

PAY GAPS, PRECARIETY, AND PREJUDICE: New evidence on LGBTQ2S+ employment in Canada

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CONTEXT

While the past several decades have seen considerable progress for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, Two-Spirit, and other sexual and gender minority (LGBTQ2S+) people in Canada, members of this community continue to face persistent disadvantages. In employment, LGBTQ2S+ people face more barriers accessing jobs, earn less money, and encounter more workplace discrimination than their non-LGBTQ2S+ counterparts.¹⁻⁴ COVID-19 has only amplified these issues: LGBTQ2S+ individuals in Canada were found to be at greater risk of job loss and income insecurity during the pandemic.⁵ Ongoing data and research gaps prevent our full understanding of inequities in LGBTQ2S+ peoples' employment experiences and outcomes in Canada, including how these may differ within the community.⁶

The project *"Building the evidence base about economic, health, and social inequities faced by LGBTQ2S+ individuals in Canada"* aimed to address some of these gaps. Drawing on multiple data sources – including a literature review, interviews with experts, an analysis of 14 years of linked data from the Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) (2003, 2005, and 2007-2018)

and the T1 Family File (TIFF) (2003-2017), and interviews and focus groups with LGBTQ2S+ people across the country – it aimed to paint a more detailed picture of the current labour market and workplace realities of LGBTQ2S+ people in Canada. This brief offers a summary of some of the key findings that emerged from the project. Full project reports are available at www.srdc.org.



Quantitative analysis of linked CCHS and TIFF data



Review of 211 peer-reviewed and grey literature sources



Interviews and focus groups with 34 LGBTQ2S+ people

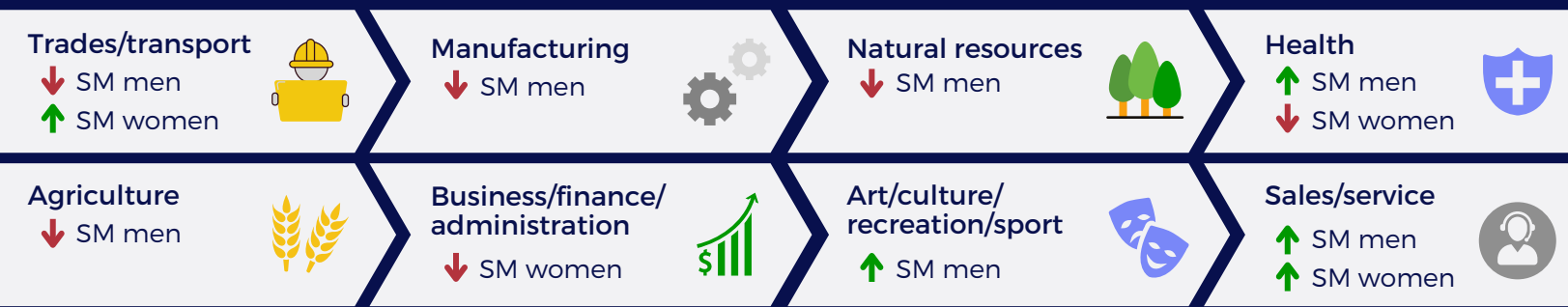


Key informant interviews with 10 experts in the field

CHOOSING A CAREER AND LANDING A JOB

While navigating career decisions can be daunting for anybody, LGBTQ2S+ people often face distinct challenges and barriers in this process. For instance, LGBTQ2S+ employees shared common perceptions of sectors or industries that were more or less safe, inclusive, and welcoming. In many cases, these perceptions informed key career choices, including avoiding certain jobs altogether.

Compared to their heterosexual counterparts, sexual minorities are more or less likely to work in:



Source: CCHS (2003, 2005, 2007-2018)

LGBTQ2S+ jobseekers are faced with the need to navigate safety throughout the application process, which often requires significant skill, time, and resources. Before applying to a role or accepting an offer, many people we spoke with had conducted extensive research on prospective employers and staff demographics, stated commitments to equity and inclusion, and organizational actions around LGBTQ2S+ rights. For some, job interviews represented a chance to assess safety by self-disclosing as LGBTQ2S+ or inquiring about company culture or policies. This type of cautious approach to job-seeking is reflected in other data: according to Trans PULSE, 17 per cent of trans Ontarians have declined a job offer due to the lack of a trans-positive workplace environment.⁷

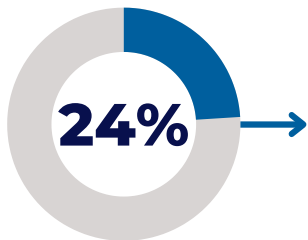
"I interviewed for a really promising job. Everything mostly went well. I didn't end up getting the job. I couldn't help but wonder whether or not my gender presentation and sexuality had a part in that... I just can't shake that feeling."

– Chinese Malaysian, disabled, gender non-conforming lesbian

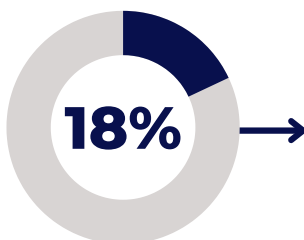
When facing financial precarity, some LGBTQ2S+ people may set aside considerations of safety and inclusion to access any job at all. Several people had navigated concealing their identity during the application process to avoid identity-based discrimination. This fear had been realized for some, who felt that past rejections from jobs for which they were highly qualified were likely due to having disclosed their identity or presenting as LGBTQ2S+ when applying.

"I pretended I wasn't trans when applying for this job...I didn't want anything to stop me from getting it...I definitely feel guilty about that, but I also feel like it's a little bit of survival mode; I literally need this job."

– Transmasculine, non-binary participant



Just under one-quarter of LGBTQ2S+ Americans report having not been hired because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.⁸



Nearly one-fifth of trans Ontarians report having been turned down for a role because they were trans.⁷



MIND THE GAP: LGBTQ2S+ EARNINGS IN CANADA

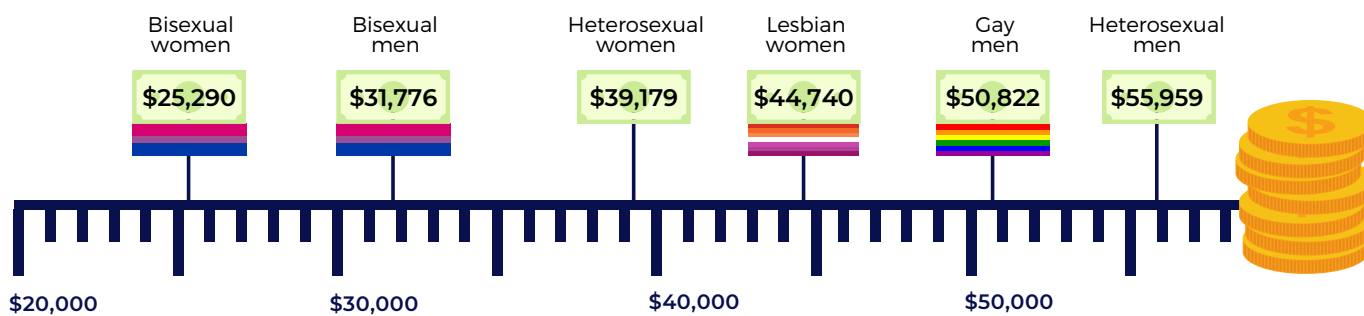
Even after finding a job, LGBTQ2S+ individuals face earnings disadvantages in the Canadian labour market.^{3-4, 9-10} Drawing on some of the highest-quality income data available across a 14-year period, our study found persistent wage gaps for lesbian, gay, and bisexual people in Canada compared to heterosexual men.

Looking at median annual earnings, we found that heterosexual men earn the most (\$55,959), followed by gay men (\$50,822), lesbian women (\$44,740), heterosexual women (\$39,179), bisexual men (\$31,776), and bisexual women (\$25,290). These gaps remained when controlling for a wide range of factors such as education, marital and parental status, occupation, and industry. In fact, gay men and lesbian women reported higher levels of education than their heterosexual counterparts, while bisexual individuals were more likely to be current

students. Compared to heterosexual men, our analysis found an earnings gap of 3 per cent for gay men, 12 per cent for lesbian women, 21 per cent for bisexual men (and heterosexual women), and 25 per cent for bisexual women.

The absence of data on certain LGBTQ2S+ identities (e.g., trans, non-binary, Two-Spirit, asexual, pansexual) within population-level surveys represents a limitation to this research. Other sources offer a more comprehensive picture; for instance, a study of 433 trans Ontarians found their median self-reported income to be \$15,000.¹¹

The lived experiences of LGBTQ2S+ employees across the country bring these numbers into even sharper focus. Many people we spoke with shared examples of being paid less than their cisgender, heterosexual colleagues who were in similar roles or who were equally qualified. Participants whose experiences were shaped by multiple forms of power or oppression – including homo/bi/transphobia, racism, sexism, ableism, xenophobia, and ageism – felt especially impacted by pay inequity.



Source: CCHS (2003, 2005, 2007-2018) and T1FF (2003-2017)

DAY-TO-DAY AT WORK

Beyond pay disparities, our findings suggest that the day-to-day workplace experiences of LGBTQ2S+ employees are often marked by exclusion, prejudice, bias, and discrimination.

Participants recounted experiences where coworkers were unwilling to work with them because of their identity. Some had been subjected to identity-based stereotypes – for instance, a gay pilot who was told by colleagues he should be a flight attendant instead, or a queer Asian man whose qualifications were regularly questioned by his superiors based on assumptions about his age. Deadnaming and misgendering by coworkers was a near-universal experience among trans participants. Several individuals, particularly sexual minority women, had received inappropriate comments or questions about their sex lives. Meanwhile, gendered washrooms and language, assumptions about partners' genders, and exclusionary human resources policies served as a constant reminder that LGBTQ2S+ identities and relationships are not considered the norm.

"Other pieces are more systemic, like parental leave policies, bereavement, where our lives are not showcased in them. Queer families are not reflected...So when you need time off, you can't get it. You are seen as problematic. This ends up in your performance reviews. In terms of parenting, many of these arrangements are not traditional: so adoption [and] surrogacy do not have proper parental leave. And if you do not identify as a woman and give birth, you may need to identify to be eligible."

— Jade Pichette (Director of Programs, Pride at Work Canada)

As a result, LGBTQ2S+ individuals we spoke with withdrew from social conversations or events at work, adjusted schedules to avoid certain colleagues, or sought to exceed performance expectations as a protective measure. While some had reported instances of discrimination to management in the past, many were skeptical of this approach.

"Every microaggression is like a mosquito bite, and eventually you get really itchy, and you get an infection, you have to take antibiotics, you have to take a few days off. I think that's exactly what happens for a lot of queer folks and racialized people: you end up dealing with the impacts of...all the mosquito bites, all the microaggressions...You're not applying for jobs when you're dealing with the mental health stress of all of that. You're not networking with people that look like the people that bully you at work. You need to take some time to yourself to recover...When you do that, that impacts your career. You're not seen as reliable. You're not seen as someone that can just do the job. You're seen as high-strung. You're seen as emotional."

— Gay, East Asian man working in the public sector



Some had even faced backlash: upon filing a complaint about a colleague's remarks, one Two-Spirit, lesbian social worker *"was told that...saying there was racism and homophobia was inappropriate, and it was insulting towards the organization."*

Perceiving few opportunities for recourse, some made the difficult decision to endure discriminatory treatment. Others made another difficult decision: leaving their jobs entirely.

Many participants also described constantly navigating disclosure at work, predicting the implications of sharing one's personal life with colleagues and adjusting their behaviour accordingly. For some, this meant concealing their LGBTQ2S+ identity altogether. Where people face additional forms of oppression based on more visible attributes (e.g., race, age, ability), concealing one's LGBTQ2S+ identity sometimes served as a protective shield against further disadvantage, harassment, or violence.



UNDERSTANDING INEQUITIES

LGBTQ2S+ individuals in the Canadian labour market face ongoing earnings disparities, exposure to microaggressions, and outright discrimination. The question remaining is, why? Our research points to several key and interrelated factors.

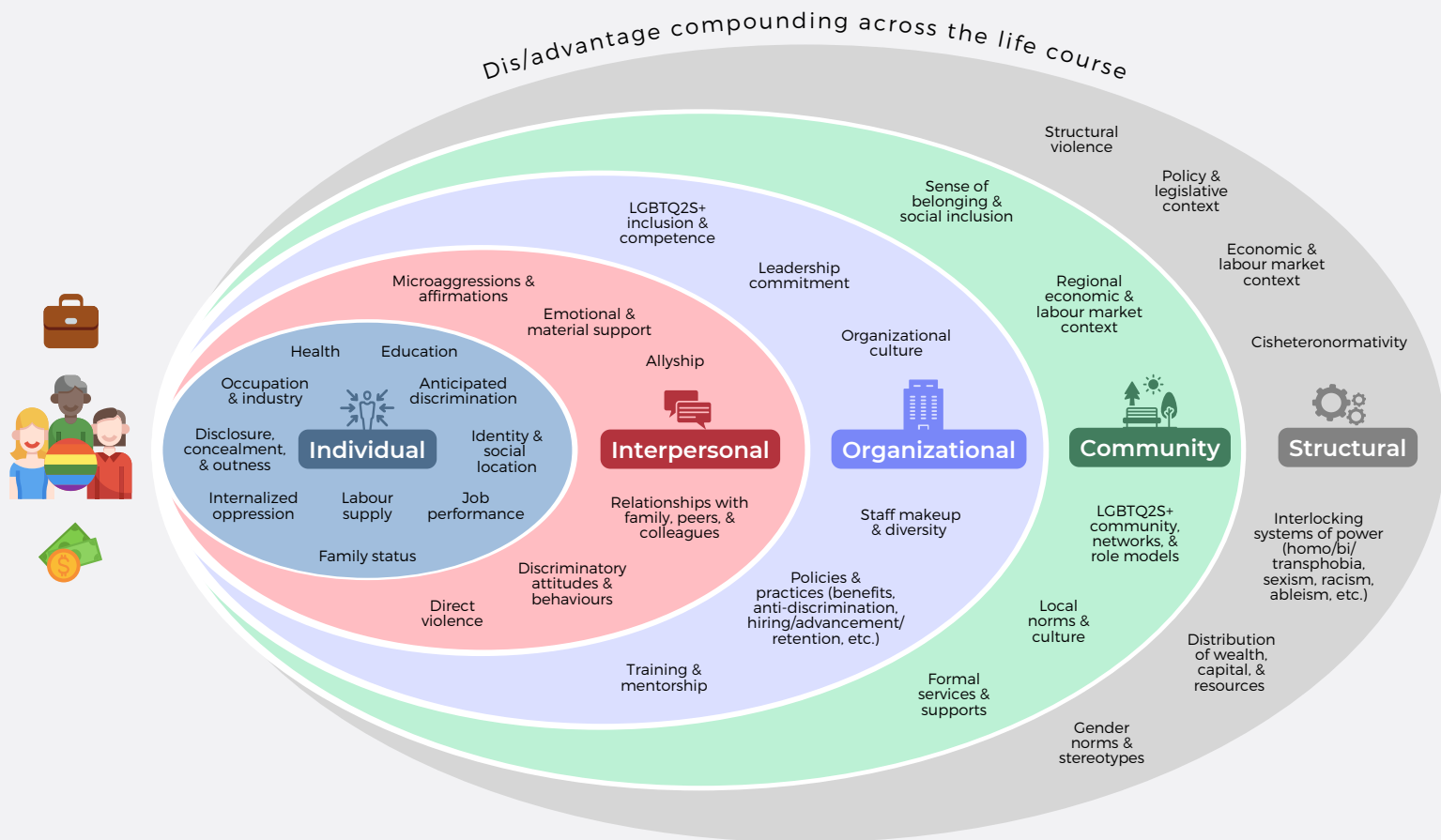
Demographics and social location

In our quantitative analysis, demographics such as age, immigrant status, race, and location served as a main driver of earnings disparities, echoing other findings.^{1-2, 6}

"Industries in Canada are geographically concentrated. If Alberta has highly paid industries like oil and gas and LGBTQ folks are leaving or not entering due to perceptions of lack of tolerance or discrimination, then LGBTQ people will be missing from these high-paying occupations."

— Dr. Sean Waite (Assistant Professor, Western University)

During our discussions with study participants, LGBTQ2S+ people characterized their employment experiences as fundamentally shaped by intersecting systems of power and oppression. In the words of a Chinese Malaysian, disabled, gender non-conforming lesbian, *"sometimes I don't know whether it's my immigration status that's the barrier, or my sexuality and gender presentation, or my disability."*



Labour supply (hours worked)

Like other research, we found that gay men and lesbian women tend to work fewer and greater hours respectively than their heterosexual counterparts; bisexual men and women work the fewest number of hours.^{3-4, 10, 12}

Dr. Greta Bauer (Professor, Western University) described a related finding of the Trans PULSE project: many trans people worked multiple part-time positions to secure a stable, adequate income.

Industry

The over- or underrepresentation of sexual minorities in certain sectors has implications for pay.^{10, 13-14} Dr. Lori Ross (Associate Professor, University of Toronto) explained: “[LGBTQ2S+ people] self-select into occupations that feel safer, which in some cases are lower-wage occupations...People

may make these choices because they are the safest or most desirable options given the context of discrimination and structural oppression.” Several people shared similar experiences in our conversations, including a white, lesbian transgender woman who changed industries during her social transition: “I’m in this position now because I feel safe, and I did accept quite a cut in pay.” Beyond earnings, the availability of fewer viable career options for LGBTQ2S+ employees can also affect job security and mobility.

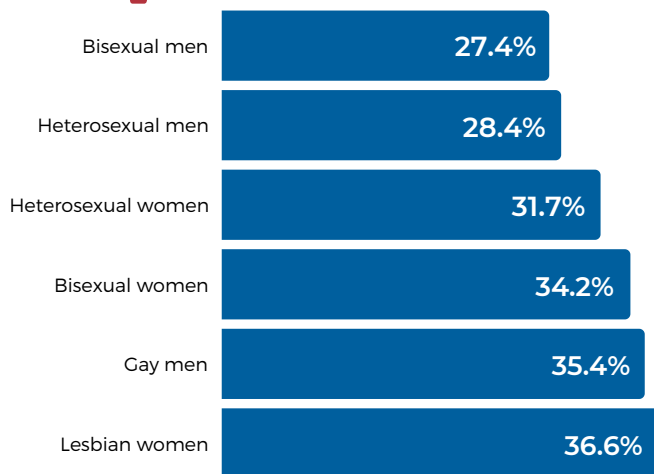
Mental health

Our quantitative analyses found that mental health drives gaps in employment earnings for sexual minority individuals. In discussions, participants also emphasized the ways in which LGBTQ2S+ employees’ mental health is shaped by employment: one cisgender,

bisexual woman remarked, “if your mental health is taking a toll, if you don’t feel safe, you’re almost certainly not going to be as productive.” The stress of navigating disclosure, engaging in self-censorship, and interacting with unsupportive coworkers can affect not only pay, but also workplace relationships, promotion, attendance, performance and job satisfaction.¹⁵⁻¹⁷



% describing work as "quite a bit" or "extremely" stressful



Source: CCHS (2003, 2005, 2007-2018)

Prejudice, discrimination, and cisheteronormativity

Those with whom we spoke shared examples of prejudice or discrimination perpetuated by organizations, supervisors, clients, and coworkers; in turn, these affected hiring, remuneration, retention, and advancement. Furthermore, deeply ingrained assumptions, beliefs, and norms about gender and sexuality signaled to LGBTQ2S+ employees that their identities, lives, and relationships were somehow at odds with their employer. Over time, these tensions led to losses in professional networks and opportunities for training and promotion.

"My dad was not accepting of me. I was homeless, I got kicked out, couch-surfing...Going through that, you never look at life the same, whether that's [the] workplace [or otherwise]. You carry that forward, seeing that even one person will react that way. It's enough to make you think someone else will, and you don't want that experience ever again."

— Gay man working multiple jobs

Cumulative and compounding disadvantage

For many LGBTQ2S+ people, negative or discriminatory experiences with family and peers, financial institutions, or service providers can reinforce employment inequities.¹⁸⁻²¹ In addition, early experiences can have career-related consequences later on.

OVER THE RAINBOW: TOWARDS POSITIVE WORKPLACE EXPERIENCES

Despite the prevalence and severity of challenges encountered by LGBTQ2S+ people in employment, we also heard accounts of inclusive, positive, and affirming experiences.

Coworkers have a major role to play in fostering this type of environment. We heard

about the importance of open-minded and respectful coworkers. At the leadership level, committed directors and managers can advocate for individual LGBTQ2S+ employees while influencing organizational-level change. The presence of openly-LGBTQ2S+ leaders was also described as impactful: as one pansexual woman of Jamaican descent articulated, *"I want to see more queer people in leadership positions. When I see that, I know I'm in good hands."* Workplaces with more LGBTQ2S+ people on staff were perceived to foster greater safety, belonging, and mentorship for LGBTQ2S+ employees.



can also help build community and foster dialogue. However, in the absence of other concrete measures, these actions risk being performative or tokenistic.

"I know no matter what that my supervisor has my back. There's something about that security that feels not just empowering, but it's given me so much more agency...I can be very open about my sexual orientation...If someone does or says something that's discriminatory, I have no problem responding to that now, instead of feeling like I have to be quiet at risk of something happening to my position."

— Bisexual cis woman

"Are you making your logo a rainbow, or are you reinvesting into the community, into the people, into the employees?"

— Queer trans woman

Employers that embraced inclusive and progressive workplace cultures more broadly were praised by LGBTQ2S+ people we spoke with. All employees can benefit from a workplace that supports employee mental health and well-being, offers flexibility around scheduling and dress codes, and adopts an equitable and transparent approach to pay.

Inclusive workplace policies were also highlighted as key to safe and equitable workplaces, including benefits that reflect the lived experiences of LGBTQ2S+ staff and their families, respect for gender inclusion and diversity (e.g., pronoun sharing, the use of gender-neutral language), and staff education and training. Dedicated fora for conversations about LGBTQ2S+ workplace inclusion (e.g., Employee Resource Groups, Queer-Straight Alliances) and company participation in cultural events such as Pride

"Being able to bring your whole self to work, if that means you are a bisexual woman, a pansexual man, someone who is transitioning...Knowing that you don't have to leave who you are at the door can be really affirming."

— Cisgender bisexual woman

LOOKING FORWARD: ACTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

When it comes to employment, LGBTQ2S+ people in Canada continue to face disadvantage and discrimination, from gaps in earnings to day-to-day workplace interactions. Based on the findings from this project, we share the following suggested actions to support a more inclusive and equitable path forward:

Governments and policymakers can...

- Explore **policy and legislative levers** that promote system-level changes (e.g., strengthening anti-discrimination legislation and other labour market protections/standards).
- Fund **labour market interventions** fostering safe and inclusive workplace environments for LGBTQ2S+ employees, including through support for civil society actors that build organizational capacity in this realm.
- Invest in **multi-sectoral solutions** that support LGBTQ2S+ people to thrive across different life domains (e.g., education, housing, mental health).
- Continue to implement more **systematic and inclusive data collection** in population-level surveys.

- Continue to build the evidence by **supporting further research**, including research that explores LGBTQ2S+-specific experiences as well as intra-community outcomes (e.g., racialized LGBTQ2S+ people).

Employers can...

- Pursue **approaches that make their workplaces more safe, inclusive, and equitable** for LGBTQ2S+ staff (e.g., LGBTQ2S+-inclusive benefits, education and training, diverse recruitment at all levels, reporting and accountability practices).

Employees can...

- Commit to **actively practicing allyship** in support of LGBTQ2S+ colleagues. While system-level solutions are key, our findings pointed to the powerful role of individuals in creating positive day-to-day work environments.

We hope this project's findings can meaningfully support efforts to address employment and other economic, health, and social inequities faced by LGBTQ2S+ individuals in Canada.



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