Minority stress and community connectedness amongst Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Australians: A comparison of rural vs. metropolitan localities

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Objective: This paper aimed to compare the experience of sexual orientation based stressors (sexual minority stress) and community connectedness amongst lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) Australian’s residing in metropolitan vs. rural localities.

Methods: A convenience sample of LGB Australian’s completed an online survey which assessed sexual minority stressors (internalised homophobia, stigma consciousness, concealment of sexuality / need for privacy), level of engagement with an LGB community (involvement in LGB community activities, number of LGB friends, and perceived connectedness with an LGB community) and social isolation. Postcodes provided by participants were coded into metropolitan vs. rural localities (inner metropolitan, outer metropolitan, other metropolitan centres, rural centres, and other rural / remote areas) based on the Rural Remote and Metropolitan Areas (RRMA) classification.

Results: A total of 1306 individuals completed the survey, with 10% (n=132) residing in a rural locality. Those in rural and remote regions reported significantly increased concealment of sexuality from friends, more concern regarding disclosure of sexuality from friends, less involvement and friendships with other LGB people relative to those residing in inner-metropolitan areas. Men in these areas additionally reported greater levels of internalised homophobia. Unexpectedly, those residing in outer metropolitan areas of major cities experienced comparable levels of minority stress and disconnection to those from smaller rural and remote regions, whilst those in rural centres (>10,000 to 99,999), although experiencing less connectedness with an LGB community, reported no increase in minority stress relative to inner-metropolitan counterparts.

Conclusions: Minority stress and social disconnection are known to contribute to increased psychiatric morbidity (including suicidality) amongst LGBs. The present findings suggest that LGBs in rural and remote regions face greater exposure to certain minority stressors, and in addition have less connectedness with other LGB individuals. Allied health professionals working with LGB Australians in rural and remote settings need to consider the burden of minority stress, lack of community support and social isolation on the mental health and wellbeing of this population.

KEY WORDS: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, LGBT, minority stress, rural, psychological well-being