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## **Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Service Members' Mental Health: The Role of Morale and Unit Cohesion**

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- Nearly 71,000 (or 2.8%) of military personnel identify as LGB (Gates, 2010)
- Unique health, behavioral health, and supportive needs among active and ~870,000 veterans is unknown
- Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT) possibly (Burks, 2011) served to:
  - Increase LGBT victimization;
  - Decrease victim reports and help seeking;
  - Prevented sexual orientation military research
- Specific needs of LGBT service members are unknown.



- Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003): Societal stigmatization & victimization lead to poor behavioral health
- These stressors include:
  - Experienced, expected, and/or internalized victimization
- The military is a unique context in which to understand the impacts of minority stress (e.g., all theoretically have access to health care)



# Group Cohesion and Leadership for Military Success

- Leadership influences unit climate and health of subordinates (Lopez, Adler, Cabrera & Thomas, 2018). Unit leaders and commanders are held accountable for the morale and cohesion of their unit members
- Leadership and cohesion within the military influences health and performance in combat and in garrison
  - Soldiers in units with higher cohesion: lower depression and anxiety symptomatology (Bliese & Castro, 2000)
- Little to no research has looked at morale and UC of minority populations



- What role does Morale and Unit Cohesion play in the relationship between Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender identity and elevated outcomes of (a) Anxiety, (b) Depression, (c) PTSD Symptomatology, and (d) Suicidality among a sample of active-duty U.S. service members?



# Methods



- IRB Approved Study
- Active duty service member (i.e., not veteran or reserves)
- Four main branches (U.S. Army, U.S. Navy, U.S. Air Force, U.S. Marine Corps)
- Age 18+
- LGBT cohort: self-identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual; self-identified as transgender; *or* asserted a gender identity different from assigned sex at birth
- Non-LGBT cohort: otherwise eligible and not in the LGBT cohort
- Representation across gender, race/ethnicity, officer/enlisted, branch
- **Recruitment** via respondent-driven sampling (RDS) within LGBT and non-LGBT cohorts (Heckathorn, 1997)





544 active-duty service members;

- Non-heterosexual service members,  $n = 228$  (41.9%)
- Transgender service members,  $n = 58$  (10.7%)
- Assigned male sex at birth,  $n = 350$  (64.3%)
- LGBT,  $n = 248$  (45.6%)



## Demographic Characteristics

- Sexual Identity
- Sex Assigned at Birth
- Gender Identity
- Age
- Race/Ethnicity

## Behavioral & Mental Health

- Anxiety (GAD-7)
- Depression (PHQ)
- PTSD (PCL-5)
- Suicidality (SBQ-R)

## Characteristics of Military Service

- Number of years served
- Service Branch
- Pay Grade (Officer/Enlisted)
- Unit Cohesion
- Morale



- 1) Sociodemographic Analysis**
- 2) Bivariate Logistic Regression**
- 3) Multivariate Logistic Regression**



# Results



**Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics, 2017-18.**

	N	%
<b>LGBT (n = 544)</b>	248	45.6
<b>Age (n = 544)</b>		
<b>18-24</b>	198	36.4
<b>25-29</b>	179	32.9
<b>30-34</b>	97	17.8
<b>35-54</b>	70	12.9
<b>Racial and Ethnic identity (n = 544)</b>		
<b>White</b>	316	58.1
<b>Black or African American</b>	91	16.7
<b>Latino</b>	73	13.4
<b>Native American or Alaska Native</b>	5	0.9
<b>Asian or Pacific Islander</b>	33	6.1
<b>Multiracial</b>	19	3.5
<b>Other</b>	7	1.3

**Table 2. Military Related Sociodemographic Characteristics, 2017-18.**

	N	%
<b>Length of Service (n = 544)</b>		
0 – 4	254	49.9
5 – 9	164	32.2
≥ 10	91	17.9
<b>Military Service Branch (n = 509)</b>		
U.S. Air Force	182	33.5
U.S. Army	226	41.5
U.S. Marine Corps	52	9.6
U.S. Navy	84	15.4
<b>Rank (n = 544)</b>		
E-1 to E-3	215	39.5
E-4 and above	144	26.5
O-1 to O-3	151	27.8
O-4 and above	34	6.2

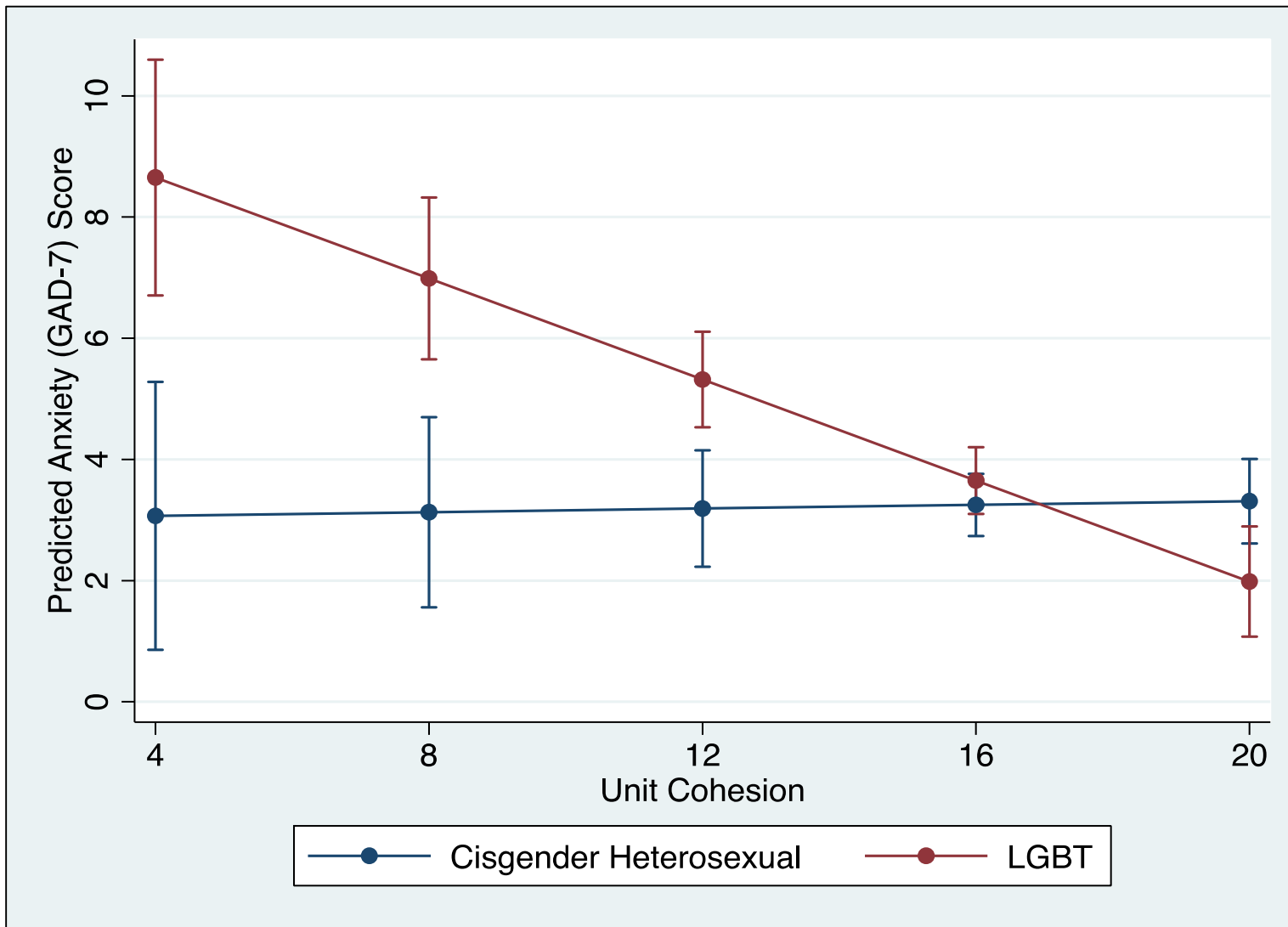
**Table 3. Sample Morale to Serve, Unit Cohesion, and Mental Health Reports, 2017-18.**

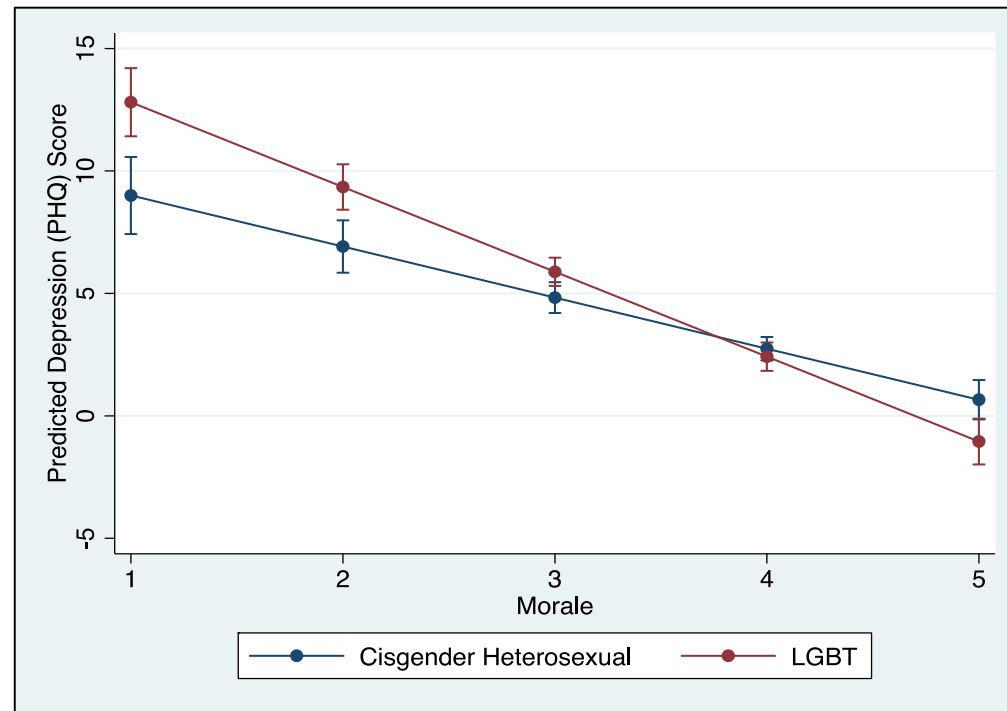
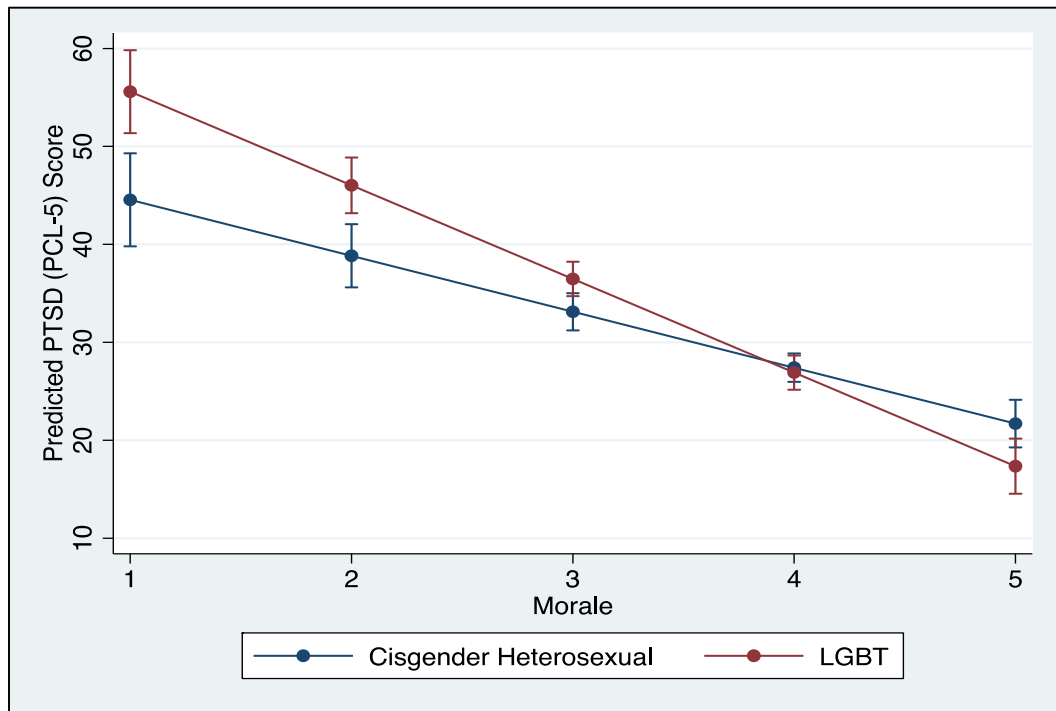
	LGBT	Non-LGBT	Range
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	
<b>Morale</b>	3.4 (1.0)	3.8 (0.9)	1 - 5
<b>Unit Cohesion</b>	15.4 (3.4)	17.1 (3.1)	4 - 20
<b>Anxiety</b>	4.7 (5.8)	2.5 (3.9)	0 - 21
<b>Depression</b>	4.9 (6.0)	2.6 (4.1)	0 - 24
<b>PTSD Symptomatology</b>	33.6 (18.2)	27.1 (11.6)	20 - 100
<b>Suicidality</b>	5.2 (3.6)	3.1 (2.3)	1 - 15

**Table 3. Results of Multivariate Ordinary Least Squares Regression, 2017-2018.**

	Anxiety (n = 501) β (p-value)	Depression (n = 538) β (p-value)	PTSD (n = 535) β (p-value)	Suicidality (n = 539) β (p-value)
<b>Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and/or Transgender (LGBT)</b>	.72 (<.001)	.48 (<.001)	.48 (<.001)	.25 (<.001)
<b>Female Sex Assigned at Birth</b>	.07 (.031)	--	--	--
<b>Less than two years of service</b>	--	--	--	--
<b>Service branch (reference: U.S. Air Force)</b>				
U.S. Army	.03 (.349)	.04 (.232)	-.01 (.908)	--
U.S. Marine Corps	.14 (<.001)	.13 (<.001)	.14 (<.001)	--
U.S. Navy	.14 (.001)	.12 (.002)	.14 (<.001)	--
<b>Rank (reference: E-1 to E-3)</b>				
E-4 and above	.08 (.043)	.12 (.001)	.11 (.003)	--
O-1 to O-3	-.01 (.874)	.07 (.044)	.02 (.515)	--
O-4 and above	.09 (.014)	.08 (.015)	.10 (.004)	--
<b>Unit Cohesion</b>	.01 (.85)	-.20 (<.001)	-.17 (<.001)	--
<b>Morale</b>	-.48 (<.001)	-.38 (<.001)	-.35 (<.001)	-.38 (<.001)
<b>LGBT X Morale</b>	--	-.48 (<.001)	-.45 (<.001)	--
<b>LGBT X Unit Cohesion</b>	-.68 (<.001)	--	--	--







# Discussion



- LGBT Service members have heightened negative mental health relative to their cisgender heterosexual peers.
- It was found that for LGBT service members Unit Cohesion was an important moderator of anxiety
- Morale was important moderator of depression and PTSD:  
As morale/Unit Cohesion decrease, negative mental health steeply rises for LGBT service members relative to cisgender heterosexual service members



- Anxiety was moderated by unit cohesion but not morale.
- PTSD and Depression were moderated by morale but not unit cohesion.
- Unit cohesion more important in explaining anxiety – anxiety might be an indication of unit/organizational climate
- Morale more important in explaining PTSD and depression – PTSD and depression are reflective of individual level attributes
- Unit cohesion and morale are measuring different dimensions of military readiness



- What is the role of unit cohesion or morale, and for which mental health outcomes?
- Cohesion and Morale are important for mental health – examine other indicators of acceptance and inclusion to better understand MH
- Future research that examines mental health of LGBT service members is needed – attention to LGBT sub-groups needed



- Though “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” is no longer the existing policy, barriers to equality of LGBT service members in the military still exist.
- There is an opportunity to improve the low levels of Unit Cohesion and Morale and associated negative mental health of LGBT service members

