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2010-06-08: Study correlates sexual orientation and health disparities

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Study correlates sexual orientation and health disparities



Conron will now work to identify what is causing the health disparities. *Photo by Mary Knox Merrill.*

June 8, 2010

A recent study conducted by Northeastern University's **Institute on Urban Health Research** found a significant number of health disparities in Massachusetts between heterosexual adults and gay, lesbian and bisexual adults.

Led by **Kerith Conron**, associate research scientist at Northeastern, in collaboration with researchers at Harvard Medical School and a private health-care consultant, the study revealed that gay men are about 33 percent less likely to be obese than heterosexual men, and lesbian women about 50 percent more

likely to be obese than heterosexual women. It also identified bisexual adults, particularly women, as disproportionately burdened by poor health.

In all, significant disparities between sexual minorities and their heterosexual counterparts were observed in 16 of the 22 mental and physical health indicators examined in the study.

The study is one of the first to focus on the relationship of sexual orientation to a range of health conditions in a population-based sample, said Conron. The results were reported in the **American Journal of Public Health.**

Among the other findings:

- Gay men and women were more likely to be current smokers compared to their heterosexual counterparts.
- Lesbian women and bisexuals were more likely to report having multiple risk factors for heart disease.
- Sexual minorities as a whole were more likely to report experiencing some form of sexual assault during their lifetime.

"What is very clear from this data is that risk factors for chronic health problems are prevalent among sexual minorities and need to be added to our list of concerns," said Conron. "In the short run, clinicians and public health agencies need to collaborate and implement culturally appropriate health interventions."

The study was made possible by the Massachusetts Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System survey, which asks respondents about their sexual orientation in addition to other demographic characteristics. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health is responsible for monitoring public health through this and similar surveys.

Researchers pooled and analyzed self-report data from more than 67,000 Massachusetts residents between the ages of 18 and 64 who responded to the annual survey between 2001 and 2008.

By identifying the social factors contributing to sexual orientation health disparities, future research can help reduce their incidence over the long term, added Conron.

Conron is also affiliated with Harvard School of Public Health. The primary collaborators included Matthew J. Mimiaga, of Harvard Medical School, Massachusetts General Hospital and the Fenway Research Institute; and Stewart J. Landers, of John Snow Inc., a public health research and consulting firm.

The Institute on Urban Health Research (IUHR) is devoted to knowledge discovery and its practical application to improve personal and public health within urban communities. The IUHR is particularly focused on understanding the social and environmental conditions of urban living in order to inform public health intervention strategies, policies and professional training.

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