

# Preliminary results of the Coping with marriage equality debate survey

*Investigating the stress impacts associated with the Australian marriage equality debate during the lead up to the postal survey results announcement*

**Dr Saan Ecker**  
**Ebony Bennett**

## **ABOUT THE AUSTRALIA INSTITUTE**

The Australia Institute is an independent public policy think tank based in Canberra. It is funded by donations from philanthropic trusts and individuals and commissioned research. We barrack for ideas, not political parties or candidates. Since its launch in 1994, the Institute has carried out highly influential research on a broad range of economic, social and environmental issues.

The Institute publishes research that contributes to a more just, sustainable and peaceful society. Our goal is to gather, interpret and communicate evidence in order to both diagnose the problems we face and propose new solutions to tackle them.

Level 1, Endeavour House, 1 Franklin St  
Canberra, ACT 2601  
Tel: (02) 61300530  
Email: [mail@tai.org.au](mailto:mail@tai.org.au)  
Website: [www.tai.org.au](http://www.tai.org.au)  
ISSN: 1836-9014

## **ABOUT THE NATIONAL LGBTI HEALTH ALLIANCE**

The National LGBTI Health Alliance is the national peak health organisation in Australia for organisations and individuals that provide health-related programs, services and research focused on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex people (LGBTI) and other sexuality, gender, and bodily diverse people and communities.

We recognise that people's genders, bodies, relationships, and sexualities affect their health and wellbeing in every domain of their life.

Email: [info@lgbtihealth.org.au](mailto:info@lgbtihealth.org.au)  
Telephone: 02 8568 1123  
Fax: 02 8212 9013  
Postal address: PO Box 51, Newtown, NSW 2042, Australia

## KEY PRELIMINARY RESULTS

---

The Australia Institute and the LGBTI National Health Alliance surveyed more than 9,500 LGBTIQ+ Australians and their allies between 16 October and 14 November 2017, of whom more than 7,500 completed every question.

These are **preliminary results** from selected questions and the final results may change by a few percentage points when the full results are published. Due to the unprecedented number of responses, analysis of this data is expected to take many months.

Participants self-selected and the survey was advertised through LGBTIQ+ networks as well as on Facebook. Approximately 75% of respondents identified as LGBTIQ+ and 25% identified as allies of LGBTIQ people including friends, family and other supporters. The response was in-keeping with proportional representation of populations from each Australian state and territory.

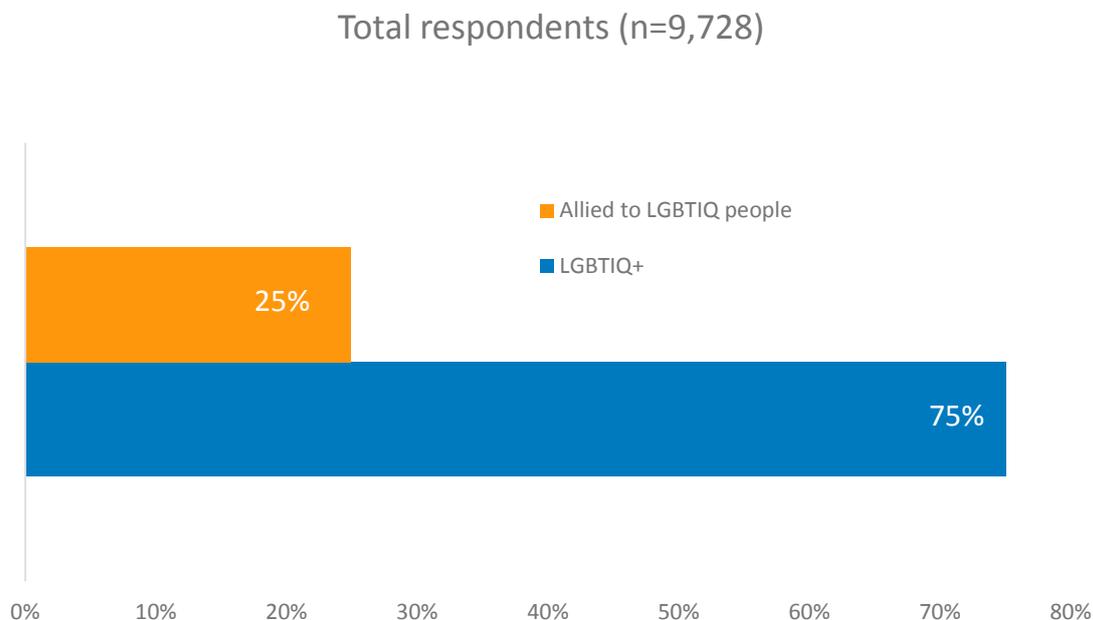
### Key results:

- LGBTIQ+ respondents reported experiences of verbal and physical assaults in the 3 months following the announcement of the postal vote more than doubled, compared to the 6 months prior to the announcement.
- LGBTIQ+ respondents suffering depression, anxiety and stress increased by more than a third after the announcement of the vote, compared to the 6 months before the announcement.
- More than 90% of LGBTIQ+ people said that debate would have a negative impact on them to some degree.
- Almost 80% of LGBTIQ+ people and almost 60% allies said that they found the marriage equality debate considerably or extremely stressful.
- Almost 70% of LGBTIQ+ people and just under one third of allies said they strategically avoided situations related to the debate that they thought would be harmful to them a good part of the time or most of the time during the debate.
- Almost 70% of LGBTIQ+ people said they 'avoided being with people in general' at least some of the time as a method of coping
- Resilience was evident in coping strategies such as nearly 80% of respondents participated to some degree in LGBTIQ+ affirmative activities such as attending marches, raising awareness or displaying yes or rainbow images

## INITIAL FINDINGS

---

More than 9,500+ people participated in the survey (more than 7,500 completed every question), with 75% of them identifying as LGBTIQ+ and 25% identifying as allies of LGBTIQ+ people including friends, family and other supporters.



### Negative impacts

LGBTIQ+ respondents reported that experiences of verbal and physical assaults more than doubled in the 3 months following the announcement of the postal vote, compared to the 6 months prior.

LGBTIQ+ respondents experiencing depression, anxiety or stress increased by more than a third after the announcement of the vote, compared to the 6 months before the announcement.

Most respondents said that they experienced negative messages about LGBTIQ+ people or same sex marriage at least daily, especially from online and television media.

---

*I was shaken by the amount of anti-LGBTI ads on television and my partner and I stopped watching commercial TV until after the survey had ended because it distressed us too much.*

---

The majority of LGBTIQ+ respondents said that they experienced considerable or extreme tension and anxiety during the debate.

- More than 90% of LGBTIQ+ people said that debate would have a negative impact on them to some degree
- Around 80% of LGBTIQ+ people and almost 60% of allies said that they found the marriage equality debate considerably or extremely stressful. Less than 5% of LGBTIQ+ people said the marriage equality debate was not at all stressful.
- Almost 70% of LGBTIQ+ people and two in five allies said the marriage equality debate made them feel considerably or extremely anxious.

## Coping

The study identified strategies LGBTIQ+ people and their allies used to cope with the debate. Despite widespread reported anger at those that had initiated this process, LGBTIQ+ people showed great resilience in dealing with the debate. The methods of coping many people used are in keeping with methods of positive reappraisal (i.e. making the best of a difficult situation). About 80% of respondents participated in some kind of LGBTIQ+ affirmative activities such as attending marches, raising awareness or displaying yes or rainbow images. More than 70% of LGBTIQ+ people and their allies also reported increasing their participation in LGBTIQ+ supportive communities. People reported on the positive effects of the outpouring of support from friends, family and strangers. Many respondents coped by concentrating on something good that could come out of the debate with around 80% saying they could do this some of the time, while less than 10% saying they were able to do this most of the time.

However the study also shows that coping with the debate led to strategies that are not so positive. Many people avoided situations, hid their feelings and pretended they were ok to cope with the national debate.

---

*The response to the survey caused me to quit my job because my work environment was not supportive.*

---

Just under 90% of LGBTIQ+ people and more than a third of allies said that they strategically avoided situations related to the debate that they thought would be harmful to them a good part or most of the time during the debate. While almost 70% of LGBTIQ+ people said they avoided being with people in general at least some of the time.

Although many jurisdictions increased support for LGBTIQ+ counselling and other resources during the time, around half of LGBTIQ+ people perceived that resources to help them cope with the debate were not available or only slightly available. One respondent noted:

---

*The constant imagery of no-voters and the no-campaign has left me feeling angry, sad and isolated. I am not an "out" member of the LGBTIQ+ community, so I struggled to find support during this time as no-one knew this campaign was personally affecting me...*

---

Many respondents reported that they did not talk with others about what was happening for them and only a few sought professional support during this time. More than 80% of LGBTIQ+ people said they kept their feelings from others at least some of the time.

This questionnaire provided a forum for LGBTIQ+ people and a wide range of allies including family, friends, religious ministers and concerned community members to voice their opinions over the debate. There are literally thousands of personal accounts of the negative impacts that this debate has had on our society.

Further analysis will combine qualitative and quantitative information to explore the stressfulness of the debate and how this has contributed to anxiety, stress and depressive symptoms among respondents. It will also explore how the stress of the debate has affected different LGBTIQ+ communities and their allies. The results of this study demonstrate the real stress that people have experienced during this debate and the strength and resilience shown in coping with this stress. This study also suggests that support services to LGBTIQ+ people and their allies may need to be ongoing for some time as people recover.

---

*It was hard to ignore the levels of hatred and bigotry in the broader community. This is something that will take a long time to go away. The survey has caused deep divisions.*

---

Finding from the full analysis have the potential to be relevant to individual interventions, supporting affirmative and strength-based support for LGBTIQ+ individuals and their allies, as well as structural interventions to create a less discriminatory society.

## ABOUT THE STUDY

---

The Australia Institute and the LGBTI National Health Alliance conducted the *Coping with the Marriage Equality Debate Study*. This research project used an online survey of adults identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) and their allies to investigate the effects of exposure to negative messages in the context of the Australian marriage equality debate. The research team, led by Dr Saan Ecker from The Australia Institute includes two leading international researchers in LGBTIQ+ issues, Professor Sharon Rostosky and Dr Ellen Riggle, who have also undertaken extensive research in the impacts of voting on same-sex marriage in the United States. The team also includes well-known Australian LGBTIQ+ educator and counsellor for 20+ years Dr Elizabeth Riley.

The study investigates perceived stress as a result of negative exposure and identifies how LGBTIQ+ people and their allies appraised and coped with the marriage equality debate. The study examines associations between exposure to negative messages, stress, coping and psychological distress. Qualitative data on experiences of LGBTIQ+ people and their allies was also collected through free text questions.

The study was approved by the ACT Health Directorate Human Research Ethics Committee. (Approval No.17.222. Valid to 12/10/2018).

This study builds on international studies which have shown significant impact of these kinds of debates on the mental health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ people and their allies. The study measures a range of quantitative psychological factors and has also provided an opportunity for people to share their experiences of the debate through free text questions. Thousands of people from all walks of life have told their stories about how it has been for them during the national debate surrounding marriage equality.

## BACKGROUND

---

The Australian marriage equality debate provides a unique opportunity to better understand how lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and questioning (LGBTIQ+) people and their allies are affected by and cope with structural discrimination and prejudice.

The debate became central in Australia on the announcement of a postal vote on same-sex marriage on 9 August, 2017. With the voting extending to 7 November, the marriage equality debate represents a prejudice-related stress event (Frost & Fingerhut, 2016) for LGBTIQ+ people of three months duration. It is important the

effect of this event on LGBTIQ+ people and their allies is measured, particularly in the absence of any obvious efforts by the Australian government to monitor this situation in a credible way.

Understanding the effects of stress events is best done as close as possible to the time of the event (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000) and this research project involved collecting information around the end of the three month period of the debate. The questionnaire ran from 16 October to 14 November 2017. Because a prospective study measuring pre and post effects of the debate was not possible after the debate had started (except possibly by longitudinal epidemiological studies), this study will consider the associations between exposure, stress, coping and mental health for respondents during the debate. Importantly, the large response to this study sends a message about the importance of recording the impact of this event on LGBTIQ+ people.

There is ample information that these kinds of debates have negative impacts on LGBTIQ+ people and their allies. Debates during marriage amendment processes in the United States (US) led to increased exposure to stressors such as misleading information and hostilities towards LGBTIQ+ people (Hatzenbuehler, McLaughlin, Keyes, & Hasin, 2010). Exposure to these stressors was associated with LGBTIQ+ individual and community psychological impacts (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2012; Herek, 2011; Rostosky, Riggle, Horne, Denton, & Huellemeier, 2010; Rostosky, Riggle, Horne, & Miller, 2009). Compared to states without public votes on same-sex marriage, LGB people in US states where voting took place showed a 250% increase in anxiety disorders, 42% increase in alcohol use disorder, 30% increase in mood disorders and as 36% increases in comorbid conditions. The Australian government itself estimated a cost of \$20 million in increased use of mental health services by LGB individuals, projected as a result of the earlier proposed Australian plebiscite, (Australian Productivity Commission, 2016) with authors noting this is conservative. This is supported by increased demand for LGB focused counselling support services within weeks of the announcement (Perkins, 2017).

This study considers the effect of potential factors associated with the postal vote that can lead to increased psychological distress. The process of instigating a vote to decide on the rights of LGBTIQ+ people reinforces the marginalized and socially devalued status of LGB individuals (Rostosky et al., 2009). Also, negative campaigns further enforce this societal stigma and discrimination against LGBTIQ+ people (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2010).

## References

- Australian Productivity Commission. (2016). *Marriage equality in Australia: The cost of holding a plebiscite*. Retrieved from <https://www.pwc.com.au/publications/pdf/marriage-equality-plebiscite-report-march-2016.pdf>
- Folkman, S., & Moskowitz, J. T. (2000). Stress, positive emotion, and coping. *Current directions in psychological science*, 9(4), 115-118.
- Frost, D. M., & Fingerhut, A. W. (2016). Daily exposure to negative campaign messages decreases same-sex couples' psychological and relational well-being. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 19(4), 477-492.
- Hatzenbuehler, M. L., McLaughlin, K. A., Keyes, K. M., & Hasin, D. S. (2010). The impact of institutional discrimination on psychiatric disorders in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: A prospective study. *American journal of public health*, 100(3), 452-459.
- Hatzenbuehler, M. L., O'cleirigh, C., Grasso, C., Mayer, K., Safren, S., & Bradford, J. (2012). Effect of same-sex marriage laws on health care use and expenditures in sexual minority men: a quasi-natural experiment. *American journal of public health*, 102(2), 285-291.
- Herek, G. M. (2011). Anti-equality marriage amendments and sexual stigma. *Journal of Social Issues*, 67(2), 413-426.
- Perkins, M. (2017). Same-sex marriage: LGBTQ agencies prepare for sharp rise in calls for help *The Canberra Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/victoria/samesex-marriage-lgbtq-agencies-prepare-for-sharp-rise-in-calls-for-help-20170820-gy079b.html>
- Rostosky, S. S., Riggle, E. D., Horne, S. G., Denton, F. N., & Huellemeier, J. D. (2010). Lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals' psychological reactions to amendments denying access to civil marriage. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 80(3), 302.
- Rostosky, S. S., Riggle, E. D., Horne, S. G., & Miller, A. D. (2009). Marriage amendments and psychological distress in lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) adults. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 56(1), 56.