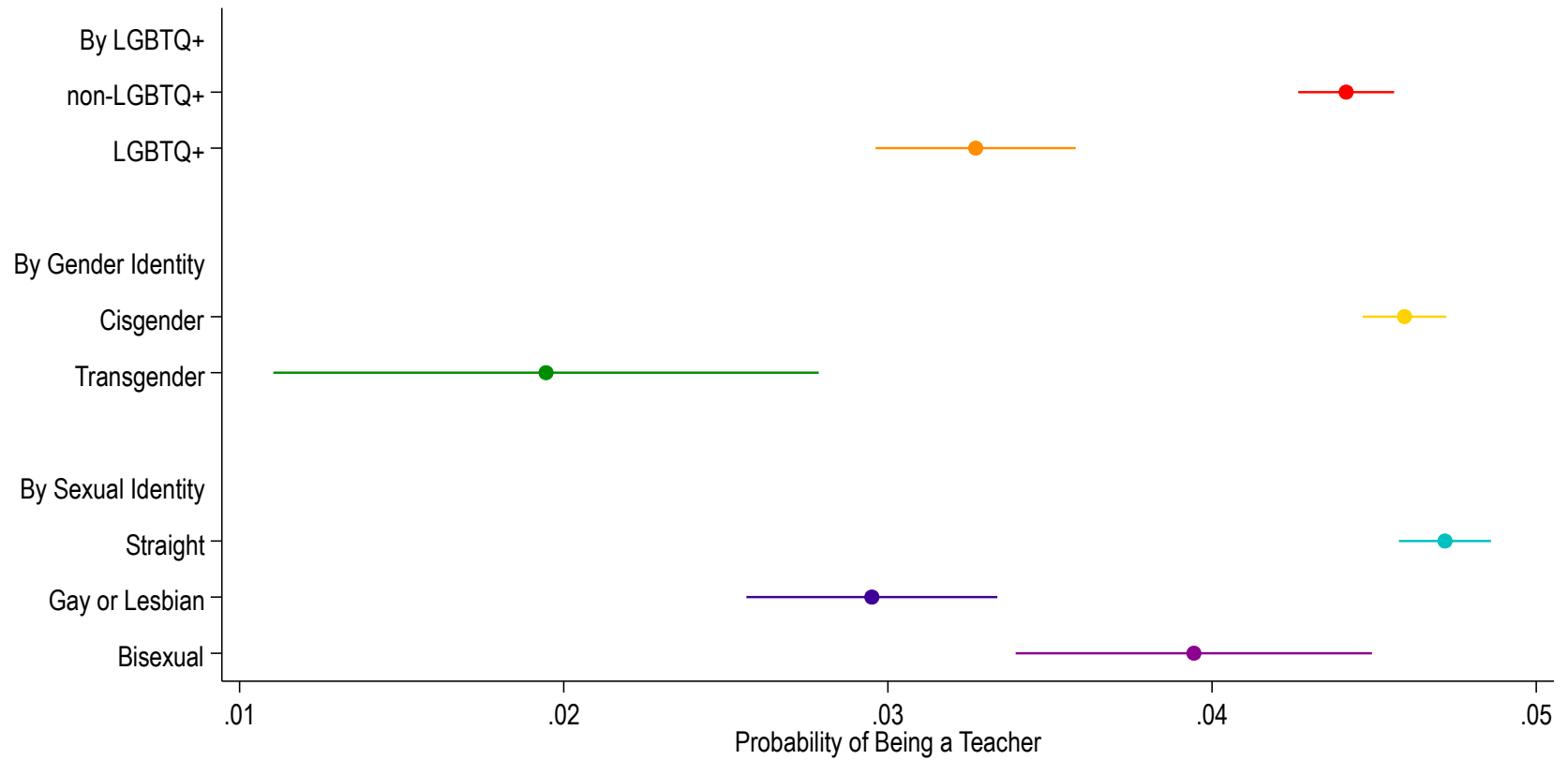
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Figure 1. Teachers by Age and LGBTQ+ Status



Notes: In the ACS, "LGBT" individuals are in same-sex couples; "non-LGBT" individuals are in opposite-sex couples (individuals who are not coupled are not included). In the Census Pulse, "LGBT" individuals include both single and coupled individuals who identify themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgender, as well as individuals who indicate their sex assigned at birth is incongruent with their current gender. "Non-LGBT" individuals include individuals who identify themselves as straight and that their sex assigned at birth is congruent with their current gender. In the ACS, teachers include preschool, kindergarten, elementary, middle school, secondary school, and special education teachers. In the Census Pulse, teachers include all individuals who indicated that they worked in the last week, that they worked or volunteered last week at a K-12 school, and that they held at least a Bachelor's degree. These results are from logistic regressions that control for educational attainment. All models include person-level weights; for Census Pulse, we also include replicate sample weights.

Figure 2. Teachers by Sexual and Gender Identity



Notes: Individuals are identified by gender and sexual identity using the Census Pulse. Individuals are identified as transgender if their current gender identity does not match their sex assigned at birth (including if they describe their current gender identity as transgender but not if they describe their current gender identity as "none of these"). Individuals could directly identify themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Teachers include all individuals who indicated that they worked in the last week, that they worked or volunteered last week at a K-12 school, and that they held at least a Bachelor's degree. These results are from logistic regressions that control for educational attainment and age category. All models include person-level weights and replicate sample weights.

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Data

American Community Survey

The American Community Survey (ACS) is a nationally representative repeated cross-section in the 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. These data are publicly available through IPUMS-USA at the University of Minnesota Population Center and contain demographic, economic, social, and housing information. As the largest household survey administered by the U.S. Census Bureau, the large sample sizes of the ACS make it particularly germane to studying relatively small subpopulations like individuals in same-sex couples. For our analysis, we pooled data from 2021 and 2022 to match the time period covered by Census Pulse.

Identification of LGBTQ+ Individuals

The ACS does not directly collect data on sexual identity, but it is possible to identify same-sex couples using a combination of methods. Married individuals in same-sex couples are directly identified in the data beginning in 2013, but it is also possible to identify unmarried individuals in same-sex couples using intrahousehold relationships. For each surveyed household, the ACS identifies a primary reference person, or head of household, as well as data on each household member's relationship to the primary reference person. If a member of the household reports having an unmarried partnership or married relationship to their same-sex primary reference person, we jointly consider that household member and primary reference person a same-sex couple. If a member of the household reports having an unmarried partnership or married relationship to their opposite-sex primary reference person, we jointly consider that household member and primary reference person a member of an opposite-sex couple. We exclude any individuals whose sex or relationship status was imputed as well as all respondents that are not in a same-sex or opposite-sex couple.

Identification of Teachers

To identify teachers, we restrict our sample to employed individuals. Primary reference persons were asked what type of work they (and each person within their household) do if they (or a reference person) were employed. The ACS use this information to create a variable (OCC) which reports the person's primary occupation, coded into a contemporary census classification scheme. This primary occupation code is the occupation in which the individual earns the majority of their money, and, if that was unclear, then it is the occupation in which the individual spends the greatest amount of their time. More details can be found on at IPUMS-USA (Ruggles et al, 2024). OCC codes 2300 (preschool and kindergarten teachers), 2310 (elementary and middle school teachers), 2320 (secondary school teachers), and 2330 (special education teachers) were used to identify PK-12 teachers.

Limitations

The ACS is limited in several ways. First, there may be misclassification arising from errors in reporting relationships to primary reference persons or the sex of members of the household. To assess this, we exclude all observations with imputed sex or imputed relationship to the primary reference person. Second, the ACS is limited in that the survey does not directly ask respondents about sexual identity, requiring researchers to identify likely sexual minorities based on the sex of cohabiting partners. This prevents identification of single, non-cohabiting sexual minorities, couples not cohabiting together, and bisexual individuals cohabiting in opposite-sex couples. Finally, the ACS does not include information on gender identity, preventing the identification of transgender individuals.

Census Pulse

For the Census Pulse, we use pooled data from phases 3.2 through 3.5 (corresponding dates shown in Table A.1). As Census Pulse was designed to be a rapid response survey, it changed frequently. Census

Pulse began asking detailed questions about sexual and gender identities in phase 3.2. Beginning in 3.6, Census Pulse continued asking questions about sexual and gender identities but changed questions about employment to coarser groupings.

Table A.1: Weeks of Census Pulse data

Week	Period
34	07/21/2021-08/02/2021
35	08/04/2021-08/16/2021
36	08/18/2021-08/30/2021
37	09/01/2021-09/13/2021
38	09/15/2021-09/27/2021
39	09/29/2021-10/11/2021
40	12/01/2021-12/13/2021
41	12/29/2021-01/10/2022
42	01/26/2022-02/07/2022
43	03/02/2022-03/14/2022
44	03/30/2022-04/11/2022
45	04/27/2022-05/09/2022
46	06/01/2022-06/13/2022
47	06/29/2022-07/11/2022
48	07/27/2022-08/08/2022

Notes: In gray, we have highlighted weeks that fall within the traditional school year. In an alternate specification, we estimate results using only these weeks.

Identification of LGBTQ+ Individuals

Beginning in phase 3.2, respondents were asked the following questions about their sex assigned at birth, their current gender, and their sexual identity:

- What sex were you assigned at birth, on your original birth certificate?
 - Male
 - Female
- Do you currently describe yourself as male, female, or transgender?
 - Male
 - Female
 - Transgender
 - None of these
- Which of the following best represents how you think of yourself?
 - Gay or lesbian
 - Straight, that is not gay or lesbian
 - Bisexual
 - Something else
 - I don't know

We classify respondents as LGBTQ+ using the process described by U.S. Census Bureau to identify LGBTQ+ individuals, which was developed "following consultation with internal and external stakeholders and experts."¹ Individuals were classified as LGBTQ+ under the following circumstances: their sex

¹ Please see <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity.html>.

assigned at birth does not match current gender; they report their current gender as transgender; or their sexual identity is gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Individuals were classified as non-LGBTQ+ if both their sex assigned at birth matched their current gender and their sexual identity is straight. Individuals were grouped into an "Other" category if they report their current gender as "none of these" or, given that their sex at birth matches their current gender, if they report their sexual identity as "something else" or "I don't know." Please see Table A.2 for all potential classifications.

Using this method, we find that 8.1 percent of respondents identified as LGBTQ+, 84.9 percent of respondents identified as non-LGBTQ+, 4.2 percent identified as "Other," and 2.8 percent did not report sexual or gender identity.

Table A.2: Classification as LGBTQ+ in Census Pulse

Sex Assigned at Birth	Current Gender	Sexual Identity	LGBTQ+ Classification
Male	Male	Straight	non-LGBTQ+
Male	Male	Gay or lesbian	LGBTQ+
Male	Male	Bisexual	LGBTQ+
Male	Male	Something else	Other
Male	Male	I don't know	Other
Female	Female	Straight	non-LGBTQ+
Female	Female	Gay or lesbian	LGBTQ+
Female	Female	Bisexual	LGBTQ+
Female	Female	Something else	Other
Female	Female	I don't know	Other
Male	Female	Straight	LGBTQ+
Male	Female	Gay or lesbian	LGBTQ+
Male	Female	Bisexual	LGBTQ+
Male	Female	Something else	LGBTQ+
Male	Female	I don't know	LGBTQ+
Female	Male	Straight	LGBTQ+
Female	Male	Gay or lesbian	LGBTQ+
Female	Male	Bisexual	LGBTQ+
Female	Male	Something else	LGBTQ+
Female	Male	I don't know	LGBTQ+
Male	Transgender	Straight	LGBTQ+
Male	Transgender	Gay or lesbian	LGBTQ+
Male	Transgender	Bisexual	LGBTQ+
Male	Transgender	Something else	LGBTQ+
Male	Transgender	I don't know	LGBTQ+
Female	Transgender	Straight	LGBTQ+
Female	Transgender	Gay or lesbian	LGBTQ+
Female	Transgender	Bisexual	LGBTQ+
Female	Transgender	Something else	LGBTQ+
Female	Transgender	I don't know	LGBTQ+
Male	None of these	Straight	Other
Male	None of these	Gay or lesbian	LGBTQ+
Male	None of these	Bisexual	LGBTQ+
Male	None of these	Something else	Other
Male	None of these	I don't know	Other
Female	None of these	Straight	Other
Female	None of these	Gay or lesbian	LGBTQ+
Female	None of these	Bisexual	LGBTQ+
Female	None of these	Something else	Other
Female	None of these	I don't know	Other

Identification of Teachers

Between phases 3.2 and 3.5, respondents were asked detailed questions about the primary location in which they worked outside the home:

- In the last 7 days, did you do ANY work for either pay or profit? *Select only one answer.*
 - Yes
 - No
- In the last 7 days, have you worked or volunteered outside your home? *Select only one answer.*
 - Yes
 - No
- In the last 7 days, which best describes the primary location/setting where you worked or volunteered outside your home? *Select only one answer.*
 - Hospital
 - Nursing and residential healthcare facility
 - Pharmacy
 - Ambulatory healthcare
 - Social service
 - Preschool or daycare
 - K-12 school
 - Other schools and instructional settings
 - First response
 - Death care
 - Correctional facility
 - Food and beverage store
 - Agriculture, forestry, fishing, or hunting
 - Food manufacturing facility
 - Non-food manufacturing facility
 - Public transit
 - United States Postal Service
 - Other job deemed “essential” during the COVID-19 pandemic
 - None of the above

We classify individuals as “likely teachers” if they worked for pay or profit in the last seven days and worked or volunteered outside the home in the last seven days at a K-12 school. We additionally require that “likely teachers” hold at least a Bachelor’s degree, given requirements for most K-12 teachers (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020). Approximately 70 percent of respondents meeting our other criteria hold at least a Bachelor’s degree. However, in robustness checks, we estimate results for all individuals who worked in the last week and worked or volunteered in a K-12 school during the past week (regardless of educational background).

Limitations

Census Pulse has substantial advantages over many previous Census Bureau products in terms of identifying LGBTQ+ individuals. Respondents are questioned directly about sexual identity and asked the two-step gender identification question, meaning that individuals who are not in same-sex partnered relationships can be identified as LGB and transgender individuals can be identified.

However, Census Pulse does not fully capture all LGBTQ+-identified individuals. For example, some non-binary individuals might identify their current gender as “none of these” and their sexual identity as

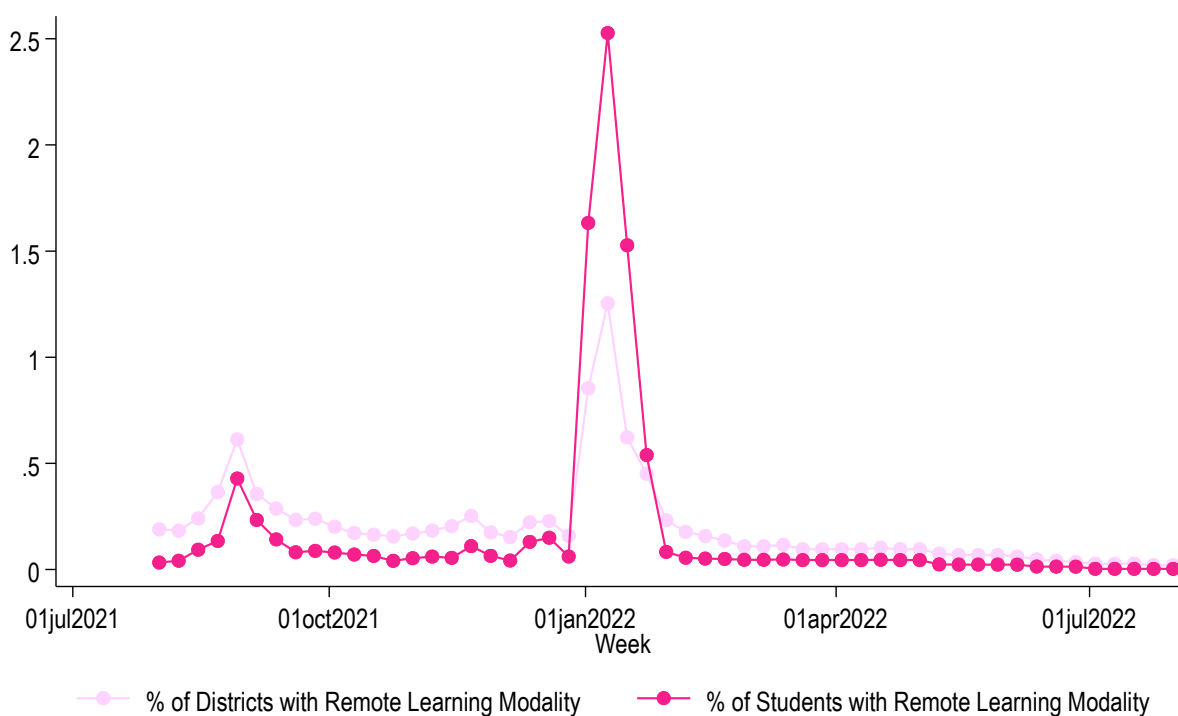
"something else." We would not identify these individuals as LGBTQ+, even though they might identify themselves as LGBTQ+.

Our measure of "likely teachers" has greater limitations. We are probably missing certain groups of teachers, such as teachers who were working remotely during weeks 34 through 48. However, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's 2021-2022 School Learning Modalities dataset, very few public and independent charter school districts were operating entirely remotely during this time period, the 2021-2022 school year (Figure A.1). This gives us greater confidence that most K-12 teachers (at least public school teachers) were likely working in-person during this period.

We are also possibly classifying some individuals as teachers who are *not* teachers. Although we screen by educational level, we are likely grouping other school-based staff with teachers (including educational leadership, counselors, etc.). Additionally, we may be counting as "teachers" very involved parent volunteers who otherwise work from home.

Finally, Census Pulse is an experimental data product. Response rates for weeks 34 through 48 ranged from 4.4 to 7.9 percent. Additionally, early responses overestimated vaccine uptake by 14 percentage points, suggesting survey bias (Bradley et al., 2021).

Figure A.1: Districts and Students with Remote Learning During Study Period



Source: Authors' calculations of CDC's School Learning Modalities, 2021-2022.

Methods

We predict whether adults are teachers using the following equation, which varies slightly by survey:

$$Teacher = \alpha + \beta_1 LGBTQ + \beta_2 Education + \beta_3 AgeCat + \varepsilon$$

Here, *Teacher* is a dichotomous variable that is one when we have identified the individual as a teacher; *LGBTQ* is also a dichotomous variable that is one when we have classified the individual as LGBTQ+; *Education* is a series of dichotomous variables representing educational attainment; and *AgeCat* is a series of dichotomous variables. In the main text, we present results from logistic regressions.

American Community Survey

In ACS, we can directly identify teachers but have no information on the sexual identity or gender identity of individuals who are not in couples. We therefore compare only working individuals in same-sex couples to working individuals in opposite-sex couples. Since we are able to directly identify PK-12 teachers, we do not limit our sample only to individuals with a Bachelor's degree but control for levels of educational attainment through a series of indicator variables (no schooling, less than a high school diploma, high school diploma, some college, college graduate). We estimate all models using person-level weights.

Census Pulse

As previously discussed, we are not able to directly identify teachers in the Census Pulse. Therefore, our preferred sample is all adults who worked in the last week and have at least as Bachelor's degree; when we control for educational attainment, we control only for graduate degree. We estimate all models using person-level weights, as well as replicate sample weights.

Full Results

Table A.3: Likelihood of Being a Teacher by LGBTQ+ Status

Variables	ACS	PULSE
LGBTQ+	0.706*** (0.0277)	0.730*** (0.0389)
No School	0.0100*** (0.00261)	
Less than High School	0.0144*** (0.00275)	
High School	0.0489*** (0.00157)	
Some College	0.115*** (0.00261)	
Graduate Degree		2.291*** (0.0602)
Age 18-24	1.336*** (0.0703)	1.227* (0.149)
Age 25-34	0.913*** (0.0132)	1.195*** (0.0452)
Age 45-54	1.054*** (0.0141)	1.474*** (0.0598)
Age 55-64	0.766*** (0.0122)	1.109*** (0.0428)
Age 65+	0.566*** (0.0362)	0.615*** (0.0267)
Constant	0.112*** (0.00106)	0.0370*** (0.00137)
Observations	1,335,588	971,836

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Notes: Results from main specifications. For ACS, sample includes all working individuals in couples. For Census Pulse, sample includes all individuals with Bachelor's or graduate degrees who worked in the last week. Estimates for age are relative to individuals aged 35-44; estimates for education are relative to BA+.

Robustness Checks

American Community Survey

Our results are robust to the inclusion or exclusion of control variables, changes to the main sample, restrictions on years included, and alternative model estimation approaches. Figure A.2 displays results from our main specification along with results from these variations.

First, we do not include any controls (Unadjusted) and continue to find that individuals in same-sex couples are less likely to be PK-12 teachers than individuals in different-sex couples. We also document similar results when we restrict to 2021 or 2022.

We have also estimated all results using both linear probability and probit models and reach similar results.

Census Pulse

Our results are robust to inclusion or exclusion of control variables, changes to the main sample, changes to the comparison group, restrictions on weeks included, and alternative model estimation approaches. Figure A.3 displays results from our main specification along with results from these variations.

First, we do not include any controls (Unadjusted) and continue to find that LGBTQ+ individuals are less likely to work in K-12 schools than non-LGBTQ+ individuals. In our "Adjusting for Weeks" specification, we include week fixed effects and reach similar conclusions.

We next vary our sample and comparison groups. In our "Varying Sample" specification, we do not restrict only to individuals with Bachelor's degrees and instead include all individuals who worked in a K-12 school in the previous week (but control for education). In our "Varying Comparison" specification, we do not require the comparison group to work in the prior week. We continue to find that LGBTQ+ individuals are less likely to work in K-12 schools than non-LGBTQ+ individuals.

As shown in Table A.1, six out of fifteen weeks for the Census Pulse fall outside the traditional school year. In "Varying Weeks", we continue to reach similar results when we restrict to weeks 37 through 45: week 37 begins September 1, 2021, and week 45 ends May 9, 2022.

We have also estimated all results using both linear probability and probit models and reach similar results.

Figure A.2: Robustness Checks Using ACS

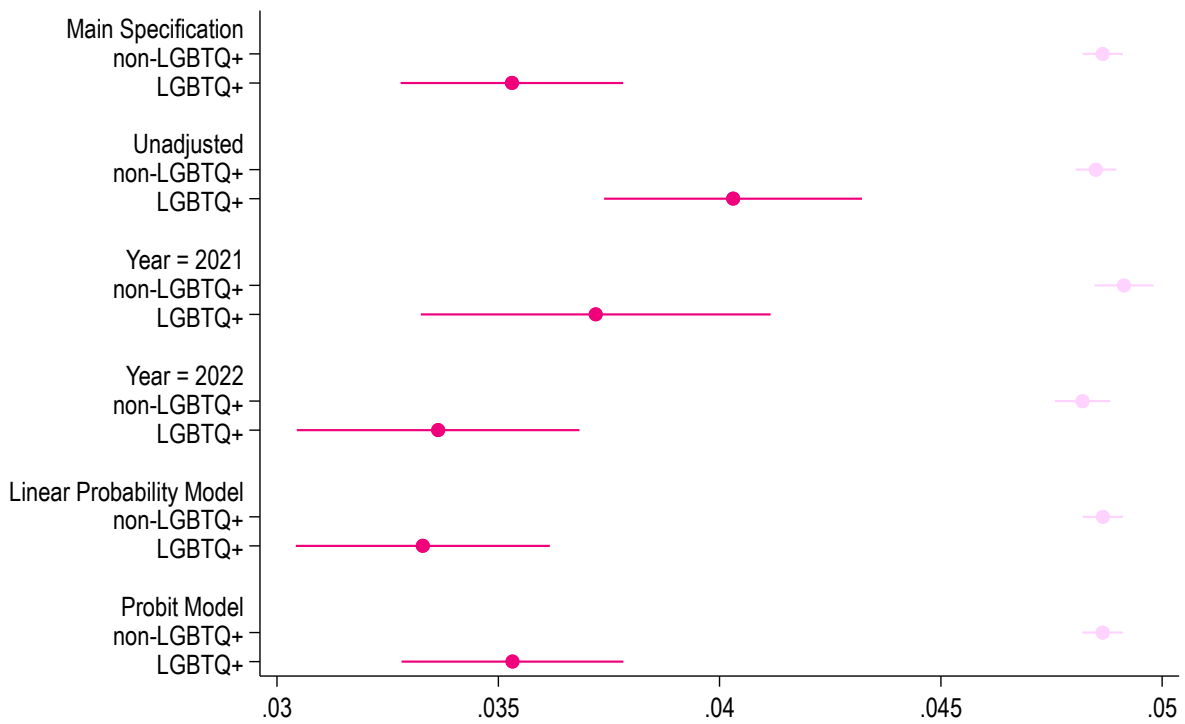
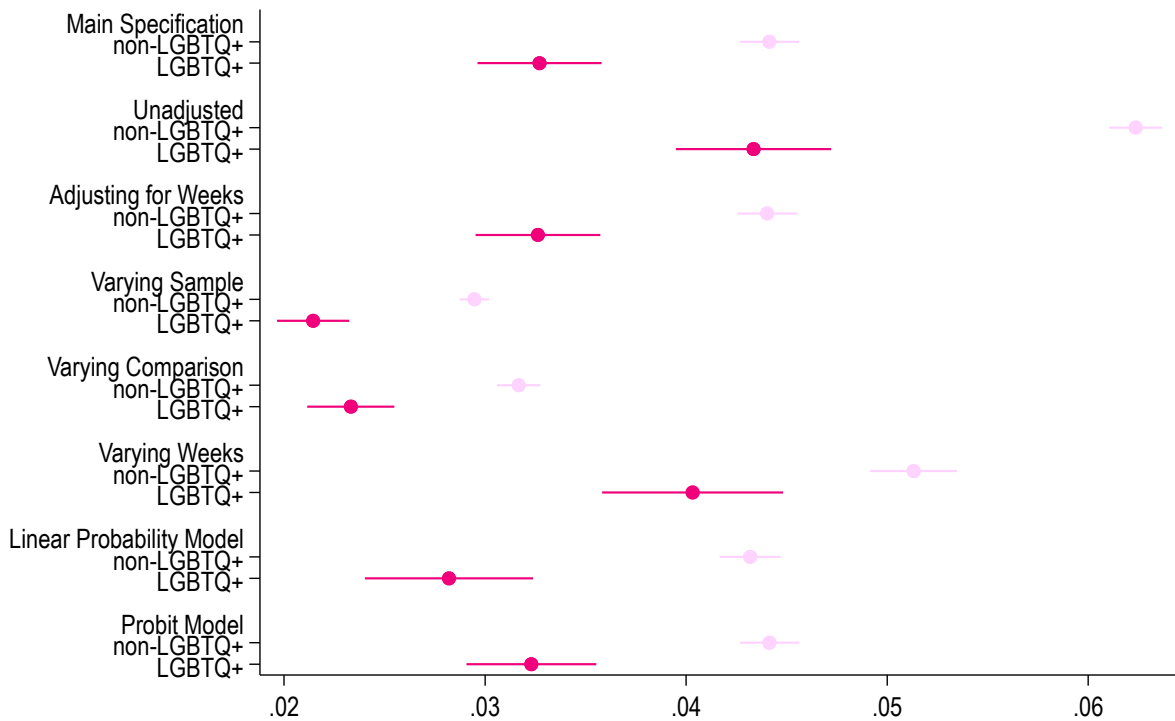


Figure A.3: Robustness Checks Using Census Pulse



Additional References

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