

Submission  
No 55

**INQUIRY INTO EQUITY, ACCESSIBILITY AND  
APPROPRIATE DELIVERY OF OUTPATIENT AND  
COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH CARE IN NEW SOUTH  
WALES**

**Organisation:** Sydney Bi plus Network

**Date Received:** 6 September 2023

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## Mental Health Care in NSW Sydney Bi+ Network Submission

*Sydney Bi+ Network acknowledges that we organise and connect on stolen lands. We pay our respect to Elders past and present, and especially want to acknowledge First Nations LGBTQIA+ people, Brotherboys, and Sistergirls, who continue to lead the way in making change. Always was, always will be Aboriginal land.*

### About Sydney Bi+ Network

Sydney Bi+ Network (SBN) is a volunteer-run, grassroots organisation dedicated to improving the wellbeing of bi+ people through community building, education, and advocacy. While our activities are primarily based across Gadigal, Wangal, Cammeraygal, Bidjigal, Dharug, and Dharawal lands, bi+ folks across the state engage with our activities, ideas, and actions.

Our work spans three primary areas:

- **Community Building:** Building community for bi+ people is crucial to improving wellbeing. We create bi+ specific spaces, where people have an opportunity to strengthen connections with one another and share stories about lived experiences. Much of what we do in this space includes peer support.
- **Education:** Bi+ issues are unique and distinct from broader LGBTQIA+ experiences. Bi-erasure and biphobia commonly influence experiences that bi+ people have. Sydney Bi+ Network seeks to provide education that breaks down stigmas, myths, and misconceptions surrounding the bi+ community.
- **Advocacy:** Common perceptions and knowledge about LGBTQIA+ communities stems from information about lesbian and gay experiences. We seek to increase understanding of bi+ specific experiences and use this information to improve bi+ inclusion in services, programming, and policies

### What Does Bi+ Mean?

We use bi+ as an umbrella term to describe people who are attracted to more than one gender, in any way, to any degree. Bi+ can include (but is not limited to) bisexual, pansexual, omnisexual, polysexual, multi gender attracted, biromantic, panromantic, queer, fluid, gay, lesbian, and questioning.

Contact: [syd.bi.network@gmail.com](mailto:syd.bi.network@gmail.com)

## **Executive Summary**

Sydney Bi+ Network welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on the equity, accessibility, and appropriate delivery of outpatient and community mental health care in New South Wales. Research continues to find that bi+ people experience high rates of poor mental health outcomes, yet our distinct experiences and needs are often invisibilised and marginalised across both mainstream and LGBTQIA+ communities. The current state of mental health care for bi+ people is a public health crisis and we hope that the gravity of improving mental health services for our communities is felt through our submission.

This submission provides a response to the terms of reference set out in this inquiry, as it relates to bi+ people and communities. It includes:

- an overview of bi+ experiences of mental health
- community as a protective factor, and the role of peer support
- recommendations to improve the equity, accessibility, and appropriate delivery of mental health care for bi+ people.

We thank the committee for their work on this important issue.

## Access to Safe, Compassionate, and Effective Mental Health Care

Access to safe, compassionate, and effective mental health care plays a prominent role in our community building, education, and advocacy work.

The NSW LGBTIQ+ Health Strategy 2022-2027 marks a significant commitment to the health and wellbeing of our communities, with mental health and suicide prevention as a prominent areas Sydney Bi+ Network welcomes the inclusion of bi+ people as a priority population, however significant work is needed to ensure that this Strategy is implemented in ways that are safe and effective for bi+ community. Even in Strategy's implementation plan, actions related to mental health and suicide prevention, along with other important health areas, fail to address the specific needs of bi+ people and communities.

This is particularly alarming given the data relating to mental health and suicidality for bi+ people, which show that:

- 88.4.% pansexual participants reported having ever seriously considered attempting suicide.<sup>1</sup>
- 79.7% bisexual participants reported having ever seriously considered attempting suicide.<sup>2</sup>
- Trans and gender diverse bisexual people are more likely to report high rates of psychological distress compared with cisgender bisexual people.<sup>3</sup>
- 77.6% of bisexual people aged 18 and over reported having thoughts of suicide in their lifetime.
- 88.1% of pansexual people aged 14 to 21 reported experiencing high or very high levels of psychological distress
- 67.4% of pansexual people aged 14 to 21 reported having experienced suicidal ideation in the past 12 months

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<sup>1</sup> Hill, A. O., Bourne, A., McNair, R., Carman, M., Lyons, A. (2020) Private Lives 3: The health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ people in Australia. ARCSHS Monograph Series No. 122. Melbourne, Australia: Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University. Retrieved from [https://www.latrobe.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0009/1185885/Private-Lives-3.pdf](https://www.latrobe.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/1185885/Private-Lives-3.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, J., Power, J., Smith, E., Rathbone, M. (2020). Bisexual mental health and gender diversity: Findings from the 'Who I Am' study. *Australian Journal of General Practice*, 49(7), <https://www1.racgp.org.au/getattachment/5ccc0c4b-7007-454a-ba3b-34ba87ecf185/Bisexual-mental-health-and-gender-diversity.aspx>

Mental health is frequently reported to us as a concern for bi+ people across NSW, with community members often sharing that existing mental health services are not equipped to work with bi+ people. Bi+ people experience biphobia and erasure within healthcare settings, including from mainstream and LGBTQIA+ mental health providers. Bi+ people report that they are often in positions where they have to educate mental health care providers about what being bi+ means, which impacts their ability to safely access the care they deserve.

I want to feel like I can seek help in mental health without needed to be an educator of queer issues

We also often hear stories from community members about service providers dismissing their identities and experiences, and making assumptions about a patient's sexual or romantic orientation. These experiences impact overall health and wellbeing, with international research showing that negative experiences in healthcare settings can lead bi+ people to delay help seeking, and health care visits.

Notably, bi+ community members regularly report that biphobia and bi+ erasure also prevail in settings where healthcare providers are said to be LGBTQIA+ friendly. This suggests existing LGBTQIA+ awareness training and capacity building for service providers does not adequately address the specific needs and experiences of bi+ communities. In our 2020 community needs survey with bi+ people across NSW, biphobia and bi+ erasure were top concerns for our community. In this, bi+ people articulated that biphobia and bi+ erasure exacerbate poor mental health, especially when biphobia and bi+ erasure occur in service provision.

For bi+ people who experience intersecting oppressions and marginalisation such as (but not limited to ) racism, transphobia, ableism, and ageism, poor

Most importantly though, poor rates of mental health exist within bi+ communities, not because of who we are but because of ongoing discrimination against us, and systemic barriers such as high costs of living, climate crisis, and lack of access to safe and affordable housing.

The impacts of biphobia, bi+ erasure, and discrimination against bi+ people have been ignored for too long by decision makers and service providers. Without addressing

these, mental health care cannot be provided in equitable, accessible, or appropriate ways.

## **Recommendations**

- Invest in bi+ community-led organisations to:
  - support the implementation and evaluation of bi+ specific priorities in the LGBTIQ+ Health Strategy
  - to develop, deliver and evaluate training to increase mental health care provider knowledge around bi+ specific experiences and needs for mainstream and LGBTQIA+ community organisations.
- Invest in educational institutions' development (under the advice of LGBTQIA+ community, including bi+ community-led organisations) and implementation of
  - LGBTQIA+ curriculum for healthcare workers, clinicians in formal education and regular reviews and updates
- Invest in whole- of-government responses to issues which exacerbate poor mental health, and create increased demand for services (such housing, the climate crisis, and cost of living, as examples).

## **Peer Support and Community as a Protective Factor**

Research also shows that bi+ specific community spaces can play an important role in supporting the health and wellbeing of bi+ people and communities.<sup>4</sup>

In 2020, Sydney Bi+ Network's Community Needs survey found that the majority of respondents did not feel included in LGBTQIA+ communities. Many respondents also indicated that free and accessible bi+ specific events would help them to feel more included in the community. For decades, community connection and sense of belonging have been shown to have a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing.

As a grassroots volunteer-run organisation, Sydney Bi+ Network provides a significant amount of peer support to bi+ communities, often because existing services are not providing appropriate or effective support. While bi+ people are best placed to provide this peer support, this work is complex and comes with its own set of challenges. As volunteers, we are often providing support in between our paid work, caring

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<sup>4</sup> Gonzalez, K. A., Flanders, C. E., Pulice-Farrow, L., & Bartnik, A. (In press). "It's almost like bis, pans kind of stick together." Bi+ belonging and community connection. *Journal of Bisexuality*.

responsibilities, studies, and looking after our own mental health.

Systems, and service providers - both mainstream and LGBTIQ+ focused are failing bi+ people, and the burden to respond has been placed primarily on volunteer, community-led initiatives.

The role of volunteer community-led organisations, such as Sydney Bi+ Network, continue to play an integral role in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of bi+ people. This work requires significant investment, so that we can continue to offer the life changing and life saving support that we provide.

## **Recommendations**

- Increased investment in bi+ community-led organisations to
  - Develop sustainable approaches for peer support, including the provision of support and appropriate supervision for bi+ people providing peer support
  - Provide sustained peer support to bi+ community
  - Develop effective mental health and suicide prevention initiatives specific for bi+ needs and experience.