

# Findings and Recommendations

## *Health and Service-related Experiences in Lesbian, Gay, and Bi-sexual US Service Members and Veterans*



### ***Millennium Cohort Study Overview***

Millennium Cohort Study is a longitudinal study of military personnel sponsored by the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs. The objective of the study is to understand the impact of military service on long-term health of service members and veterans.<sup>1</sup> Participants are enrolled during their military service and complete surveys every 3 to 5 years, both during and after their service. The first panel of service members was enrolled in 2001, with additional panels enrolled in 2004, 2007, 2011, and 2020. There are currently over 260,000 MCS participants from all service branches and components, making it the largest and longest ongoing cohort study of U.S. military personnel.

### ***Summary of Recent Research***

Limited research has examined the military and health experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) US service members and veterans across all service branches and components. In 2014-2016, the Millennium Cohort Study included survey questions on sexual orientation, and 3.6% of participants who responded to that survey identified as LGB. We recently published 2 studies that suggest that LGB service members and veterans are disproportionately affected by adverse military- and separation-specific experiences and health outcomes.

- ◆ The first study, published in BMC Public Health, found that LGB service members and veterans were more likely to report lower military satisfaction and unit support compared with their heterosexual peers. LGB veterans were also less likely to fulfil their term of service or retire, and more likely to have non-routine separations for reasons such as disability, medical reasons, or perceived incompatibility with the military.<sup>2</sup>
- ◆ The second study, published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, focused on health outcomes in LGB service members and veterans. LGB service members and veterans reported poorer mental health, (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder), physical health, (e.g., somatic symptoms), and behavioural health, (e.g., smoking and problem drinking), than heterosexual peers. These disparities were most notable among gay or lesbian women and bisexual individuals.<sup>3</sup>

*"The inclusive design of the Millennium Cohort Study allows active service members and veterans to confidentially and openly indicate their sexual orientation and a variety of occupational and health outcomes that they may have experienced. These studies are among the first of their kind to shed light on issues that could be addressed through policies and programs aimed at greater inclusivity and cultural competence within the military environment to support the health, readiness, and retention of LGB service members."*

Dr. Felicia Carey, lead author for both studies

## Key Points

- ◆ 3.6% of participants self-identified as LGB (2014-2016 survey). Compared with heterosexual service members and veterans, LGB service members and veterans:
  - ◆ Reported lower military satisfaction and unit support
  - ◆ Were more likely to separate from service for non-routine reasons
  - ◆ Reported poorer mental, physical, and behavioural health
- ◆ Findings highlight need for improved equity initiatives that promote cultural responsiveness, acceptance, and approaches to support the healthcare needs of LGB military members

## Implications and Recommendations

Our recent research suggests that LGB individuals may be more vulnerable to attrition before service term fulfilment, an issue that could be addressed by increasing inclusion in the military environment. Policies that focus on creating a supportive culture and ensuring equal opportunity for advancement among military personnel could promote retention of qualified, well-trained service members, leading to better unit readiness and a reduction in costs associated with recruiting and training new service members. This research also suggests that LGB service members experience health disparities, despite many having equal eligibility for and access to health care, highlighting the need for improved equity initiatives that promote cultural responsiveness, acceptance, and approaches to support the healthcare needs of LGB military members. Study findings suggest it may be useful for military leaders, veteran service organizations, and policy makers to address systemic social and health inequities among LGB military personnel and veterans by proactively promoting inclusivity and cultural competence in the military.

## References

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Millennium Cohort Study  
Protecting Service Member and Veteran Health



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