



# Research Update

## Attitudes towards Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People in Northern Ireland

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The **Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT)** Survey has explored issues of levels of prejudice and tolerance and people's attitudes to other sections of the community over a number of years. Although there have been regular reviews of the changes in patterns of racism and sectarianism within Northern Ireland, this is the first Research Update to explore attitudes towards the lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) population.

Over the past decade the LGB population in Northern Ireland has become more visible and more active with a larger number of groups and organisations, and a higher profile for annual events such as the Belfast Pride festival. There has been greater recognition of, and legislation for LGB rights, although at the same time there has also been greater awareness of the levels of discrimination and hostility that lesbian, gay and bisexual people experience in all areas of daily life (see for example Jarman and Tennant 2003; Hansson, Dupret and Fitzpatrick 2007; McNamee, Lloyd and Schubotz 2008; O'Doherty 2009). The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) figures for recorded homophobic hate incidents

and crime, for example, reveal a steep rise from the 57 incidents recorded in 2000/1 (when police records began) to 220 incidents in 2005/6 (Figure 1). And although the figures declined the following year to 155 incidents, the numbers have increased in each of the following two years.

### Perceptions of unfair treatment

Since 1998, the NILT Survey has asked a variety of questions about people's attitudes towards the LGB population and attitudes towards issues specifically affecting LGB people. However, most questions have been asked only once or twice and therefore it is difficult to identify any consistent or general changes in attitudes over time.

The one question that has been asked regularly is whether people believe any of the groups of people from a list of ten categories are treated unfairly when compared with the other groups. This question has been asked in six surveys: in 2001, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2008. In each year the categories of Travellers, Elderly, Disabled, LGB and Minority

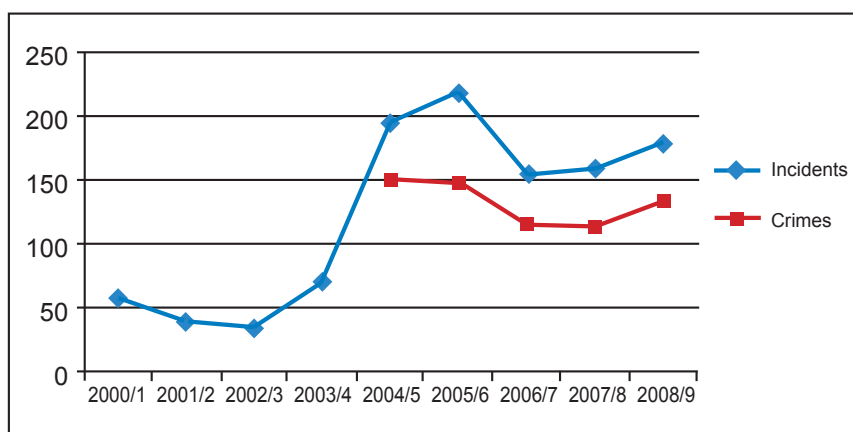


Ethnic people have been identified as most likely to be unfairly treated. Indeed, there has been an increase, across all five categories, in the percentage of people believing that these groups experience unfair treatment. In 3 of the past 4 surveys, LGB people were considered second to minority ethnic people as being more likely to be treated unfairly. At the same time, the categories of Catholics, Protestants, Women, Men and Children have generally been considered as more unfairly treated by fewer than 10 per cent of respondents.

A recent study by the Equality Commission (2009: 38) identified the same range of social categories as most likely to experience unfair treatment, with LGB people identified as the fourth most likely group to be unfairly treated (12% of respondents) after racial or ethnic groups (24%), Travellers (16%) and older people (15%). The survey also revealed that 24 per cent of respondents believed that discrimination against LGB people was more common than five years ago and, more than any group, 54 per cent of respondents to that survey believed that LGB people were especially likely to be subject to forms of harassment (Equality Commission 2009: 34-39)

The NILT surveys also reveal that women were slightly more likely to acknowledge that LGB people (and most other categories) were subject to unfair treatment than men were. Both

Figure 1: Homophobic hate incidents and crimes recorded by the PSNI 2001-2002 to 2008-2009.



Catholics and people with no religion were much more likely to acknowledge unfair treatment of LGB people than were Protestants, with a difference ranging from 9 percentage points in 2001 to 20 percentage points in 2005. The survey also revealed that older people, and particularly people over 65, were much less likely to acknowledge that LGB people suffered unfair treatment compared to other social categories.

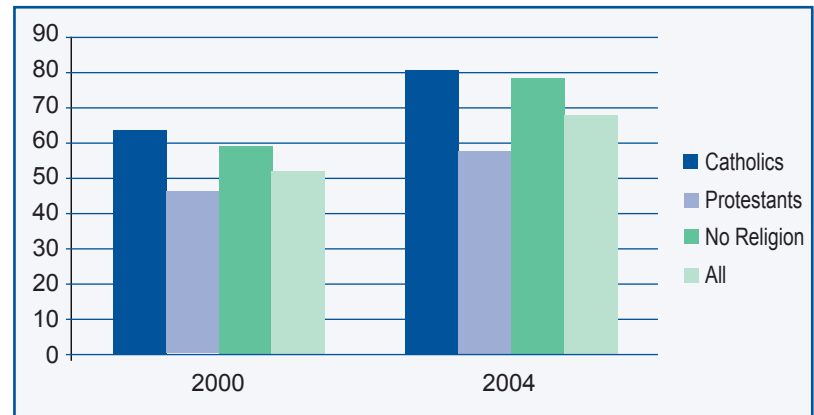
## Discrimination and rights

In 2000 and 2004, NILT asked respondents how much they agreed or disagreed that gay and bisexual people should not be discriminated against. In 2000 53 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that there should not be discrimination against gays and bisexuals, while 15 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed. In 2004, those agreeing had increased to 68 per cent while those disagreeing had declined to 11 per cent. In 2000 women were more likely to agree than men (58% compared to 46%), while in 2004, the gap had declined with 71 per cent of women against discrimination compared to 66 per cent of men. Catholics and people with no religion were more likely to be opposed to discrimination than Protestants were, as can be seen in Figure 2.

The same two surveys also asked whether people believed that a gay couple should have the same rights as a heterosexual couple. In this case in 2000 just 27 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that gay couples should have the same rights as heterosexual couples, while 39 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed that they should have the same rights. In 2004 38 per cent agreed or strongly agreed, while 33 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed. In both years, women took a more liberal position than men (in 2004, 41% of women supported equal rights compared to 36% of men). Catholics and people with no religion were more likely to support equality than Protestants, with 54 per cent of Catholics, 48 per cent of people with no religion and 27 per cent of Protestants supporting equality between gay and heterosexual couples.

In 2004 the Civil Partnership Act was passed by Parliament which gave same sex couples the same rights and responsibilities as in a civil marriage. The

Figure 2: Percentage of people agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement 'Gay and Bisexual people should not be discriminated against'.



first civil partnership ceremony carried out under the full requirements of the new legislation in the United Kingdom took place in Belfast on 19 December 2005.

In 2005, NILT respondents were asked if gay or lesbian couples should have the right to marry one another if they want to: 35 per cent of people agreed or strongly agreed, while 40 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed. Women were more likely to agree with the idea of gay marriage than men, with 42 per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing compared to 27 per cent of men. Similarly, younger people were more supportive than older people with 51 per cent of 18-24 year olds supporting the idea against 14 per cent of those aged 65 or older. Finally, 47 per cent of Catholics and 59 per cent of people with no religion supported the idea compared to 22 per cent of Protestants (Table 1).

In 2008, NILT asked people if they approved or disapproved of laws that treat same sex partnerships 'somewhat like marriage'. Twenty three per cent of respondents approved or strongly approved of such laws against 39 per cent who disapproved or strongly disapproved. As with previous questions, women were more likely to support such laws than men with 25 per cent approving or strongly approving compared to 20 per cent of men. Younger people were more supportive than older – 33 per cent of those in the 25-34 age range compared to 10 per cent of over 65s. And people with no religion were more supportive than Catholics and Protestants – 39 per cent compared to 28 per cent of Catholics and just 15 per cent of Protestants.

The 2008 NILT survey also asked about people's attitudes to same sex couples adopting children. Just 17 per cent of respondents approved or strongly approved of such adoptions, while 54 per cent disapproved or strongly disapproved. Females were slightly more in approval than males (20% compared with 13%); people aged 25-34 were most likely to approve such adoptions (31%); compared to just 7 per cent of over 65 years old; and 26 per cent of people with no religion were supportive of the idea compared to 22 per cent of Catholics and 11 per cent of Protestants.

The NILT survey has asked people about their attitudes to sexual relations between two adults of the same sex on three occasions, in 1998, 2004 and 2008. The findings reveal that in 1998 65 per cent of respondents believed that sex between people of the same sex was wrong, while the figure dropped to 53 per cent in 2004 and 52 per cent in 2008 (Figure 3).

Although the survey reveals high levels of disapproval of sex between people of the same sex, the findings do reveal some degree of softening of attitudes between 1998 and 2004. Whilst there is a similar change of views evidenced between 2004 and 2008, attitudes among Protestants become slightly more hostile to this issue over this period, thus bucking the general trend to a greater liberalisation of opinion.

The final group of questions relates to the nature of any form of personal relationship that respondents have with a gay or lesbian person, although these questions have so far only been included in the 2005 NILT Survey. The findings

**Table 1: Percentage of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with rights of lesbian and gay people.**

	% agreeing or strongly agreeing					
	All	Women	Men	Catholic	Protestant	No Religion
Same rights as heterosexual couple (2000)	27	32	22	36	21	35
Same rights as heterosexual couple (2004)	38	41	36	54	27	48
L & G should have right to marry (2005)	35	42	27	47	22	59
Approve same sex partnerships (2008)	23	25	20	28	15	39
Approve same sex adoptions (2008)	17	20	13	22	11	26

(Table 2) reveal that nearly half of respondents said that they know someone who is gay or lesbian, but only 20 per cent had a gay or lesbian friend, just 7 per cent had a gay or lesbian work colleague and only 3 per cent had a member of their family who were gay or lesbian. In line with other findings, the survey found that women are more likely to know someone who is lesbian or gay than are men, while people with no religion are similarly more likely to acknowledge having a gay or lesbian friend or acquaintance than either Catholics or Protestants.

As has been found in response to other questions, younger people were more likely to state that they know someone who is lesbian or gay (63% of 18-24 year olds compared to 19% of those aged 65 or over); and to have a lesbian or gay friend (31% of 18-24s compared to 5% of those aged 65 or over); however people in the 25-34 age group are more likely to have a gay or lesbian work colleague than other age groups (12% compared to just 4% of 18-24 years olds).

The findings suggest that there is a degree of social distance between

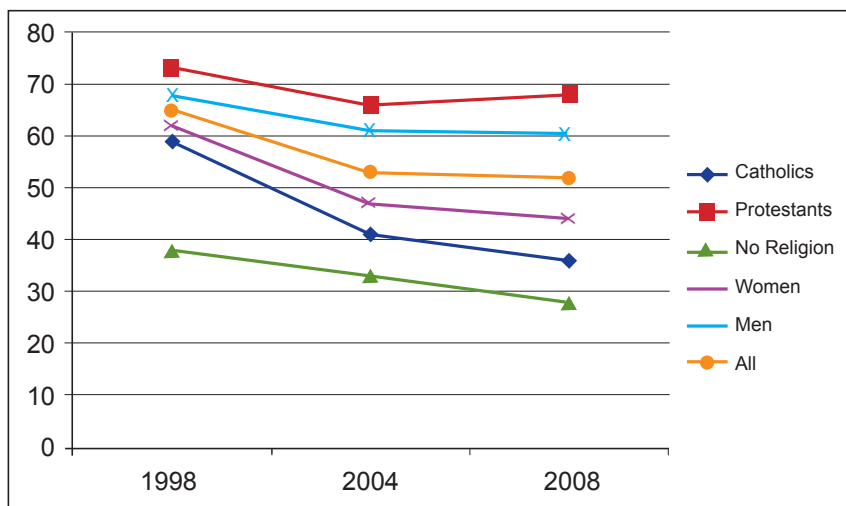
heterosexual people and LGB people, which may in turn fuel prejudicial or antithetical attitudes. This is reinforced by the findings of the 2008 Equality Awareness Survey carried out by the Equality Commission, which found that people had more negative attitudes towards LGB people than towards any other social group except Travellers, with 21% of respondents having negative attitudes towards lesbian women or gay men (Equality Commission 2009: 40). That survey also found that 23 percent of respondents would mind a little or a lot if they had an LGB person as a work colleague or a neighbour, and 35 per cent would mind a little or a lot if an LGB person were to 'marry' a close relative. In each case attitudes towards LGB people had worsened since the previous survey in 2005 (Equality Commission 2009: 46).

## Conclusions

The various questions asked in the Life and Time Surveys since 1998 reveal widespread prejudice towards gay and lesbian people in Northern Ireland. Although nearly half of respondents acknowledged that gays and lesbians were more liable to be subject to discrimination than most other social categories, a sizeable minority (15% in 2000 and 11% in 2004) did not believe that people should not discriminate against gays and lesbians. The surveys also found that a minority of respondents supported the rights of same sex couples to marry and to adopt children, while a majority thought that it was wrong for people of the same sex to have a sexual relationship. In almost all cases women had more liberal views than men, younger people were more liberal than older people, and Catholics and people with no religion were more liberal than Protestants. The Equality Commission's 2008 Equality Awareness Survey had similar findings with regards to gender and age, but did not publish findings of attitudes to LGB people based on respondents' religious background. Finally, although nearly half of all respondents knew someone who was lesbian or gay, only one in five (20%) had a gay or lesbian friend, around one in fifteen (7%) had a gay or lesbian work colleague and fewer than one in 30 (3%) had a gay or lesbian member of their family.

Nevertheless there are some positive developments that can be taken from

**Figure 3: Percentages of respondents believing that sex between adults of the same sex is always, or almost always, wrong.**



**Table 2: Percentages of respondents with different categories of personal relationship with a lesbian or gay person.**

	%					
	All	Women	Men	Catholic	Protestant	No Religion
Know LGB person	46	52	39	47	43	60
Family Member	3	4	2	4	2	4
Friend	20	24	15	20	17	31
Acquaintance	17	16	18	19	14	25
Work colleague	7	7	7	7	6	2
Other	8	9	7	9	9	2

these findings. In those cases where the same question has been asked on more than one occasion there does appear to have been some reduction in negative attitudes and an increase in positive

attitudes to LGB people over time. For example, there was an increase in the percentage of people who believed that LGB people should not be discriminated against between 2000 and 2004; that

same sex couples should have the same rights as a heterosexual couples; or that sexual relations between two adults of the same sex was not wrong at all.

## Key Points

In 2008, 33% of respondents believe that LGB people experience unfair treatment in Northern Ireland.

In 2004, 68% of respondents believed that LGB people should not be discriminated against.

But:

Just 35% of respondents to the 2005 NILT believed that same sex couples should have the right to marry.

Only 23% of respondents to the 2008 NILT supported civil partnership laws and just 17% approved of same sex adoptions.

LGB people appear to remain relatively isolated from non-LGB people as the 2005 NILT survey found that fewer than half the population claimed to know an LGB person, just one in five had an LGB friend and only one in fifteen had an LGB colleague at work.

In general women hold more liberal views towards LGB people than men; Catholics are more liberal than Protestants and younger people are more liberal than older people.

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