Closing the Gap
The Health Disparities of
Older LGBTI People in
the Americas
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Acknowledgments

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The purpose of the series is to provide continuous updates on the different areas of action of the Decade of Healthy Aging (2021-2030) in the Region, as well as on other related aspects.

The collaboration of the experts from PAHO, the United Nations, the Inter-American System, and the academic world who participated in the initiative and formulated essential feedback and recommendations for the project to see the light is appreciated.
Abbreviations and acronyms

LGBTI  lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex
LTCF  long-term care facilities
OAS  Organization of American States
OHCHR  Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
STI  sexually transmitted infection
USA  United States of America
Introduction

As a result of societal stigma, discrimination, and denial of their civil and human rights, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) (1) people face a number of health disparities in many countries of the Americas. Older LGBTI people may face discrimination and multiple forms of oppression as a result of how societies respond to their sexual orientations and gender identities. This discrimination often intersects with other identities and realities, which have their own accompanying biases, such as health, ability, socioeconomic status, and race. Due to the historical devaluation of their identities, as well as ageism, they have been rendered invisible in research, policy, and practice. In this report, evidence will be presented to support these claims.

These disparities among older LGBTI individuals have been associated with a lifetime of humiliation, discrimination, violence, victimization, and increased poverty rates. These specific populations also experience an absence of LGBTI-inclusive and culturally competent health practitioners, as well as low rates of health insurance coverage, where applicable (2). As societies age, it is critical to address the specific disparities that older LGBTI people face and devise solutions for closing the gap in accessing health care and social services. Enhancing the health care of LGBTI persons benefits their general well-being, lowers the need for care, can reduce costs, increases longevity as well as quality of life, and reduces the spread of disease (3).

The purpose of this report is to look at the intersections of being older LGBTI people and their health care disparities and to highlight aspects of health care systems that need to be improved in terms of access to care for LGBTI older adults. The information in this report is based on current research and consultation with members of community organizations at the local and national levels in the following countries and territories of the Americas: Argentina, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Canada, Costa Rica, Mexico, Peru, Puerto Rico, and the United States of America. Data for this report were gathered from a variety of groups and organizations that serve older LGBTI people, as well as research articles and publications from the aforementioned countries.

The selection of countries was made based on the availability of data on older LGBTI populations, although data for some of the countries mentioned in this report were not fully available. Gaps in research and population health data have made estimating the proportion of LGBTI older adults in the Americas difficult (4). In Canada, for example, it is estimated that at least 400 000 older adults belong to LGBTI communities (5). In the USA, the percentage of older LGBTI people in
society decreases with age: 2.6% for people aged 50 to 64 years, and 1.9% for those aged 65 years and older.

Existing studies on LGBTI older people provide invaluable information on the lived experiences of these communities and demonstrate that they face unique challenges in aging that their heterosexual, cisgender peers do not. As a result of this gap, very few studies on older people and aging include a focus on sexual orientation or gender identity. It can be deduced that those who live to be 80 years old and over are this cohort’s surviving pioneers; however, little is known of their experiences and quality of life (6, 7).

Due to the intersecting gaps and discriminatory realities mentioned above, which have rendered them invisible, it is possible to assume that the abuse and mistreatment of older LGBTI adults remain one of the least recognized forms of violence in the world. They frequently have to “remain in the closet” (concealing their sexual orientation and/or gender identity). They have high rates of anxiety and depression, are denied access to care, and are excluded from their own communities (8). Furthermore, they are subjected to assault, poverty, homelessness, neglect, and the debilitating effects of social isolation. They ultimately die younger than their heterosexual contemporaries. According to an Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) press release, the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have highlighted and amplified the suffering of older LGBTI individuals (9).

We live in a heteronormative and cis-normative world, which complicates even more the situation of LGBTI older people, who face unique challenges when it comes to accessing health care and social services. However, it is important to note that the recognition of the rights and freedoms of LGBTI older people in the Americas has improved in recent decades. For example, the Organization of American States (OAS) established the Inter-American Convention for the Protection of the Human Rights of Older Persons. Its mission is to promote, protect, and ensure the recognition, full enjoyment, and exercise of all human rights and fundamental freedoms of older adults under equal conditions, in order to contribute to their full inclusion, integration, and participation in society. In Article 5 of the Convention, “Equality and non-discrimination based on age,” and Article 9, “Right to security and a life free from violence of any kind,” both mention and advocate for the inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity as protected grounds. Only eight out of the 35 countries of the Americas signed the Convention (as of November 2021) (10).
Despite the great diversity of systems and approaches to social and health services that can be found in the Americas, it can be seen that in some countries there is more sensitive medical and social coverage for LGBTI older adults. In Bolivia (Plurinational State of), it was reported that less than 30% of interviewees had access to regular health care (11). In some countries, being an older person provides them with protection, but they must conceal their sexual orientation to avoid discrimination. According to an investigation conducted in Argentina (based on focus groups that were carried out with 10 older gay men and 10 older lesbians), the subjects had to hide their sexual orientation when seeking or receiving health care services. This necessity was a protective factor against stress associated with the fear of becoming visible (in the context of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity) and consequent rejection (12).

An AARP publication indicates that 78% of LGBTI older people distrust health care systems. Additionally, older LGBTI people who have faced discrimination in the past are often hesitant to disclose their sexual orientation to health care providers; therefore, they must “return to the closet” to obtain the services they need (13).

Older LGBTI individuals in the USA may be less inclined to go to the doctor or seek help because they fear prejudice or have experienced discrimination. Health care practitioners and other professionals who work with older adults lack specialized cultural competency training when it comes to interacting with LGBTI older adults. This has a detrimental effect on efforts to create safer and more inclusive environments for older LGBTI individuals. In SAGE USA’s poll, 40% of LGBTI older respondents in their sixties and seventies said their health care practitioner was unaware of their sexual orientation. In the same poll, Hispanic LGBTI older respondents were the most concerned that if they were open about their sexual orientation, their quality of health care would suffer (34% of Hispanic respondents, compared to 23% of African American and 16% of White respondents) (14).

A survey from the Argentine Federation of Municipalities on older LGBTI people in their communities found that 100% of professionals providing services to older people did not receive information on cultural competency in the area of diversity and gender identity. Sixty-seven percent of respondents are aware of older LGBTI people in their communities but are unaware of their health care access needs and living arrangements (15).
As well as the discrimination and prejudice noted above, LGBTI older adults also face a similar fate when it involves the workplace, when looking for housing, or when accessing social support such as long-term care (16).

The specifics of HIV/AIDS

HIV/AIDS is one of the most significant health disparities confronting LGBTI older persons. For example, one-quarter of the 1.1 million Americans living with HIV are aged over 50 years. The HIV pandemic has had a significant impact, although there are no HIV prevalence data for older LGBTI people at national or international levels (17).

According to Mano Diversa, a Bolivian LGBTI diversity organization, it is estimated that there are 89,000 older adults who have diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. According to this group’s data, six out of ten people report that they have had some symptoms of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and one in every three people know they have HIV; furthermore, seven out of ten people report that they do not have health insurance, where applicable (18).

In the USA, the HIV epidemic has had a profound impact on the LGBTI population and continues to have a long-term physical, emotional, and psychological impact on the older generation (19, 20). While no US data on HIV prevalence for older LGBTI adults are available related to that country (21), researchers discovered that 9% of a surveyed, non-probability sampling of US-based LGBT older adults had HIV (22).

To conclude, older LGBTI people have higher rates of HIV infection than non-LGBTI older adults. Due to HIV/AIDS infection, they also have deteriorating physical and mental health, and in some cases disabilities, a higher likelihood of experiencing stressors, as well as barriers to care (23).

Older transgender people and health disparities

Trans women usually do not live to an old age. This tragedy is a result of the violence they constantly face in their lives, which puts them at risk of serious physical and mental health problems (24). In this regard, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights estimated transgender people’s life expectancy to be 30 to 35 years (25). Between 2008 and 2017, 78% of the 2,609 documented murders of trans and gender diverse people worldwide occurred in Latin America and the Caribbean (26).
Although more research is needed in the area of aging, health, and longevity among transgender people, everything appears to indicate that public health inequalities exist, particularly in the areas of mental health, sexual health, and access to health care (27). Data are lacking on trans aging; thus, one can only provide information about younger adult trans people. It is anticipated that older trans people will have similar or worse experiences as their younger counterparts. In primary health care in Canada, for example, nearly 38% of trans people felt that their health care practitioners lacked knowledge about how to provide care based on their self-perceived gender identities, which translated into delaying or not seeking medical attention (28). In a similar vein, less than 10% of medical students in Canada feel prepared to serve trans patients.

Transgender people in Mexico reported high rates of discrimination from family, friends, and neighbors (30%), as well as violence (24%), sexual harassment (34%), and threats/insults (50%). More than 58% reported suicidal ideation and more than 55% attempted suicide (29). In countries where there is no legislation protecting trans people, they must access services using the gender that appears on their identification, exposing themselves to humiliation and mistreatment. Additionally, older transgender persons may also encounter a refusal to place themselves in the section of a long-term care facility that corresponds to their gender identity, or may encounter a refusal to accept a trans person’s pronoun or wardrobe preferences (28).

Other health care issues and impediments

Increased substance use: alcohol and (other) drug usage

According to studies, LGBTI older adults are more likely than non-LGBTI older adults to engage in health-harming behaviors such as smoking, binge drinking, and risky sexual activity (30).

More than one-fifth of LGBTI people in Canada use substances to cope with traumatic events in their lives, and two-thirds of LGBTI people report regularly consuming more than five alcoholic beverages in two hours; in addition, sexual orientation has been linked to a nearly five-fold increase in the risk of fatal drug overdose (28).

Social isolation and the lack of support networks

One of the main concerns of LGBTI older people is social isolation and loneliness. In the USA, loneliness and social isolation can have a
detrimental effect on one’s health. According to a United States study of older LGBTI persons, 59% report a lack of companionship, 53% report feeling disconnected from others, and 53% report feeling left out (21).

Social isolation has a negative impact on older LGBTI people, which raises concerns about premature mortality—many have no partner or family connections to help them and are at a higher risk of negative physical effects, as well as mental health consequences, such as depression. LGBTI people are less likely to be in intimate relationships in comparison to cisgender heterosexuals. They then must seek help from LGBTI aging organizations, community support, and individuals whom they can rely on (3). For example, in an Argentine survey, only 20% of older LGBTI adults maintain contact with their relatives (31); in Canada, this cohort of LGBTI people feel isolated in over 50% of cases (32). Many LGBTI elders lack the support networks on which other older adults rely on during times of crisis. According to a report from Costa Rica, a survey found that 20 out of 45 of these LGBTI people lacked family support, expressed concern about their future aging as a result of discrimination, and concluded that there was a lack of awareness of the existence and needs of the older LGBTI people (11).

In Bolivia (Plurinational State of), 60% of older LGBTI people reported being evicted from their homes at some point by their traditional families, and over 40% reported ongoing discrimination by their families of origin because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (11). In Mexico, LGTBI older adults live largely alone and have few or no family or community support networks (33).

Loneliness has been linked to health, social, and personal issues. Some examples are substance use (including alcohol); antisocial behavior; impaired decision-making ability; various mental health problems, such as anxiety, stress, and depression; various physical health problems such as weight gain or loss; poor nutrition; cardiovascular diseases and strokes; increased cognitive impairment and dementia; memory loss and impaired learning ability; as well as suicide (22).

Simultaneously, LGBTI older adults have created and continue to construct vibrant interpersonal connections and important social relationships. In terms of care, many LGBTI older individuals have developed “chosen families” (versus “given families”—those in which they are born or raised). These newer familial models also provide much needed care and support during the aging process.
Increased poverty levels and its effect on health

Older LGBTI people often live in poverty and lack financial security. These facts imply that this cohort is less healthy due to a lack of access to quality health care, regardless of whether the criterion is the frequency of acute or chronic diseases, mental health, or premature mortality (11). Same-sex couples also have a higher poverty rate compared to heterosexual, married couples. Older lesbian couples, in particular, are 10%–20% less likely than different-sex couples to have retirement income or interest and dividend income and are much more likely to receive public assistance (3).

According to a Gallup survey conducted in 2014, approximately 3.4% of Mexican adults are LGBTI, representing nearly 9 million people, 1 million of whom are older adults, and 433,000 of whom are impoverished (34). In the USA, almost half of bisexual men (47%) and women (48%) and half of transgender older adults (48%) live at or below the federal poverty level, as do nearly one-third of older LGBTI people (35).

Due to the increased poverty rates, LGBTI older adults are also more likely to rely on government assistance. In a nationally representative survey conducted by the Center for American Progress, 22.7% of older LGBTI respondents reported receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits for themselves or their families. They also make use of housing assistance (6.3%) (35).

Long-term care facilities (LTCF)

LGBTI older people who lack traditional support systems rely on LTCF or other institutions that provide care. In Canada and the USA between 18% and 33% of persons over the age of 85 live in group-housing facilities such as retirement homes, assisted living facilities, and nursing homes. However, there is a scarcity of data on the perspectives and experiences of LGBTI older persons in these contexts (36).

LGBTI older adults living in LTCF and assisted-living facilities may also face institutional neglect and abuse, as well as prejudice and violence from other residents, patients, and staff. In Costa Rica, more than one in four workers with older people (26%) consider homosexuality to be a mental illness, and 35% report that their centers would not accept an older LGBTI person (37).
Conclusion and next steps

This report has looked at how LGBTI ageing intersects with access to health care in some countries in the Americas. The available data have been examined, which revealed the existing gaps that LGBTI older people face. According to the tenets of the Decade of Healthy Ageing 2020–2030 campaign, the authors use the phrase, “We are living longer lives, but are we healthier?” (38). This quote confirms our own conclusion that through the findings of this report on the health disparities of older LGBTI people, what must be done to ensure that this cohort ages in a healthy manner? It is important and necessary to prioritize discussions, dialogues, and actions in regard to LGBTI aging in the Americas.

To be successful in addressing the health disparities mentioned in this report, it is necessary to take several steps such as conducting research across the Americas, focusing on LGBTI aging and health. To make the disparities of older LGBTI people visible, it will be necessary to have official statistics data, including information about intersections between age, sexual orientation, gender identity, and health. Furthermore, we must translate and transform the collected data into better actions, policies, programs, and services through a collaboration between governments, civil society, philanthropic organizations, international agencies, the media, and the private sector—across the Americas—to invest in LGBTI older adults and improve their access to equal and equitable health care. Providing training and practices for professionals who work with older LGBTI persons—the medical professionals, government, and others—on how to create safer and welcoming settings for older LGBTI people, wherever they are. Additionally, it is vital to explore how to address reparation for this long-suffering population, incorporating their voices as a strategy for eradicating their invisibility while also participating in creating practices and public awareness campaigns that promote respect, visibility, and well-being. By following the above recommendations, the goal of closing the gaps in health care for older LGBTI people can be reached.
References


Closing the Gap: The Health Disparities of Older LGBTI People in the Americas is part of the publication series titled ‘The Decade of Healthy Aging in the Americas: Situation and Challenges’. In order to outline the current knowledge available on the situation of health and well-being of older persons in the Americas at the beginning of the United Nations Decade of Healthy Aging (2021—2030), this document presents data and existing evidence on different forms of discrimination and mistreatment that older people face due to their sexual orientation and gender identities, which ultimately increase health disparities.

Previous studies on LGBTI older people offer valuable information on the lived experiences of these communities and demonstrate that they face unique challenges with aging, emphasizing the difficulties related to access to care. Very few studies on older people and aging include a focus on sexual orientation or gender identity; however, it is possible to point out that HIV/AIDS is one of the most significant health disparities confronting LGBTI older persons, followed by physical and mental health problems, substance use, social isolation, poverty, and the lack of access to quality health care, including long-term care facilities or other institutions. Closing the gap in access and quality of health and care services is an imperative to increase longevity, health status, and quality of life of LGBTI older people.