

LGBTQ Service Members: Wellness and Retention

Kati McNamara, PhD, LCSW

Maj, U.S. Air Force



Outline

- Define terms
- LGBTQ service:
 - History
 - By the numbers
 - Health disparities
 - “Outness”
 - Retention
- Research findings expressed as LGBTQ service member needs
- Resources
- References
- Discussion



What are
sexual
orientation
and gender
identity?

We all have a sexuality

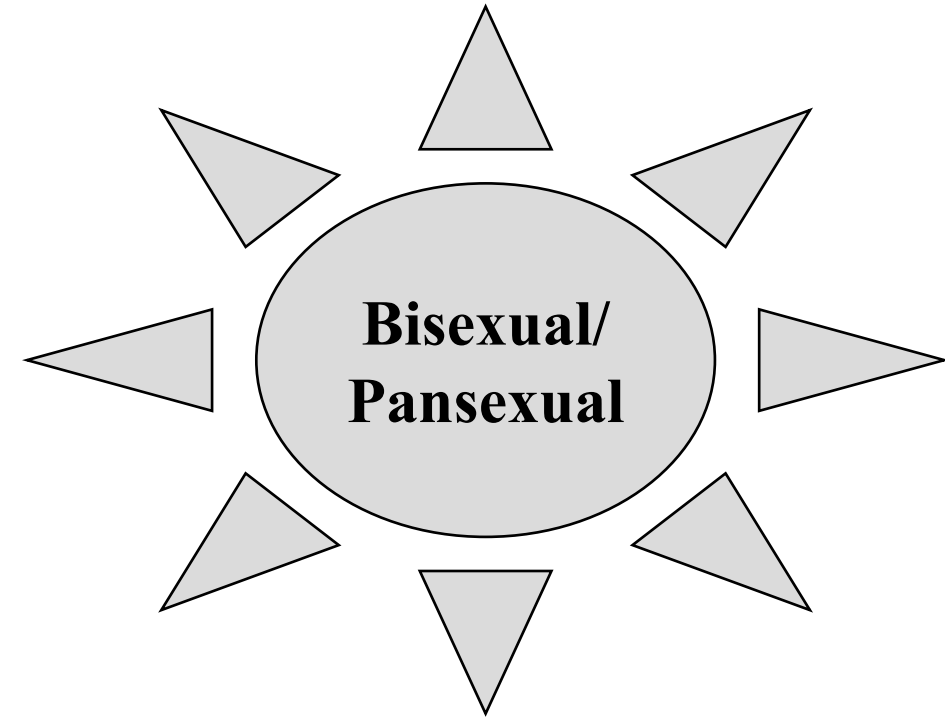
We all have a gender
identity

Some are less common
than others

Getting on the same page

Gender vs. Sex

Cisgender

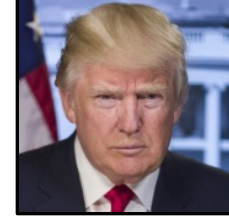


**Heterosexual,
Gay, or
Lesbian
(Monosexual)**

**Transgender/
Affirming one's
gender/Aligning
one's gender**



Policies impacting LGBTQ service members



1942

1982

1993

2011

2015

2016

2017

2021



First policy
banning
homosexuality
in US military

First
directive
banning
homosexuals
in US
military

DADT
signed
into law

DADT
repealed

Marriage
bans un-
constitutional

Ban on
transgender
service
members
repealed

Ban on
transgender
service members
re-instated

Transgender
service
members
permitted to
serve openly



By the numbers

- $\geq 72,000$ LGBTQ U.S. service members
- ≥ 1 million living LGBTQ U.S. veterans
- $\approx 14\%$ of servicewomen are lesbian or bisexual
- $\approx 3\%$ of servicemen are gay or bisexual
- $< 1\%$ of service members are transgender or non-binary
 - $\approx 4,000$ currently in all branches and components



Health Disparities Among Service Members by SOGI

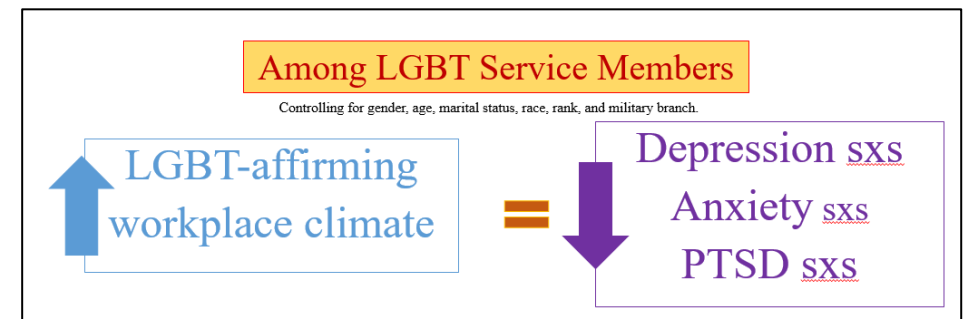
- Lesbian and bisexual women are at higher risk of misusing substances
- Gay and bisexual servicemen are at higher risk for suicidality
- Bisexuals are at higher risk for anxiety, depression, PTSD, and life dissatisfaction than lesbians/gays
- Transgender service members have greater odds of anxiety, depression, PTSD, and suicidality than their cisgender peers, including cisgender LGB service members

Victimization is significantly more common for LGBTQ service members:

Sexual harassment: 81% LGB, 84% transgender, 56% non-LGBTQ

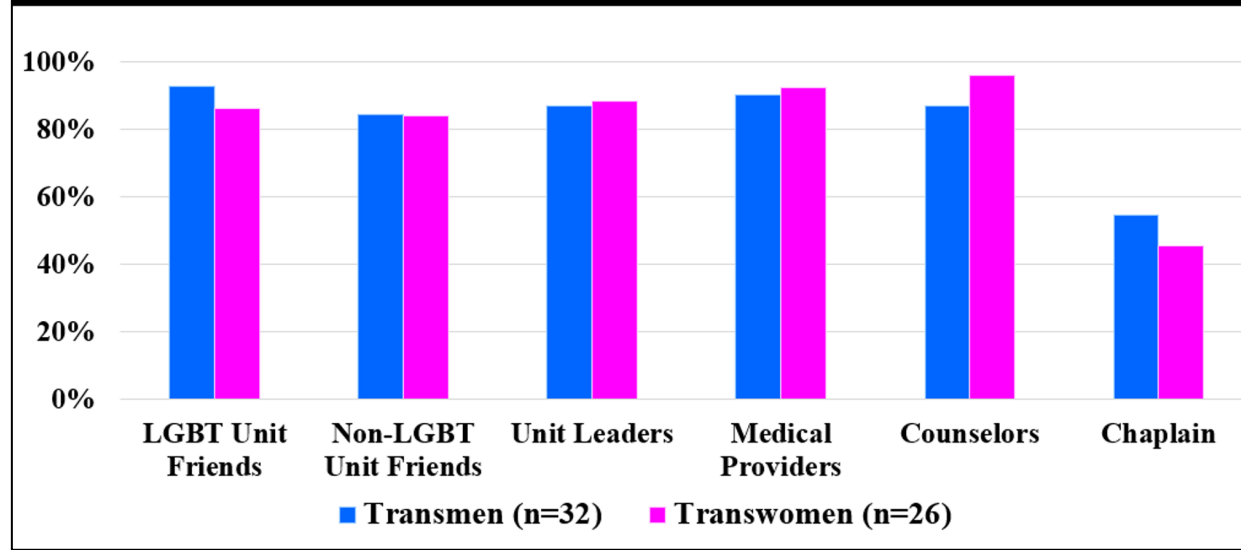
Stalking: 39% LGB, 30% transgender, 24% non-LGBTQ

Sexual Assault: 26% LGB, 31% transgender, 14% non-LGBTQ

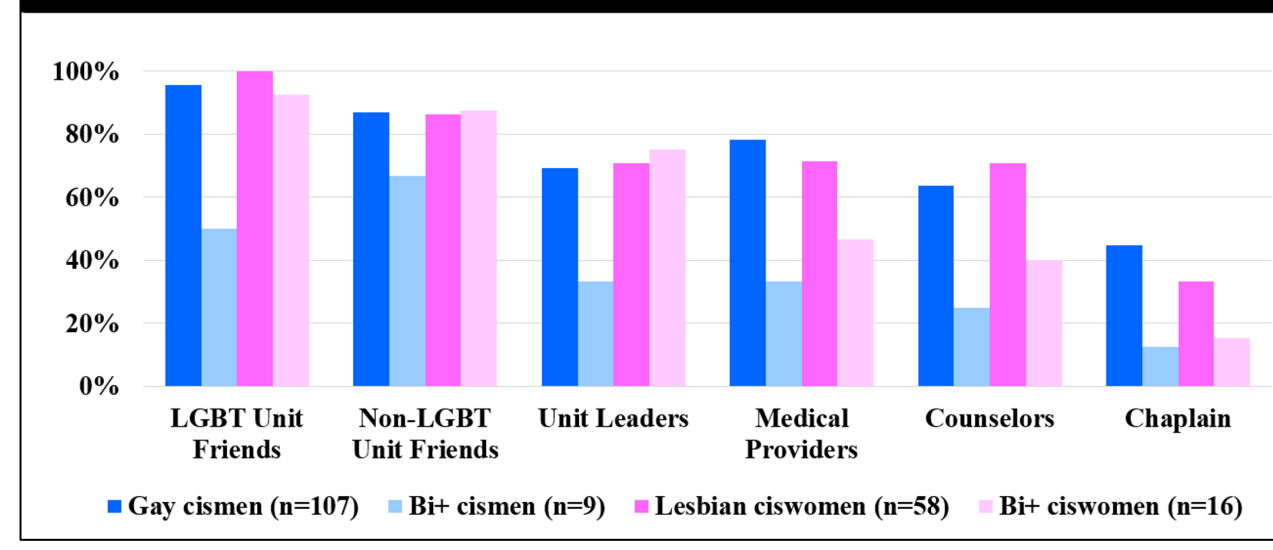


OUTNESS

Outness among transgender service members



Outness among cisgender LGB service members





YOU DON'T WANT TO BE A CANDIDATE FOR PUNISHMENT: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF LGBT SERVICE MEMBER "OUTNESS". MCNAMARA, K. A., LUCAS, C. L., GOLDBACH, J. T., HOLLOWAY, I. W., & CASTRO, C. A. (2020). *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*

ABSTRACT



BACKGROUND:

Policies regarding lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) military service members in the U.S. have changed dramatically over the last nine years. Limited empirical evidence exists to assess the well-being of the estimated 74,000 LGBT service members who have served during these changes.

AIMS:

This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the "coming out" experiences of LGBT service members following repeal of LGBT bans.

METHODS:

In-depth interviews were conducted with 37 active duty LGBT military members in the Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marines stationed on American military bases worldwide in 2016.

RESULTS:

FEAR OF LINGERING ANTI-LGBT BIAS IN MILITARY

19%



19% of participants expressed general distrust and fear of misalignment between military culture, policy, and personal opinions also manifested as fear of negative career repercussions (e.g., loss of career broadening opportunities; separation from the military).

SEEKING CUES OF POTENTIAL ACCEPTANCE OR REJECTION

49%



Half of participants (49%) noted interpersonal-level factors guiding their disclosure decision-making. These participants stated that they gauge for cues (flags) from coworkers to determine whether disclosing to that individual will be safe.

PERSONAL MOTIVATION TO DISCLOSURE

70%



A majority (70%) of participants noted individual-level factors in their LGBT disclosure decision-making in the military workplace. These participants noted concern over the burdens associated with "coming out" as a minority in some way and questioning the relevance of coming out as LGBT at work as barriers to disclosure.

50%



Thematic analysis of these data found that half of participants feared that the military environment, at both the institutional and interpersonal level, is not yet LGBT inclusive. However, most participants employed outness in the military as a means of presenting their authentic identity to others and paving the way for other LGBT service members to be "out."

CONCLUSION:

While repeal of LGBT bans provide a sense of institutional protection and improvement in quality of life among LGBT service members, barriers to disclosure remain. As the "first generation" serving after repeals, this population weighs perceived risks and benefits to disclosure as they determine what it looks like to be an openly LGBT military member.



Notable quotations

I can tell you right now that it has a long way to go. I think they [fellow clinicians] have learned how to be supportive of same-sex couples, at least politically speaking and officially. However, individually, I think the clinicians have a lot of sensitivity training to go through.

(Gay male, Air Force, P2)

Even if the policy changes, the culture remains the same. The law of the land might be one thing, but if the minds and hearts of the people that you serve shoulder to shoulder with every day, if that doesn't change, then you still feel the impact of being treated differently.

(Lesbian, Army, P42)

In the military there's this idea that you do not want to stand out at all, like you want to blend in with the walls. You want to seem like everyone else. You want to be like interchangeable with other people. You do not want to stand out because you do not want to be a candidate for punishment.

(Bisexual, male, Air Force, P21).



Retention: Military Career Plans by SOGI

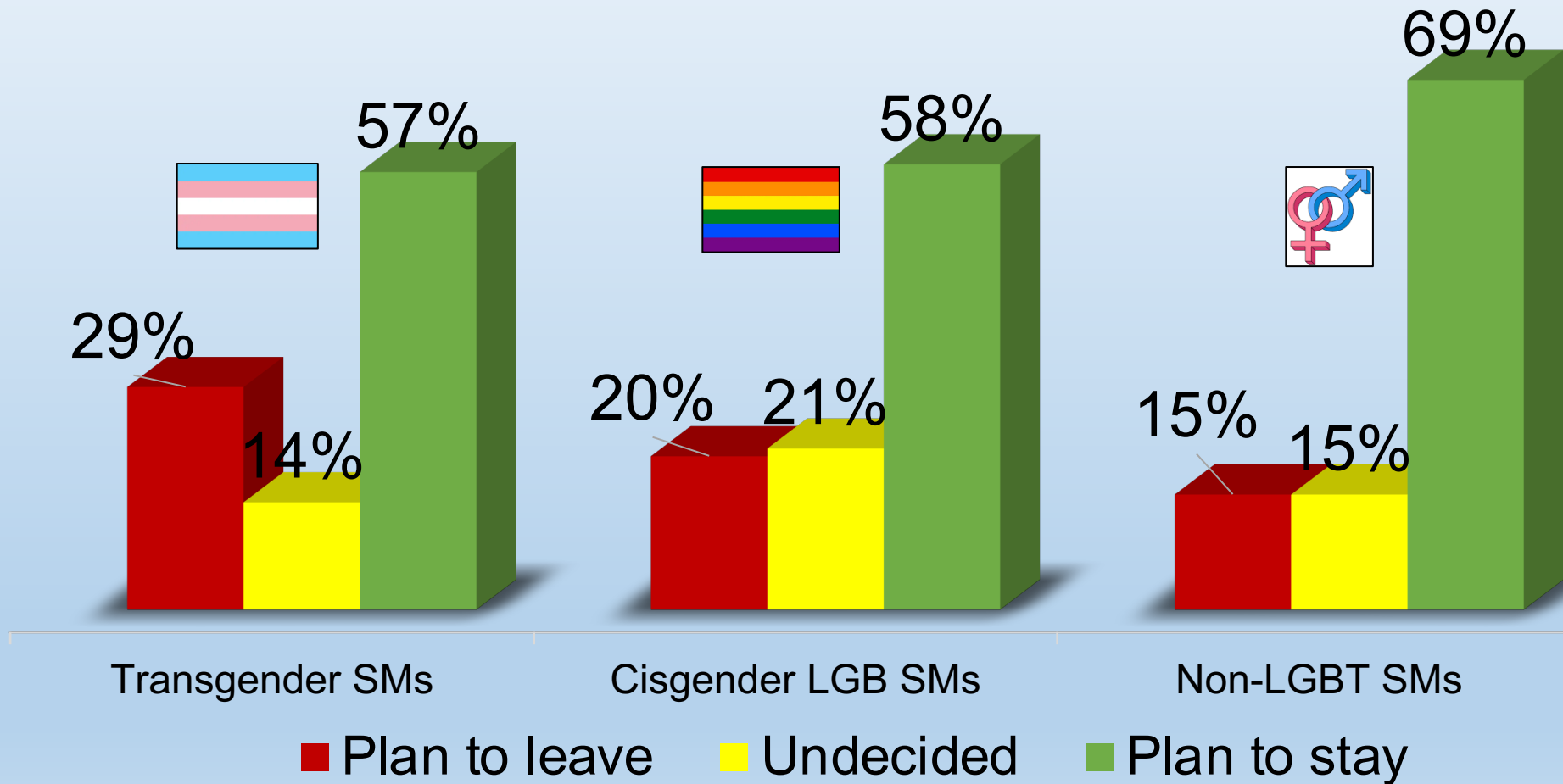


Table 5 Adjusted odds ratios of service separation experiences among veterans by sexual orientation (N= 56,645)

From: [Military service experiences and reasons for service separation among lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals in a large military cohort](#)

Outcome Variable	Sexual Orientation (Ref: Heterosexual)	
	Gay or Lesbian	Bisexual
	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)
Specific reasons for separation (Ref: no endorsement) ^a		
Dissatisfaction with deployments/frequent moves	0.91 (0.80, 1.05)	1.07 (0.94, 1.23)
Hardship for family	0.76 (0.66, 0.87)	1.01 (0.88, 1.15)
Dissatisfaction with job	1.03 (0.90, 1.17)	1.20 (1.05, 1.36)
Desire to continue education, start new career, change in personal goals	0.90 (0.79, 1.03)	0.97 (0.84, 1.11)
Difficulty meeting fitness/weight standards	1.09 (0.95, 1.26)	1.26 (1.09, 1.45)
Legal problems, problems meeting military obligation	1.09 (0.79, 1.50)	1.58 (1.21, 2.06)
Fulfilled term of service/retirement eligible	0.78 (0.68, 0.89)	0.88 (0.77, 1.01)

Note. No significant effect modification by sex was observed for these models. All models are adjusted for sex, birth year, race/ethnicity, marital status, education level, service branch, pay grade, military occupation, length of service, deployment experience, and panel. Bolded values are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$)

CI confidence interval, OR odds ratio

^aORs represent the odds of any endorsement of each specific reason for separation versus no endorsement

Summary of findings expressed as needs (not direct quotes)

“I’m transgender. Call me by the right pronoun, name, and Sir/Ma’am title. Make it easy for me to change my gender marker and name in all DoD systems, including the electronic medical record. Teach healthcare providers about transgender health and ensure I have access to needed medical and behavioral health care without my gender presentation threatening my military service.”

“I’m part of the LGBTQ community and want to engage with the religious services on base. I’d like the military to ensure that I’m welcome to attend religious functions on base and marriage retreats run by the chapel. Educate religious personnel about my history of religious discrimination and my need for inclusive religious services.”

“I date/am married to someone of the same sex. I need military healthcare providers to be educated on interventions such as PrEP, assistive reproductive technologies, and asking about sexual health in a way that’s respectful. Ensure I can receive competent care from entities that address sexual harassment and intimate partner violence.”

“I’m part of the LGBTQ community. I need my Commanders, medical and religious providers, and co-workers to have an explicitly open and accepting stance toward me and my family. ”

Resources

- Modern Military Association of America: <https://modernmilitary.org/>
- SPARTA: A Transgender Military Advocacy Organization: <https://spartapride.org/>
- Forged in Fire: LGBTQ+ Leadership [podcast, many military guests]
- Fenway Institute www.fenwayhealth.org
- World Professional Association for Transgender Health www.wpath.org
- GLMA: Health Professionals Advancing LGBT Equality www.glma.org



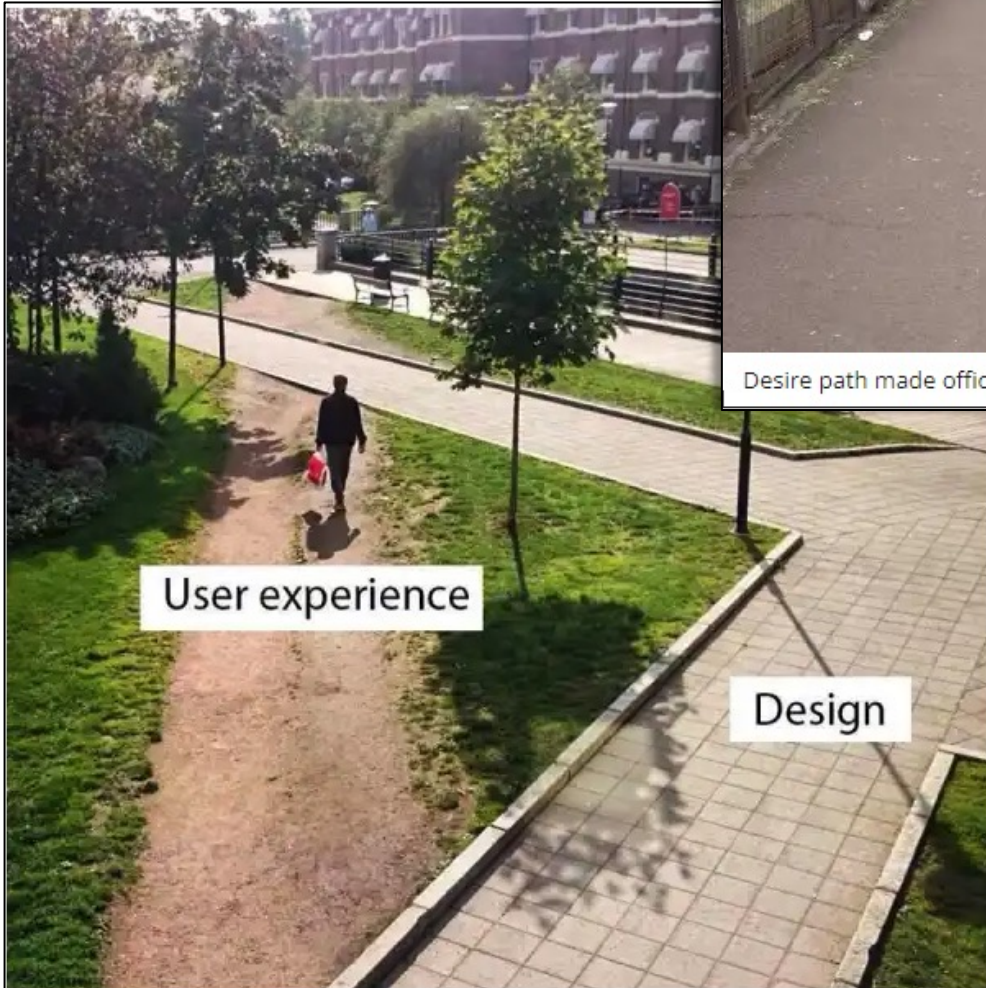
References

- Beltran, R. A., Schuyler, A. C., Blair, C. S., Goldbach, J. T., Castro, C. A., & Holloway, I. W. (2021). "That's kind of like the big struggle right now is can we get PrEP?": Facilitators and barriers to PrEP uptake among active duty gay and bisexual males. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*.
- Blair, C. S., Dunlap, S., Tzen, M., Castro, C. A., Goldbach, J. T., & Holloway, I. W. (2020). Mental Health, Sexual Orientation, and Perceived Social Network Support in Relation to Hazardous Alcohol Consumption Among Active Duty Military Men. *American Journal of Men's Health*.
- Biddix, J. M., Fogel, C. I., & Perry Black, B. (2013). Comfort levels of active duty gay/bisexual male service members in the military healthcare system. *Mil Med*, 178(12), 1335–1340. <https://doi.org/10.7205/MILMED-D-13-00044>
- Carey, F.R., Jacobson, I.G., Lehavot, K. et al. Military service experiences and reasons for service separation among lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals in a large military cohort. *BMC Public Health* 22, 39 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-12420-1>
- Dunlap, S. L., Holloway, I. W., Pickering, C. E., Tzen, M., Goldbach, J. T., & Castro, C. A. (2020). Support for Transgender Military Service from Active Duty United States Military Personnel. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*.
- Davis, L., Grifka, A., Williams, K., & Coffey, M. (2016). 2016 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members. Retrieved from https://sapr.mil/public/docs/reports/FY17_Annual/FY16_Annual_Report_on_Sexual_Assault_in_the_Military_Full_Report_Part2_4.pdf
- Green, D. C., Holloway, I. W., Pickering, C. E., Tan, D., Tzen, M., Goldbach, J. T., & Castro, C. A. (2020). Group Perceptions of Acceptance of Racial/Ethnic, Sexual and Gender Minorities in the United States Military. *Military Behavioral Health*.
- Holloway, I. W., Green, D., Pickering, C., Wu, Elizabeth, Tzen, Michael, Goldbach, J. T., & Castro, C. A. (2021). Mental Health and Health Risk Behaviors of Active Duty Sexual Minority and Transgender Service Members in the United States Military. *LGBT Health*.
- Klemmer, C. L., Schuyler, A. C., Mamey, M. R., Schragger, S. M., Castro, C. A., Goldbach, J. T., & Holloway, I. W. (2020). Health and Service-related Impact of Sexual and Stalking Victimization During United States Military Service on LGBT Service Members. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*.
- Mark, K., McNamara, K., Gribble, R., Rhead, R., Sharp, M., Stevelink, S., ... Fear, N. (2019). The health and well-being of LGBTQ serving and ex-serving personnel: a narrative review. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 31(1), 75–94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540261.2019.1575190>
- McNamara, K., A. Lucas, C., Goldbach, J., Kintzle, S., & Castro, C. (2019). Mental health of the bisexual Veteran. *Military Psychology*, 31(2), 91–99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08995605.2018.1541393>
- McNamara, M., & Ng, H. (2016). Best practices in LGBT care: A guide for primary care physicians. *Cleveland Clinic Journal of Medicine*, 83(7), 531–541. <https://doi.org/10.3949/ccjm.83a.15148>
- McNamara, K. A., Lucas, C. L., Goldbach, J. T., Holloway, I. W., & Castro, C. A. (2020). "Even if the policy changes, the culture remains the same:" A mixed methods analysis of LGBT service members' outness patterns after repeal of LGBT bans. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*.
- McNamara, K. A., Lucas, C. L., Goldbach, J. T., Holloway, I. W., & Castro, C. A. (2020). "You don't want to be a candidate for punishment": A qualitative analysis of LGBT service member 'outness.' *Armed Forces and Society*.
- McNamara, K. A., Goldbach, J. T., Holloway, I. W., & Castro, C. A. (in press). Building a culture of inclusion in the modern military: Acceptance and "outness" post-LGBT bans. In Matherly, C. & Holmes, T. B. (Eds.), *Diversity and Inclusion in the DAF: A Handbook promoting One Team One Fight*.
- McNamara, K. A., Shipherd, J. C., Adirim, T. (2023). Mental Health of LGBT Service Members and Veterans. In C. H. Warner & C. A. Castro (Eds.), *Veteran and Military Mental Health: A Clinical Manual* (pp. 359-373). Springer. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-031-18009-5_20
- Meadows, S. O., Engel, C. C., Collins, R. L., Beckman, R., Cefalu, M., Hawes-Dawson, J., ... Williams, K. M. (2015). 2015 Department of Defense Health Related Behaviors Survey (HRBS). Retrieved from https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1695.html
- Potter, E. C. & Patterson, C. J. (2019). *LGBT Health*, 6(7). <http://doi.org/10.1089/lgbt.2019.0013>
- Rerucha, C. M., Runser, L. A., Ee, J. S., & Hersey, E. G. (2018). Military healthcare providers' knowledge and comfort regarding the medical care of active duty lesbian, gay, and bisexual patients. *LGBT Health*, 5(1), 86–90. <https://doi.org/10.1089/lgbt.2016.0210>
- Schuyler, A. C., Klemmer, C. L., Mamey, M. R., Schragger, S. M., Goldbach, J. T., Holloway, I. W., & Castro, C. A. (2020). Experiences of Sexual Harassment, Stalking, and Sexual Assault During Military Service Among LGBT and Non-LGBT Service Members. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*.
- Sullivan, K. S., Dodge, J., McNamara, K., Gribble, R., Keeling, M., Taylor-Beirne, S., Kale, C., Goldbach, J., Fear, N. T., & Castro, C. A. (2021). Perceptions of family acceptance into the military community among US LGBT service members: An exploratory mixed methods study. *Journal of Military, Veteran, and Family Health*.
- Van Gilder, B. J. (2017). Coping with Sexual Identity Stigma in the U.S. Military: An Examination of Identity Management Practices Prior to and After the Repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell". *Identity*, 17(3), 156–175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2017.1340162>

Desire paths: illicit or helpful information?



Desire path made official in Plaistow, London by [turnipstealer](#)



Desire paths as a metaphor for user experience and design by [Natalia Klishina](#)

Discussion

Contact:
Maj Kathleen McNamara, USAF
Nellis AFB, NV
Kathleen.a.mcnamara10.mil@health.mil