



## Research Report

# Associations of racial/ethnic identities and religious affiliation with suicidal ideation among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and questioning individuals

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Our aim was to examine the associations of racial/ethnic identity and religious affiliation with suicidal ideation among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and questioning (LGBQ) and heterosexual college students. An additional aim was to determine the prevalence of passive suicidal ideation (i.e., death ideation) and active suicidal ideation among culturally diverse LGBQ individuals.

**Methods:** Data from the National Research Consortium probability-based sample of college students from 70 postsecondary institutions ( $n=24,626$ ) were used to examine active and passive suicidal ideation in the past 12-months and lifetime active suicidal ideation among students by sexual orientation, racial/ethnic identity, and religious affiliation.

**Results:** Across most racial/ethnic groups and religious affiliations, LGBQ students were more likely to report active suicidal ideation than non-LGBQ individuals. Among LGBQ students, Latino individuals had lower odds of reporting both past 12-month passive and active suicidal ideation than their non-Hispanic white LGBQ counterparts. Compared to Christian LGBQ students, Agnostic/Atheist LGBQ individuals had greater odds of reporting past 12-month passive suicidal ideation, and Jewish LGBQ students were less likely to endorse past 12-month passive and active suicidal ideation.

**Limitations:** Cross-sectional design and self-reported data.

**Conclusions:** Results corroborate previous research showing elevated prevalence of suicidal ideation among LGBQ individuals in comparison to their heterosexual counterparts. These findings are among the first to document prevalence differences within the LGBQ population based on intersectional identities (race/ethnicity and religious affiliation). Providers should recognize that LGBQ individuals might need support in negotiating the complex relationship between multiple identities, especially due to their elevated prevalence of suicidal ideation.

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## 1. Introduction

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and questioning (LGBQ) individuals are approximately twice as likely to attempt suicide as non-LGBQ individuals (Blosnich and Bossarte, 2012; King et al., 2008; Silenzio et al., 2007; Whitlock and Knox, 2007). Evidence shows differences in suicidal behavior based on racial/ethnic identity (Baca-Garcia et al., 2010, 2011a; Crosby et al., 2011) and religious affiliation (Stacker and Lester, 1991; Steven and Kposowa, 2011; Taliaferro et al., 2009) within the general population, but it is unclear how these identities

may operate among LGBQ college students. Moreover, the public health burden for suicidal behavior among LGBQ individuals warrants understanding differences in prevalence of death ideation (i.e., passive suicidal ideation) vs. active suicidal ideation (Baca-Garcia et al., 2011b; Beck et al., 1979), which could inform suicide prevention efforts geared toward LGBQ individuals across cultures. In terms of racial/ethnic identity, although Black LGB individuals tend to have lower prevalence of mental health disorders than their Latino and non-Hispanic white LGB counterparts (Meyer et al., 2008; O'Donnell et al., 2011), Black and Latino LGB individuals are more likely to report suicidal ideation and attempt suicide than non-Hispanic white LGB individuals (Meyer et al., 2008; Mustanski et al., 2010; O'Donnell et al., 2011; Remafedi, 2002; Ryan et al., 2009). Further, religion can be both a stressor and a source of support in the LGB community, as some religious LGBQ individuals may feel estranged from their

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religious organizations (Barnes and Meyer, 2012; Buchanan et al., 2001; Herek et al., 2002; Schnoor, 2006; Sherry et al., 2010). Consequently, the intersection of identities, especially identities that correlate with active and passive suicidal ideation, may provide salient information about the heterogeneity of suicide risk within LGBQ populations.

Over the years, scholars have started to examine various levels of suicidal ideation, especially in relation to suicide attempts (Baca-Garcia et al., 2011b; Van Orden et al., 2013, 2014). Specifically, death ideation (i.e., passive suicidal ideation) is often operationalized as the perception that life was not worth living or that individuals wished they were dead whereas active suicidal ideation is usually measured by seriously considering suicide (Van Orden et al., 2013, 2014). Although passive suicidal ideation tends to be considered more frequently among older adults (Van Orden et al., 2013, 2014), research suggests that adults with death ideation had a similar level of risk for attempting suicide as those who solely reported suicidal ideation (Baca-Garcia et al., 2011b). Further, individuals with both death ideation and suicidal ideation had the greatest odds for attempting suicide (Baca-Garcia et al., 2011b). Therefore, examining suicidal ideation at various levels of severity may provide additional information about suicidal behaviors among LGBQ individuals.

Individuals negotiating multiple marginalized identities (e.g., sexual orientation, racial/ethnic identity, and religious affiliation) may have different risk and protective factors for suicidal ideation in comparison to those who identify primarily with one salient marginalized identity. The Cultural Model of Suicide provides a framework to examine how intersecting identities relate to suicidal ideation (Chu et al., 2010). This model suggests that the cultural sanctions, idioms of distress, minority stress, and social discord individuals experience may vary by culture and level of integration (Chu et al., 2010), and these factors may be particularly salient among college populations, since college is often the first opportunity for emerging adults to explore their intersecting identities. For example, choosing identities on college applications, deciding how to identify on campus, and individuating from their families may help students begin negotiating multiple identities (Peña-Talamantes, 2013; Stewart, 2008). Further, college may be the first experience individuals have with engaging diverse groups of people, which may broaden their thinking about intersecting identities.

Among college students, research suggests that although racial/ethnic minorities report higher prevalence of single-incident suicidal ideation (i.e., endorsed suicidal thoughts once on an annual assessment), there were no differences in persistent suicidal ideation (i.e., endorsed suicidal ideation on more than one annual assessment) based on racial/ethnic identity (Wilcox et al., 2010). Moreover, while higher levels of internalized heterosexism and internalized racism are associated with lower self-esteem and higher levels of psychological distress among racial/ethnic minority LGB individuals (Szymanski and Gupta, 2009), in general, evidence does not support the supposition that racial/ethnic minority LGB individuals have greater prevalence of mental health disorders compared to non-Hispanic white LGB persons (Cochran et al., 2007; Dube and Savin-Williams, 1999; Hayes et al., 2011; Meyer et al., 2008; Mustanski et al., 2010; O'Donnell et al., 2011). Despite similar prevalence of mental disorders, evidence suggests that racial/ethnic minority LGB individuals have a greater prevalence of attempting suicide in comparison to their non-Hispanic white LGB peers (Mustanski et al., 2010; O'Donnell et al., 2011), and same-sex attraction among Black and Latino students has been associated with suicidal ideation (O'Donnell et al., 2004). This issue is further complicated since college students of color may be less likely than their non-Hispanic white peers to self-disclose their suicidal ideation to mental health providers, unless directly asked about their suicidality (Morrison and Downey, 2000).

In addition to racial/ethnic identity, religious identity has been associated with suicidal ideation through religious sanctions related

to suicidal behavior (e.g., low acceptability of suicide) (Boyd and Chung, 2012; Neeleman et al., 1997). Although the integration of a LGB sexual orientation and religious affiliation is often assumed to be a negative experience, some LGB individuals may negotiate their religious affiliation with their sexual orientation by self-identifying as spiritual or affiliating with an affirming religious organization (Buchanan et al., 2001; Lease et al., 2005; Sherry et al., 2010). Participation in LGB-affirming religious organizations has been associated with lower levels of internalized homonegativity and higher levels of psychological health and spirituality (Barnes and Meyer, 2012; Lease et al., 2005). While involvement with non-affirming religious organizations was linked to internalized homonegativity, it was not directly associated with negative mental health outcomes (Barnes and Meyer, 2012). Among LGB individuals, Christians tend to report greater prevalence of conflict between the intersection of their religious affiliation and sexual orientation than Jewish, Atheist, and Agnostic LGB individuals (Schuck and Liddle, 2001). However, in a predominantly Christian sample, LGB individuals with a religious affiliation reported lower odds of attempting suicide compared to LGB persons without a religious affiliation (Kralovec et al., 2012).

Overall, little is known about how intersecting identities, such as racial/ethnic identity or religious affiliation, of LGBQ individuals are associated with active or passive suicidal ideation, especially among college students. Research has started to examine the relationship of racial/ethnic identity and suicidal ideation among LGBQ individuals; however, the sample sizes tend to be small (Meyer et al., 2008; O'Donnell et al., 2011; Remafedi, 2002), and research is scant about how religious affiliation is linked to suicidal ideation among LGBQ individuals. Our aim was to explore how LGBQ individuals across racial/ethnic identities and religious affiliations differed from their non-LGBQ peers in terms of suicidal ideation and whether or not the degree of ideation varies. Moreover, we examined within-group differences of suicidal ideation among LGBQ individuals. Based on previous research we hypothesized: (1) in comparison to non-LGBQ individuals, LGBQ individuals would have higher prevalence of suicidal ideation (both passive and active), (2) in comparison to non-Hispanic white LGBQ students, LGBQ individuals of color would have higher prevalence of suicidal ideation (both passive and active), and (3) in comparison to Christian LGBQ individuals, LGBQ individuals with other or no religious affiliations would have higher prevalence of suicidal ideation (both passive and active).

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Sample and procedures

Data are from the 2006 National Research Consortium of Counseling Centers in Higher Education. This dataset is a stratified random sample of students from 70 U.S. institutions of higher education with comparable samples to other national college surveys (Drum et al., 2009). Compared to national demographics, the data includes a similar number of students from public and private institutions as well as individuals from four diverse geographic locations (Drum et al., 2009). Surveys were administered via a web-based questionnaire to undergraduate and graduate students with response rates of 24% and 25%, respectively. A total of 26,451 students completed the survey in the spring of 2006; however, after excluding international students, our analytic sample included 24,626 individuals. Additional information about the sample and methodology has been published previously (Drum et al., 2009).

### 2.2. Dependent variables

The Research Consortium survey included items measuring various levels of severity in suicidal ideation (Drum et al., 2009;

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