

Partnership Disparities between UK LGB and Heterosexual Adults: Chances and Educational Gradients

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Short abstract

Existing evidence suggests that LGB adults face persistent inequalities across key areas of life, such as health and the labour market. Despite partnership being considered a key axis of social stratification in the general population, this domain remains comparatively under-researched in LGBTQ+ studies, particularly in Europe. Similarly, the role of educational attainment in shaping partnership dynamics among LGB people is still poorly understood, even though they tend to be more highly educated than heterosexual people. Using data from the UKHLS, this study examines how partnership chances and the timing of entry into first coresidential partnerships differ between LGB and heterosexual individuals across cohorts, and how education shapes these outcomes. The analytical strategy combines Coarsened Exact Matching with multinomial and Poisson regression models, using individual-clustered standard errors, alongside Kaplan–Meier analysis. Preliminary findings reveal a consistent pattern: LGB individuals, particularly gay men, are significantly less likely than their heterosexual peers to transition into a first coresidential partnership or to be partnered at any given time. Lower coupling rates among LGB people may reflect structural constraints, while fewer transitions into coresidential unions may point to less heteronormative life-course trajectories. Analyses of educational gradients show that medium-educated bisexual women and highly educated lesbian women are less likely to have a partner. Conversely, low-educated gay men show a higher likelihood of being partnered. Unlike among heterosexuals, no clear educational gradient in transitions to first coresidential partnership emerges for LGB individuals. If anything, education appears to increase transition rates for bisexual men and lesbian women.

Extended abstract

Research has repeatedly documented persistent inequalities among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (LGB) people in multiple domains, including health (Liu & Reczek, 2021), earnings (Denier & Waite, 2019; Drydakis, 2022), and poverty risk (Uhrig, 2015). However, the partnership domain – a central dimension of adults’ lives – has received comparatively little attention, particularly in Europe (Bohr & Lengerer, 2024; Ophir et al., 2023). This is striking given that partnerships represent a key axis of social stratification in the general population, linked to economic security (Carr et al., 2024; Vespa & Painter, 2011) and wellbeing (Braithwaite & Holt-Lunstad, 2017; Hill et al., 2009). Unequal access to partnership opportunities may therefore compound existing social inequalities among LGB individuals.

Existing evidence suggests that LGB adults are less likely to have a partner than heterosexuals (Bohr & Lengerer, 2024; Carpenter & Gates, 2008; Waite, 2021) and face higher risks of relationship dissolution (Andersson et al., 2006; Einiö & Ponkilainen, 2025). These differences likely reflect a combination of structural constraints, such as smaller dating pools (Wu et al., 2020), social barriers including stigma, discrimination, family rejection, and delayed disclosure (Carastathis et al., 2017; Doan & Mize, 2020; Saewyc, 2011), and institutional contexts shaped by legal recognition and social acceptance (Abou-Chadi & Finnigan, 2019; Waaldijk, 2020). Some LGB individuals also pursue non-traditional forms of intimacy, such as living-apart-together relationships, polyamory, or chosen families (Hammack, 2005), and may reject marriage as a heteronormative institution (Rostosky et al., 2016). Yet, research on partnership formation remains limited, often focused on non-European contexts or relying on administrative data that infer sexual orientation from partner sex. Consequently, we still know relatively little about overall partnership chances, including among single individuals, and how these patterns have evolved across cohorts.

Similarly, how education interacts with sexual identity to shape partnership formation and timing across cohorts remains poorly understood, even though LGB people tend to be more highly educated than heterosexuals (Boertien et al., 2024; Mittleman, 2022). Educational attainment may stratify partnership experiences within the LGB population by shaping economic security (Martell & Nash, 2020), increasing opportunities to expand queer networks (Taulke-Johnson, 2010), and creating environments that support identity affirmation (Hall et al., 2021). At the same time, higher education may foster autonomy and the choice to remain single, similarly to high educated women (Van Den Berg, 2023).

Accordingly, this study addresses two main research questions:

1. How do partnership chances and the timing of first coresidential partnerships differ between LGB and heterosexual individuals in the UK, and how have these differences evolved across cohorts?
2. How does educational attainment shape partnership chances and timing of first coresidential partnerships among LGB individuals?

By combining evidence on partnership disparities with insights on educational gradients, this article makes three key contributions: (1) it provides some of the first evidence on partnership dynamics among LGB individuals in the UK (Ophir et al., 2023; Ophir & Boertien, 2024); (2) it examines how education influences partnership formation and timing within the LGB population; and (3) it advances understanding of how sexual identity intersects with broader stratification processes.

Data and analytical strategy

This study uses the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS), a nationally representative survey providing rich longitudinal data on partnership histories. Unlike many European datasets, the UKHLS captures self-identified sexual orientation, allowing analysis of both partnered and single LGB individuals. Analyses are based on waves 3–13 (2009–2022), restricting the sample to respondents aged 25 or more with valid data on sexual identity and educational attainment. The final sample comprises 26,991 individuals, including 741 who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual at least once.

The analytical strategy unfolds in two main stages, aimed at addressing selection bias, time-to-event dynamics, and differences in partnership chances. First, Coarsened Exact Matching (CEM) reduces observable differences between LGB and heterosexual respondents, treating sexual orientation as the exposure variable. Matching is based on birth cohort, parental occupational status, gender, urban/rural residence, and ethnicity, with resulting weights applied in subsequent models to ensure covariate balance.

After matching, multinomial regressions with year fixed effects and clustered standard errors at the individual level are used to estimate the relative risk of being single (0), in a non-coresidential partnership (1), or in a coresidential partnership (2). As a second step, to examine whether birth cohort (1945–1964; 1965–1979; 1980–1994) and its interaction with education (ISCED 0–2; ISCED 3–4; ISCED 5–8) shape partnership chances differently by sexual identity, we estimate stratified models by sexual identity. All models are controlled for ethnicity, current occupation, age and age squared, parental SES, and region of residence. To improve statistical power, the non-coresidential and coresidential partnership categories are combined, and Poisson regression models are used to estimate the relative risk of being single (0) versus in a relationship (1). Finally, the timing and probability of entering a first coresidential partnership are analysed using Kaplan-Meier survival curves, complemented by Cox proportional hazards models that adjust for covariates.

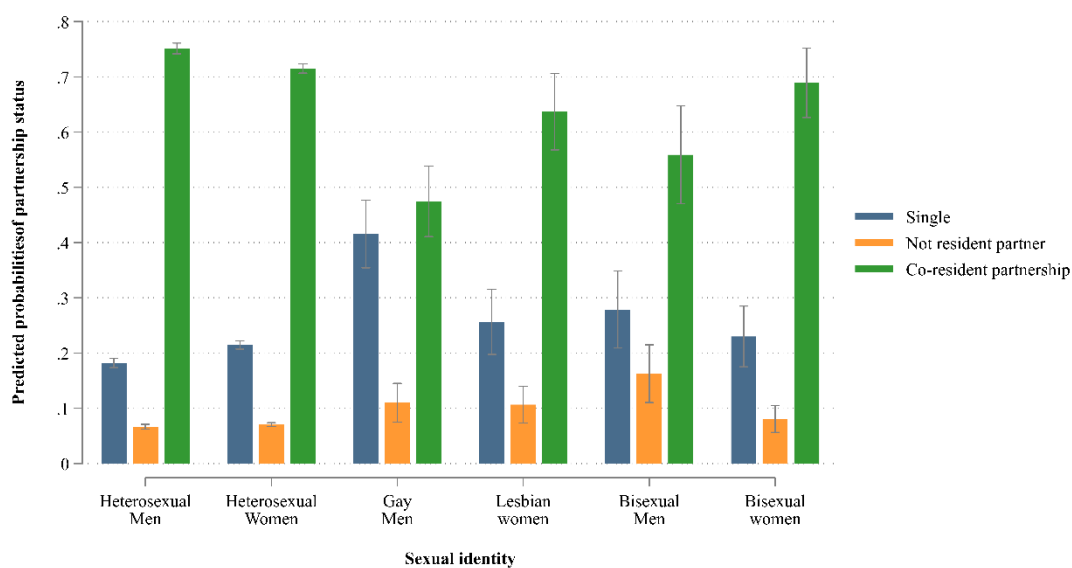
As a sensitivity analysis, robustness checks will be conducted using panel multinomial and panel logistic regressions, which were not used in the main analysis because they cannot accommodate clustered standard errors when weights are applied, nor do they support CEM weights as probability weights.

Preliminary findings

Overall, the results reveal a consistent pattern: LGB individuals, particularly gay men, are significantly less likely than their heterosexual peers to transition into a first coresidential partnership or to be partnered at any given time. Moreover, no clear educational gradients emerge among LGB individuals.

Multinomial logistic regressions (Figure 1) show that LGB respondents are more likely to be single or in a non-coresidential partnership than to have a coresidential partner. Among men, gay respondents exhibit the highest probability of being single, while bisexual men show the second-highest probability of singlehood and the highest likelihood of being in a coresidential partnership. Among women, lesbian respondents are more likely than heterosexual women to be in non-coresidential partnerships.

Figure 1: Predicted probabilities of having a partner by sexual identity. Multinomial logistic regression with year fixed effects and clustered standard errors. (UKHLS, 2011-2022)



Looking at education, medium-educated gay men have a higher relative risk of being partnered than highly educated gay men, a pattern that also applies to low-educated gay men (though not significant). This pattern is the opposite gradient observed among heterosexual women. Although the main effects for the birth cohorts were not statistically significant, the significant interaction term highlights that the effect of cohort is not constant across all education levels. The relative risk seems higher for older cohorts of low-educated lesbian women and lower for younger bisexual women with a medium level of education.

Looking at transition to first coresidential partnership Kaplan–Meier estimates further corroborate the overall results. They show that gay men, lesbian women, and bisexual men are more likely to remain unpartnered throughout the observation window. Among heterosexuals, education is associated with delayed transition to first coresidential partnership, particularly for women. Among LGB individuals, overall, no clear pattern emerges. Low-educated lesbian women are distinctly less likely to enter a first coresidential partnership, especially after age 25. Among bisexual men, the relationship between education and partnership formation is different: those with high education show the lowest likelihood of transitioning to a coresidential union, while those with medium education are most likely to.

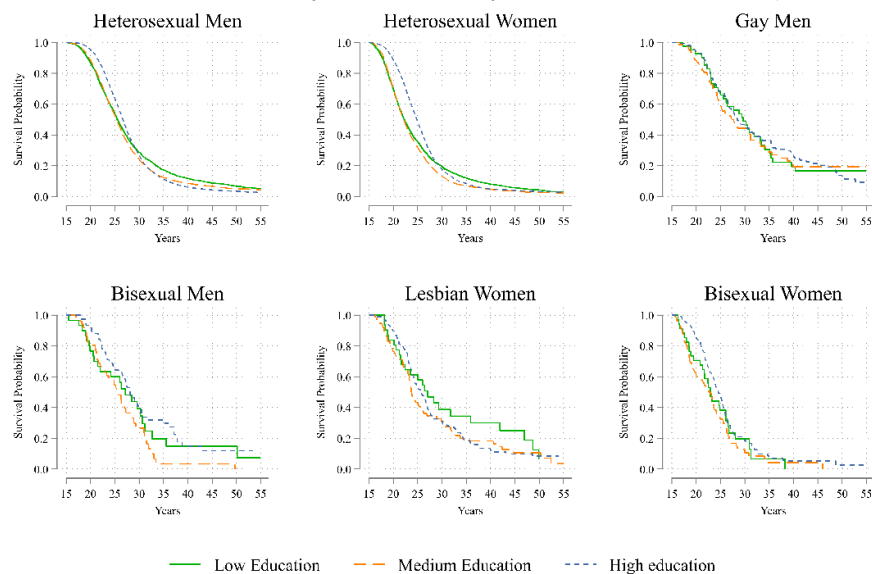
Table 1: Relative risks of having a partner by educational level and cohort, stratified by sexual identity. Poisson regressions with clustered standard errors and fixed year effects.

	Heterosexual Men	Heterosexual Women	Gay Men	Lesbian Women	Bisexual Men	Bisexual Women
Educational level (ref: High educated)						
Low educated	1.016 (0.017)	0.919 (0.020) ***	1.235 (0.202)	0.712 (0.214)	0.976 (0.262)	1.098 (0.162)
Medium educated	0.971 (0.015) †	0.961 (0.014) **	1.311 (0.189) †	1.011 (0.104)	1.376 (0.280)	1.237 (0.207)
Birth cohort (ref: 1965/1979)						
1945/1964	0.907 (0.021) ***	0.931 (0.021) **	0.794 (0.217)	1.038 (0.185)	0.974 (0.279)	0.977 (0.244)
1980/1994	1.013 (0.023)	1.040 (0.021) *	0.972 (0.186)	0.742 (0.139)	1.260 (0.307)	0.956 (0.154)
Education # cohort (ref: High edu # 1965/1979)						
Low educated # 1945/1964	0.948 (0.027) †	1.046 (0.035)	0.861 (0.345)	1.747 (0.590) †	0.906 (0.312)	1.107 (0.370)
Low educated # 1980/1994	0.910 (0.044) †	1.006 (0.038)	1.094 (0.392)	0.801 (0.347)	0.870 (0.499)	1.053 (0.196)
Medium educated # 1945/1964	1.004 (0.026)	1.019 (0.028)	0.645 (0.223)	0.945 (0.200)	0.739 (0.256)	1.161 (0.396)
Medium educated # 1980/1994	1.017 (0.029)	1.000 (0.023)	0.700 (0.166)	1.016 (0.179)	0.916 (0.238)	0.683 (0.130) *
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Number of observations	78974	106149	1694	1338	817	1256

*** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05, † p<.1

Taken together, findings suggest that LGB individuals are less likely to be in a couple, which may reflect structural constraints leading to higher singlehood, and less likely to transition to first coresidential partnerships, which may reflect less heteronormative life-course trajectories. The effect of education is less clear: while it partially facilitates partnership among bisexual women and men, it is associated with a greater likelihood of transitioning to a first coresidential partnership among high-educated lesbian women despite their overall lower partnership rates. Finally, the minimal educational differences observed for gay men suggest that persistent stigma or discrimination may uniformly constrain their partnership formation, irrespective of educational attainment.

Figure 2: Transition to first cohabitation by sexual identity and educational level (UKHLS, 2011-2022)



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