

Are LGB Migrants Better off than LGB Stayers?

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Abstract

This paper investigates whether LGB people receive higher returns from migration than heterosexual people in terms of educational attainment, income, and mental health. LGB individuals are more likely to migrate, but few quantitative studies have estimated whether migration provides higher returns to LGB people. Some studies have shown that the choice of university for gay men is not only motivated by educational reasons. Other studies have shown that migrating to a different city can be a way to distance themselves from non-accepting family and friends for many LGB individuals. This suggests that socioeconomic motivations, central to much research on migration, might not be sufficient to explain migration behavior among LGB people. We use Next Steps data from the UK with information on migration between ages 15 and 25, as well as information on sexual identity (N = 6701, out of which 324 LGB people). We find that LGB migrants are higher educated and have more income than LGB non-migrants. However, these returns are also observed, or even appear larger, for heterosexual people. We observe that the mental health of LGB migrants is substantially higher than the mental health of LGB non-migrants, whereas there is no difference in mental health at all between heterosexual migrants and non-migrants. These results underline the importance of non-socioeconomic factors for understanding the migration experiences of LGB people.

The residential mobility of LGB individuals has been often registered in qualitative studies as a way to seek a place they can go to live their lives more freely than where they grew up (Ueno et al., 2014; Weston, 1995; Wimark, 2016). In migration studies, the most common motivations for LGB migration are still to study or to find a job, like most heterosexual internal migrants. Although, for LGB migrants these reasons in most cases hide secondary motivations, such as those related to living in a city far from their home environment. In this sense, sexual minorities have been known to be more geographically mobile than their heterosexual counterparts (Levine, 2022). To understand these migration patterns better, we aim to answer the following questions: Are the returns for education, income and mental health for LGB migrants higher than for stayers? And, are there differences in these returns compared to the general population?

In the UK, Taulke-Johnson (2010) conducted a study with gay university students, which shows that the choice of leaving their hometowns to pursue higher education is not only for educational purposes. Students made their choices based also on where they could see themselves being able to engage more freely with their sexuality. Education has been known to empower individuals and is often used by queer individuals as a strategy to delay the heteronormative traditional paths that are expected of them. Wimark (2016) also shows that gay men and lesbians that migrate to larger cities in Turkey to obtain higher education, have impacts on the family ties of these individuals. Regarding income, it has been shown that gay men earn less than heterosexual men and that lesbian earn more than heterosexual women. So far, to the best of our knowledge, there is no study that take into account migration as a factor that could contribute to these wage gaps by sexual orientation (Aksoy et al., 2018; Waite & Denier, 2015). Another important factor is the impact of living in an urban area can have on mental health of gay men and lesbians. Studies have shown that gay and lesbians that live in urban areas have better mental health than those in rural areas (Wienke & Hill, 2013). Ueno et. al (2014) shows that sexual minorities have better mental health when migrating to more urban areas. They also find that for sexual minority men moving to areas that have higher population density and high proportion of college-educated population seem to have a positive impact on their mental health outcomes. With this in mind, we hypothesize that LGB migrants will have higher levels of education, income and well-being than LGB non-migrants. Given the higher migration rates among LGB people, we also expect these returns to migration to be higher among LGB people than among heterosexual people.

Data & Methods

We use the Next Steps Survey from the UK with people born in England in 1989/1990. We use information from two waves: at age 15 and age 25. Sexual orientation is asked at age 25 with the options: heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and other, which we excluded from the sample. We base our analysis on two variables related to migration, the first is the region of residence during the adolescence at age 15 (2005) and then the region of residence at age 25 (2015). This determines if the individual migrated or not in the last 10 years. Our sample consists of a total of 6701 individuals out of which 152 are gay/lesbian and 172 are bisexuals, present in both waves.

The outcome variables, all measured at age 25, are: having a college degree, weekly income and mental health (General health questionnaire, scale of 12 questions on mental health well-being), having a partner and having someone to talk about problems. We first present regression-predicted levels of education, income and mental health, controlling for gender. Subsequently, we include controls for socioeconomic background, such as family resources at age 15, and well-being variables at age 15 to control for baseline differences in mental health. In future analysis, we will also split the analysis by gender and, possibly, socioeconomic background, even though the sample size is limited. We also aim to add comparable data from the British Cohort Study 1970 to increase sample size and study change over time.

Results

Our initial findings show that gay men and lesbians migrate more than their heterosexual counterparts, which is line with recent findings in the US (Levine, 2022). We also show that LGB migrants have higher education than LGB non-migrants and heterosexual non-migrants, with heterosexual migrants having proportionally more individuals with college education among the groups. Regarding weekly income, it becomes even more clear that the LGB migrant have larger returns than LGB non-migrants. Although, once again heterosexual migrants seem to have the highest returns in this aspect too. Among the outcomes analyzed it is mental health where LGB migrants have the highest returns. In contrast to the considerable returns for LGB people, migration does not seem to affect heterosexuals in terms of mental health.

Overall, if individuals in general migrate to seek better opportunities to obtain higher education and higher income, it would seem that LGB migrants also migrate for the sake of their mental health. These results add the literature on internal migration by showing that queer migration

has specific motivations related to their decision-making and need to be explored more thoroughly.

Fig 1. % Migrating to other region between ages 15 and 25 by sexual identity and gender

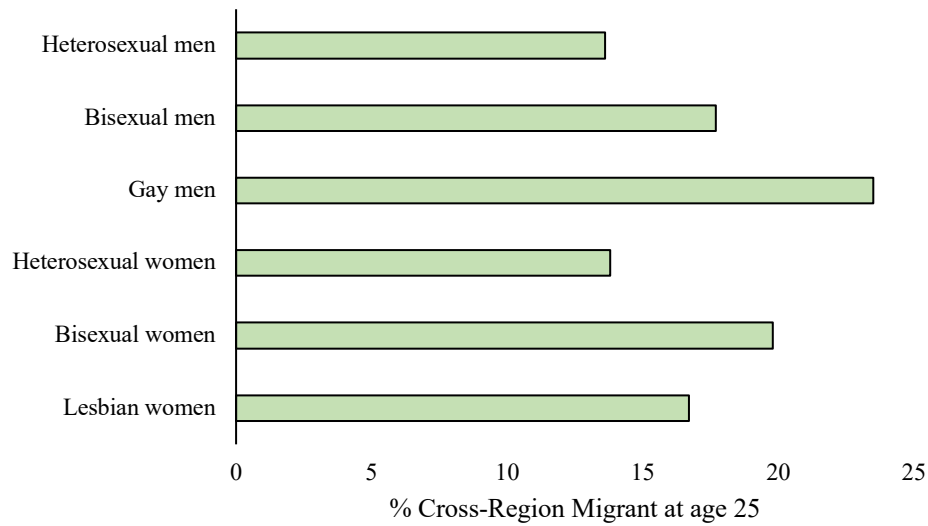
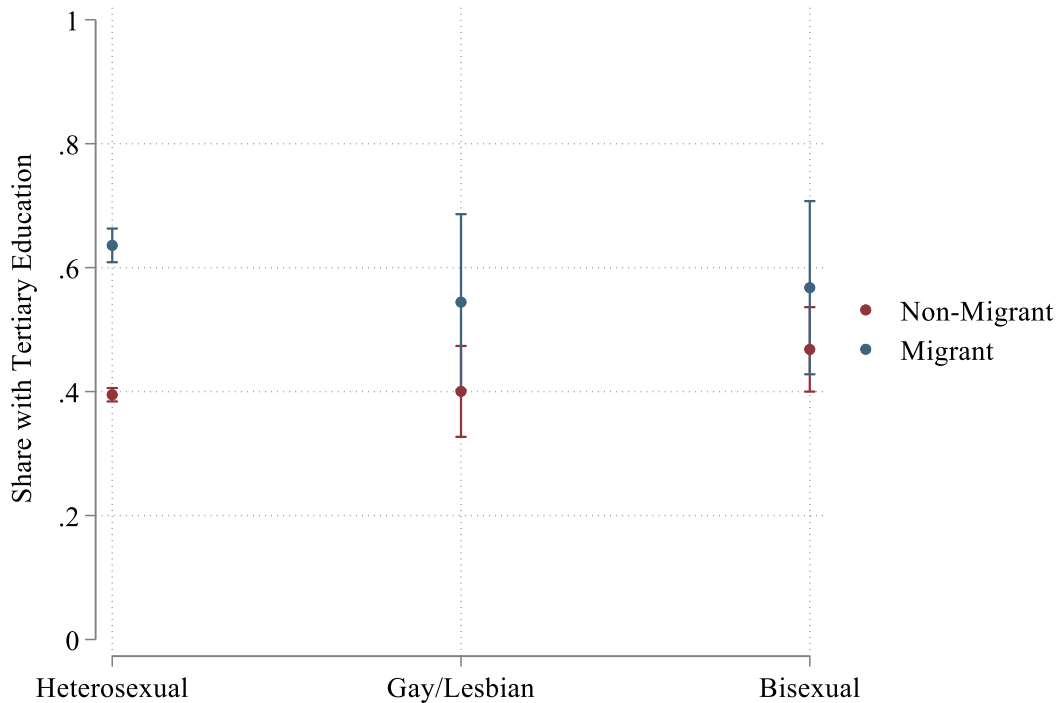
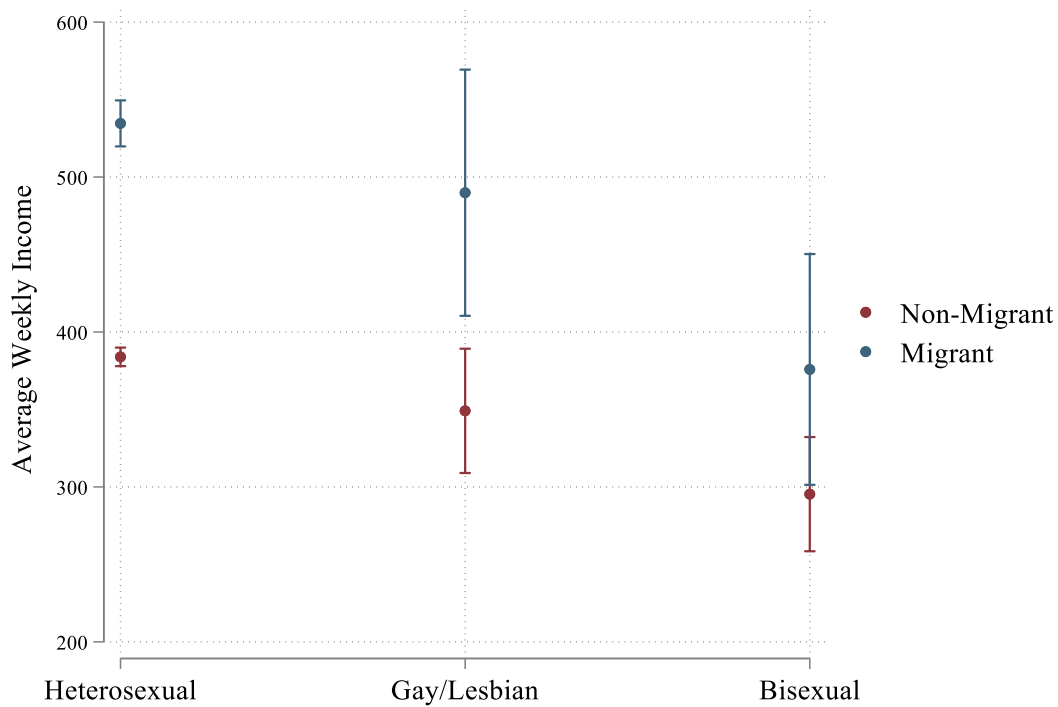


Fig 2. Tertiary education by sexual identity and migrant status



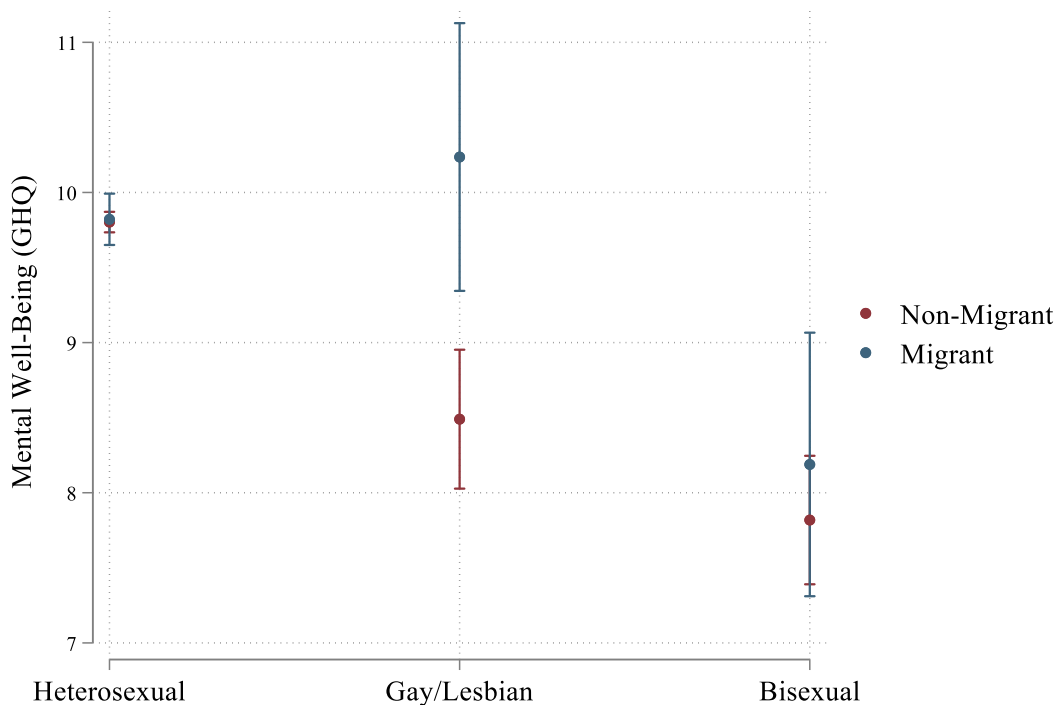
Note. 90% Confidence Intervals. Regression predicted values controlling for binary gender

Fig 3. Weekly income by sexual identity and migrant status



Note. 90% Confidence Intervals. Regression predicted values controlling for binary gender

Fig 4. Average mental well-being by sexual identity and migrant status (high score is good)



Note. 90% Confidence Intervals. Regression predicted values controlling for binary gender

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