

# Mapping Homophobia in Australia

Australia Institute Webpaper July 2005

Michael Flood and Clive Hamilton<sup>1</sup>

---

## Summary

Homophobia refers to the unreasoning fear or hatred of homosexuals and to anti-homosexual beliefs and prejudices. While not a phobia in the literal sense, it is a useful term of social description for everyday emotional tension about sexual identity that is widespread among heterosexuals. While not everyone who is homophobic engages in discriminatory behaviour towards gay men and lesbians they are more likely to contribute to a general attitude of intolerance. Thus derogatory and insulting remarks about gay men and lesbians by, for example, prominent radio personalities reinforce intolerance and appear to sanction discriminatory behaviour.

The forms of discrimination faced by gay men and lesbians include: denial of access to housing; refusal of health treatment; inconsistent laws regarding the age of consent; lack of official recognition of same sex relationships; and various forms of vilification including violence.

A large database compiled by Roy Morgan Research using self-completion interviews with 24,718 respondents aged 14 and over has been used in this study to identify the extent of homophobia in Australia. In this study homophobia is identified with those who believe that homosexuality is immoral.

Overall, 35 per cent of the population aged 14 years and above believes that homosexuality is immoral. When broken down by gender, nearly 43 per cent of men and 27 per cent of women take this view.

Queensland and Tasmania are the most homophobic states and Victoria is the least, although among men the Northern Territory is the most homophobic area. By and large city areas in all states are less homophobic than country areas, but there are exceptions. For example, the Newcastle and Hunter region of NSW is less homophobic than several areas of Sydney.

Within the major cities there are substantial variations in the level of homophobia by region. In Sydney, the Central region is the least homophobic and the Southern

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr Michael Flood is a Post-doctoral Fellow at Latrobe University and a Visiting Fellow at NCEPH, ANU. Dr Clive Hamilton is Executive Director of the Australia Institute. We are grateful to Leigh Thomas who did much of the data analysis for this paper. We are also grateful to Sarah Maddison and Kath Gelber for providing comments that have substantially improved this paper. Any remaining errors are those of the authors.

suburbs the most. In Melbourne, the Inner City is the least homophobic and the Outer South & East the most. The study identifies the three most and three least homophobic areas of Australia. Overall the most homophobic areas are the Moreton area of country Queensland (excluding the Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast), Central/South-West Queensland and the Burnie/Western district of Tasmania where 50 per cent believe homosexuality is immoral. The least homophobic region is the Inner City of Melbourne (14 per cent), followed by Central Perth (21 per cent) and Central Melbourne (26 per cent).

Older Australians are considerably more homophobic than young adults. However, those in the 14 to 17 age group, especially boys, are much more inclined to hold anti-gay views than young and middle-aged adults. Homophobic attitudes are closely related to levels of education – 25 per cent of those with tertiary education hold homophobic views compared to 40-50 per cent among those who did not complete high school.

Among those who declare a religious affiliation, Catholics are the *most* tolerant in Australia, with only 34 per cent believing that homosexuality is immoral (although those affiliated with the Anglican and Uniting Churches have similar scores). The least tolerant are Baptists (of whom 68 per cent believe homosexuality is immoral) followed closely by evangelical Christians (62 per cent). These counter-intuitive findings suggest that the Catholic Church has less doctrinal authority over its congregation than some other Christian and non-Christian churches and that Catholics have become adept at interweaving their own moral instincts with the various proscriptions of their church.

## 1. What is homophobia?

Homophobia refers to the unreasoning fear or hatred of homosexuals and to anti-homosexual beliefs and prejudices.<sup>2</sup> It is based on the belief that heterosexuality is normal and natural and that homosexuality is unnatural, sick or dangerous.<sup>3</sup>

Homophobia also lies behind discrimination and various forms of oppression. According to Michael Flood:

Gay men and lesbians experience cultural invisibility, they are routinely told that their innermost feelings and desires are disgusting, dangerous, just a phase or non-existent, they are denied civil and legal rights and the recognition of their partners and relationships, their consenting sexual relations are criminalised and policed, and they are subject to verbal and physical harassment, bashings and even murders.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> It can also apply to bisexuals, trans-sexuals and transvestites. It is believed that George Weinberg, a psychotherapist, first coined the term 'homophobia' in 1967 to describe the fear some of his fellow clinicians felt for gay men and lesbians. Almost immediately the word was applied by both straight and gay communities to those people who dislike and fear homosexual people. Vern L. Bullough, Homophobia, in *glbtq: An Encyclopaedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Culture*, ed. Claude J. Summers, gltbq Inc, Chicago, 2004. [www.gltbq.com/social-sciences/homophobia.html](http://www.gltbq.com/social-sciences/homophobia.html)

<sup>3</sup> See Michael Flood, 'Gender, Homophobia and Heterosexism', speech to an Anti-Homophobia Roundtable, August 2003

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

According to researchers Tomsen and Mason, while few suffer from a literal phobia of gay men and lesbians, the term ‘homophobia’ is a useful term of social description for everyday emotional tension about sexual identity that is widespread among heterosexuals.<sup>5</sup> Homophobia is not a phobia or morbid fear in the usual sense because it is characterised more by anger and contempt than fear. Nor is it seen as a clinical problem for those afflicted by it but as an attitude or set of beliefs that is widely accepted or tolerated. For many the problem lies with the object of the fear or anger rather than the phobic him or herself. Therefore, while the victim of a phobia is the one damaged by it, homophobia hurts everyone; it locks people into rigid patterns and beliefs, inhibits the capacity to form intimate relationships with members of the same sex, encourages macho behaviours and can be used to stigmatise heterosexual people who are seen to have ‘gay’ characteristics.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, not everyone who is homophobic engages in discriminatory behaviour towards gay and lesbian people. But they are more likely to contribute to a general attitude of intolerance that is interpreted by those who are actively homophobic to condone their vilification of gay and lesbian people. It is for this reason that derogatory and insulting remarks about gay men and lesbians by, for example, prominent radio personalities contribute to and reinforce the intolerance of those already homophobic. Indeed, it is likely that the small minority who are prone to commit acts of violence against gay men and lesbians are encouraged to act aggressively because they feel that their homophobia is sanctioned by influential voices in the community.

## 2. Effects of homophobia

The attitudes and beliefs people hold can influence their behaviour both consciously and unconsciously. Those with homophobic attitudes or beliefs will not necessarily behave in a discriminatory or hostile way to gay men and lesbians, and their behaviour towards the latter will be influenced by a variety of personal and social factors. However, homophobic attitudes are correlated with general patterns of behaviour.<sup>7</sup>

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission has documented some of the areas where gay men and lesbians face discrimination.<sup>8</sup> They include: denial of access to housing; refusal of health treatment; inconsistent laws regarding the age of consent; lack of official recognition of same sex relationships; and various forms of vilification.

Workplaces can be distressing for gay men and lesbians. Many attempt to hide their sexuality, which is difficult and demoralizing, and they may live in fear of being found out. For those who are ‘out’ the treatment they receive can lead to depression,

---

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Tomsen and Gail Mason, *Rethinking Hatred and Studying the Contradictions of Sexual Prejudice*, Conference paper, The Australian Sociological Association, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Flood, *ibid*.

<sup>7</sup> See Gregory Herek, ‘Beyond “Homophobia”’: Thinking About Sexual Prejudice and Stigma in the Twenty-First Century’, *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*, Vol. 1, No. 2, April 2004

<sup>8</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Human rights for Australia’s gays and lesbians*, Website, n.d. [http://www.hreoc.gov.au/human\\_rights/gay\\_lesbian/index.html](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/human_rights/gay_lesbian/index.html)

stress-related illness, substance abuse and even suicide. Irwin<sup>9</sup> studied the experiences of 900 gay men, lesbians and transgender people in the workplace and found that homophobia in workplaces was widespread, with 59 per cent of the people surveyed having experienced harassment or prejudicial treatment. This ranged from sexual and physical assault to verbal abuse, destruction of property, ridicule, unfair rostering, unreasonable work expectations and career restrictions.

Hate crimes are of continuing concern in Australia. In 2004 a report commissioned by the NSW Attorney General's Department showed that violence against gay men and lesbians had changed little in the last ten years.<sup>10</sup> Key findings included:

- during the previous 12 months 56 per cent of homosexual people experienced homophobia or violence;
- during their lifetime 85 per cent of gay men and lesbians experienced harassment or violence; and
- one in four gay men and lesbians has been physically attacked sometime in their life.

The effects of homophobia on young people are especially worrying as harassment and violence against same-sex attracted youth (SSAY) can scar them for life. According to a recent study, SSAY in Australia account for between five and 11 per cent of the relevant population. It has been estimated that they are six times more likely to attempt suicide than the population as a whole.<sup>11</sup> Homophobic attitudes and behaviours have been shown to be prevalent in schools, putting SSAY at risk of discrimination, victimisation and violence. According to one study:

... the place at which the abuse was most likely to occur was school (69%) with boys more likely to be abused there than girls (81% vs 53%). The streets were the second most likely place of abuse (47%) followed by social (34%) and sporting events (9%). ... Fifty nine percent of those who had been verbally or physically abused named other students as the perpetrators. Added to this, 10% named friends, some of whom were also likely to be school students.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> J. Irwin, *The pink ceiling is too low: Workplace experiences of lesbians, gay men and transgender people*, Sydney, The University of Sydney, Australian Centre for Lesbian and Gay Research, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> Attorney General's Department of NSW, *You shouldn't have to hide to be safe: A report on Homophobic Hostilities and Violence against Gay Men and Lesbians in New South Wales*, NSW Attorney General's Department, 2003. See also Stephen Tomsen and Gail Mason, *Rethinking Hatred and Studying the Contradictions of Sexual Prejudice*, Conference paper, The Australian Sociological Association, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Karolyne Quinn, Rural suicide and same-sex attracted youth: issues, interventions and implications for rural counsellors, in *Rural and Remote Health* 3 (online), no. 222, 2003. <http://rrh.deakin.edu.au/articles/showarticlenew.asp?ArticleID=222>

<sup>12</sup> Lynne Hillier *et al.*, *Writing Themselves In: A National Report on the Sexuality, Health and Well-Being of Same-Sex attracted Young People*, Melbourne, Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society, Latrobe University, 2002. See also NSW Teachers Federation, *Education Online: Creating safe and supportive environments*, 2003. [http://www.nswtf.org.au/edu\\_online/51/createsafe.html](http://www.nswtf.org.au/edu_online/51/createsafe.html)

### 3. Attitudes and homosexuality

The Australia Institute has used the extensive demographic and attitudinal database compiled by Roy Morgan Research to examine the nature and extent of homophobia in Australia. These data were collected by Roy Morgan Research from 24,718 respondents aged 14 and over across Australia in self-completion interviews during the period October 2003 to September 2004.

Two of the attitudinal questions in the Roy Morgan Research survey allow us to identify those who hold negative attitudes towards homosexuality. In particular respondents were asked to say whether they agree or disagree with the following statement.

‘I believe that homosexuality is immoral’.

This is used as our indicator of homophobia, although the two concepts are not identical. Others have used more detailed instruments to assess homophobia,<sup>13</sup> but in the present study we have access to a very large and detailed sample that allows national comparisons across a range of demographic characteristics. Respondents were also asked whether they agree or disagree with the following statement.

‘Homosexual couples should be allowed to adopt children’.

The belief that homosexuality is immoral and the belief that homosexual couples should not be allowed to adopt children are closely correlated, as might be expected. Of those who believe that homosexuality is immoral only seven per cent think that homosexual couples should be allowed to adopt children. This compares to nearly 37 per cent of the total sample who consider that adoption by homosexual couples is acceptable. Among those who do not believe homosexuality is immoral, 56 per cent are of the opinion that gay couples should be allowed to adopt children.

### 4. The extent and distribution of homophobic attitudes

How widespread is homophobia in Australia? Overall, 35 per cent of the population aged 14 years and above believes that homosexuality is immoral. When broken down by gender, nearly 43 per cent of men and 27 per cent of women take this view.

#### *Regional distribution*

Figure 1 graphs the percentage of people in each state who believe that homosexuality is immoral. Looking at the average for men and women, it shows that Queensland and Tasmania are the most homophobic states and Victoria is the least. However, among men the Northern Territory is the most homophobic area of Australia (50 per cent) with Queensland, Tasmania and Western Australia not far behind. It is worth noting that states with the most homophobia have the highest need for strategies to counter it. Thus:

---

<sup>13</sup> See, eg., Van de Ven, Paul, Laurel Bornholt, and Michael Bailey. (1996). Measuring Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral Components of Homophobic Reaction. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 25(2), pp. 155-179

Contrary to their image as the ‘redneck’ states, Tasmania and Queensland are the most advanced in anti-homophobia strategies in schools, and Tasmania is the only state where anti-homophobia kits in schools are mandatory.<sup>14</sup>

By and large city areas in all states are less homophobic than country areas, but there are exceptions. For example the Newcastle and Hunter region of NSW is less homophobic than several areas of Sydney.

Within the major cities there are substantial variations in the level of homophobia by region. Figures 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 graph homophobic attitudes by region within Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane and Perth. Thus in Sydney, the Central region is the least homophobic and the Southern suburbs the most. In Melbourne, the Inner City is the least homophobic and the Outer South & East the most.

Figure 7 shows the three least homophobic and the three most homophobic regions of Australia. Overall the most homophobic regions are the Moreton area of country Queensland (excluding the Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast), the Central South-West region of Queensland and the Burnie/Western region of Tasmania, where 50 per cent of residents believe homosexuality is immoral. The least homophobic region is the inner city of Melbourne (14 per cent) followed by Central Perth (21 per cent) and Central Melbourne (26 per cent).<sup>15</sup>

If we take men only, the most homophobic areas are Central South-West Queensland and Eyre in South Australia with 63 per cent and 60 per cent respectively of men believing that homosexuality is immoral. Moreton remains the most homophobic area where women are concerned. In all cases, inner city Melbourne is the least homophobic area in Australia, with only 15 per cent of men and 14 per cent of women agreeing that homosexuality is immoral.

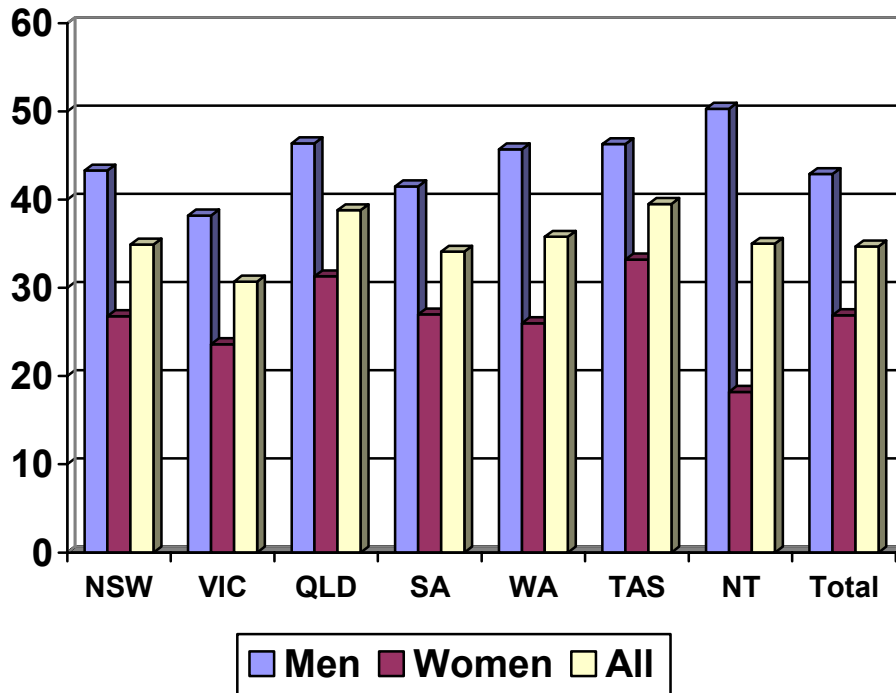
---

<sup>14</sup> Greg Callaghan, ‘Worst Days of their Lives’, *The Australian*, 10 April 2000.

<http://www.gaynet.com.au/news/archive/STORY-55.HTM>

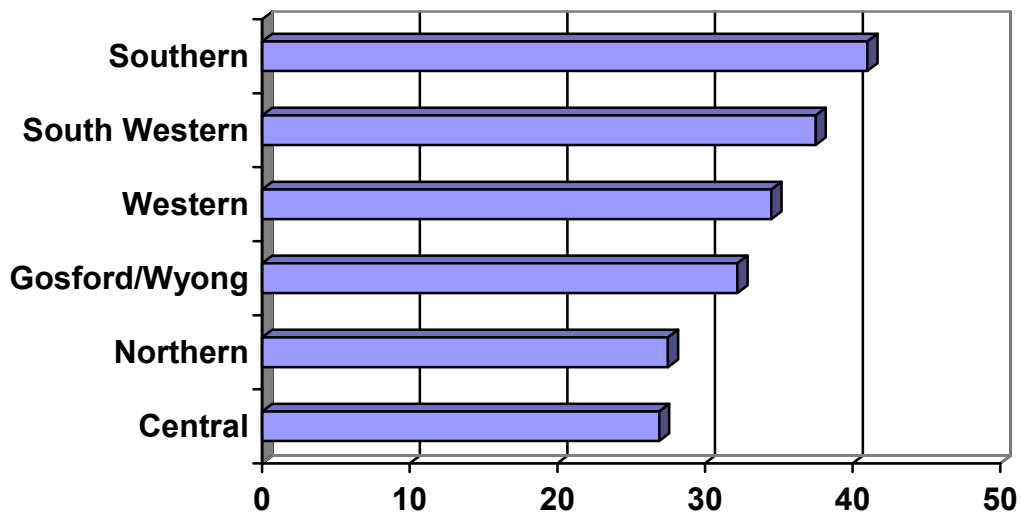
<sup>15</sup> Several other city regions have similar percentages.

**Figure 1 Percent who consider homosexuality to be immoral, by state**



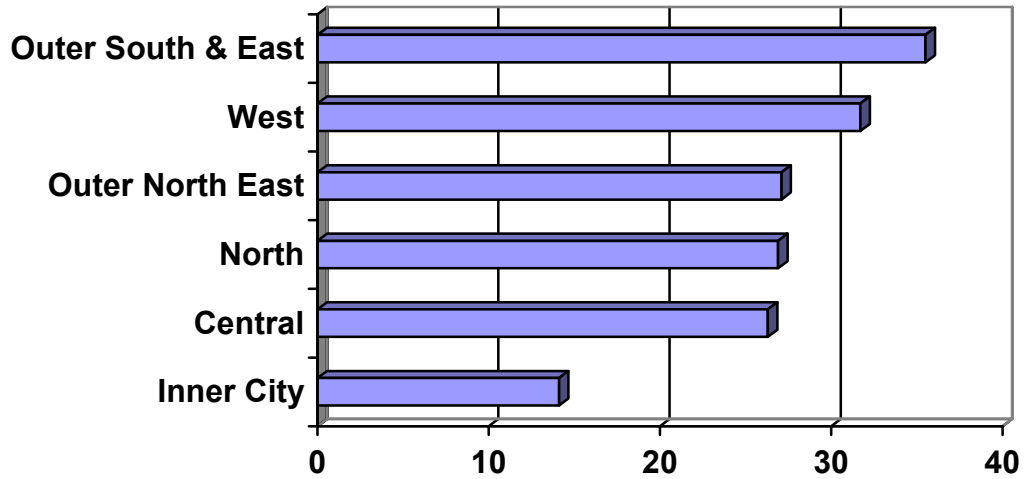
Source: Roy Morgan Research, October 2003-September 2004

**Figure 2 Percent who consider homosexuality to be immoral, by areas within major cities – Sydney (%)**



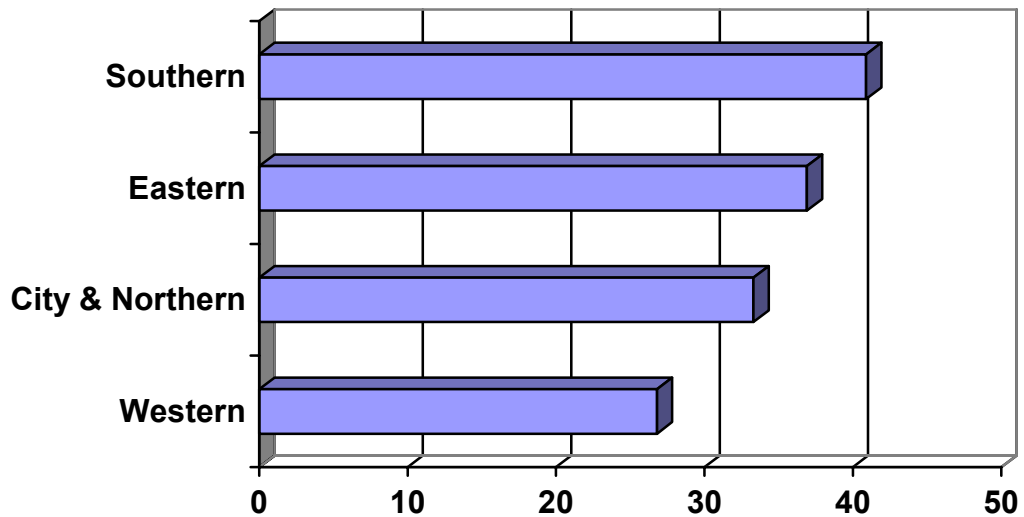
Source: Roy Morgan Research, October 2003-September 2004

**Figure 3 Percent who consider homosexuality to be immoral, by areas within major cities – Melbourne (%)**



Source: Roy Morgan Research, October 2003-September 2004

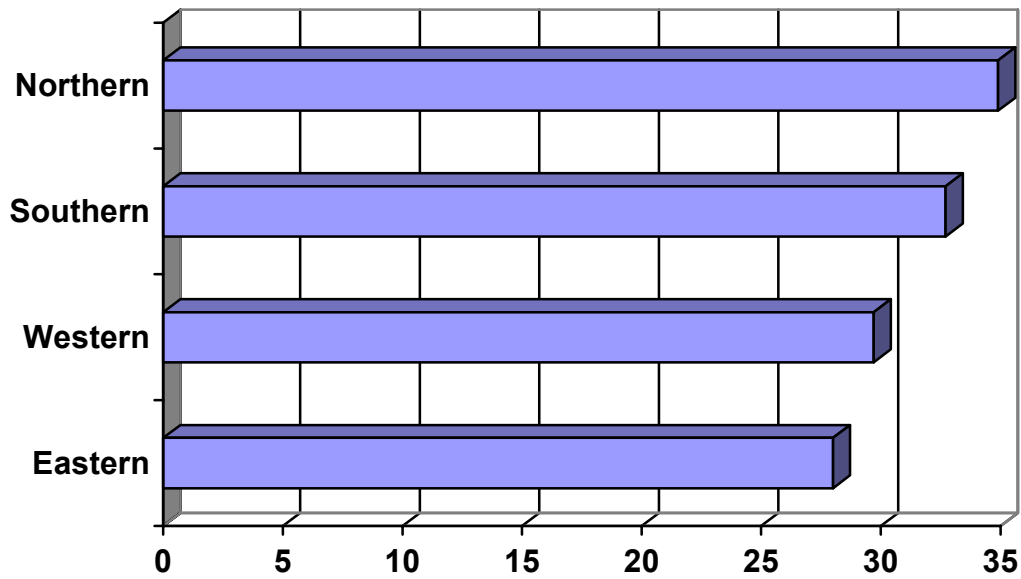
**Figure 4 Percent who consider homosexuality to be immoral, by areas within major cities – Brisbane (%)**



Source: Roy Morgan Research, October 2003-September 2004

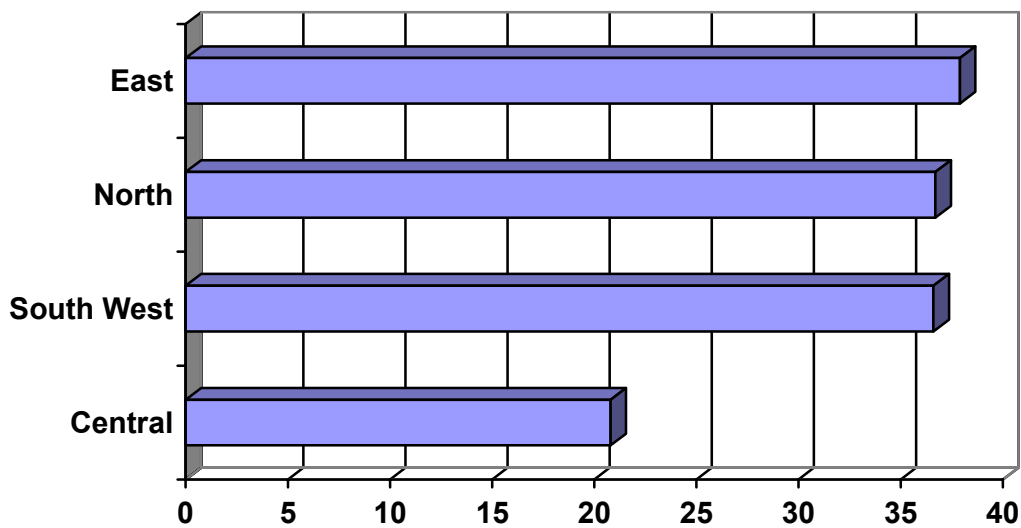


**Figure 5 Percent who consider homosexuality to be immoral, by areas within major cities – Adelaide (%)**

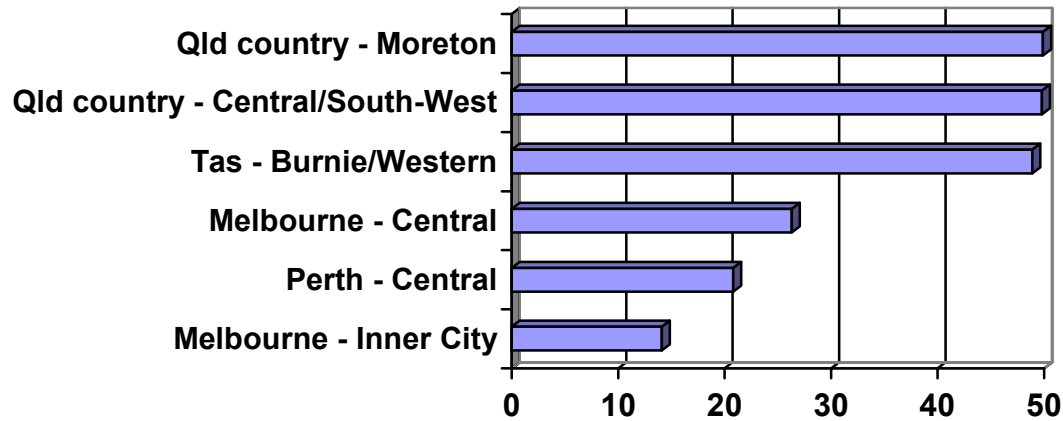


Source: Roy Morgan Research, October 2003-September 2004

**Figure 6 Percent who consider homosexuality to be immoral, by areas within major cities – Perth (%)**



Source: Roy Morgan Research, October 2003-September 2004

**Figure 7 Most and least ‘homophobic’ regions in Australia (%)**

Source: Roy Morgan Research, October 2003-September 2004

Note that Northern Sydney, Central Sydney, Melbourne North and Outer North-East, Western Brisbane and Adelaide Eastern all have percentages only slightly higher than Melbourne Central.

### *Gender*

Men are more likely to be homophobic than women, with 43 per cent of men believing homosexuality to be immoral compared to 27 per cent of women.<sup>16</sup> The difference between men and women is remarkably consistent across different age, socio-economic and regional groupings.

In most regions women are less homophobic than men by a significant margin. However in the Hunter region of NSW (excluding Newcastle), women are more homophobic than men, 37 per cent to 28 per cent. This result is unusual. Although there are exceptions, as a general rule the percentage difference between the attitudes of men and women to homosexuality is smallest where both are least homophobic.

### *Age*

As might be expected, older Australians are considerably more homophobic than young adults; among those over 65, 53 per cent adopt this view compared to 26 per cent among 18 to 24 year olds – see Figure 8. Consistent with earlier research, those in the 14 to 17 age group, especially boys, are much more inclined to hold anti-gay views than young and middle-aged adults. Forty three per cent of male youths in the 14 to 17 age group consider homosexuality to be immoral compared with 23 per cent of young women.

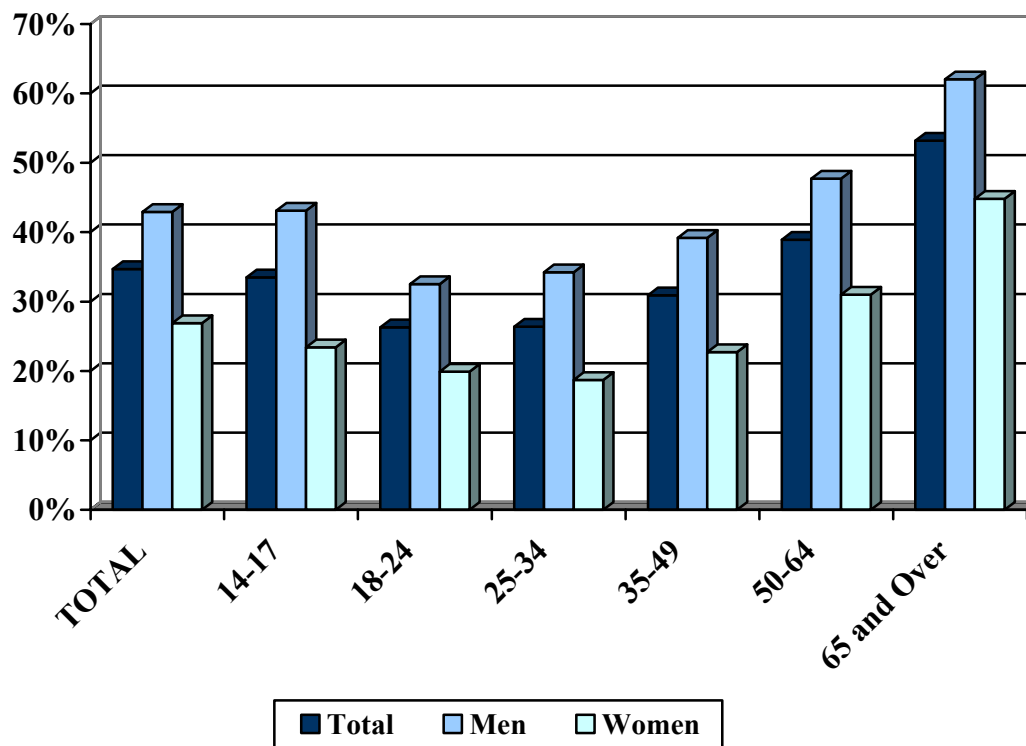
<sup>16</sup> Flood, *ibid.*, reviews evidence that supports the conclusion that males are more homophobic than women. See also, eg., Plummer, David. (1999). *One of the Boys: Masculinity, Homophobia, and Modern Manhood*. New York: Harrington Park Press.

This raises the question of whether attitudes to homosexuality change as teenagers grow into adults and become more comfortable with their own sexual orientation. If attitudes had not softened we might expect to find 18 to 24 year olds as homophobic as 14 to 17 year olds, but this is not the case, although the difference is not great. It would seem that high school is a particularly toxic environment promoting anti-gay beliefs, but that for many these dissipate once they leave school.

It is perhaps not surprising that young people are afraid of any homosexual tendencies they perceive in themselves, for same sex attracted youth experience very difficult times at school. As stated by Robinson and Ferfolja:

Not only do many gay and lesbian individuals hear pejorative language, such as “poof”, “dyke” and “that’s so gay” bandied around on a daily basis, often unchecked by teachers, but gay and lesbian identities are largely omitted from school curricula or from any positive representation at all.<sup>17</sup>

**Figure 8 Percent who consider homosexuality to be immoral, by gender and age**



Source: Roy Morgan Research, October 2003-September 2004

Schools in NSW are required to develop anti-homophobia programs but these are not enforced and, as a consequence, it has been estimated that ‘25 per cent of schools do it well, another 50 per cent pay lip service and the rest completely ignore it’.<sup>18</sup> In

<sup>17</sup> Kerry H. Robinson and Tania Ferfolja, *Anti-Homophobia education in teacher education: Perspectives from teacher educators in NSW, Australia*; Paper present at the NZARE/AARE conference, New Zealand, November 30-December 3, 2003.

<sup>18</sup> Sharon Aris, ‘Damage Control’, *Australian Educator*, Australian Education Union, Spring 2003.

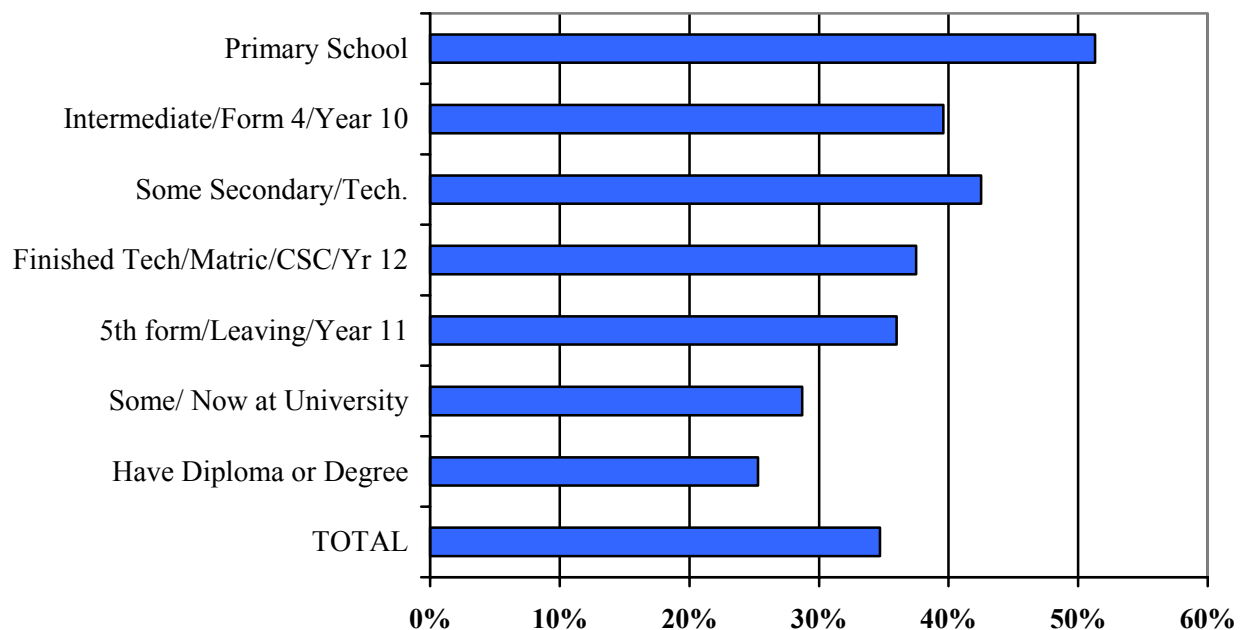
Victoria it is recommended that schools promote safe, discrimination-free environments, which take account of the needs of SSAY. However, many find it difficult to provide education on sexual diversity; reasons include concern about parental and community reactions, moral and religious conflicts, a failure to recognise that the issue is an important one and fear that teaching sexual diversity might be seen to be promoting homosexuality.<sup>19</sup>

#### *Education and socio-economic groups*

Homophobic attitudes are closely related to levels of education with more highly educated people being less homophobic – see Figure 9. But even among tertiary educated men 33 per cent consider homosexuality to be immoral, as do 17 per cent of tertiary educated women. Homophobia among the lower three educational levels is high with 53 per cent of males and 38 per cent of females considering homosexuality to be immoral.

In part reflecting education levels, people in higher socioeconomic groups are less homophobic than people in lower socioeconomic groups; 23 per cent of people in the AB quintile (the highest socio-economic group) are homophobic compared with 45 per cent in the FG quintile (the lowest socio-economic group) – see Figure 10. In every quintile men are more homophobic than women.

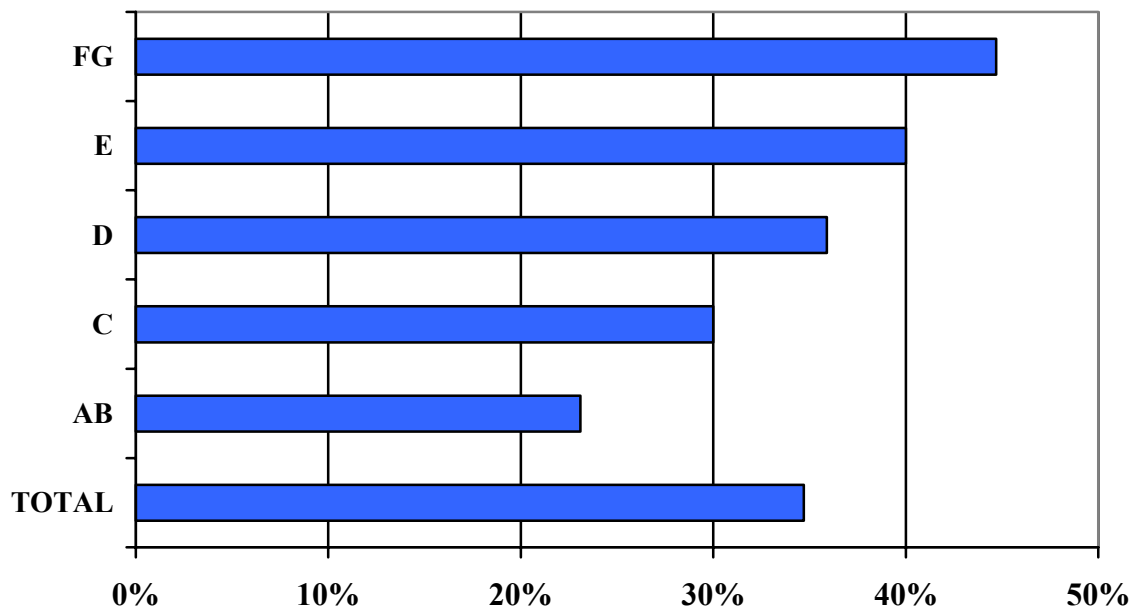
**Figure 9 Percent who consider homosexuality to be immoral, by levels of education**



Source: Roy Morgan Research, October 2003-September 2004

<sup>19</sup> Frank Bonnici and Lance Tucker, *Eliminating homophobia: A social education strategy*, in Proceedings of the National Youth Roundtable, 2002.  
[http://www.thesource.gov.au/involve/NYR/previous\\_roundtables.asp](http://www.thesource.gov.au/involve/NYR/previous_roundtables.asp)

**Figure 10 Percent who consider homosexuality to be immoral, by socio-economic level (quintile)**



Source: Roy Morgan Research, October 2003-September 2004

### *Religion*

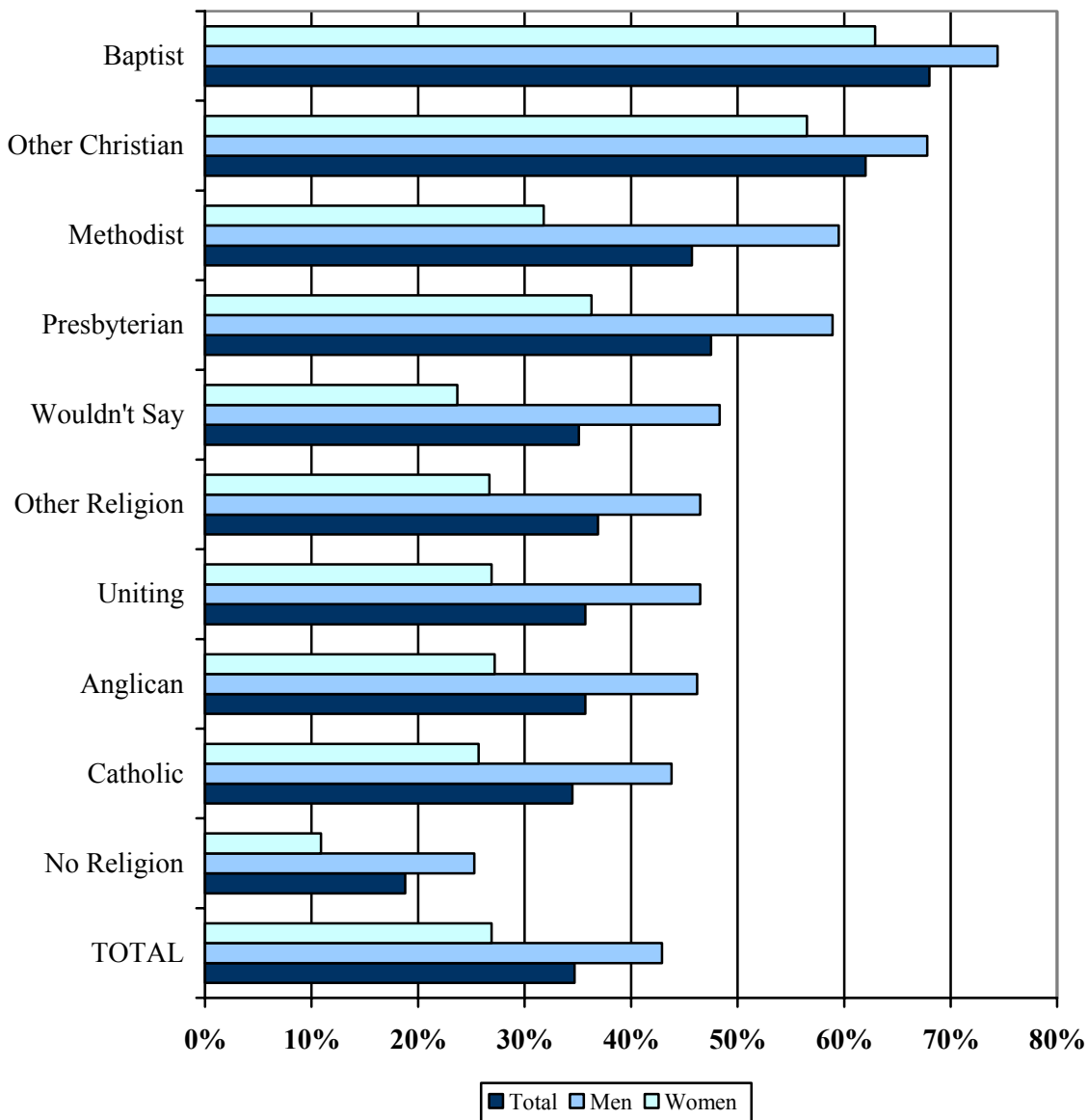
Some religions officially condemn homosexuality as immoral. Perhaps the Catholic Church's views on this subject are best-known in Australia with prominent Catholic leaders active in debates over gay marriage and resisting calls to recognise gay priests. Cardinal George Pell of Sydney has taken a particularly conservative position on these issues.

However, it turns out that, among those who declare a religious affiliation, Catholics are the most tolerant in Australia, with only 34 per cent believing that homosexuality is immoral (although those affiliated with the Anglican and Uniting Churches have similar scores) – see Figure 11 . The most homophobic religious community in Australia are Baptists – where 68 per cent believe homosexuality is immoral. They are followed closely by evangelical Christians (62 per cent). These counter-intuitive findings suggest that the Catholic Church has less doctrinal authority over its congregation than some other Christian and non-Christian churches and that Catholics have become adept at interweaving their own moral instincts with the various proscriptions of their church.

It is interesting to note that while homophobia is high amongst Methodists (46 per cent) the difference of opinion between Methodist men and women is particularly wide, with twice as many men (60 per cent) than women (32 per cent) believing homosexuality is immoral.

Those who say they have no religion are the most tolerant on this issue in Australia with only 19 per cent believing homosexuality to be immoral.

**Figure 11 Percent who consider homosexuality to be immoral, by religion**



Source: Roy Morgan Research, October 2003-September 2004

**5. Concluding remarks**

Two-thirds of the Australian population reject the view that ‘homosexuality is immoral’. While gay men and lesbians in Australia continue to face a range of formal and informal discriminations, majority opinion in the community shows at least a liberal tolerance or acceptance of homosexuality.

However, it is also clear that a significant proportion of the Australian population accepts the view that homosexuality is immoral. Individuals who hold this view may or may not subscribe to other homophobic beliefs and values, and they may or may not engage in discriminatory behaviour against gay men and lesbians and those perceived to be so. Nevertheless, they do believe that homosexuality is outside the forms of sexual attraction, behaviour or identity which have moral legitimacy. Men are far more likely than women to accept this belief. The gender gap in attitudes

towards homosexuality persists across different age, socioeconomic, educational and regional groupings.

While one-third of Australians accept the notion that ‘homosexuality is immoral’, this is likely to decline over time. The belief is most common among the oldest age groups, less common among younger adults, and least common among the youngest adults. This suggests that a belief in the immorality of homosexuality will lessen over time as these cohorts age. (Boys in the youngest age group, 14 to 17, also show relatively high levels of homophobia, but this declines by the time they reach early adulthood.)

In addition, the relationship between religious adherence and the belief that homosexuality is immoral is more complex than some popular stereotypes would lead us to believe. In particular, while Roman Catholic doctrine is seen to be clear in its condemnation of homosexuality, Catholics are the least homophobic of those Australians with a religious affiliation. This suggests that there is a gap between the official teachings of the Church and the everyday beliefs and values of those people who share its faith.