



# Understanding the educational attainment of sexual minority women and men



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## ABSTRACT

National studies have not analyzed sexual identity disparities in high school completion, college enrollment, or college completion in the United States. Using Add Health data, we document the relationship between adult sexual orientation and each of these outcomes. Many sexual minority respondents experienced disadvantages in adolescent academic achievement, school experiences, and social environments. This translates into educational attainment in complex, gendered ways. We find that the socially privileged completely heterosexual identity predicts higher educational attainment for women, while for men it is often a liability. Mostly heterosexual and gay identities are educationally beneficial for men but not women. There are college completion disparities between gay and mostly heterosexual women and their completely heterosexual counterparts. Bisexual respondents, especially women, have particularly problematic outcomes. Adolescent experiences, attitudes, and social contexts explain some of these differences. From adolescence through college, sexual minority groups, but especially females, need intervention to reduce substantial educational disparities.

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## 1. Introduction

Educational attainment is an important and dynamic social phenomenon. Strongly linked to later success in terms of income, occupational status, wealth, health, and life satisfaction, it is arguably more important now than in the past because of increasing income inequalities and the need for highly skilled workers (Mirowsky & Ross, 1998; Ross & Wu, 1995). Major sociodemographic dividing lines pattern educational outcomes. Socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic disparities in educational attainment follow expected patterns, with higher-socioeconomic-status (Breen & Jonsson, 2005) and White (Everett, Rogers, Hummer, & Krueger, 2011) adults reporting more years

of education. Gender patterns are in flux, with men's traditional educational attainment advantage having disappeared fairly recently, replaced by an advantage for women up through at least a college degree (Everett et al., 2011). In contrast, the economic returns to education vary by gender, with men experiencing higher incomes than women at a given level of educational attainment (Blau & Kahn, 2007). But perhaps surprisingly, we know little about the educational implications of another important sociodemographic dividing line: sexual orientation.

In this study, we help address this gap, examining several educational attainment outcomes across sexual minority identity groups using the nationally representative National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health). Past research on sexual orientation and educational attainment is quite limited, and Russell (2005) has argued that we need more research on the influence of sexual minority status on "educational milestones"

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among young people. We compare educational attainment outcomes across completely heterosexual, mostly heterosexual, bisexual, and gay respondents as self-identified in early adulthood (ages 24–32). To understand drivers of educational attainment disparities, we also examine a variety of individual, family, school, and neighborhood factors that shape young people's schooling experiences. This responds to Russell's (2005) call for more attention to factors at multiple contextual levels that predict risk and resilience among sexual minorities. New U.S. studies have examined some educational attainment disparities by sexual attraction and same-sex sexual contact (Ueno, Roach, & Peña-Talamantes, 2013; Walsemann, Lindley, Gentile, & Welihindha, 2014; Watson & Russell, 2014), but no study has analyzed sexual orientation/identity disparities.

## 2. Background

In the larger literature on educational attainment, we know more about the attainment of educational milestones than about the fine-grained, in-school processes that may contribute to that attainment. Interestingly, in the small literature on sexual minority status and educational attainment, the opposite is often true. Comparatively much is known about the experiences, such as bullying and school climate problems, of sexual minority adolescents and college students in their educational settings and other social settings during secondary and postsecondary schooling (e.g., Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Carpenter, 2009; Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009; Rankin, 2005; Rivers, 2001; Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001). But there has been less research on educational attainment comparing sexual minorities to others. Much of what we know about the educational attainment of U.S. sexual minorities comes from population-based samples of adults (Barrett, Pollack, & Tilden, 2002; Black, Gates, Sanders, & Taylor, 2000; Carpenter, 2005), which combine a wide variety of cohorts and sometimes define sexual minorities and their comparison groups in limited ways detailed below.

### 2.1. Educational attainment in adulthood

Analyses of educational attainment have yielded decidedly mixed findings about the size and direction of differences between sexual minorities and others. Black and colleagues' (2000) analyses of 1990 U.S. Census data found that women and men in same-sex cohabiting couples were more likely to have finished college than people of the same gender who were married to an opposite-sex spouse. The authors found that these differences were not due to parents' education levels, which were similarly distributed across groups. Unpartnered sexual minority individuals, people in same-sex relationships who were not cohabiting, and sexual minorities in opposite-sex relationships were not included. Black and colleagues (2000) also analyzed the 1992 General Social Survey, which identified sexual minorities by the gender of the people a respondent has had sex with, finding a similar pattern of results when comparing sexual minority respondents to married people of the

same gender. Their measure of sexual minority status did not capture bisexuality.

A later study focused on only one state but included bisexual populations. In a large representative survey of Californian adults aged 18–64 in 2001, Carpenter (2005) found educational advantages for gay and for unmarried (but not married) bisexual men compared to others. Results for women were fairly similar, with lesbian-identified women experiencing educational advantages in terms of both high school dropout and college completion and unmarried bisexual women having a higher proportion of Bachelor's degrees or more compared to heterosexual women. Carpenter (2005) also found that estimates of the relationship between sexual minority status and earnings often varied substantially by time period, suggesting that results from older cohorts may not apply to younger ones.

Carpenter (2008) investigated a representative sample of Australian women aged 18–23 in 1996. He found that lesbian women's prevalence of high school dropout and college completion was not significantly different from that of heterosexual women, but bisexual women were significantly overrepresented among high school dropouts compared to heterosexual women (there was no significant difference in college completion). In sum, U.S. data incorporating older cohorts suggest that some sexual minorities have more education than their heterosexual counterparts, though Australian data from a younger cohort find the opposite for some groups of women.

Three new studies of U.S. educational attainment analyzed the Add Health cohorts (grades 7–12 in 1994–1995). Two used sexual attraction to measure sexual minority status. Watson and Russell (2014) focused on differences among same-sex-attracted respondents, finding that those who were more engaged in middle or high school ended up with more years of education. Walsemann and colleagues (2014) found that depending on life course timing, some same-sex-attracted women and men experienced educational attainment disparities compared to their consistently opposite-sex-attracted counterparts. Ueno and colleagues (2013) focused instead on same-sex sexual contact. They identified educational disparities compared to same-sex others for women who had same-sex contact, but advantages for men who had same-sex contact in young adulthood but not the teen years. Together, these studies paint a complex picture of the educational outcomes of sexual minorities, finding that they depend on the definition and timing of same-sex experiences or attraction. This picture is less rosy than the one painted by the studies of older cohorts, which more often identified educational advantages for sexual minorities. Previous studies have not examined educational attainment by sexual orientation or identity, an important basis of sexual minority status.

### 2.2. Potential explanations for educational attainment disparities

Why might at least some groups of sexual minorities have higher levels of educational attainment? Hewitt (1995) and Barrett et al. (2002) suggest some possible explanations. Sexual minorities might choose to continue their education for longer than heterosexual people: "(1)

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