

Family support in sexual minorities' mental health

Evaluation shows family support has role in improving sexual minorities' mental health when same-sex marriage introduced



The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of introducing same-sex marriage in England, Wales and Scotland (2013-14) on mental health among sexual minorities, and to investigate whether family support moderates this relationship. This analysis looked at the mental health benefits associated with marriage equality among all sexual minorities, not just those who actually got married.

A high degree of family support is associated with higher levels of mental wellbeing, so this research set out to understand how the anticipated improvement in mental health among sexual minority people over this period differs based on differing levels of reported family support.

The outcome of the analysis suggests that the mental health among sexual minorities did improve for all sexual minority groups over the period when marriage equality was introduced, but that the degree of improvement was greatest for sexual minority men who had reported good levels of family support and lowest among sexual minority men who had reported below average levels of family support. The mental health of sexual minority women showed good levels of improvement over this period, but reported levels of family support played a considerably smaller role in improving their mental health.

Why was the policy considered necessary?

Laws to allow same-sex marriage in England and Wales were passed in July 2013 and in Scotland in 2014. This change built on the UK-wide Civil Partnership Act in November 2004. Same-sex couples who were legally married reported lower levels of psychological distress and increased wellbeing compared with those in civil unions.

These findings highlight important differences between civil partnership and marriage for sexual minorities, and the unique mental health benefits of same-sex marriage above and beyond the legal rights afforded by civil partnerships. From a narrow legal perspective, there is little difference between the two, so the mental health improvements can largely be attributed to the social recognition conferred by marriage equality among friends and family, as well as the opportunities for greater social inclusion as a couple.



How was the evaluation carried out?

It would not be feasible to identify a control group who did not experience the social change associated with the marriage equality in Great Britain. This research therefore used a fixed-effects, (i.e., before and after, within each person in the sample) regression analysis to investigate the impact of legalising same-sex marriage on the mental health of all 2,172 of those over 16 from a sexual minority in the Understanding Society survey, and how the effect on mental health varied by an individual's degree of family support.

Waves 3–7 of the Understanding Society covering the years 2011–17 were used. Individual-level mental health functioning was measured using the mental component score (MCS-12) of the Short Form-12 survey. This was combined with reported levels of family support from Waves 2 and 5 using six questions including: 'understanding the way you feel', 'can you rely on them when you have a serious problem', 'can you open up to them', 'how much do they criticise you', 'do they let you down' and 'do they get on your nerves'. These were all rated on a four-point scale from 'a lot' to 'not at all' with the scores summed and averaged over the two years.

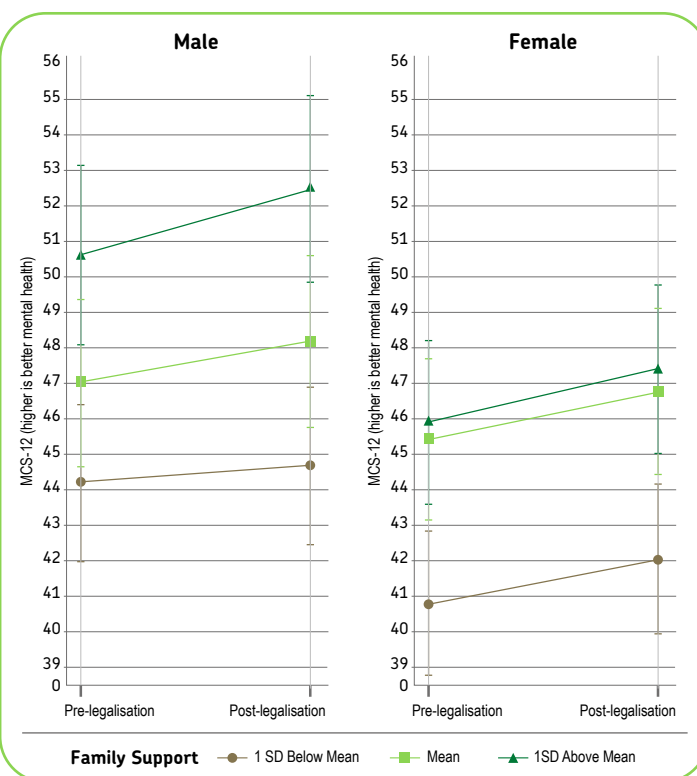
What were the strengths of using Understanding Society data?

This research has some very particular data requirements which made Understanding Society highly relevant. This research required longitudinal data to track changes in mental health in the same people over the period when the policy took effect. The research also required a particular combination of variables which cut across elements of people's lives, including their reported sexuality, their levels of family health, and their mental wellbeing. The research also took household income, friends' support, marital status, and the presence of health conditions into account. Further, all of this data needed to be a representative sample of the UK population.



Findings

The baseline MCS-12 mental health scores range from about 40 to about 50 throughout the population, with a higher score representing better mental health.



The chart shows that the effect of legalisation on mental health functioning was higher for men with higher degrees of family support (green line) compared with men with low family support (blue line). However, family support did not modify the effect of legalisation for women.

The legalisation of same-sex marriage had an independent positive effect on mental health of sexual minority individuals, with an overall MCS-12 improvement of 1.26 (1.17 for men and 1.37). This is seen as a conservative estimate as the modelling approach restricts variance observable within individuals. While this improvement may be modest at the individual level, a systemic improvement of the same amount across the entire sexual minority subpopulation would be a significant measurable outcome if legalisation of same-sex marriage were to be considered as a national public health intervention.

In terms of the impact of levels of family support on mental health, for each set increase in family support (i.e. one standard deviation), the effect of legalisation on mental health increased the MCS-12 score by 0.43. This was found to be greater for men (0.70) than for women (0.12). Therefore, the effect of legalisation on mental health functioning was higher for men with higher degrees of family support (compared to men with low family support), but family support did not greatly modify the effect of legalisation for women. This result suggests that men from sexual minorities derive more of their support from family than women from sexual minorities do, with women perhaps deriving support from a wider range of sources.



Source: Celine Teo, Nicholas Metheny, Antony Chum, *Family support modifies the effect of changes to same-sex marriage legislation on LGB mental health: evidence from a UK cohort study*, *European Journal of Public Health*, 2022: <https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckab139>