

WHERE WE CALL HOME: LGBT PEOPLE IN RURAL AMERICA

April 2019



Author



NATIONAL CENTER FOR LESBIAN RIGHTS

Partners

This report was authored by:

Movement Advancement Project

MAP's mission is to provide independent and rigorous research, insight and communications that help speed equality and opportunity for all people. MAP works to ensure that all people have a fair chance to pursue health and happiness, earn a living, take care of the ones they love, be safe in their communities, and participate in civic life. For more information, visit www.lgbtmap.org.

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The Equality Federation

The Equality Federation is the movement builder and strategic partner to state-based organizations advocating for LGBTQ people. From Equality Florida to Freedom Oklahoma to Basic Rights Oregon, we amplify the power of the state-based LGBTQ movement. We work collaboratively on critical issues—from advancing workplace fairness and family recognition to defeating anti-transgender bathroom bans and HIV criminalization laws—that affect how LGBTQ people experience the world from cradle to grave. Together with our partners we work on cross-cutting issues impacting our community such as racial equity, reproductive justice, and immigration. Learn more at www.equalityfederation.org.

The National Black Justice Coalition (NBJC)

NBJC is a civil rights organization dedicated to the empowerment of Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and same gender loving (LGBTQ/SGL) people, including people living with HIV/AIDS. NBJC's mission is to end racism, homophobia, and LGBTQ/SGL bias and stigma. As America's leading national Black LGBTQ/SGL civil rights organization focused on federal public policy, NBJC has accepted the charge to lead Black families in strengthening the bonds and bridging the gaps between the movements for racial justice and LGBTQ/SGL equality. Learn more at www.nbjc.org.

The National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR)

NCLR was the first national LGBTQ legal organization founded by women and brings a fierce, longstanding commitment to racial and economic justice and our community's most vulnerable. Since 1977, NCLR has been at the forefront of advancing the civil and human rights of our full LGBTQ community and their families through impact litigation, public policy, and public education. Decades ago, NCLR led the way by establishing the first LGBTQ Immigration Project, Transgender Rights Project, Youth Project, Elder Law Project, and began working to end conversion therapy through what is now the Born Perfect campaign. NCLR also hosts regular Rural Pride convenings around the country, which provides a forum to focus on the unique needs of the rural LGBTQ community. Learn more at www.nclrights.org.

This work contains data generated from the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey, which was conducted by the National Center for Transgender Equality. To find out more about the U.S. Transgender Survey, visit <http://www.ustranssurvey.org>.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	I
Interviewees.....	i
Data Support and Consultation	i
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	iii
INTRODUCTION	1
SECTION 1: RURAL AMERICA: WHERE MANY LGBT PEOPLE CALL HOME	5
Estimates of People Living in Rural Communities	5
Estimates of LGBT People Living in Rural Communities	6
SECTION 2: STRENGTHS, STRUCTURES, AND CHALLENGES: HOW RURAL LIFE AMPLIFIES THE IMPACT OF ACCEPTANCE AND REJECTION	9
Family, Faith, and Community.....	11
Family.....	11
LGBT Parents.....	12
LGBT Youth	14
Faith Communities.....	15
Community Organizations.....	17
Education and Schools	22
Employment and Economic Security.....	26
Farming and Agriculture	27
Immigrant Workers in Rural Communities	28
Discrimination at Work	28
Housing & Homelessness.....	31
LGBT Youth Homelessness.....	33
Public Places and Businesses.....	35
Health Care	38
Fewer Alternative Providers.....	38
Lower Cultural Competency.....	38
Discrimination in Rural Health Care	41
The Legal System.....	46
Legal Bias	46
Fines, Fees, and Cash Bail.....	48
The Strengths, Structures, and Challenges Shaping LGBT Life in Rural Communities.....	49
SECTION 3: SOCIAL AND POLITICAL LANDSCAPE: LGBT PEOPLE IN RURAL AREAS ARE MORE VULNERABLE TO DISCRIMINATION	51
Public Opinion: Less Supportive, But More Diverse Than Imagined	51
Policy Landscape	54
Federal Laws: No Clear, Consistent Protections	54
State Laws.....	54
Rural States Have Worse Overall LGBT Policy Climate	56
Rural States Have Fewer LGBT Protections.....	57

Rural States Have More Discriminatory Laws.....	58
Vast Differences in Legal Protections Across and Within Regions	59
Local Laws: Fewer Protections in Rural Areas.....	62
Political Power	64
Less Political Representation	64
Different Political Influence.....	65
The Social and Political Landscape for LGBT People in Rural Communities.....	67
RECOMMENDATIONS	68
CONCLUSION	80
ENDNOTES	81

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Rural America is where many LGBT people call home. LGBT people are part of the fabric of rural and urban communities alike, working as teachers and ministers, small business owners and community organizers, farmers and construction workers. LGBT people who choose to live in rural communities often choose to live there for many of the same reasons that other people do: they value the same, wonderful aspects of rural life as other people, including vibrant and tight-knit community, family life, and connection to the land. Rural communities are where they were raised, where their families are, where they build their lives, or simply where they call home.

LGBT people also experience many of the same challenges of rural life, including fewer healthcare providers, declining populations, and limited employment opportunities. However, LGBT people in rural areas are uniquely affected by the structural challenges and other aspects of rural life, which amplify the impacts of both rejection and acceptance. What's more, the social and political landscape of rural areas makes LGBT people more vulnerable to discrimination. Public opinion in rural areas is generally less supportive of LGBT people and policies, and rural states are significantly less likely to have vital nondiscrimination laws and more likely to have harmful, discriminatory laws. Additionally, the geographic distance and isolation of rural areas makes political organizing more difficult, further lessening the ability of LGBT people in rural areas to effect change in their local communities.

While this report focuses on the impact of rural life on LGBT people specifically, this analysis of rural life in the United States may also describe the experiences of many people of color, immigrants, people with disabilities, and others who might be considered "different" in many parts of rural America. It is further important to note that many LGBT people in rural America are also people of color, immigrants, people with disabilities, or others living at the intersection of multiple minority identities. For these communities, the challenges and experiences described herein are likely magnified multiple times over.

Overall, the report illustrates the importance of examining the impact of place of residence on LGBT people's (and indeed many communities') experiences throughout America, and shows the critical need

for advancing federal and state nondiscrimination protections and LGBT-inclusive community services in rural America, where so many LGBT people call home.

SECTION 1: Rural America: Where Many LGBT People Call Home

According to the U.S. Census, over 62 million people, or roughly one in five American residents, live in rural areas.ⁱ As of the 2010 Census, about one in five rural residents are people of color, and among rural residents of color, 40% are Black, 35% are Latinx, and 25% are Native American, Asian or Pacific Islander, or multiracial.ⁱⁱ

National surveys of rural areas show that between 3% and 5% of the rural population identifies as LGBT,ⁱⁱⁱ consistent with estimates that 4.5% of the U.S. adult population identifies as LGBT.^{iv} Additional research shows that roughly 10% of youth identify as LGBT, with rural youth just as likely as urban youth to identify as LGBT.^v Taken together, this suggests that between 2.9 million and 3.8 million LGBT people—or 15-20% of the total U.S. LGBT population—live in rural areas around the country.^{vi}

General societal stereotypes and pop culture portrayals of LGBT people suggest that LGBT people live solely in urban settings, while stereotypes and portrayals of rural communities rarely, if ever, include LGBT people—except as targets of anti-LGBT violence, or as people yearning to leave their rural home to migrate to "more accepting" urban areas.^{vii} These assumptions and narratives create a singular understanding of "how to be"—and where to be—LGBT in the United States.

In reality, not only do LGBT people live in rural America, but many of them want to and enjoy living in rural America. LGBT people in urban and rural areas report similar levels of subjective well-being, health, and satisfaction.^{viii} In discussions with LGBT people living in rural communities, researchers find that for many LGBT people in rural areas, living in a rural area may be just as important to who they are as being LGBT.^{ix}

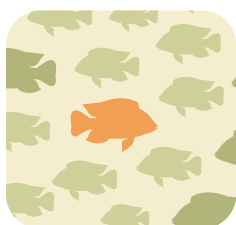
2.9-3.8 Million
LGBT People in Rural America

-Movement Advancement Project, with data from the U.S. Census Bureau, the CDC, and The Williams Institute

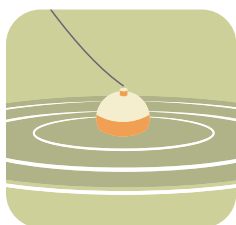
SECTION 2: Strengths, Structures, and Challenges: How Rural Life Amplifies the Impact of Acceptance and Rejection

Just as there is no singular LGBT experience, there is no singular rural experience. However, many people in rural parts of the country describe their communities in similar ways: built around family and close-knit community; centered around strong social institutions such as churches, schools, and local businesses; deeply connected to place and the environment; and based in a sense of efficacy and self-reliance to make change in their own communities.^x Certain challenges and experiences are also increasingly common in rural America, including the ongoing economic hardships; addiction and substance abuse, including the opioid epidemic; fewer or more distant options for quality health care; and more.

The challenges of rural life often lead to different consequences for LGBT people, and can amplify LGBT people's experiences of both acceptance and rejection. Why is this the case?



Increased visibility. The lower population of urban areas means that anyone who is “different” can be more noticeable—and that when someone is different, more people know it, particularly in tightly-knit communities. If an LGBT person in a rural community is open about their identity in even one part of their life, such as work, it is likely that many community members, including outside of work, will know they are LGBT.



Ripple effects. Rural life and communities are deeply interconnected, and so experiences in one area of life can create ripple effects that touch many other areas of life. For example, if a person is excluded from their faith community for being gay, they may have a difficult time at work or finding a job, because their church members may also be their coworkers or potential employers. This effect may also work in a positive way: if a rural church community or employer takes a supportive stand for local LGBT residents, that support can also ripple outward to other areas of life.



Fewer alternatives in the face of discrimination. Many rural areas face the challenge of having too few doctors, employers, housing options, and more. For LGBT people in rural areas—and especially LGBT people of color in rural areas—this poses a special challenge, because if they are discriminated against, they may have no alternative place to find a doctor, job, or home. Additionally, many service providers in rural areas are religiously-affiliated and are covered under religious exemption laws that allow them to discriminate, even when providing public services.



Less support structure. Finally, the greater social and geographic isolation of rural areas means there are fewer support structures available to LGBT people in rural areas. When LGBT people in rural areas face discrimination, or even simply are struggling with acceptance or coming out, there are fewer places to turn for social support, legal support, or even just basic information.

The report addresses how these unique challenges of rural life impact the experiences of LGBT people as they build families and community—and access education, employment, housing, public services and accommodations, health care, the legal system, and more.



Family, faith, and community comprise the core of how many people living in rural places create, nurture, and sustain emotional and social connections to one another. They also provide valuable opportunities that impact other areas of life, including employment options, access to knowledge and resources, and more. So when family, faith, and community organizations are not welcoming—or worse, are intentionally exclusionary—the lack of alternatives can result in emotional, spiritual, and economic isolation for LGBT people that has substantial impacts for overall wellbeing and success.



Education and schools are another cornerstone institution of rural communities, but resource and teacher shortages mean students in rural districts are often at a disadvantage compared to their urban and suburban peers. LGBT students (and children with LGBT parents) in rural districts are at a further disadvantage if they experience more hostile school climates, fewer structural or policy supports, or an absence of educational alternatives—as research shows they often do.^{xi}



Employment and economic security are key issues in rural communities. Differences such as high rates of entrepreneurship to high rates of poverty and unemployment impact all residents in rural America. LGBT people face unique challenges because they are more visible in rural communities, face high rates of discrimination at work, and face fewer alternative job options. Additionally, LGBT people in rural areas are less likely to have vital protections against employment discrimination, at both the state and local level.



Housing and homelessness are also problems facing rural communities. Though housing may be more affordable in rural areas compared to suburban or urban areas, housing costs remain unaffordable for many rural residents, and particularly so for quality housing. LGBT people in rural areas may face discrimination when seeking housing, from applying for rentals to applying for mortgages, lowering the chances of finding quality, affordable housing even further. LGBT youth also face disproportionate rates of homelessness, and in rural areas, a lack of services providers with competency serving LGBT youth means this homelessness may be more difficult to recognize and redress.



Public places and businesses, or “public accommodations,” refers to a wide range of businesses, services, and spaces that make up rural Main Streets and everyday life, from restaurants and coffeshops to public libraries and healthcare providers. Rural areas generally have fewer providers of such services, and as a result, if an LGBT person in a rural area is discriminated against

when seeking such a service, they are unlikely to have an alternative place to get that service. Combined with a lack of nondiscrimination protections, and a higher likelihood of religious exemption laws, LGBT people in rural areas are especially vulnerable to discrimination in public accommodations and have few options for overcoming such discrimination.



Healthcare access can be difficult in rural communities, with hospitals closing and fewer providers available—not to mention the ongoing opioid crisis—making it extremely challenging for LGBT patients to find knowledgeable and affirming health care. Rural areas are also more likely to be served by religious healthcare providers, who may be covered under religious exemptions laws that may allow them to discriminate. When LGBT patients do experience discrimination, they may have no alternative healthcare provider from whom to seek help. Experiences or fear of discrimination may also lead LGBT people to avoid health care or receive inadequate care or no care at all, putting the health and wellbeing of LGBT people in rural communities especially at risk.



The legal system is a large component of rural economies. But the reliance on fines, fees, and cash bail can create poverty traps, particularly in rural areas (where poverty rates are higher) and for LGBT people (who are more likely to experience poverty). Further, LGBT people—particularly people of color and/or transgender people—experience significant bias and discrimination in the legal system. In rural areas where there are fewer legal providers and outside resources, such as legal clinics or LGBT community centers, LGBT people may be even more vulnerable to legal discrimination.

Contrary to many societal images of rural areas, many rural communities embrace their LGBT neighbors and family members. However, when LGBT people in rural communities do experience discrimination, it can also be harder to overcome due to their increased visibility, the ripple effects of living in a close-knit community, fewer alternatives in the face of discrimination, and fewer support structures to deal with hardship or discrimination.

SECTION 3: Social and Political Landscape: LGBT People in Rural Areas are More Vulnerable to Discrimination

Rural communities also have unique social and political landscapes regarding LGBT people and issues. On average, public opinion in rural areas is relatively less supportive of LGBT people and issues, but it is far more diverse than might be assumed. More significantly, majority-rural states are far less likely to have vital state-level nondiscrimination protections and far more likely to have harmful, discriminatory policies. Further, LGBT people in rural areas have less political power than in other areas: there are fewer LGBT-identified elected officials in rural areas, and rural areas also tend to have less of the sociopolitical infrastructure that helps advance understanding of LGBT people and policies. As a result, LGBT people in rural America are more vulnerable to discrimination (including state-sanctioned discrimination) and less able to cope with its effects.



Public Opinion. The lower population of rural areas means there are fewer LGBT people in rural areas overall. Therefore, rural populations may be less familiar with LGBT people (and indeed, people in rural areas are less likely than urbanites to have a close friend or family member who is gay, lesbian, or transgender).^{xii} Rural residents are also, on average, less supportive of legal and policy protections for LGBT people. However, rural public opinion is far more diverse than might be assumed: a majority of rural residents still support these policies. This is especially true among younger rural residents, women, and people of color.

The complexity of public opinion in rural America illustrates that rural communities must not be written off as opposing equality for LGBT people. Certainly, the public opinion landscape may be more challenging in rural areas than outside them, but support for LGBT people exists—and has always existed—within rural America. Significant policy and legal work still needs to be done to protect LGBT people in rural areas, but public opinion data show that this significant work can be done.



Policy Landscape. LGBT people in rural areas face a challenging policy landscape. There are few, if any, clear and explicit federal nondiscrimination protections for LGBT people. At the state level, LGBT people in rural states are less likely to have key legal protections against discrimination in employment, housing, public accommodations, health care, adoption and foster care, and more. Rural states are also less likely to have protections against conversion therapy and bullying in schools, while transgender people in rural states are less likely to have relatively straightforward processes for updating their gender marker on key identity documents. LGBT people in rural states are also more likely to experience harmful, discriminatory laws, including HIV criminalization and statewide religious exemptions. Even at the local level, rural states have a smaller percent of their population protected by LGBT-inclusive local ordinances, compared to the percent protected in urban states. However, many small towns and rural areas are working diligently to welcome and protect their LGBT residents, acting as role models for local-level leadership in the fight for LGBT equality.

In short, LGBT people in rural areas are disproportionately harmed by the lack of protections and the presence of discriminatory laws. The current policy landscape demonstrates the clear and urgent need for federal and state nondiscrimination protections for LGBT people, as well as the potential harm from discriminatory laws such as religious exemptions.



Political Power. In rural areas, LGBT people are less likely to be represented by LGBT elected officials and less likely to have the types of social infrastructure, such as community centers, that can often serve as spaces for organizing and public education to improve support for LGBT people and issues. LGBT people in rural areas may also face different political challenges than LGBT people in urban areas, such as needing to focus on more basic public education about LGBT people. Given the relative scarcity of resources in rural areas, LGBT people may have different (i.e., not LGBT-specific) priorities altogether. Taken together, these structural challenges mean that LGBT people in rural areas have fewer resources and a strained ability for advocating for the political changes they may need.

Recommendations

As argued throughout the report, the strengths, structures, and challenges of rural life can have a profound and unique impact on the experiences of LGBT people in rural America. While the full report offers many recommendations, the bottom line is this: LGBT people in rural areas shouldn't have to choose between basic rights and protections and the place they call home.

This is why it's critical to pass LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination protections at the federal, state, and local level, while also pursuing important advances such as resisting or repealing religious exemption laws that may allow service providers to discriminate, expanding LGBT competency training for service providers, and more.

Continuing to address the structural challenges facing rural communities broadly (e.g., improved healthcare access, internet access, and more) will also improve the experiences of LGBT people in rural areas, and indeed all residents of rural America.

Endnotes

- ⁱ U.S. Census. December 2016. "New Census Data Show Differences Between Urban and Rural Populations."
- ⁱⁱ Daniel Lichter. 2012. "Immigration and the New Racial Diversity in Rural America." *Rural Sociology* 77(1): 3-35.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Public Religion Research Institute. 2017. American Values Atlas. NPR/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation/Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. October 2018. *Life in Rural America*.
- ^{iv} Frank Newport. "In U.S., Estimate of LGBT Population Rises to 4.5%." 2018. Gallup.
- ^v SK Choi, L Baams, and BDM Wilson. 2017. *LGBTQ Youth in California's Public Schools: Differences Across the State*. Los Angeles: The Williams Institute.
- MM Johns, R Lowry, J Andrzejewski, et al. 2019. "Transgender Identity and Experiences of Violence Victimization, Substance Use, Suicide Risk, and Sexual Risk Behaviors Among High School Students—19 States and Large Urban School Districts, 2017." *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 68:67-71.
- L Kann et al. 2016. "Sexual Identity, Sex of Sexual Contacts, and Health-Related Behaviors Among Students in Grades 9-12—United States and Selected Sites, 2015." *MMWR Surveill Summ* 65(SS-9):1-202.
- ^{vi} This range was calculated using the Census' estimates that 19.3% of the population (62.9 million people) lives in rural areas, that 77.7% of rural residents are 18 or older, and that 22.3% of rural residents are below the age of 18. Applying 3%-5% to the rural adult population and 10% to the rural youth population generates the estimate of 2.9-3.8 million LGBT people in rural areas.
- ^{vii} Summarized in: Luke Andrew Boso. 2014. "Policing Masculinity in Small-Town America." *Temple Political & Civil Rights Law Review* 23(345).
- ^{viii} Chris Wienke and Gretchen Hill. 2013. "Does Place of Residence Matter? Rural—Urban Differences and the Wellbeing of Gay Men and Lesbians." *Journal of Homosexuality* 60(9): 1256-79.
- ^{ix} Emily Kazyak. 2011. "Disrupting Cultural Selves: Constructing Gay and Lesbian Identities in Rural Locales." *Qualitative Sociology* 34(4): 561-81.
- ^x Katherine J. Cramer. 2016. *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*. University of Chicago Press. NPR/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation/Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. October 2018. *Life in Rural America*.
- ^{xi} JG Kosciw et. al. 2018. *The 2017 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth in our nation's schools*. New York: GLSEN.
- ^{xii} PRRI. 2017.

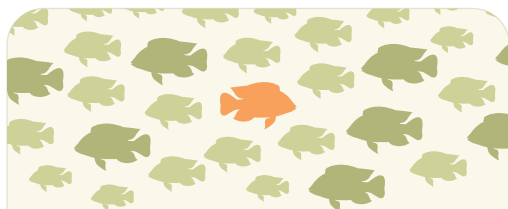
LGBT PEOPLE IN RURAL AREAS HAVE UNIQUE EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES

RURAL AMERICA IS HOME TO MANY LGBT PEOPLE

An estimated 2.9 – 3.8 million LGBT people live in rural communities across the United States. Many LGBT people choose to live in rural areas for the same reasons that non-LGBT people do, including tight-knit communities and a rural way of life.

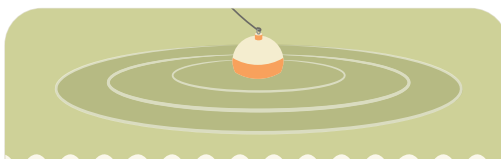


STRENGTHS, STRUCTURES, AND CHALLENGES: HOW RURAL LIFE AMPLIFIES THE IMPACT OF ACCEPTANCE AND REJECTION



INCREASED VISIBILITY

Fewer people in rural communities means any difference is more noticeable.



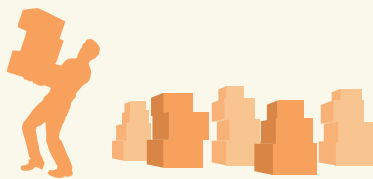
RIPPLE EFFECTS

When communities are tightly interwoven, rejection and acceptance in one area of life (such as church) can ripple over into others (such as work or school).



FEWER ALTERNATIVES

In the face of discrimination, the already limited number of rural service providers can be limited even further.



LESS SUPPORT STRUCTURE

More social and geographic isolation means less ability to find supportive resources, build supportive community, and endure challenges or discrimination.

IMPACTING MANY AREAS OF LIFE:



Family, Faith, & Community



Education



Employment & Economic Security



Housing & Homelessness



Public Places & Businesses



Health Care



Legal System

SOCIAL & POLITICAL LANDSCAPE: RURAL LGBT PEOPLE ARE MORE VULNERABLE TO DISCRIMINATION



LESS SUPPORTIVE PUBLIC OPINION

Rural residents are less likely to know LGBT people and less supportive of LGBT policies. However, many rural residents—especially rural people of color, women, and younger people—support LGBT policies.



FEWER LEGAL AND POLICY PROTECTIONS

Rural states are less likely to have vital protections and laws for LGBT people. They are also more likely to have harmful, discriminatory laws.



LESS POLITICAL POWER

In rural areas, there are fewer LGBT elected officials, fewer LGBT-supportive resources that can help make political change, and political organizing is more difficult due to geographic isolation and other factors.

INTRODUCTION

Popular culture images of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people suggest that most LGBT people live in cities or on the coasts. Yet the more than 19 million LGBT people in the United States^a—reflecting 4.5% of U.S. adults¹ and roughly 10% of youth²—live in every county and congressional district of the United States, including rural communities.³ As shown in the infographic, LGBT people in rural America often have unique experiences, both good and bad, because of who they are and where they live.

Rural America is where many LGBT people call home. LGBT people are part of the fabric of rural and urban communities alike, working as teachers and ministers, small business owners and community organizers, farmers and construction workers, and much more. Living in rural areas may sometimes create additional obstacles, and some LGBT people leave for other areas, but the LGBT people who choose to live in rural communities often choose to live there for many of the same reasons that other people do. Rural communities are where they were raised, where their families are, where they build their lives, or simply where they call home.

LGBT people in rural America share many of the same concerns and dreams as their non-LGBT neighbors, and they experience many of the same wonderful aspects of rural life, including vibrant community, family life, and connection to the land. They also experience many of the same challenges of rural life, including fewer healthcare providers, declining populations, and limited employment opportunities. As discussed next, however, though LGBT people in rural areas face many of the same challenges as their neighbors, they experience different consequences.

The strengths, structures, and challenges of rural life amplify the impact of rejection—and acceptance. Regardless of whether they live in urban or rural settings, many LGBT people experience stigma and

discrimination, including in key community institutions, education, employment, housing, accessing services and public accommodations, health care, the legal system, and more. But for LGBT people in rural areas, the impact of discrimination can be more profound, for at least four reasons:

- **Increased visibility.** The lower population of rural areas means that anyone who is “different” may be more noticeable—and the often tight-knit nature of rural communities means that when someone is different, more people know it. If an LGBT person in a rural community is open about their identity in even one part of their life, such as work, it is likely that many other community members, including outside of work, will also know they are LGBT.
- **Ripple effects.** This interconnected, tight-knit aspect of rural life and communities may also lead to ripple effects that aren’t as profound in urban areas. What happens in one’s family or church community, whether supportive or discriminatory, can ripple outward to other areas of life, such as employment and beyond.
- **Fewer alternatives in the face of discrimination.** Additionally, many rural areas face structural challenges that impact all residents, such as fewer healthcare providers or employers. However, these challenges have a unique impact on LGBT people, who may have fewer options to find doctors or work if they are discriminated against. LGBT people of color in rural areas experience this disadvantage even further. Further amplifying this problem, many service providers in rural areas are religiously-affiliated and are covered under religious exemption laws that may allow them to discriminate, even when providing public services.
- **Less support structure.** Finally, the relative geographic isolation of rural areas means there are fewer LGBT people, and that what, if any, LGBT-supportive resources exist are fewer and farther between. This means that when LGBT people face discrimination, or even simply are struggling with acceptance or coming out, there are fewer places to turn for social support, legal support, or even just basic information. This can be a particular challenge for LGBT youth or youth who are questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity, as well as for their families.

^a In 2017, the U.S. Census estimated the total U.S. population to be 325.7 million people, with 252.1 million adults and 73.6 million youth (under age 18). (At the time of this report’s publication, 2018 estimates for the percent of the population under age 18 were not yet available.) Gallup estimates that 4.5% of U.S. adults identify as LGBT, and CDC research shows that roughly 8% of high school students identify as LGB and 1.8% identify as transgender. Similarly, Williams Institute research shows that at least 10% of youth in California identify as LGBT. California is home to more than 12% of the country’s population and is therefore reasonable for drawing inferences about the broader U.S. population. Gallup estimates suggest that 11.3 million adults identify as LGBT, and the CDC’s/Williams’ estimates suggest that about 10%, or at least 7.6 million, youth identify as LGBT, leading to an estimate of about 19 million LGBT people in the United States.

The social and political landscape of rural America means that LGBT people in rural areas are more vulnerable to discrimination. In addition to the structural challenges of small, rural communities described above, rural residents are less likely to know an LGBT person, and they are also, on average, less supportive of legal and policy protections for LGBT people, though rural public opinion is more diverse than might be assumed. More significantly, “majority-rural states” (see *Deeper Dive: The Challenge of Defining “Rural”*) are less likely to have vital state-level nondiscrimination protections and more likely to have harmful, discriminatory policies. Further, LGBT people in rural areas have less political power than in other areas: there are fewer LGBT-identified elected officials in rural areas, the geography of rural areas makes political organizing difficult, and rural areas also tend to have less of the sociopolitical infrastructure that is often key to advancing understanding of LGBT people and policies. As a result of these structural obstacles, LGBT people in rural America are more vulnerable to discrimination and less able to cope with its effects.

Importantly, this analysis of life in rural America also describes the experiences of many people of color, immigrants, people with disabilities, and others who might be considered “different” in many parts of rural America. This report focuses on the impact of rural life on LGBT people specifically, and their unique experiences, but it is important to note that many LGBT people in rural America are also people of color, immigrants, people with disabilities, or others living at the intersection of multiple minority identities. For these communities, the challenges and experiences are likely magnified multiple times over.

Overall, this report highlights the structural differences in rural life that impact all rural Americans, and it shows how these differences uniquely impact LGBT people, making them more vulnerable to discrimination and less able to respond to its harmful effects. It also discusses the social and political landscape of rural America, and further offers a set of recommendations for improving the lives of LGBT people in rural America. The report illustrates the importance of considering how place of residence impacts LGBT people’s experience throughout America, and shows the critical need for advancing federal and state nondiscrimination protections and LGBT-inclusive community services in rural America, where so many LGBT people call home.

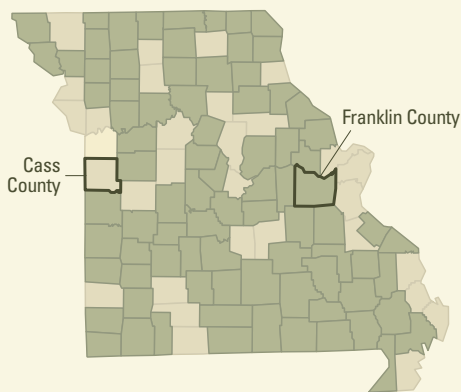


Deeper Dive: The Challenge of Defining “Rural”

(continued on next page)

There is no singular definition of “rural” used in demographic research, in policy research, or even in rural communities. Rather, for many people living in rural places, it is less of a quantitative measure and more of a lived experience.

This report recognizes this and allows for fluidity and nuance in writing about what it means to live in a “rural” place as an LGBT person. This report uses the term “rural” to refer to communities that may be geographically isolated and have relatively small population centers, as well as those that may have historically been rooted in agricultural or other “working lands,” may have a “small town feel,” communities that residents describe as rural, and communities that may have grown in size without increasing in infrastructure.



Defining Rural. Some definitions of rural are strictly based on the total population in a given area, such as a county. Counties with fewer than several thousand people, for example, might be defined as rural, while counties with more residents would be defined as suburban or urban. However, this method does not account for the fact that counties typically have a mix of urban and rural areas, and a county’s population may be more concentrated in one type of area than another.

The U.S. Census uses a different method that, rather than just counting the total number of people in a county, instead begins by examining smaller areas and identifying them as either urban or rural.⁴ A county can therefore have a mix of urban and rural areas, and

individuals within a county can be coded as urban or rural residents, according to how the area they live in is identified. This allows researchers to see, for example, what percent of a county’s population lives in rural areas, or whether a county is majority-urban or majority-rural. This more micro-level analysis allows for a more in-depth understanding of rural areas and populations.

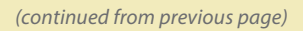
For example, Missouri’s Cass County and Franklin County both have populations of roughly 100,000 people, and both are adjacent to a major metropolitan area (Kansas City and St. Louis, respectively). By total population alone, both counties would likely be defined as urban. But using the Census’ more micro-focused approach, we can see where in each county the roughly 100,000 residents actually live.

In Cass County, there are a number of urban areas as the county draws closer to the Kansas City area, and there are also several urban clusters (different from and less populated than “urban areas,” but still urban by Census definitions). Overall, about two-thirds of Cass County’s residents live in these urban areas or clusters, and the remaining third lives in rural areas. In Franklin County, however, there are no urban areas. There are only urban clusters and rural areas. More than half of the county’s residents live in rural areas.

As a result, though both counties have approximately the same total population and both are adjacent to major cities, the Census’ approach reveals that both counties have urban and rural residents. The Census method also shows that the population of one county (Cass) is mostly urban, while the other (Franklin) is mostly rural.

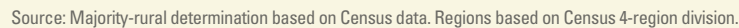
“Majority-Rural States.” Though there is no single definition of rural, this report relies on U.S. Census approaches for the report’s original data analyses regarding policy trends across states and regions.

We use Census data to identify counties—such as Franklin County, Missouri—whose residents mostly or all live in rural areas.⁵ If at least 50% of a county’s population lives in rural areas, the Census codes that county as majority-rural. We then repeat that process at the state level: if at least 50% of a state’s counties are rural counties, then that state is coded as “majority-rural.” We do not measure rurality by the total number of state (continued on the next page)



In short, “majority-rural states”—or simply “rural states”—refers to states where, in a majority of counties, a majority of people live in rural areas. These states are shown in *Figure 1*.

States Where, in a Majority of Counties, The Majority of Residents Live in Rural Areas



We refer to states that are not-majority-rural as “majority-urban,” or urban, for the sake of simplicity. This is consistent with the U.S. Census’ definition of rural as anything that is not urban. These language choices are for accessibility and ease of understanding, and not intended to contribute to a false binary of rural versus urban. Following Census approaches, suburban areas are included under “urban.”

SECTION 1: RURAL AMERICA: WHERE MANY LGBT PEOPLE CALL HOME

Estimates of People Living in Rural Communities

According to the U.S. Census, over 62 million people, or roughly one in five Americans, live in rural areas. These rural areas account for 97% of the country's land area.⁶ *Figure 2* shows that, using this report's definition (see *Deeper Dive*, previous page), nearly 60% of counties in the United States are majority-rural. In other words, the U.S. is itself a majority-rural country, and especially so in the Midwest and in the South (65% and 63% majority-rural counties, respectively).

The assumption that rural areas are uniformly white ignores both the current and historical racial and ethnic diversity of rural communities, and the extent to which rural communities are becoming even more diverse. As of the 2010 Census, about one in five rural residents are people of color, and among rural residents of color, about 40% are Black, 35% are Latinx, and 25% are Native American, Asian or Pacific Islander, or multiracial.⁷

In many rural counties in the mid-Atlantic and South, Black people constitute a majority of residents, while rural counties and reservations in the upper Midwest, Mountain West, and Southwest are home to many Native Americans.⁸ In the South and Southwest, Latinos are a significant portion of the population, including in rural areas.⁹ In fact, in several entire states, the majority or nearly half of rural and small-town residents are people of color, including in Hawai'i (69%), New Mexico (61%), South Carolina (44%), Mississippi (43%), Arizona and Texas (42%), and New Jersey (41%).¹⁰

One in Five Rural Residents are People of Color



Among rural residents of color:

40%

are Black

35%

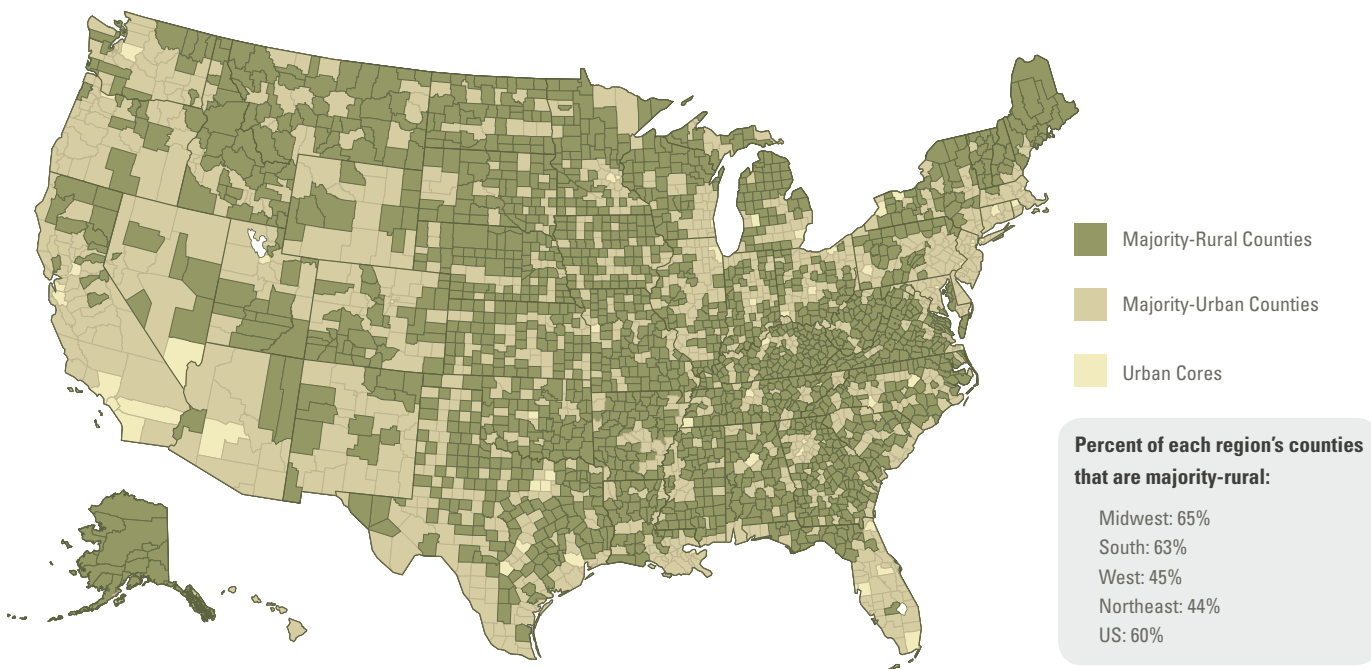
are Latinx

25%

are Native American, Asian/
Pacific Islander, or multiracial

Source: 2010 U.S. Census.

Figure 2: Majority of U.S. Counties are Rural, Especially in the Midwest and South
Counties Where the Majority of Residents Live in Rural Areas



Source: Format adapted from Pew 2018, "What Unites and Divides Urban, Suburban and Rural Communities." Rural definition and majority-rural determination based on U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census, Summary File 1, Table P2. "County Classification Lookup Table."



And the face of rural communities, particularly in the Midwest, is growing even more racially and ethnically diverse. Between 2000 and 2010, for example, the population of people of color in nonmetropolitan areas increased by 20%,^b with the Latino population growing in these areas by 45% during this period.¹¹ Research about the changing landscape of rural communities shows that many Latino residents of Midwestern rural communities moved there for economic opportunities.¹² One third of Latinos living in non-metro communities were born outside the United States, emphasizing the importance of these residents in rural communities and economies, especially agriculture (farming, forestry, and fisheries), construction (including maintenance and repair), and service (including sales and office work).¹³

While popular culture and news reports often document the phenomenon of rural residents leaving for more urban areas, many people also choose to stay in, live in, or return to rural America. Forty-one percent (41%) of rural adults have lived in or near their community their entire lives (not including time away for school or military service),¹⁴ and the majority (63%) of people living in rural communities have lived there for more than a decade, compared to just 45% of people living in urban areas.¹⁵ Two in five rural residents (42%) said they came back or remained in their communities in order to be near family,¹⁶ and U.S. Department of Agriculture research similarly shows that common reasons for returning to rural areas include family (either having parents or family members in rural communities, or wanting to raise one's own family there) and the quality of community.¹⁷ Indeed, when asked what the biggest strength is of their community, rural residents' most frequent answer was the closeness of the community.¹⁸

Estimates of LGBT People Living in Rural Communities

That LGBT people choose to live in rural communities may come as a surprise to many. General societal stereotypes and pop culture portrayals of LGBT people suggest that LGBT people live solely in urban settings, while stereotypes and portrayals of rural communities rarely, if ever, include LGBT people—except as targets of anti-LGBT violence, or as people yearning to leave their rural home to migrate to “more accepting” urban areas.¹⁹ These assumptions and narratives create a singular understanding of “how to be”—and where to

be—LGBT in the United States. This understanding of LGBT people as incompatible with rural communities doesn't reflect the true diversity of the LGBT population across lines of race, class, gender, and geography. Too often, the lives of LGBT people in rural communities are cast in a single light of oppression and stigma rather than recognizing the complexity and, for many, the beauty, of life in rural areas.²⁰

2.9-3.8 Million LGBT People in Rural America

-Movement Advancement Project, with data from the U.S. Census Bureau, the CDC, and The Williams Institute

As of 2018, approximately 4.5% of the adult population identifies as LGBT.²¹ National surveys of rural areas show that between 3% and 5% of the rural adult population identifies as LGBT.²² Other research suggests roughly 10% of youth identify as LGBT, with rural youth equally as likely as urban youth to identify as LGBT.²³ Taken together, this suggests that between 2.9 million and 3.8 million LGBT people live in rural areas around the country.^c

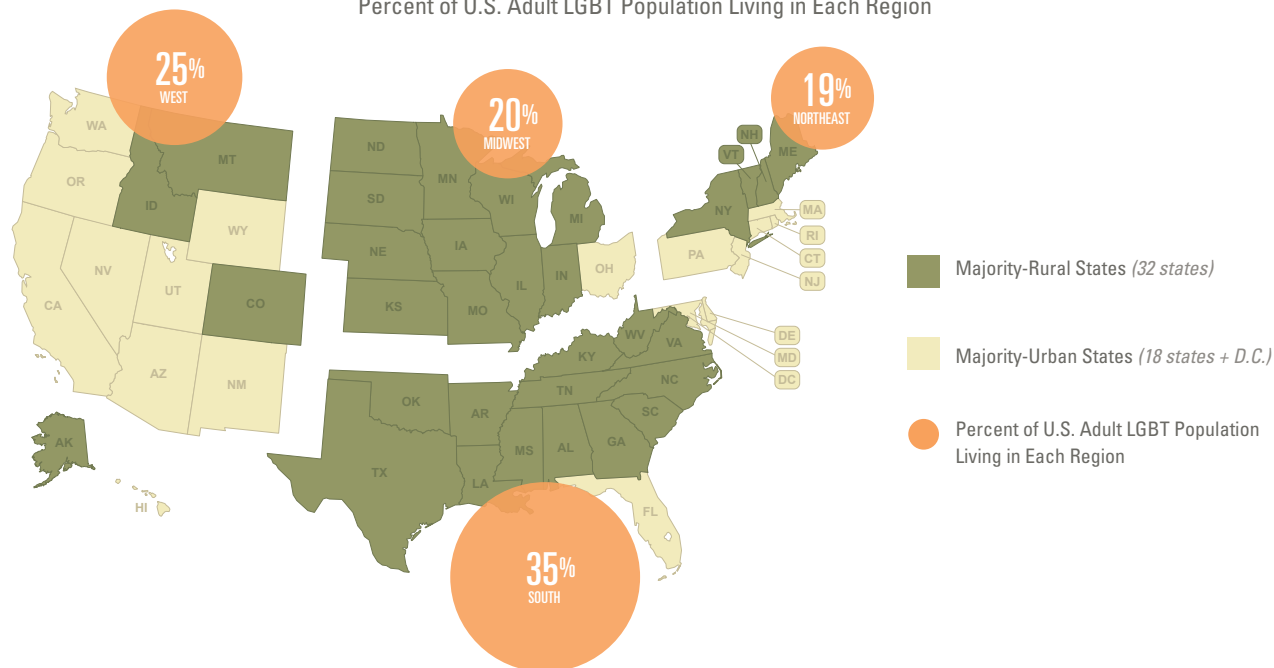
There are significant variations across states and communities in the portion of the population that identifies as LGBT. For example, Vermont leads the country with the greatest concentration of rural residents (93% of counties are majority-rural), but also has the sixth highest proportion (5.2%) of LGBT adults.²⁴ By contrast, North Dakota is also a majority-rural state (79% of counties are majority-rural), but it contains the lowest portion of adult LGBT residents in the entire country, with only 2.7% of its adults identifying as LGBT.²⁵ These differences could be due to people in some rural areas being less willing to self-identify as LGBT on a phone survey, that LGBT people in general are less likely to choose to live in some rural areas, or other reasons.

^b “Nonmetropolitan” is not the same as “rural.” According to the U.S. Census Bureau, “Metropolitan Statistical Areas or ‘metro’ areas are defined at the county level, and most counties have a mix of urban and rural areas. In fact, according to the latest American Community Survey (ACS), 54.4 percent of people living in rural areas are within a metro area.” As a result, these estimates of the increase of people of color in nonmetropolitan areas (significantly removed from metropolitan areas) likely under-report the total increase of people of color in all Census-defined rural areas, given that the total number of people of color is increasing throughout the country.

^c This range was calculated using the Census' estimates that 19.3% of the population (62.9 million people) lives in rural areas, that 77.7% of rural residents are 18 or older, and that 22.3% of rural residents are below the age of 18. Applying 3%–5% to the adult rural population and 10% to the youth rural population generates the estimate of 2.9–3.8 million LGBT people in rural areas.



Figure 3: Majority of LGBT Adults Live in the South and the Midwest, Which Are Majority-Rural Regions
Percent of U.S. Adult LGBT Population Living in Each Region



Source: Adapted from Amira Hasenbush, et al. 2014. "The LGBT Divide: A Data Portrait of the South, Midwest, & Mountain States." The Williams Institute. Numbers may not sum to 100 due to rounding. Majority-rural determination based on Census data. Regions based on Census 4-region division.

RURAL AMERICA IS HOME TO MANY LGBT PEOPLE

**2.9-3.8
MILLION**
LGBT PEOPLE IN
RURAL AMERICA

LGBT people are a fundamental part of the fabric of rural communities, working as teachers, ministers, small business owners, and more. For many of these millions of LGBT people, living in a rural community may be just as or more important to their identity as is being LGBT. Rural America is where many LGBT people choose to call home.

MANY REASONS FOR LIVING IN RURAL COMMUNITIES:

CLOSENESS
TO FAMILY

STRENGTH OF LOCAL
COMMUNITIES

CONNECTION TO
THE LAND

RURAL WAY
OF LIFE



As seen in *Figure 3* on the previous page, using the Williams Institute's analysis of Gallup data, over half of LGBT people in America live in the Midwest or Southern regions of the country.²⁶ While these regions aren't entirely rural, they contain many of America's rural communities, as reflected in Figures 1 and 2.²⁷ Indeed, almost half of all U.S. residents who live in rural areas live in the South alone.²⁸

Rural areas may also have more LGBT youth than LGBT adults. While 4.5% of adults identify as LGBT, younger people are more likely to identify as LGBT. For example, among Millennials (born 1980-1999) in the Gallup Daily Tracking Survey, 8.2% identify as LGBT,²⁹ and in other research, teenagers are even more likely to do so.³⁰ Several surveys suggest that youth in rural areas are just as likely as those in urban areas to identify as LGBT. For example, a 2017 report from California found that at least 10% of youth in the state identify as LGBTQ, with virtually no difference between rural and urban youth.³¹

Not only do LGBT people live in rural America, but many of them *want* to live there and enjoy living in rural America. LGBT people in urban and rural areas report similar levels of subjective well-being, health, and satisfaction.³² In discussions with LGBT people living in rural communities, researchers find that many LGBT people in rural areas not only enjoy rural ways of

life, but also that living in a rural community directly shapes their own LGBT identity and their broader understanding of what it means to be an LGBT person. In fact, a key finding of this research is that, for many LGBT people in rural areas, living in a rural area may be just as important to who they are as being LGBT.³³

In short, many LGBT people in rural communities aren't simply living there because they haven't yet moved to urban areas—but rather because rural America is where they choose to call home.

Some rural LGBTQ people appear to find identity in their geographic location and the specifics of their rural culture, while suburban and urban LGBTQ people may not have this identity anchor to protect them from social stress. ...For some, a rural community may provide space for the development of healthy identity.

Impact Texas LGBTQ Needs Assessment.
2017. Appendix A, p117.



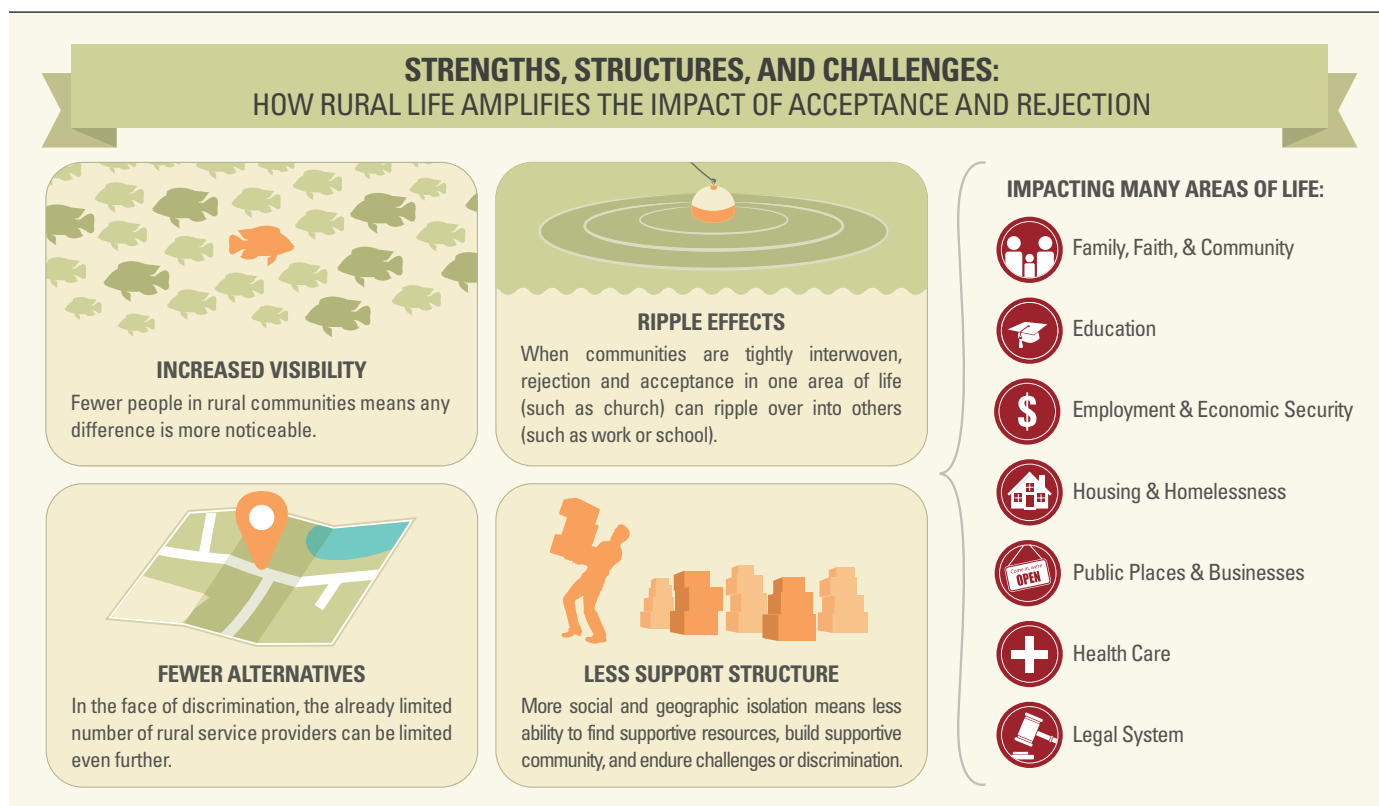
SECTION 2: STRENGTHS, STRUCTURES, AND CHALLENGES: HOW RURAL LIFE AMPLIFIES THE IMPACT OF ACCEPTANCE AND REJECTION

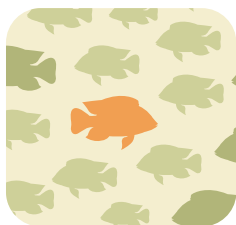
LGBT people living in rural communities—just like their non-LGBT rural neighbors, and like LGBT people living in urban or suburban areas—live varied, full lives. LGBT people in rural communities work in many different types of jobs and are members of different types of faith communities (or none at all); some raise children; some volunteer; and some struggle with family or health or economic issues. Some LGBT people in rural communities have experienced or fear experiencing discrimination or violence, and some are also on the front lines advocating for their families or communities. There is no singular story to tell, because the reality of life in rural America, for LGBT and non-LGBT people alike, is much richer.

And just as there is no singular LGBT experience, there is no singular rural experience. However, many people in rural parts of the country describe their communities in similar ways: built around family and close-knit community; centered around strong

social institutions such as churches, schools, and local businesses; deeply connected to place and the environment; and based in a sense of efficacy and self-reliance to make change in their own communities.³⁴ Certain challenges and experiences are also increasingly common in rural America, including the ongoing economic hardships faced in many rural communities; addiction and substance abuse, including the opioid epidemic; fewer or more distant options for quality health care; and more.

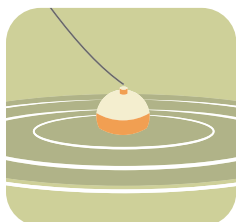
LGBT people in rural America share these values and challenges of rural life. Yet these shared challenges often lead to different consequences for LGBT people, particularly when coupled with the added challenges of discrimination and a lack of legal protections. In the following sections, these challenges and consequences are illustrated in the areas of: community institutions, including faith, family, and local organizations; education; employment and economic security; housing; public places and businesses; health care; the legal system; and more. This examination shows that LGBT people's life in rural America is marked by at least four major themes, though not every theme applies to each area examined below.





1. First, in rural areas, **difference is more visible**. There are generally fewer people and so any “difference” is more noticeable. As a result, LGBT people are likely to be more visible—particularly if

they are gender non-conforming—than if they were in more populated areas. Additionally, because of the close-knit, interwoven nature of many rural communities, where neighbors know one another and information often travels quickly, if an LGBT person is open about their identity, or even if they are assumed to be LGBT, it is likely that that many of their neighbors, coworkers, healthcare providers, fellow congregants, and others may also be aware that the person is LGBT.



2. Second, the **deep interconnection of rural communities can create ripple effects**, amplifying both positive and negative experiences. What happens in one’s family or church

community, whether supportive or discriminatory, can ripple outward to other areas of life, such as employment and beyond. This means that experiencing rejection in one part of the community, especially if by someone influential or in a leadership position in the community, can lead to broader rejection from the community as a whole—but it also means that acceptance can similarly spread from one part of the community to others.



3. Third, **fewer alternatives are available in the face of discrimination**. One of the shared challenges that LGBT and non-LGBT people alike face in rural areas is that there are simply fewer

providers or options overall, whether in health care, social services, restaurants, employers, and more. Though these structural differences impact all rural residents, they have a unique impact on LGBT people who may also face discrimination or additional obstacles. For example, if an LGBT person in a rural area is discriminated against by a doctor, that person may have few, if any other doctors to

turn to for care. Further amplifying this problem, many service providers in rural areas are religiously-affiliated and covered under religious exemption laws that could allow them to discriminate, even when providing public services. While research suggests that “rural and urban queer residents experience similar levels of discrimination, ...the [relative] lack of community, resources, and services in rural areas can intensify both the experiences of discrimination, and the stress associated with living in a context where it can be prevalent.”³⁵



4. Finally, **there are fewer social support structures** due to the greater social and geographic isolation of rural areas. There are fewer LGBT people with whom to build community, and LGBT-

competent or affirming resources (such as LGBT-friendly medical providers, a gay-straight alliance at school, an LGBT-affirming church, or an LGBT community center) are fewer and farther between. Furthermore, finding such community or resources in person may require traveling a considerable distance, which may not always be economically possible. This means that when LGBT people face discrimination, or even simply are struggling with acceptance or coming out, there are fewer places to turn for social support, legal support, or even just basic information. This lack of resources and support structure can be a particular challenge for LGBT youth or youth who are exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity, as well as for their families.

This section examines both the positive and the challenging experiences of rural communities, as well as the unique experiences for LGBT people in those communities across multiple key aspects of life.



Family, Faith, and Community

Community is perhaps the most central aspect of rural American life. In 2018, a nationally representative survey asked 1,300 rural Americans—5% of whom identified as LGBT—what they thought was the biggest strength of their local community. The most frequent answer was the closeness of the community, followed by “being around good people.”³⁶ The same survey showed that 81% of rural residents said they feel very or somewhat attached to their local community, and 50% said their relationships with their neighbors are extremely or very important to them.³⁷ Similarly, a survey by Pew finds that rural residents are more likely (40%) to know all or most of their neighbors, compared to suburban (28%) and urban (24%) residents.³⁸ While not specifically a finding of LGBT people in rural communities, LGBT people overall report that community is similarly important to them, with 69% of LGBT Americans saying in a 2017 survey that community was important to their overall well-being.³⁹

What is “community” in rural parts of America? For many, community is a sense of connectedness that extends from family outward to places of faith and worship, community organizations and institutions like service organizations such as Kiwanis or Rotary, and ultimately the broader sense of belonging to part of something bigger—a sense that comes from knowing your neighbors and seeing people you know at the grocery store, when dropping your children off at school, or simply walking down the street.

Indeed, rural life boasts a deeply interconnected framework: a person’s family or coworkers are likely part of their church or faith community as well, and rare are the opportunities to be in a space without knowing a single other person. As a result, the acceptance or rejection that LGBT people experience in one area of community likely bleeds into other areas.

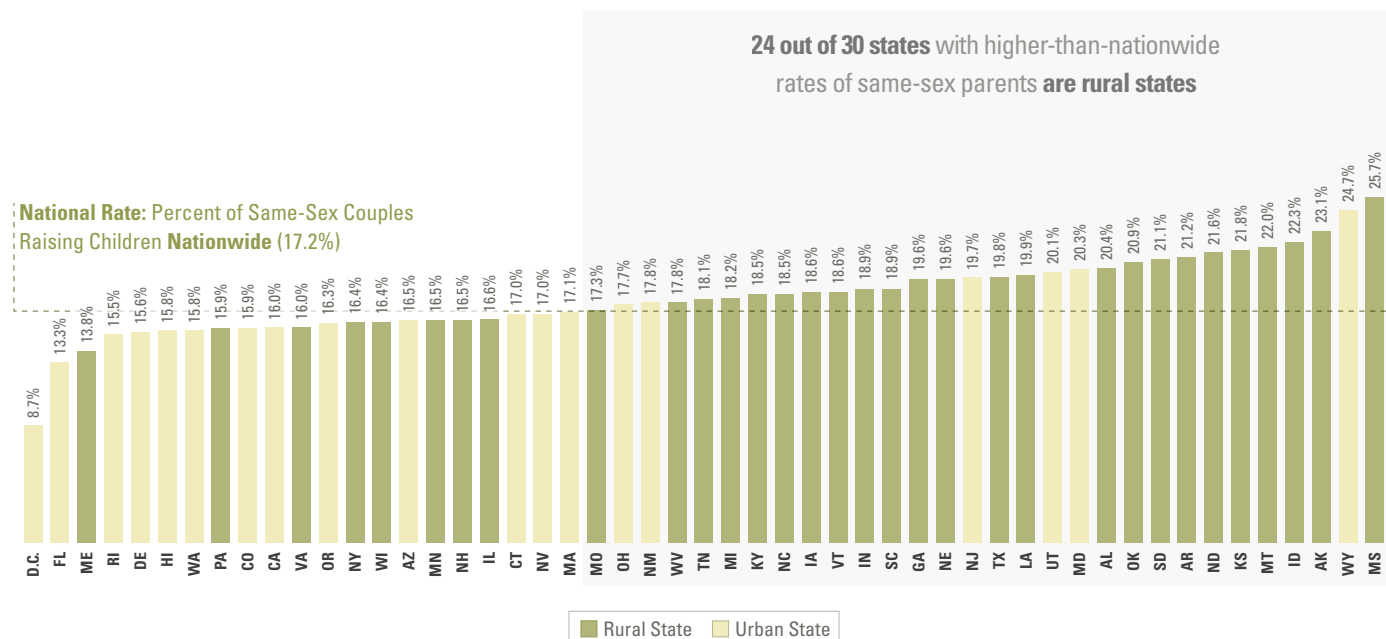
And because of how important community is in rural life, LGBT people in rural communities may have vastly different experiences, depending on the attitudes and behaviors of those around them. When seen as community members whose skills and community participation are valued,⁴⁰ LGBT people

are likely to live rich, full lives in rural spaces. However, when LGBT people in rural communities experience exclusion or discrimination in one part of town or life, they can find themselves effectively excluded from the community at large.

Family

Regardless of where one lives, the role of family in one’s life cannot be understated—family is where children are raised, young adults learn and grow, and where adults look for support during challenging times and for celebration during good times. This is no less true in rural communities. In fact, the role of family may be even more central in rural spaces. As noted above, two in five rural residents live in or near communities where they’ve lived their entire lives.⁴¹ Similarly, two in five rural residents (42%) said they remained in or returned to their communities in order to be near their family.⁴² Research also shows that many families, including LGBT-headed families, are either moving or returning to rural communities to raise their children,⁴³ given affordability of housing, perceptions of community safety and school quality, and an overall higher quality of life.⁴⁴ If they have extended family in these rural communities, that can be additionally beneficial, both logistically and emotionally, for families with children. As a result, the role of one’s immediate and extended family for people living in rural communities is often a core component of social, emotional, and even financial life in rural America.

The centrality of family in rural communities has several unique aspects for LGBT people, including LGBT youth and LGBT adults raising children, offering both incredible benefits but also highlighting the risks of family rejection. When LGBT people in rural areas experience discrimination and rejection from their families, this can ripple through the broader community, including churches, businesses, schools, and beyond. Take the example of a dairy farmer, interviewed in a study about queer farmers, who had planned to take over his parents’ farm.⁴⁵ But when he came out as gay, they rescinded their offer, leading not only to the loss of family support but also the loss of employment. Conversely, rejection by a church or the broader community can put pressure on family and friends who want to be supportive of an LGBT person but fear themselves being shunned from or losing their job or church community for accepting an LGBT family member or friend. In rural areas—where relationships

Figure 4: Rural States Have Higher Rates of Same-Sex Couples Raising Children

Source: Majority-rural determination based on Census data. Same-sex parenting data from LGBT Demographic Data Interactive (2019), The Williams Institute.

and networks are deeply linked and interconnected—when LGBT people experience family or community rejection, there are fewer places to turn for help, and the consequences can be dire.

LGBT Parents

LGBT people in rural areas are most likely to be raising children. Many LGBT people across the country are raising children, including in rural communities, small towns, suburbs, and large cities. Research shows, however, that the highest rates of parenting by both same-sex couples and LGBT individuals are in the most rural regions of the country.⁴⁶ For example, *Figure 4* shows percent of same-sex couples raising children in every state. Twenty-four out of the 30 states with a higher-than-nationwide rate of same-sex couples raising children are majority-rural states. Of the states with below national rates of same-sex couples raising children, most are majority-urban states.

In the Midwest, Mountain, and Southern regions—which are heavily rural and also where nearly two-thirds of LGBT people currently live⁴⁷—the average number of same-sex couples raising children increases to 20% or more.⁴⁸ In Mississippi, for example, nearly 26% of same-sex couples are raising children.⁴⁹

LGBT parents in rural areas are highly visible.

As mentioned previously, LGBT people living in rural America are often more visible due to the simple fact that there are fewer people in general, and so someone who is different is more likely to stand out. However, LGBT-headed families in rural communities are arguably the most visible of all, particularly when raising children in a family headed by a same-sex couple. That a single person is LGBT may not always be as obvious to others, but if that person has a same-sex partner, and even more so if that couple has children, their LGBT identity becomes clear. This is especially the case given that parents often attend their children's school functions, sporting events, or other community activities together. LGBT parents and their children may also experience increased scrutiny, particularly during challenging times such as when conflict arises between parents, when issues arise with a child's behavior or school performance, or when advocating for themselves or LGBT issues in their community.⁵⁰ As discussed throughout this report, when LGBT people live their lives openly, including as parents, they may be more fully able to participate in community, but this increased visibility may also mean a heightened risk of discrimination.

The same is true when LGBT parents participate in their extended families: LGBT adults may have reached

a peaceable relationship with their relatives, but upon having children or encountering challenges during child-raising, their families' negative attitudes toward LGBT people may resurface and leave the LGBT parents without much needed family support. Similarly, when LGBT families face challenges such as separation, divorce, or death of a parent, broader family tensions can arise or resurface, sometimes even leading to legal challenges. For example, if an LGBT parent dies, her own parents or family members may seek to prevent her partner from receiving benefits or retaining custody of their children. Given that rural communities may have fewer attorneys and legal services overall, and especially services that are both knowledgeable and competent on LGBT family law, LGBT parents may find themselves facing hostility in creating or maintaining legal ties to their children, and without the resources to defend themselves.

LGBT parents in rural areas face significant obstacles from religious exemptions and legal bias. In child welfare and family services, religious exemption laws can allow social workers, adoption agencies, and other service providers—including those that are taxpayer funded—to refuse to work with LGBT people if working with LGBT people goes against their religious beliefs. For example, religious exemptions can allow agencies to refuse to help LGBT-headed families seeking to become parents or expand their family through adoption or fostering, can allow discrimination against LGBT youth in care, and in some cases even allow them to refuse to serve LGBT youth already in the foster and adoption system.⁵¹ For LGBT people in rural areas who want to be parents, being rejected by the child services agency closest to them may prevent them from becoming parents altogether as there simply may not be other close-by adoption agencies. While such laws certainly harm LGBT adults, the primary harm is to children. Over 123,000 children in the foster care system who are eligible for adoption and awaiting a forever home may be kept in the system rather than given the opportunity to find a home with qualified same-sex couples or individual LGBT people.⁵²

There are over 123,000 children waiting for adoption in the U.S., and over 70,000 (nearly 60%) of these children are in rural states.

- U.S. Administration for Children and Families (2017)

Furthermore, religious exemption laws exacerbate the damaging effects of other problems facing rural areas. For example, rural areas are disproportionately experiencing the harms of the ongoing opioid epidemic. In some cases, people struggling with addiction have their children placed with family members while the parent(s) works toward recovery. However, if that family member happens to be LGBT, religious exemption laws could allow state workers and family services to refuse to place that child with the family member—even if the alternative is placing the child with a stranger through the foster or adoption system. In short, religious exemption laws in child and family services put individuals' religious beliefs above the welfare of children and families, and ultimately, children pay the price.

Relevant case law also suggests that LGBT parents in rural communities are at a disadvantage in the legal system, given that LGBT people who live in rural communities may be seen as contradicting small-town values and therefore as unfit parents or community members.⁵³ Take the example of a lesbian mother's custody case from Union, Missouri, a town of 5,500 people.⁵⁴ Her ex-husband learned after their separation that she was gay and sued for full custody of their children. The state Court of Appeals sided with the husband, writing: "Homosexuality is not openly accepted or widespread. We wish to protect the children from peer pressure, teasing, and possible ostracizing they may encounter as a result of the 'alternative lifestyle' their mother has chosen."⁵⁵

This Missouri case illustrates both the harm of family rejection and the lack of legal services for LGBT families in rural areas. Had her ex-husband not contested her parenting rights on the basis her sexuality, she would not have lost custody of her children (let alone be outed to the broader community). Had she had access to legal services knowledgeable in LGBT family law, such as are more common in urban areas, she might have kept custody of her children.

In rural areas, rejection of LGBT parents—as well as LGBT youth, discussed next—can have ripple effects that extend well beyond the discriminating individuals or institutions. For example, a 2018 report by the Center for American Progress details a case of an LGBT-inclusive adoption agency that avoids "placing children with same-sex couples in certain regions of the state, because they know judges in those regions consistently deny permanent placements with same-sex couples."⁵⁶ In other words, even though the agency would and

does work with LGBT parents, due to discrimination by judges and the local legal system, LGBT parents in these areas are effectively blocked from the chance to provide a loving home to children in need.

LGBT Youth

LGBT youth grow up in families across the country, and they are as likely to live in rural communities as in suburban and urban communities. There is limited evidence that LGBT youth in rural communities experience more family rejection or other difficulties compared to LGBT youth in other places. However, given that rural residents are generally more likely to hold conservative opinions about LGBT people and issues (see *Public Opinion* section), combined with fewer LGBT-specific institutions and formal support networks (see *Political Power* section), it is likely that families and LGBT youth in rural communities have unique struggles when a child comes out as LGBT.

Parents with an LGBT child in a rural community may have less access to information and fewer resources and support systems. For example, parents and family members may face tremendous community pressure if they accept an LGBT child, and even more so if they try to advocate for their child. This can lead to community rejection not just of the LGBT child, but of their family as well. Additionally, LGBT rural youth who experience rejection—whether in school, in their faith community, by the larger community, in sports teams, by service providers from doctors to school counselors, and more—may have fewer alternatives available to them. This can be very difficult not just for rural LGBT youth, but also for family members who want to protect and support them.

LGBT youth in rural areas are also likely to have different needs and concerns than other rural youth, or than LGBT youth in urban areas. For example, given that rural communities have fewer people in general, LGBT youth in rural areas are less likely to have other LGBT youth nearby, compared to those in more densely populated areas.⁵⁷ This does not necessarily lead to difficulties, but without strong informal and formal in-person support networks such as school clubs, local youth organizations, or LGBT community centers, LGBT youth may feel more isolated and be more likely to look to online support communities to help them understand their sexuality and gender identity and/or to navigate coming out to their families.⁵⁸ For some LGBT youth, the internet may be where they first “come out” and then

SPOTLIGHT



Online Spaces Often Key for LGBT Youth, Especially in Rural Areas

For many LGBT youth, the internet can be a vital—and sometimes the only—space where they can find information, connection, and resources about their sexuality, gender, health, and more. Given that LGBT youth are over three times more likely than non-LGBT youth to experience online bullying and harassment—and that rural LGBT youth experience even higher rates of digital harassment—this makes the availability of LGBT-affirming and supportive spaces online even more important for LGBT youth.⁵⁹

The Trevor Project, “the leading national organization providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention” for LGBT youth, provides multiple online and digital spaces for LGBT youth to connect with community, support, and services for mental health. For example, “TrevorSpace” is a social networking site for LGBT youth and allies under age 25, and “TrevorChat” provides a free, confidential, and secure instant messaging service that provides live help to LGBT youth. “TrevorText” provides text messaging and direct support with trained specialists. Similarly, CenterLink’s “Q Chat Space” provides an online space, including via smart phones, for “real-time, chat-based, professional facilitated support groups for LGBTQ+ teens.” Text and mobile support can be especially important for rural LGBT youth, who are more likely to use a computer at school and therefore may need other ways of finding digital support after school hours.⁶⁰

For rural LGBT youth, who are less likely to have other LGBT youth nearby and more likely to experience bullying and harassment, online and digital spaces such as those provided by the Trevor Project or CenterLink can be key, and particularly in efforts to reduce the risk of suicide and self-harm among LGBT youth. For more about the importance of internet access to rural communities, see page 20.

only later tell friends or family,⁶¹ and indeed rural LGBT youth are more likely than those in other areas to say that they are more open about their identity online than they are in person.⁶² As several researchers working to understand the experiences of rural LGBT youth explain, their experiences and “pathways to well-being” are not

necessarily more challenging than those of urban youth, but rather just different.⁶³

A growing body of research has explored the connection between family rejection and the overrepresentation of LGBT youth among youth experiencing homelessness.⁶⁴ Notably, most LGBT youth became homeless not in the immediate aftermath of “coming out” but in large part as the result of frayed relationships over time, as well as general family instability.⁶⁵ Among rural youth who experience homelessness, many youth also report that their housing situation is due to family economic instability, typically related to either joblessness or substance use.⁶⁶ In all however, LGBT youth are 2.2 times more likely to report experiencing homelessness compared to their non-LGBT peers, and black and multiracial LGBT youth are at even higher risk.⁶⁷ LGBT youth homelessness is discussed further on pages 33–34.

Faith Communities

Faith is often a cornerstone of rural America. In addition to families, churches and faith communities have historically served as “anchor institutions” in many rural communities. Often, churches were the first buildings or public spaces that were created when rural towns were first formed, and over time these churches have grown to become central pillars of many rural communities, sometimes even becoming synonymous with the local rural culture itself.⁶⁸ Like community organizations, churches can provide not only a place for social and spiritual connection, but a connection to the broader rural community itself—especially in areas where a majority of residents practice the same tradition or attend the same church.

Overall, people living in rural America are most likely to be Protestant (59%), two-thirds of whom identify as “born again Christians.” Another 16% of rural residents identify as Catholic, 17% as religiously unaffiliated, and 8% as religious but not Christian.⁶⁹ While rural residents are no more likely to attend church than are those who live in cities, rural residents who do attend church are far more likely to attend regularly, with 41% of rural residents attending church at least once a week and a further 15% attending once or twice a month.⁷⁰ In fact, a 2011 Pew survey found that people living in rural areas were more likely to be involved in church and spiritual groups than in any other type of social group or organization.⁷¹ Furthermore, as shown in *Figure 5* on



Deeper Dive: Faith and Social Justice

Historically, faith communities have played an important role in the history of social justice in the United States.⁷² For example, in the 19th century, churches and faith were instrumental in abolition movements, and in the 20th century, faith communities were part and parcel of the civil rights movement. More recently, faith communities—particularly in rural areas—have played an increasing role in advocating for labor, immigrant, and LGBT rights. The “Moral Mondays” movement, which began in North Carolina and has since spread to numerous other states, features clergy and other religious leaders organizing a series of protests and civil disobedience actions against discriminatory legislation and other government actions. In all of these examples, Black faith leaders and other people of color have played and continue to play leadership roles.

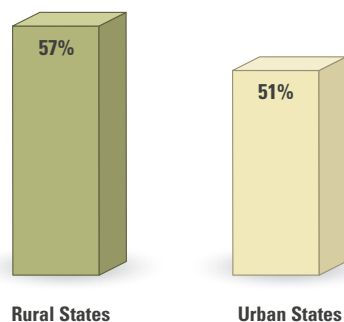
On both individual and structural levels, faith communities can and regularly do work to promote social justice, from fundraising to support community members in need or providing shelter for immigrants or refugees, to leading efforts for social or policy change. In rural areas, where faith communities are often key anchor institutions, the actions of churches and faith leaders can have an even larger impact on the local community, its culture, and its values.

the following page, polling by Pew Research Center shows that rural states have a higher number of “highly religious” residents compared to urban states.⁷³

Importantly, faith communities provide not only religious connection and fulfillment, but key resources such as meals, transportation, activities, and social connection.⁷⁴ Rural churches also frequently act as key providers of both physical and mental health care and support,⁷⁵ especially for people of color,⁷⁶ veterans,⁷⁷ immigrants,⁷⁸ and older adults.⁷⁹

Many LGBT people in rural areas are people of faith. According to the PRRI 2017 American Values Atlas, LGBT people in rural areas are significantly more likely than LGBT people in urban areas to identify with Protestant

Figure 5: Rural States Have More “Highly Religious” Residents
Average % of State Residents Who Identify as “Highly Religious”



Source: Majority-rural determination based on Census data. State religiosity by Pew Research Center (2016), “How Religious is Your State?”

Christian traditions, including white evangelical and mainline Protestant denominations.⁸⁰ The 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey shows that 66% of transgender people—including 71% of Middle Eastern and 77% of Black transgender people—have, at some point in their lives, been a part of a faith community.⁸¹

While LGBT-affirming faith communities can be found throughout the country, LGBT-specific faith communities, such as Metropolitan Community Churches, are more likely to be found in cities, likely because of the concentration of LGBT and allied people needed to support and sustain such a community. In rural areas, many LGBT people of faith participate in their local faith communities, rather than traveling to urban areas.⁸²

SPOTLIGHT



Kentucky Church Leads Way for Local LGBT Inclusion

In Berea, Kentucky—population 15,597—Union Church is leading the way in LGBT inclusion and affirmation in its rural community.

In 2000, Union, an ecumenical Christian faith community, began its process of discernment about the church’s beliefs regarding LGBT people and inclusion. After over a year of conversations and learning, they developed and implemented a policy stating that LGBT people are welcome to the full services and spirit of the church community. Union’s pastor, Reverend Kent Gilbert, said the process was marked by open conversations and self-reflection, and that church members ultimately felt a “rural practicality of, ‘we all live here, so let’s all operate by similar rules and make sure no one gets kicked out of their house or their church just because of who they’re with.’”

In the nearly twenty years since Union’s first conversations, the church has grown to a vibrant community of LGBT and non-LGBT people alike. Union offers a youth group and other intentionally and visibly LGBT-inclusive programming, and Rev. Gilbert describes “how valuable it is for our congregation to meet these young [LGBT] people and hear their witness. It provides a strong spiritual impetus for our members to better understand the world around them.”

The church community is also active in the local community, including in advocating for an LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination ordinance that went before the local city council several years ago. Though the ordinance failed, Rev. Gilbert said that, for Union Church members, “It was an easy step from everybody should be allowed to come to church and receive church services, to then saying you shouldn’t get fired from your job down the road from the church. Once you humanize people, it’s really hard to then justify mistreatment.”

Founded in 1853 on the principles of social and racial equality and recognizing slavery as a sin, Union Church in Berea, Kentucky, describes itself as the first abolitionist church in the South. The church continues its work for racial justice, and sees its work for LGBT inclusion as an integral part of its justice-focused tradition and foundation. “We like to say, ‘All means all, y’all,’” says Rev. Gilbert. “That’s what our faith teaches. Even if there’s a cost.”

The discernment process is one that many faith communities across denominations and traditions are undertaking. Reflecting on Union’s process, Rev. Gilbert said: “Being sure isn’t the point. You don’t have to be sure. But we do know how we’re going to react when we’re unsure, and the Christian gospel calls us to react out of something different than fear.”

Source: Original interview with MAP

But many LGBT people of faith have experienced rejection from their faith communities. For example, among transgender people who have ever been part of a faith community, nearly one in five (19%) left their faith community after facing rejection, and nearly two in five (39%) left due to fear that they would be rejected.⁸³

Religious communities, including in rural areas, vary widely in their acceptance of LGBT people, even within denominations or individual houses of worship. Some faith communities in rural areas may explicitly welcome and celebrate their LGBT community members, while others may not directly address LGBT people or issues. Still others may be explicitly negative or exclusionary toward LGBT people and their families. However, in rural communities, residents tend to be more conservative and there are fewer options for faith community and connections, and so if religious communities are not welcoming, LGBT people may struggle to find any local spiritual home or place for social connection. Additionally, since LGBT people in rural communities are more visible, they may face more open hostility or outright rejection from a non-welcoming faith community.

While the 2017 PRRI survey shows that LGBT people in rural areas are often more likely than those in urban areas to be Protestant Christian,^d the survey also shows that LGBT people in rural areas are less likely than their non-LGBT rural neighbors to be religiously affiliated. In other words, LGBT people in rural areas are more likely (than urban LGBT people) to be people of faith, but they are less likely (than their non-LGBT rural neighbors) to be affiliated with a religious practice or local faith community.

While stereotypes falsely suggest LGBT people are inherently less religious, many LGBT people have deeply painful stories about ongoing rejection by or hostility from faith communities that led to their turning away from their faith—and losing the crucial support network that a faith community provides.

And the cost is not merely religious connection; again, the ripple effect of rural interconnection can come into play. Since many faith institutions or religiously-affiliated organizations in rural areas provide opportunities for social connection, professional networking, loans and credit, or services for immigrants and low-income people such as meals, clothing, and housing assistance (see *Deeper Dive: Key Services and Religious Providers in Rural Areas* on the following page),

rejection from a faith community means LGBT people can find themselves shut out of far more than benefits, if not sustains, their lives—both spiritually and materially.

Community Organizations

Community organizations are vital, but they may or may not welcome LGBT people. Community institutions, both formal and informal, play a particularly important role in rural life and in building a larger sense of belonging. Institutions such as churches, clubs or associations, and community centers often provide important opportunities for friendship, fellowship, social support, professional networking, business opportunities, and community building.⁸⁴ They may also provide important services including sports and recreation, child care and development, and health and wellness programming. Given the interconnectedness of rural community, they can have an outsized impact across many areas of life, such as employment: in smaller towns, for example, word of mouth or networking through one's church can help in hearing about or being considered for a job opportunity. Indeed, community organizations' contributions to rural infrastructure and economies are so important that these organizations are sometimes supported by government or private funding to sustain or expand their work.⁸⁵

A 2011 Pew survey found that people living in rural communities were most likely to be involved in church and spiritual groups, followed by veterans' groups, farm associations, and groups for older adults.⁸⁶ Rural community-based organizations may include fraternal societies like the Elks; service-based organizations such as Rotary or Kiwanis; veterans' groups such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW); local business and professional groups like chambers of commerce; youth-based groups like 4-H, the Future Farmers of America (FFA), and the Girl Scouts and Boys Scouts; and community centers for local residents or specific groups of residents, such as seniors or LGBT people.

As is the case throughout America, rural community institutions such as these may or may not welcome LGBT people. For example, in 2010, Rotary International's Council on Legislation voted to adopt a nondiscrimination membership policy that prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation.⁸⁷ In 2013, the Boy Scouts changed their previously discriminatory policies, and now permit

^d Sample sizes too small to report other religious traditions.

both youth and adults to participate regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity—including allowing girls to participate.⁸⁸ However, other organizations are actively fighting for their ability to discriminate. Most notably, 4-H—a national program administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and supported by universities and local communities—recently reversed course on protecting LGBT staff, volunteers, and participants. The nondiscrimination guidance was issued under the Obama administration and then rescinded by USDA staff and the Trump administration.⁸⁹

Even if LGBT people in rural areas are living in states with LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination laws, many key community associations are allowed to discriminate against them anyway. This is because community associations are sometimes considered “private associations” and are therefore not required to follow local, state, and even federal nondiscrimination laws—as was made famous by the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 2000 that the Boy Scouts of America could maintain a policy of discrimination against gay and lesbian people because they were a private organization that could set their own membership standards.⁹⁰

Because community organizations play such a large role in rural life and provide many important services, when these cornerstone institutions of rural communities are not welcoming of LGBT people, this can amplify the already harmful impacts of rejection: LGBT people, youth, and their families who are excluded from these community organizations can find themselves cut off not only from local community and social events, but also from key opportunities, job connections, and much more.

Far fewer LGBT-specific community organizations exist in rural areas. While many LGBT people in rural areas value their local community, they may also want and need LGBT-specific spaces where they can be themselves, be affirmed, and have their needs or questions met without fear of hostility. However, rural areas are less likely to have spaces such as these. To address this gap and the importance of affirming, explicitly welcoming connections and services for LGBT people, particularly youth and older adults, LGBT-specific community centers exist throughout the country. They provide important resources, programming, space, and connection for LGBT people and allies including physical and mental health and wellness programming, social connections and



Deeper Dive: Key Services and Religious Providers in Rural Areas

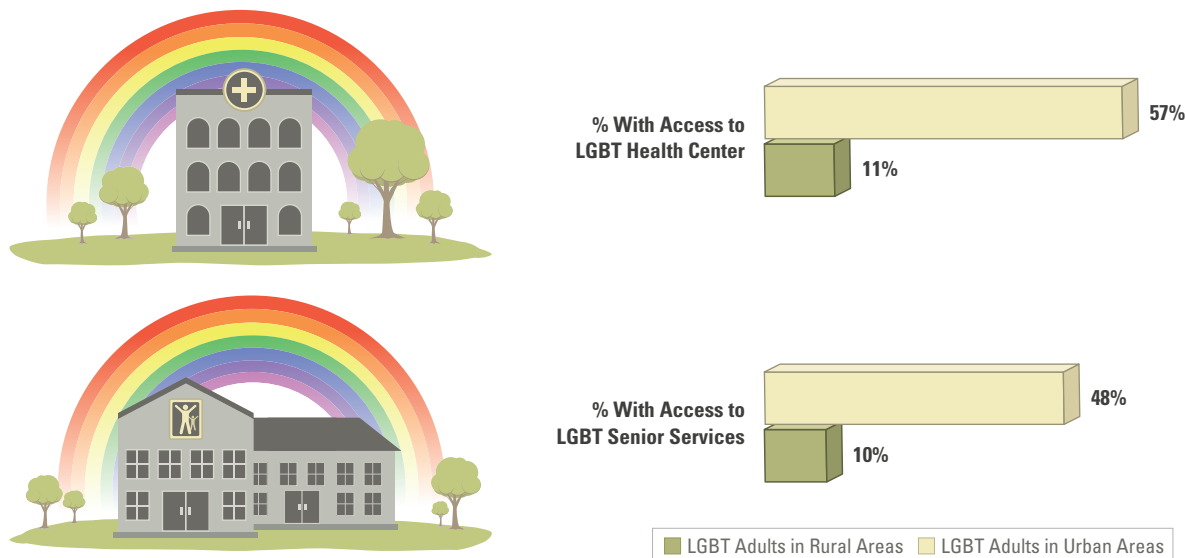
Nonprofit and social service providers face many challenges in serving rural areas, including low funding, high costs to deliver services due to geographic distance and transportation expenses, diverse needs within the community, and more.⁹¹

As a result, many social services—including job training, food banks, homeless shelters, domestic violence shelters, child welfare services, and more—are provided by religiously-affiliated organizations that already exist in rural areas, and that may receive government funding to provide such services. Churches themselves may “fill in the gaps of often absent or hard-to-reach social services, whether it’s repairing a congregation member’s roof, providing free health screenings, or planning the summer reading program.”⁹² This may be especially true for rural communities of color, whose historical (and often contemporary) experiences of segregation meant that faith communities may have been the sole provider of such services.⁹³

For LGBT people in rural areas where key services are provided by religiously-affiliated organizations, their ability to access these needed services may depend entirely on whether the organization is welcoming of LGBT people. Additionally, religious exemption laws may allow these providers to discriminate even when providing these taxpayer-funded services. Given the lack of alternative providers in rural areas, if LGBT people are turned away by these organizations, they may never receive these critical services at all.

support, computer access (often critical for school or employment purposes), and community education and advocacy work. A 2018 survey of LGBT community centers showed that participating centers collectively provide services to over 40,000 people every week.⁹⁴

However, like many support structures for LGBT people, far fewer LGBT community centers are located in rural areas; the majority are located in urban areas.⁹⁵ For example, in a 2018 survey by AARP, 11% of LGBT adults

Figure 6: LGBT Adults in Rural Areas Have Less Access to LGBT-Specific Services

Source: Houghton, Angela. March 2018. *Maintaining Dignity: Understanding and Responding to the Challenges Facing Older LGBT Americans*. Washington, DC: AARP Research.

ages 45 and older living in rural communities said they had access to an LGBT health center compared to 57% of those living in a big city or urban area, and only 10% of rural LGBT adults had access to LGBT senior services compared to 48% of those in big cities (see *Figure 6*).⁹⁶

Finding the financial, staffing, and community support required to maintain a robust LGBT community center can be challenging for smaller, more isolated LGBT communities in rural communities. Of the four states currently lacking any LGBT community centers (according to CenterLink: Louisiana, Minnesota, North Dakota, and West Virginia⁹⁷), all are majority-rural states.

When LGBT people in rural communities are not served by a local LGBT community center, they may travel significant distances so they can access important resources or community spaces. For example, in a 2015 survey of LGBT people living in central Alabama, many rural respondents said they travel to Birmingham, a city of approximately 200,000, for social services and to interact with the community.⁹⁸ Birmingham is also home to at least one LGBT community center, the Magic City Acceptance Center, which provides a space for LGBT youth and allies. In the same survey, many rural residents said they had heard a local LGBT community exists, but that they had difficulty finding it.⁹⁹

Distinct from LGBT community centers, LGBT-supportive local groups also play an important role for

SPOTLIGHT



Rural LGBT Center Helps Local Students Find Community and Leadership Skills

OutCenter, an LGBT center in Benton Harbor, MI, runs the “LGBTQ+ Safe Schools Collaborative,” a systems-change approach in a tri-county area that is 81% rural and very religiously conservative. This initiative brings together key allies that work in the school system, including school district administrative and counseling staff and LGBTQ students and their families. These representatives meet regularly to share insights and discuss strategies for creating LGBTQ safe school communities throughout the area. Additionally, teens who don’t have gender and sexuality alliances or clubs (GSAs) in their schools come from many parts of the region to attend the center’s monthly Teen Pride GSA and have the experience of belonging to a GSA. Each three-hour session includes food, unstructured time for community building, and experiential exercises for developing youth leadership skills. This also enables the youth to return to their hometowns and advocate for a gay-straight alliance at their local school. OutCenter also provides technical assistance and workshops directly to school counselors and staff to aid in establishing new GSAs.

Source: 2018 LGBT Community Center Report



Deeper Dive: The Essential Role of Internet Access for Rural LGBT People

(continued on next page)

A core need in rural communities is increased internet and technological access.¹⁰⁰ Though rural access to high-speed internet has improved in recent years, rural residents remain less likely than urban and suburban residents to have home internet, a smartphone, or a home computer.¹⁰¹ This creates a “digital gap” between rural and non-rural communities. Access to broadband internet and reliable mobile phone service are critical for education, job training, employment and economic growth, accessing government services, the ability to receive health care, civic engagement, and more.¹⁰² While internet access is important for all rural residents, LGBT people in rural communities may be uniquely impacted, as the internet can help them find anything from LGBT-affirming and knowledgeable healthcare providers to counselors to legal assistance and even faith communities.¹⁰³

Queer Appalachia And The Queer South

Representation and visibility in the Queer South.

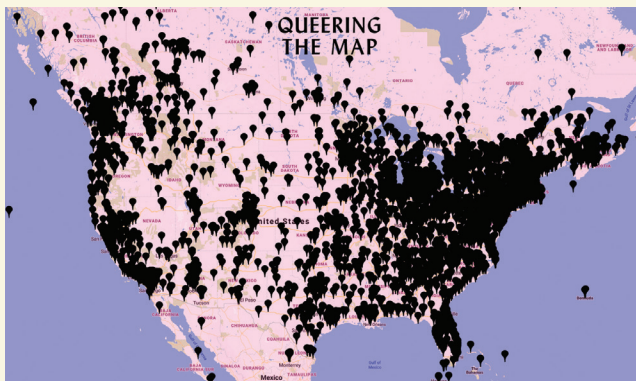


Internet access helps rural LGBT people build community and find support.

Internet access plays an important role for the ability of LGBT people in rural areas to build and find connection with one another, particularly given the lack of LGBT-specific or -affirming physical spaces (such as community centers). While social networking or location-based apps are helpful, LGBT people in rural areas often use the internet and technology to create spaces and LGBT community that uniquely exist online. For example, the Queer Appalachia Project is an online community that, since its inception in 2016, has gained over 100,000 followers.¹⁰⁴ The project works “to define Queer Appalachia and the Queer South with our own images and truths. By embracing a combination of contemporary technology and social media, we are in a constant state of

documenting our culture, community, lives and history/herstory.” In addition to uplifting stories and images of and for LGBT people in rural Appalachia and the rural South, Queer Appalachia also sponsors a micro-grant program to support rural LGBT community programming and projects, and will soon launch an online support group for rural LGBT people in recovery from addiction.¹⁰⁵

Similarly, the “Queering the Map” Project is an online project that began in 2017 and asks LGBT people to add their own stories to a digital map. Tens of thousands of stories have already been added. This “community-generated mapping project” illustrates not only that LGBT people are everywhere, but is yet another way in which LGBT people in rural spaces use technology to find and build community with one another. As Salon writes, “In the past year alone, these online spaces have grown at unprecedented rates, providing new platforms for queer folks to tell [their] stories.”¹⁰⁶



Additionally, research shows that rural LGBT youth use the internet and new media not just to build community, but to build their own identities, reshaping their rural hometowns in the process.¹⁰⁷ Technology researcher Mary Gray found that LGBT youth use the internet not to escape their rural homes, “but to expand their experience of local belonging.” They use new media to connect to and see broader LGBT community outside their hometowns, and then integrate the connection, representation, and information they find into their own rural community.¹⁰⁸



Deeper Dive: The Essential Role of Internet Access for Rural LGBT People

(continued from previous page)

Internet access further helps LGBT people in rural areas access vital information and assistance they may not have available in their rural communities. A number of LGBT and allied organizations offer “Know Your Rights” materials for LGBT people focused on everyday issues ranging from supporting LGBT youth in schools to legal rights in employment, health care, and for LGBT parents raising children, and more. For LGBT people in rural communities, internet access is critical in order to access these resources and understand the protections available to them through local, state, or federal laws. Take the example of a transgender woman who, when she tells her employer she is transitioning and will be changing her name, is fired from her job. Without access to the internet, she may not be aware of or able to discover the fact that she can file a complaint with the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and have her complaint investigated.

Additionally, the internet allows rural LGBT people to more easily share information about knowledgeable and competent healthcare providers, teachers, and others. For example, online resources such as RADRemedy.com allow transgender, non-binary, intersex, and other people to share their experiences with healthcare providers, allowing for a digital word-of-mouth effect that might otherwise be difficult to create given that there are fewer LGBT people in rural areas overall. The Campaign for Southern Equality also recently released *Trans in the South: A Guide to Resources and Services*, a directory of over 400 trans-friendly and trans-competent health care and service providers across 13 states. Online message boards, networks, and directories such as these can help LGBT people in rural areas find the health care and other key services they need.

“Without the ability to access or afford internet services, LGBTQ people living...in rural communities are without means to retrieve important information about their health, acquire legal services, or find support from LGBTQ networks outside of their communities.”

- Hunter et. al. 2018. *Intersecting Injustice*. p41.

Similarly, LGBT youth may not feel comfortable accessing in-person resources such as school counselors or healthcare providers, particularly in small communities where there is less anonymity. Electronic formats such as “text chats” and online chat features through organizations ranging from the Trevor Project to Q Chat Space, a digital LGBTQ+ center for youth run by CenterLink, offer youth a safe place to connect, ask questions, get resources, and be supported.

While online communities clearly have the potential to support LGBT people in rural America, researchers and rural residents alike agree that there is little substitute for the positive emotional, mental, and physical health impacts of an affirming, in-person social network and community.

rural LGBT life and can create community and provide resources in the heart of rural areas. For example, PFLAG has more than 400 chapters around the country, many of which are in rural areas. The organization is specifically focused on supporting parents and friends of LGBT people, including building a community for allies and parents of LGBT people to support one another and advocate on local issues affecting the local LGBT community. Yet in many small towns and rural communities, groups like PFLAG may be the only LGBT-affiliated local group, and so these meetings also provide space, resources, and community directly to local LGBT people. While PFLAG is a national organization with hundreds of local chapters, LGBT community groups and resources in rural communities may be less likely to be formal nonprofit organizations and rather may be volunteer-run or even organized simply through a listserv.¹⁰⁹



BOTTOM LINE: FAMILY, FAITH, AND COMMUNITY

Community is central to rural life. Family and community institutions, ranging from places of worship to service organizations and community centers, comprise the core of how many people living in rural places create, nurture, and sustain connections to one another. While these institutions can provide richness of emotional and social connections, they also provide valuable opportunities that impact other areas of life, including professional and employment options, access to knowledge and information about resources and how communities “work,” and more. So when family, faith, and community organizations are not welcoming—or worse, are intentionally exclusionary—the lack of alternative faith communities, community-based service providers, and other places for connection and key services can result in emotional, spiritual, and economic isolation for LGBT people that has substantial impacts for overall wellbeing and success.



Education and Schools

Schools are a central component of rural communities for youth and adults alike, as they provide not only education for youth and employment for adults, but also a shared sense of identity and tradition for local residents. Rural schools, depending on funding and resources, can also act as social and cultural hubs for the entire community, providing everything from sports, music, and theater to adult education, town meetings and civic engagement opportunities, and much more.¹¹⁰ Rural schools also serve more students than might be expected; one in five students in the United States attends a rural school,¹¹¹ and more students attend rural schools than attend the schools in New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, and, incredibly, the next 75 largest school districts *combined*.¹¹²

Compared to suburban and urban schools, rural schools are more likely to have smaller class sizes (if only due to the lower population density of rural areas), and research suggests smaller classes are beneficial to both student performance and teacher retention.¹¹³ Indeed, recent improvements in rural school performance mean that rural students on average now score better in academic performance than their urban counterparts, though racial achievement gaps persist across geography.¹¹⁴ Rural students, including low-income rural students, are also more likely to graduate high school than are urban students (though they are less likely to attend college).¹¹⁵

However, rural schools face numerous challenges. While many public schools throughout the nation face severe underfunding, rural school districts receive, on average, only 17% of state education funding, despite serving 20% of students.¹¹⁶ Rural schools themselves are fewer in number after decades of school consolidation, particularly in the Southeast and Mid-Atlantic U.S. (i.e., much of Appalachia).¹¹⁷ Additionally, rural districts face significant obstacles in recruiting and retaining teachers in general, and especially teachers with more advanced degrees and additional skills or specialized training.¹¹⁸ The geographic isolation or distance from universities and other providers creates “a significant barrier” to ongoing, “high-quality, relevant professional development,” such as training to teach advanced classes, best practices for creating LGBT-inclusive

classrooms, or instruction strategies for students who are English language learners (a growing population in rural classrooms).¹¹⁹ Resource and staff shortages¹²⁰ also limit the ability of rural schools to respond to similarly systemic challenges facing their students, such as the high rates of child poverty in rural America: nearly two-thirds (64%) of rural counties have high rates of child poverty, compared to 47% of urban counties.¹²¹

For LGBT students (as well as LGBT adults who work in education) in rural areas, these challenges are amplified in multiple ways. First, while resource and teacher shortages mean that rural students in general are at a disadvantage, LGBT students in rural areas also face a more hostile school climate on average than their suburban or urban peers. GLSEN's 2017 National School Climate Survey, with a sample of over 20,000 LGBT youth, found that LGBT students in rural areas reported the most hostile school climates, and that they were more likely to have negative and dangerous experiences at school that can make attending school, let alone succeeding at school, more difficult.¹²²

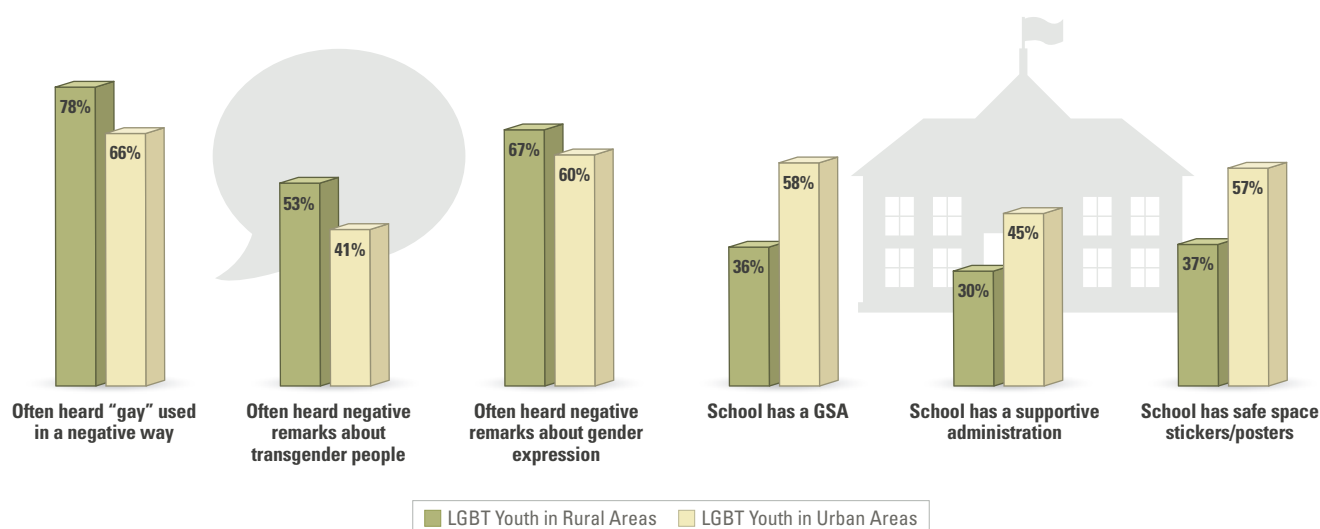
Across the board, LGBT students in rural schools were more likely to report being bullied based on their sexual orientation or gender identity, to experience discriminatory school policies and practices, and to experience every type of biased language the survey asked about. For example, as shown in *Figure 7*, nearly 80% of LGBT students in rural communities said they frequently or often heard "gay" used in a negative way

at school, while 67% frequently heard negative remarks about gender expression at school.¹²³ Such experiences have profoundly negative impacts on LGBT students' health, academic performance, and school attendance.

Related to school climate and the experience of LGBTQ students as well as the broader resource constraints faced by rural schools, GLSEN's 2017 survey (and Figure 8) also showed that rural LGBT students were the least likely to report having access to LGBT-related resources and supports, such as gender and sexuality alliances (GSAs, also referred to as gay-straight alliances), supportive teachers or administration, or LGBT-inclusive curricula.¹²⁴ Having inclusive and culturally competent educational materials and teaching practices is important for many communities, including LGBT youth, youth of color, immigrants, youth with disabilities, and more. At a minimum, inclusive and competent materials help ensure that students of all backgrounds can see themselves represented positively in the classroom, and that other students can learn about people who are different from them in positive, affirming ways.

Furthermore, GLSEN's research shows that when rural schools have GSAs, LGBT students are more likely to attend school, suggesting that GSAs in particular may play a unique role in supporting rural LGBT students, lessening the harm of potential victimization or mistreatment at school, and potentially strengthening academic outcomes.¹²⁵ Similarly, LGBT students do well in schools with nondiscrimination and anti-bullying

Figure 7: LGBT Youth in Rural Areas Experience More Hostile School Climates and Have Fewer Supports



Source: GLSEN's "The 2017 National School Climate Survey" (Appendix 3).



Deeper Dive: The Impact of Colleges on LGBT Inclusion in Rural Communities

Having a community college, four-year college, or other institution of higher education in a rural area can have many positive effects on a rural community. Research shows that community colleges and universities make significant contributions to job growth and provide other economic benefits to the rural communities.¹²⁶ Colleges can also provide many opportunities for adult education, job training or related services, social and cultural events such as concerts or speakers, and more. Additionally, as discussed on page 31, major employers in rural areas can serve as leaders when it comes to modeling inclusion in the local community.

For example, in Swannanoa, North Carolina—with its population of 4,576—the local Warren Wilson College is a clear leader in LGBT inclusion, with LGBT-specific courses and student resources, LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination policies for both students and staff, and much more. According to the Campus Pride Index, a nationwide and “overall indicator of institutional commitment to LGBTQ-inclusive policy, program, and practice,” Warren Wilson has 4.5 stars out of a possible 5-star rating—a higher score than many of the more urban-based colleges in the state, including Duke University, UNC-Charlotte, UNC-Greensboro, and Wake Forest University.¹²⁷ By leading in LGBT inclusion on campus, colleges can support LGBT inclusion off campus as well, such as by extending nondiscrimination protections to their employees who live in the local area, and by cultivating LGBT-inclusive programming and events in the local community.

For rural areas, community colleges are especially important. While many rural Americans live over an hour from the nearest public college,¹²⁸ the Rural Community College Alliance shows that roughly two-thirds (64%) of public two-year colleges in the country primarily serve rural areas, with a student population of roughly 3.4 million.¹²⁹ However, research also shows that, like many four-year colleges, two-year colleges infrequently have LGBT-specific support services, despite the fact that these services are directly linked to students’ academic and social success.¹³⁰

And, as states continue to drastically cut funding for public higher education, both two- and four-year colleges are forced to raise tuition and cut what services they may offer, including any LGBT-specific offerings they may have. Not only does this harm the students and staff of those colleges, research shows it also harms the local community: for example, in counties where state funding for community colleges decreased the fastest, these counties also faced dramatic employment losses.¹³¹

policies, policies affirming transgender students’ right to attend school and use facilities in accordance with their gender identity, support for student clubs such as GSAs, and curriculum standards that are inclusive of diverse family structures and LGBT people and issues. Research shows that these policies make a difference in the experiences of LGBT youth in schools¹³²—including fewer suicide attempts by both LGBT and non-LGBT youth¹³³ alike—yet the data also show that these supportive policies are all too rare for students in rural areas. According to GLSEN’s research, LGBT students in rural areas are more likely than suburban and urban students to report that their schools have discriminatory policies and practices, including school-level policies such as disciplining LGBT (but not non-LGBT) students for public displays of affection.¹³⁴

At the state level, generally speaking, policies regarding LGBT students either prohibit discrimination or enable it. LGBT-supportive policies can explicitly prohibit discrimination in schools based on sexual orientation or gender identity, and—importantly for students with LGBT parents—can also prohibit discrimination based on “association” with someone else’s sexual orientation or gender identity.¹³⁵ However, there are also explicitly anti-LGBT laws in school settings, such as laws that forbid teachers from even discussing LGBT people or issues.¹³⁶ Given that LGBT rural residents already have fewer support systems available, these laws only further limit the potential sources of support for LGBT youth in rural areas. As discussed on pages 58-59, rural states are less likely to have supportive education policies and more likely to have these harmful policies.

STORY: Family Moved Twice in Two Years to Ensure Transgender Child Can Safely Attend School



In 2017, Brandy Rose's daughter, Maddie, was told by school administrators at her elementary school in Sherman, Texas, a small city of 38,000, that she could not wear girls' clothing to school, use the girls' restroom, or wear nail polish. Despite having informed the school that Maddie was a transgender girl, the school refused to allow her to attend school safely. Maddie experienced relentless bullying. After the ACLU of Texas advocated on Maddie's behalf, she was allowed to use a staff bathroom.

A few years later, the family moved from Sherman to Achille, Oklahoma, a small community of nearly 500 people, so Maddie could have a fresh start at a new school. However, after learning that Maddie was transgender, students began harassing her again. After she used the girls' restroom, the school and Maddie both received violent threats. The Bryan County Sheriff's Office investigated the threats and closed the school district for two days. Even after the school reopened, Brandy shared, "I don't feel safe living here anymore. I can't drop my daughter off at the movies anymore. What if someone recognizes her in the Walmart parking lot? She won't even sleep in her bed anymore." The sheriff's office stationed more officers in the school and a hall monitor followed Maddie throughout the school.

In the aftermath, community members rallied around Maddie and Rose, including raising funds to assist the family in moving yet again. So for the second time in two years, the family prepared to move in order for their daughter to safely attend school. "It's frustrating to have to pick up and move all over again. It makes me feel horrible because when we moved here, I promised my kids, 'We're not going to move again for a very long time,'" Brandy said. "But we've got to do what's best for the whole family in the long run."

Adapted from: Alexander Kacala, 8/20/18, "After violent threats, family of transgender girl looks to leave town," NBC News; Katie Reilly, 8/17/18, "I Don't Feel Safe Living Here.' After Threats From Parents, a Transgender Girl's Family Is Moving. Again," Time.

Finally, as with many other services and programs, rural residents simply have fewer options when it comes to education providers, and particularly so given ongoing and widespread school consolidation in rural areas. This means that if an LGBT (or any other) student is discriminated against or mistreated at their rural school, they may have no realistic alternative for where they can get an education free from harassment or bullying. What's more, given that schools are also a social and cultural center of rural communities, school rejection means that an LGBT student is not just denied access to education, but also to vital social connection and opportunities. As a result, families may have to seek private schools, to the extent they are available and affordable, or even consider moving if a school is unwilling or unable to provide a safe, affirming learning environment for their children.



BOTTOM LINE: EDUCATION AND SCHOOLS

Resource and teacher shortages mean students in rural districts are often at a disadvantage compared to their urban and suburban peers. LGBT students (and children with LGBT parents) in rural districts are at a further disadvantage if they experience more hostile school climates, fewer structural or policy supports, and an absence of educational alternatives—as research shows they often do.



Employment and Economic Security

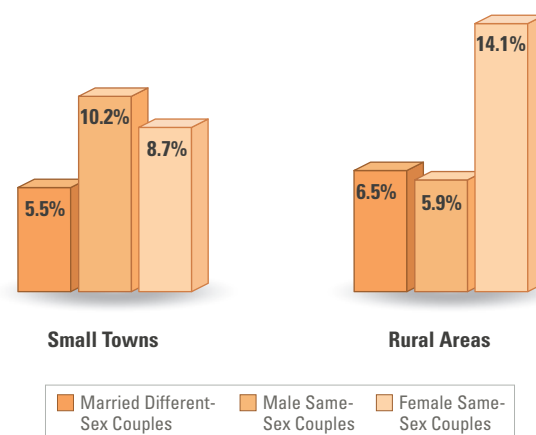
Jobs and economic prosperity are at the forefront of rural concerns, perhaps more than almost any other issue.¹³⁷ While “rural America” may bring to mind agriculture and farming, there is significant diversity in the most common jobs or industries in rural areas. In fact, rural counties have the highest rates of entrepreneurship, or self-employed business owners, in the entire country.¹³⁸ What’s more, the same data show that the more rural the county, the more self-employed business owners there are. Rural businesses are also more resilient than metro-based businesses, with higher rates of five-year business survival even despite “the considerable economic advantages of urban areas, which boast a denser network of workers, suppliers, and markets.”¹³⁹

Despite these successes, rates of poverty are significantly higher in rural communities (even when accounting for education, industry, and other factors),¹⁴⁰ and rates of education are significantly lower.¹⁴¹ There are fewer employers overall, and rural unemployment rates reflect this disparity.¹⁴² In small economies, even seemingly minor changes in the number of employers or jobs available can have a significant impact on the local community.

However, this economic picture isn’t true for all rural communities: rural experiences of economic opportunity and security vary by region and demographics. For example, while poverty exists throughout the country, and disproportionately so in rural areas, “almost 84% of counties in persistent poverty are located in the South.”¹⁴³ Poverty rates are roughly six percentage points higher in Southern rural counties than in Southern urban areas.¹⁴⁴ Additionally, people of color in rural areas in particular feel the brunt of scarce jobs: 53% of nonwhite rural people said the lack of jobs is a major problem in their community, compared to 38% of rural white people.¹⁴⁵

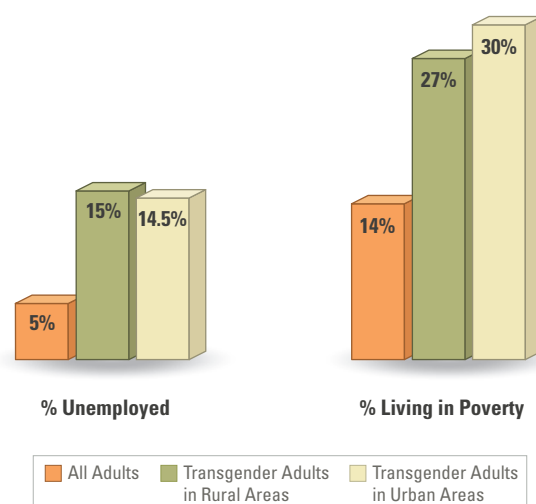
LGBT people in rural areas face additional obstacles in terms of access to employment opportunities, substantially impacting economic security for LGBT people. Research finds that LGBT people, and particularly transgender people, LGBT people of color, and those in rural areas, are more likely to live in poverty (see *Figures 8 and 9*).¹⁴⁶

Figure 8: Same-Sex Couples in Small Towns and Rural Areas Are More Likely to Be in Poverty Than Different-Sex Couples in those Same Areas
% of Couples Living in Poverty



Source: M.V. Lee Badgett, Laura Durso, & Alussa Schneebaum. June 2013. “New Patterns of Poverty in the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community.” The Williams Institute.

Figure 9: Transgender People In Both Rural and Urban Areas Face Higher Economic Insecurity



Source: MAP original analysis of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey.

Figure 9 shows that transgender adults are significantly more likely than the general population to be unemployed and to live at or near the poverty level. Transgender adults in rural and non-rural areas face roughly similar rates of unemployment and poverty.

Similarly, in a 2018 survey, 44% of LGBT respondents said they struggled to maintain adequate savings, compared to 38% of the general population.¹⁴⁷ Given the

higher average poverty rates in rural areas and for LGBT people generally, LGBT people who also live in rural America are especially vulnerable to economic hardship.

Farming and Agriculture

Many rural communities' dependence on agriculture as a primary economic driver has lessened in recent years, often related to the consolidation and increased mechanization of agricultural work, combined with the related reduction in family farming. In the 704 counties across the country in which 100% of the population lives in a rural area, the largest employers are education, health care, and social services, employing 22% of all workers.¹⁴⁸ In these 100% rural counties, agriculture and mining employ only 10% of workers.¹⁴⁹

Though agriculture is no longer the primary economic driver of rural areas, it remains an industry with deep roots in rural communities, both socially and economically: roughly 20% of majority-rural counties—and especially those in the Midwest—are “farming-dependent” economies, according to the USDA.¹⁵⁰

SPOTLIGHT



Making Fresh Food Available to Rural LGBT Communities

Nearly two-thirds of the U.S. LGBT population lives in the South, the Midwest, or the Mountain States, where they are 1.5 to 2 times more likely to experience food insecurity than non-LGBT people in those same areas.¹⁵¹ In Allentown, PA, the Bradbury-Sullivan LGBT Community Center—which serves both Allentown and the surrounding, often rural Lehigh Valley—recently learned that many of its LGBT community members also do not have access to fresh fruits and vegetables. In response, the Center developed a partnership with Crooked Row Farm, a woman-owned, certified-organic farm in Lehigh County. Community members can sign up for a full or half share in this community-supported agriculture (CSA), and then pick up their produce each week at the LGBT community Center throughout farm season. The partnership also includes healthy eating workshops led by Crooked Row Farm. Programs like these are especially vital in rural areas and for LGBT people, who experience food insecurity at far greater rates.

Source: [2018 LGBT Community Center Report](#)

Many LGBT people also share an investment in farming and particularly in sustainable agriculture and food movements, reflecting the shared values and occupations often associated with rural America.¹⁵² Some LGBT people may have been raised in families that engaged in farming, while for others, it may be a newer endeavor. One important recent advancement, both in supporting LGBT people currently farming and those interested in farming, is the update to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's nondiscrimination regulations to prohibit discrimination based on sexual

STORY: Both Harassment and Empowerment for Transgender Latina Farmworker in California



As a transgender Latina farmer working in the fields of California picking raspberries, Roselyn's male coworkers would harass and bully her. As Roselyn describes, they had a machista attitude and would call her gay, make comments about her body, and direct her to the men's restrooms. She rarely had health insurance, and without it, the hormones she needed cost her \$100 a month.

When Roselyn applied for office jobs, her inaccurate identity documents became an issue and employers turned her away, especially after interviewing. Roselyn turned to the LGBT community for support. That's when she discovered that she wasn't alone and that she could fight for her right to be treated fairly at work. Roselyn connected with California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA), a nonprofit legal service program created to help California's low-income individuals and communities. She participated in CRLA's Conexiones LGBT leadership and support program in Salinas, an agricultural community in Northern California, becoming a leader of the program and ultimately a full-time staff member for CRLA.

“Before I joined Conexiones, I was treated poorly by hospital staff. Sometimes I wouldn't go see the doctor, even if I were sick. Thanks to Conexiones, I know my rights. I stand up for myself and see the doctor when I need to. ...Every day I put my make up on and go to work, I feel fabulous, powerful, and that I am going to be successful.”

Source: Adapted from materials provided by California Rural Legal Assistance.

orientation and gender identity.¹⁵³ This important change means that for all USDA programs that the agency directly administers—including farm loans, small business development, and food programs—LGBT people cannot be discriminated against.

Immigrant Workers in Rural Communities

An estimated 4% of rural residents were born outside the U.S.¹⁵⁴—roughly the same percentage as LGBT-identified adults in rural areas—and many of these immigrants in rural areas are people of color. Research shows recent immigrants to rural areas are especially likely to be Latinx.

Immigrants make significant contributions to rural communities and economies, including in agriculture, food processing, and health care.¹⁵⁵ The Midwest in particular, for example, is home to many rural areas whose economies center around agriculture or food processing, to which local immigrant residents greatly contribute.¹⁵⁶ Similarly, about one in six U.S. healthcare workers are immigrants, including doctors, dentists, pharmacists, and optometrists, among others—all professions in short supply in rural areas.¹⁵⁷ In fact, these foreign-born medical professionals are more likely to work in rural areas and underserved communities in the U.S., compared to U.S.-born healthcare workers.¹⁵⁸

However, despite these many contributions, immigrants also face challenges in rural areas, including potential language barriers as well as many of the same obstacles facing LGBT people in rural areas: fewer healthcare providers with less culturally-relevant knowledge; risk of exploitation or discrimination based on their identity; geographic isolation from affirming or supportive resources; higher likelihood of experiencing poverty; and outright prejudice. Additionally, in the United States, there are an estimated 904,000 immigrants who are also LGBT-identified, a large majority of whom are people of color.¹⁵⁹ These individuals face challenges as both LGBT people and as immigrants, and for those who additionally live in rural areas, these challenges are even further magnified.

Discrimination at Work

Nationally, LGBT people report high rates of employment discrimination ranging from being harassed, unfairly fired, and not hired or promoted. For example, as *Figure 10* on the next page shows, a 2017 nationally representative survey of LGBT people found



Deeper Dive: Connections to Nature and Land

The concept of “rural America” often brings to mind images of wide-open spaces where nature abounds, with fresh air, clean water, clear views of the night sky, and access to nature. It can also conjure images of farmers and farm workers, barns and livestock, crops, and an agriculturally-driven economy. For some, this deep connection to land, nature, and place is a fundamental part of what it means to be rural, or to live in a rural area.

Many LGBT people share this connection to land, nature, and rural space more generally. Scholar Mark Hain describes the importance of this connection for LGBT people, both historically and in the present day: from lesbian separatist back-to-the-land movements and Radical Faeries, to Camp Trans and vacationers at LGBT campgrounds around the country, “nature allows space for the self-reflection and self-invention” that is crucial for LGBT people as they create and navigate their own identities.¹⁶⁰

In a modern example, Lupinewood is a collective of queer and transgender people living in a rehabilitated historic home on rural land near Greenfield, Massachusetts.¹⁶¹ The collective’s stated mission, “to build a permanent stronghold for trans sanctuary, radical art, and community organizing,” draws support from their connection to the surrounding land and nature, including the medicinally-beneficial “native plants that are grown here” and “the wooded trails” throughout the sanctuary. In fact, the specific land and place of Lupinewood is so central to the group’s mission that they have placed it in a trust to ensure its availability to future LGBT people.

Jonah Mossberg, a queer farmer and creator of the documentary *Out Here*, which centers on LGBT farmers, “says he thinks there’s a natural connection between the instincts involved in rethinking food production and those involved in rethinking human relationships. ‘For a queer person, farming is like looking in a mirror. There’s room for experimentation and for things to shift and change.’”¹⁶²

that, overall, 20% of LGBT people had been personally discriminated against when applying for jobs because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and 22% had been discriminated against when it came to equal pay or opportunities for promotion.¹⁶³ The 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey found that, among transgender people who had ever lost a job, 30% had lost their job because of their gender identity or expression.¹⁶⁴ (See the Political Landscape section for a detailed discussion of legal protections against such discrimination.) Indeed, analysis of discrimination claims finds that LGBT people file complaints of employment discrimination at rates similar to people of color and women.¹⁶⁵

Perhaps unsurprisingly given these rates of discrimination, nearly half (48%) of LGBT workers were not out at work, according to a 2018 national probability survey by the Human Rights Campaign.¹⁶⁶ While it may be relatively easier to not be out at work in a big city where people are less likely to run into their coworkers, in rural areas this may be near impossible. An LGBT person or same-sex couple can run into coworkers at local sports games, the grocery store, a restaurant, or just about anywhere. In fact, in interviews commissioned by the Movement Advancement Project, some rural LGBT people reported driving 90 minutes or more each way to find employment that was further from home, making it easier to stay closeted at work in the face of hostile work environments.

While little hard data is available to show the rates of discrimination experienced by LGBT people in rural compared to urban communities, research does suggest that employment discrimination against LGBT people may look different in rural communities than it does in urban centers.¹⁶⁷ For example, in smaller or less diverse communities, there may be more societal agreement about how people are “supposed to act,” including based on their gender. In the context of rural communities and their history of agricultural or physical work, there may be a stronger emphasis placed on men’s masculinity and manual labor. Such norms may be particularly detrimental to gay, bisexual, and transgender men, all of whom transgress at least one norm of what “men do” (i.e., to whom they are attracted) or who men are traditionally assumed to be. And so rural men who deviate from these local norms may be more likely to experience discrimination.¹⁶⁸

Further, if LGBT people choose to be out at work and in their communities, they are sometimes accused

Figure 10: LGBT People Experience High Rates of Discrimination at Work



Sources: NPR/RWJF/Harvard, 2017, “Discrimination in America: Experiences and Views of LGBTQ Americans.” James et al, 2016, “The Report from the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey,” National Center for Transgender Equality.

of inappropriately “talking about their sex lives,” when they may simply be talking about what they did over the weekend with their spouse or partner. Particularly in small communities where social norms may be challenged simply by being LGBT, these types of accusations may be used as pretext to fire someone simply for being LGBT.¹⁶⁹ Such justifications for discrimination may be more likely to pass as acceptable to rural courts than urban courts. For example, consider the case of a lesbian couple living in Sheridan, Wyoming. In that case, courts ruled that a community’s discomfort with and moral disapproval of the couple’s relationship justified their being denied employment in the local public school district.¹⁷⁰

Employment discrimination can also be a challenge for same-sex couples that move to a rural area from another community. For example, a worker may accept a transfer within a national corporation that has a nondiscrimination policy—only to find their partner or spouse is unable to find work after the move.

When LGBT people in rural areas lose jobs or are denied work because of discrimination, they also often face additional obstacles finding other work. Rural areas may simply have fewer employment options, and so being denied one job may lead to longer term unemployment. The interconnectedness of rural communities also means that the majority of local employers may know an individual is LGBT, making jobs

STORY: School Offers Man a Job, Then Learns He's Gay and Rescinds the Offer



(Dan (left) and Bert (right), on their wedding day, 2014; Dan and Bert in Montana)

Bert and his husband, Dan, live in Miles City, Montana, a town with a population of 8,483. Bert and Dan have fostered 14 children over the years, and they currently provide a safe, loving home to seven children.

After losing his job close to home due to outsourcing, Bert applied to a job 70 miles away at St. Labre Indian School, a private Catholic high school serving children from neighboring Northern Cheyenne and Crow reservations. As both a Catholic and a Blackfeet Native American, Bert felt this was a natural fit, and that he and Dan would figure out a way to make the long commute work. He excitedly accepted the well-paying job when the school offered it to him.

But when Bert looked for housing at the school, in case bad weather ever meant he needed to stay nearby rather than make the long drive home to his family, he mentioned his husband and children to the St. Labre employee showing him available housing. A few days later, Bert received a call from the school's administrator, asking him to come speak with the entire school board.

"Are you a practicing homosexual?" the board asked Bert. "Why didn't you mention this when we asked in your interview if you lived by Catholic values?" they asked. Bert explains what happened next: "I live my life by the morals and values I was taught in Catholic school, so of course I answered truthfully that I live by Catholic values. I didn't think this was a problem." The school rescinded the job offer, leaving Bert without a job to provide for his family. Eventually he found another job, but for considerably less pay than what St. Labre had offered.

Though this experience seriously affected his family, Bert says, "I probably run into more problems and discrimination being Native American than being gay," referring to multiple experiences of hateful speech, disrespect, and mistreatment over the years. In one particularly difficult experience, Bert was with family at a local restaurant when someone came in and loudly made racist, anti-Native comments. Bert's 12-year-old relative later asked him, quietly, "Does everybody here hate people like us?"

While Bert's experiences illustrate the realities of being both Native and gay in a rural place, he says, "I love living in Montana. I love Miles City. It's a good place to raise kids, just big enough to have services... We've made quite a few friends." He and Dan were supported by their friends and family when they married in 2014, as well as when St. Labre rescinded Bert's job offer. Community members sometimes call on Bert and Dan to support younger LGBTQ children in the area, and Bert has run for both local and statewide office. "Montanans are fiercely independent people," Bert says. "Some of the friends you don't expect are your biggest supporters. ...It's not as daunting as it looks. Here we are."

Source: Original interview with MAP

SPOTLIGHT



Opportunity for Employers to Lead in Rural Areas

In many rural areas, major employers are universities, plants or branches of national companies, or government organizations. These major employers may have significant influence when it comes to local policy and practices, and they can act as community leaders by supporting LGBT-inclusive policies at the local level, as well as modeling best practices (including internal nondiscrimination policies) for diverse and inclusive workplaces.

Together We Grow describes itself as a collection of companies, universities, government agencies, and non-governmental organizations “with a stake in American agriculture and a commitment to building a modern workforce that reflects the communities in which we live and work.” The organization works to promote best practices for diversity and inclusion in agriculture, an industry at the heart of many rural American communities and the primary economic force of at least 20% of rural counties.¹⁷¹

Some of the featured practices on their home page include, for example, updating required dress codes to be more gender neutral, and providing employees with free classes in English as a Second Language, High School Equivalency, U.S. citizenship, and digital and financial literacy, among others. Another feature describes the National Association of Agricultural Educators, the National Future Farmers of America Organization, and the National Teach Ag Campaign’s collective efforts to provide more inclusive teacher training and student support. Together We Grow also promotes the Human Rights Campaign’s Corporate Equality Index as a measure of LGBT-inclusive practices.

harder to find in a less accepting community. Next, as noted earlier, when employment opportunities and networking occur through word of mouth or community institutions like churches, and when LGBT people are excluded from these formal and informal networks, they can be further shut out of potential opportunities to find work and put food on the table for their families. Finally, LGBT people living in rural states are also less likely to have the protection of explicit employment nondiscrimination protections (see page 57), and so may also have less recourse against discrimination.

against employment discrimination, at both the state and local level. Given this, and given the significant role of both small businesses and major anchor employers in rural communities, employers can play a key leadership role in supporting and protecting LGBT people in rural areas.



Housing & Homelessness



BOTTOM LINE: EMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC SECURITY

The employment opportunities and challenges in rural communities—from high rates of entrepreneurship to high rates of poverty and unemployment—impact all residents in rural America. Yet, there are added dynamics at play for LGBT people in rural areas: LGBT people are more visible in rural communities, face high rates of discrimination at work, and there are simply fewer alternative job options in rural areas. Additionally, LGBT people in rural areas are less likely to have vital protections

While housing may cost less in rural areas compared to cities, the challenge of affordability and quantity can make it challenging for people to find housing, particularly given lower incomes overall in rural communities and higher rates of poverty. In some communities, an influx of second or seasonal home owners, vacationers, and retirees can drive up housing costs, as is the case in New England where three-quarters of vacant rural housing units are used for occasional or seasonal use and just 4% of vacant units are available for rent.¹⁷² In other rural communities, land use and zoning policies that emphasize natural spaces, agriculture, and single family homes can further limit housing options and therefore increase costs.¹⁷³ It is estimated that 41% of rural renters

spend more than 30% of their income on housing.¹⁷⁴ Additionally, renters in rural areas are more likely to live in poverty and are twice as likely to live in substandard housing than their rural peers who own their homes.¹⁷⁵

The challenges of finding quality, affordable housing in rural areas can be exacerbated for people with disabilities, those who are low-income, and older adults because of the limited number of units that may meet their needs. Additionally, research shows that people of color experience widespread discrimination when seeking housing.¹⁷⁶ Similarly, for LGBT people in rural communities, the challenges of finding affordable housing are compounded by the fear or actual experience of housing discrimination.

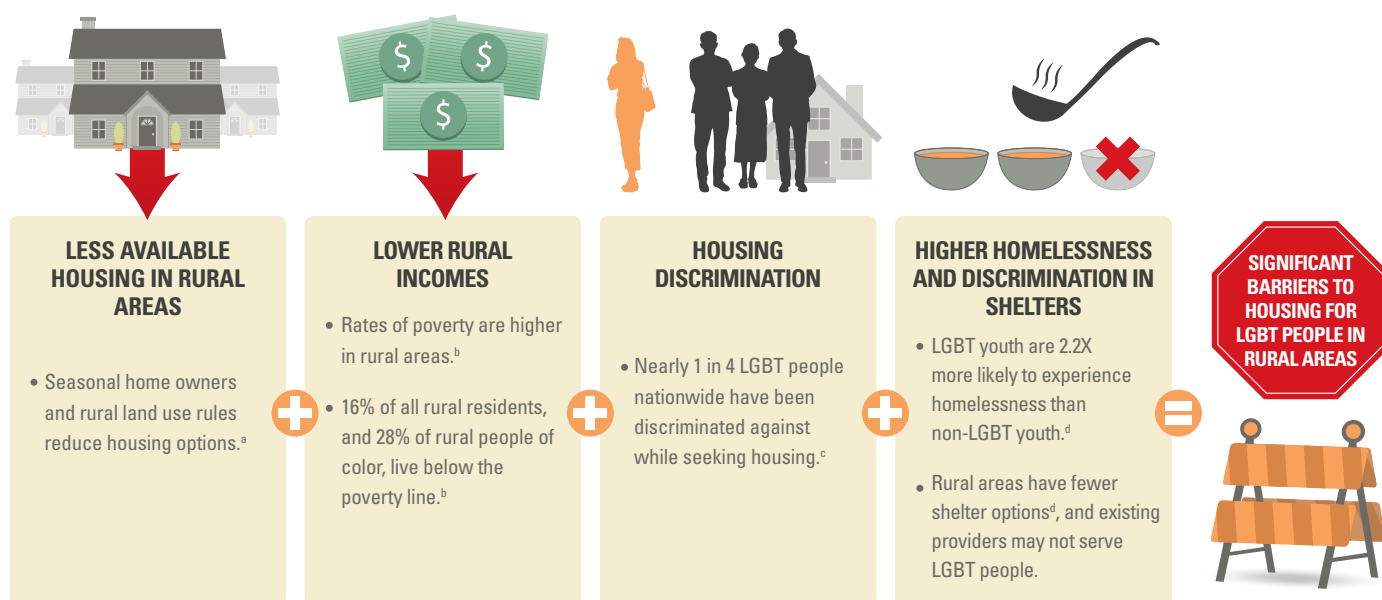
Studies find that nationwide, LGBT people experience high rates of housing discrimination, which can include having a rental application denied because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, being denied a loan to purchase a home, being unfairly evicted, or being harassed by landlords or other tenants. In a 2017 national survey of LGBT people, nearly one in four (22%) said they had personally been discriminated against because they were LGBT when seeking housing.¹⁷⁷ Similarly, in an experiment in which both

a heterosexual couple and a same-sex couple visited or applied for housing, researchers found that 27% of houses tested treated same-sex couples differently by either quoting higher monthly rent or denying housing applications.¹⁷⁸ In a study focused on LGB senior housing, both a heterosexual senior and an LGB senior contacted the same senior housing community to determine availability, and nearly half of time (48%) the LGB senior was treated differently, such as being told there was no availability or that prices were higher.¹⁷⁹

In a 2015 national study, nearly one-quarter (23%) of all transgender adults experienced some kind of housing discrimination and/or instability in the past year alone because of their gender identity or expression.¹⁸⁰ While transgender people in rural and urban areas were roughly equally likely to report such experiences, transgender people of color were even more likely to report housing instability.

While few studies have examined the experiences of LGBT people searching for housing in rural communities specifically, the fact that rural areas already face limited housing options means that additionally facing discrimination lowers the chances of finding quality, affordable housing even further. This may be particularly

RURAL HOUSING CHALLENGES CAN BE ESPECIALLY DIFFICULT FOR LGBT PEOPLE



^a Jessica Carson & Marybeth Mattingly. 2017. Carsey Research National Issue Brief #128. UNH Carsey School of Public Policy. ^b Housing Assistance Council. 2012. Taking Stock: Rural People, Poverty, and Housing in the 21st Century. ^c NPR, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. November 2017. Discrimination in America: Experiences and Views of LGBTQ Americans. ^d Voices of Youth Count. 2018. Missed Opportunities: LGBTQ Youth Homelessness in America. University of Chicago.

true for transgender people and for same-sex couples with children because their gender identity and/or sexual orientation may already be common knowledge or may be disclosed during their housing search. For example, a transgender applicant may have ID that shows a different gender marker than their application, and a same-sex couple with children may be less likely to be seen as “roommates.” And housing discrimination occurs not only at the hands of landlords: banks may also refuse to lend credit or offer mortgages (where again, same-sex couples with joint accounts can be easily flagged). In rural areas where banks have consolidated, there are fewer options for mortgage loans which can make obtaining a mortgage more challenging.¹⁸¹

Currently under federal law, housing discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity is not explicitly prohibited, though the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and numerous courts interpret the Fair Housing Act’s ban on sex-based discrimination to include discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Additionally, both HUD and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) have nondiscrimination policies for programs funded through those agencies that prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.¹⁸² These programs include the USDA’s Housing Preservation Grants that assist low and very low-income residents to repair and rehabilitate housing units, as well as direct or guaranteed loans with low interest rates to individuals to purchase housing.¹⁸³ Compared to urban environments, there are far fewer public housing options for extremely low-income rural residents. These units often have very long waiting lists, leaving residents to rely on housing vouchers or other types of assistance, which may not include nondiscrimination protections.¹⁸⁴ For further discussion of federal, state, and local protections against housing discrimination, see the *Political Landscape* section.

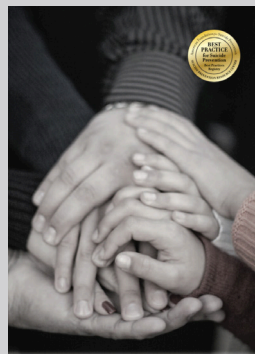
LGBT Youth Homelessness

Youth homelessness is a problem nationwide, including in rural areas. A national survey of youth experiencing homelessness found that it is as common in rural communities as in urban communities: among youth (ages 13-17), 4.4% of rural youth and 4.2% of urban youth reported homelessness, while 9.2% of rural young adults (ages 18-25) and 9.6% of urban young adults reported this experience (see *Figure 11* on the next page).¹⁸⁵

SPOTLIGHT



Supporting Families with LGBT Children Through Evidence-Based Practice



Supportive Families, Healthy Children
Helping Families with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Children
SAN FRANCISCO STATE UNIVERSITY

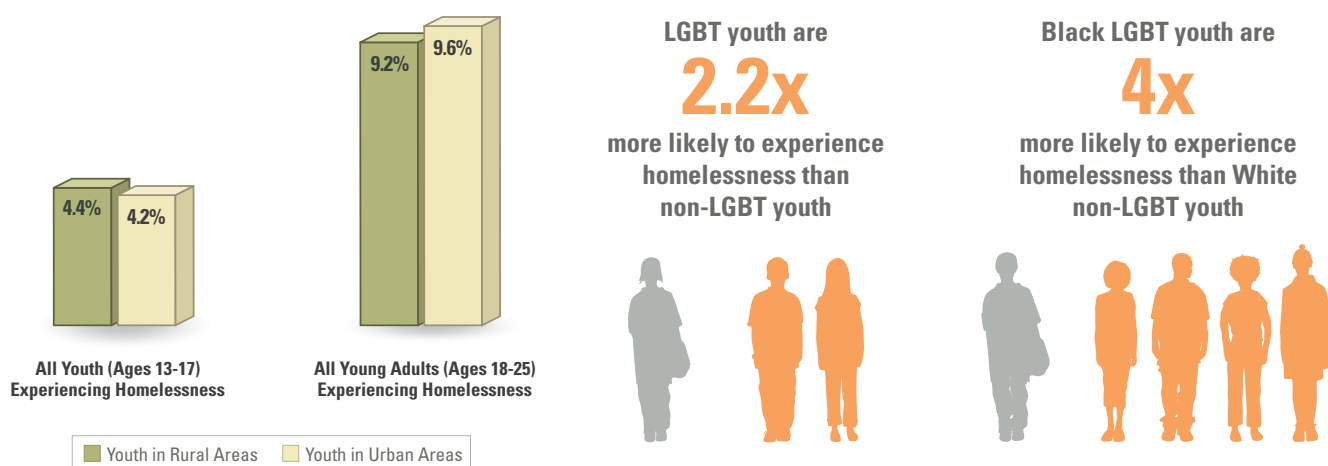
The Family Acceptance Project is a “national research, education and training program that helps families to support their LGBT children.” The group produces research and provides evidence-based trainings and materials to support best practices for families, communities, faith organizations, and more, in order to protect the physical and mental health of LGBT youth and reduce potential risks of suicide, homelessness, and other negative outcomes.

The Family Acceptance Project’s research shows that when parents and families accept and support their LGBT youth, that acceptance dramatically improves the child’s self-esteem and life satisfaction, and further decreases their risk of experiencing depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, or engage in self-harming behaviors.¹⁸⁶ Their resources include a free guide called “Supportive Families, Healthy Children: Helping Families with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Children,” available in English, Spanish, and Chinese.¹⁸⁷ They have also produced a report specifically geared toward Latter-Day Saints families, as well as short documentaries about both Latinx and Latter-Day Saints families with LGBT children.

While any family may struggle with acceptance or understanding how best to support their LGBT child, families in rural areas may be at a disadvantage when it comes to finding easily accessible, LGBT-affirming resources and information. Information and guidebooks like those produced by the Family Acceptance Project and easily available online can be vital to those who are geographically far from the nearest LGBT community center or other supportive space.

For more information, see www.advancingacceptance.org or familyproject.sfsu.edu.

Figure 11: Youth Homelessness is a Problem in Both Rural and Urban Areas, and LGBT Youth are Especially Likely to Experience Homelessness



Source: Voices of Youth Count Survey 2018.

However, youth homelessness in rural communities is more likely to be “hidden,” as youth are more likely to couch surf, sleep outside, or sleep in a vehicle, rather than in places like homeless shelters (where they can be counted and provided services).¹⁸⁸

Research shows that most LGBT youth experiencing homelessness became homeless not in the immediate aftermath of coming out, but in large part as the result of frayed relationships over time, as well as general family instability.¹⁸⁹ Among rural youth who experience homelessness, many report that their housing situation is due to family economic instability, typically related to either joblessness or substance use.¹⁹⁰ Family rejection does play a role, however: LGBT youth overall are 2.2 times more likely to report experiencing homelessness compared to their non-LGBT peers, and black and multiracial LGBT youth are at even higher risk.

Regardless of whether LGBT youth experience family rejection and are then forced to leave their homes or they experience homelessness for other reasons, the extent to which LGBT youth can access affirming services is an important question in rural communities. There may be fewer social service agencies that contract with the state to provide family support services, foster homes, or even adoptive homes for youth, and those that do receive contracts may lack basic LGBT competency or the ability to identify rejecting behaviors exhibited by family members, or may actively discriminate against LGBT youth and LGBT prospective parents.¹⁹¹ In a

national survey of LGBT youth who had experienced homelessness, young people’s sense of whether service agencies were safe and affirming spaces for LGBT youth often informed their decisions about whether to engage with them.¹⁹² Rural youth experiencing homelessness report that most of the counties in which they live lack services specifically for youth experiencing homelessness (let alone services that are LGBT-affirming), which means they may be forced to go without help or travel to find support.¹⁹³



BOTTOM LINE: HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

Though housing may be more affordable in rural areas compared to suburban or urban areas, housing costs remain unaffordable for many rural residents, and particularly so for quality housing. Additionally, LGBT people in rural areas may face discrimination when seeking housing, from applying for rentals to applying for mortgages. Given that rural areas already face limited housing options means, facing discrimination lowers the chances of finding quality, affordable housing even further. LGBT youth also face disproportionate rates of homelessness, and in rural areas, a lack of services providers with competency serving LGBT youth means this homelessness may be more difficult to recognize and redress.



Public Places and Businesses

A common image of small towns or rural America is a Main Street filled with local businesses, banks, restaurants, and more. As noted above, small businesses drive the economies of many rural communities, where rates of entrepreneurship are higher than in other communities. In some rural communities, Main Streets are filled with thriving, innovative businesses and public spaces that serve their communities, employ residents, and foster community connections.¹⁹⁴ In other rural communities, the reality of Main Street is rather empty storefronts and larger “box” stores such as WalMart that have replaced smaller businesses and reduced the number of retail establishments. In both cases, however, local businesses—whether “Mom and Pop” stores or big box chains—are crucial to rural economies, communities, and the daily life of rural residents, as they provide both employment and, often, additional places for social gatherings and community building.

Businesses, such as those at the heart of rural economies, are one part of what’s often referred to as “public accommodations.” While the legal definition may vary from state to state, public accommodations generally describes a wide range of places where people carry out their day-to-day life, such as local or chain businesses, restaurants, and coffeeshops, as well as public services such as libraries, parks, transportation services, and healthcare providers.

Across all these forms of public accommodations, rural residents are likely limited in the number of options they may have available. There may be only one or a few clothing stores, restaurants, or grocery stores. For example, in an estimated 20% of rural counties, all residents live more than 10 miles from even one supermarket or supercenter.¹⁹⁵ In Mississippi, 70% of low-income residents who are eligible for federal food assistance must travel more than 30 miles to reach a supermarket.¹⁹⁶ For rural residents, particularly those who rely on public transit or those who are low income, this may mean fewer options for finding the goods and services they need and paying more for the same goods compared to people with access to more retail options.¹⁹⁷

For LGBT people in rural communities, the limited number of businesses and service providers can be

SPOTLIGHT



LGBT-Owned Businesses in Rural America

In addition to working in and patronizing local businesses, rural LGBT people also create their own establishments, including gay bars. Sociologist Greggor Mattson describes how “outpost” gay bars—gay bars that are more than a one-hour drive from the next closest gay bar—differ from gay bars in big cities, and further how they provide more than just another place to drink or gather.¹⁹⁸ Serving both LGBT and non-LGBT people, outpost gay bars routinely fundraise for local community organizations, use their own profits to support local nonprofits, and serve as sites for social services, such as STI testing, counseling, or other important health programs. To the extent they participate in Pride or other event planning, these and other LGBT-owned establishments also promote tourism and stimulate local economies.

Inadequate transportation can be a major challenge for rural residents, given the long distances to stores. In Mississippi...over 70 percent of food stamp eligible households travel more than 30 miles to reach a supermarket.

The Grocery Gap: Who Has Access to Healthy Food and Why It Matters. 2010.



limited even further if they experience discrimination. In most states, businesses and other places of public accommodation can legally discriminate against LGBT people because of their sexual orientation and gender identity. No federal law prohibits such discrimination by businesses that serve the public. For a detailed discussion of policy protections (and religious exemptions that allow businesses to opt out of following nondiscrimination laws), see the *Political Landscape* section.

Though wedding-related services are the most frequently imagined example of public accommodations discrimination against LGBT people, data show that LGBT people in fact routinely experience discrimination across many areas of life and many types of public

MOST PEOPLE USE AT LEAST ONE PLACE OF PUBLIC ACCOMMODATION EVERY DAY, INCLUDING WHEN THEY:

GO OUT TO DINNER OR DRINKS WITH A FRIEND

Fact: 12% of LGBT people report avoiding restaurants due to fear of discrimination.^e

VISIT A LOCAL BUSINESS

Fact: 18% of all LGBT people made decisions about where to shop to avoid discrimination.^a

Public places

are a part of daily life, and in rural areas they are even more central to the life of the local community.

Without nondiscrimination protections, these places are potentially unwelcoming or unsafe for LGBT people.

EXERCISE AT THE GYM AFTER WORK

Fact: 18% of transgender people reported experiencing discrimination at a gym or health club.^d

USE PUBLIC SERVICES

Fact: 34% of transgender people reported experiencing discrimination in public transportation.^b

Fact: 14% of transgender people reported experiencing discrimination at the DMV.^b

GO TO THE DOCTOR'S OFFICE

Fact: Nearly 56% of LGBT people experienced at least one instance of discrimination or patient profiling when attempting to access health care.^c

^aSejal Singh and Laura Durso. 2017. "Widespread Discrimination Continues to Shape LGBT People's Lives in Both Subtle and Significant Ways." Center for American Progress. ^bSandy James, Jody Herman, Sue Rankin, Mara Keisling, Lisa Mottet, and Ma'ayan Anafi. 2016. "The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey." Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality. NOTE: Any number in this figure and from this source is based on survey respondents who visited a place of public accommodation in the past year where staff knew or thought they were transgender. ^cLambda Legal. 2010. "When Health Care Isn't Caring." ^dJames et al 2016. ^eSingh and Durso 2017.

places.¹⁹⁹ Furthermore, this type of discrimination is far more common than most people realize. For example, a nationally-representative survey of LGBT people by the Center for American Progress shows that over the course of one year (2016), fully one-quarter of LGBT respondents experienced discrimination because of their sexual orientation or gender identity in employment, housing, and/or public accommodations.²⁰⁰ Similarly, in the past

year alone, among transgender people who visited a place of public accommodation and staff knew or thought they were transgender, 31% experienced some or multiple kinds of discrimination or mistreatment, including 24% who were verbally harassed, 14% of respondents who were denied equal treatment or service, and 2% who were physically attacked because they were transgender.²⁰¹

STORY: Lesbian Couple Denied Tax Preparation Services



In Russiaville, Indiana—population 1,094—Bailey and Samantha Brazzel recently went to the local tax services business for help with their first filing as a married couple. Bailey had filed her taxes there as an individual four years in a row without incident, but when her wife Samantha came with her this year, the couple was turned away. The employee told the women that her personal belief was that marriage was between one man and one woman, and that therefore she could not prepare the couple's taxes.

"I went in there to have my taxes done, not push my beliefs on her," Bailey said. "If you are going to run a business, you should be professional enough to do business with people from all types of backgrounds."

Indiana has no statewide protections for LGBT people facing discrimination in public accommodations (nor in employment or housing), nor does Russiaville have a local ordinance prohibiting such discrimination. As a result, the Brazzels have no legal recourse against the discrimination they faced, and were forced to travel in search of businesses willing to serve them.

Adapted from Vic Ryckaert, 2/18/19, "An Indiana tax service turned away a gay couple. Both sides claim discrimination," Indianapolis Star, and Kayla Epstein, 2/20/19, "Christian tax preparer turns away lesbian couple on religious grounds," Washington Post.

These experiences of discrimination have substantial impacts on LGBT people. Experiencing discrimination in public accommodations discourages LGBT people from using places of public accommodation in the future: for example, 47% of LGBT people who experienced discrimination in the past year made specific decisions about where to shop in order to avoid further discrimination, while 34% avoided public places like stores and restaurants, 18% avoided doctors' offices, and 10% avoided public transit.²⁰²

Additionally, when LGBT people experience discrimination by businesses, some people may argue that LGBT people should just "go somewhere else." In rural communities, however, that simply may not be possible given the relative scarcity of options. In a 2017 survey by the Center for American Progress, LGBT people living outside of metropolitan areas are at least twice as likely to say it would be "very difficult" or "not possible" to find a similar type of business service if they were turned away.²⁰³

LGBT people living outside of metropolitan areas are at least twice as likely to say it would be "very difficult" or "not possible" to find a similar type of business service if they were turned away.

- Center for American Progress (2017)

Additionally, two key policy components increase the likelihood that LGBT people experience discrimination in public accommodations. First, nondiscrimination laws, which prohibit discrimination in public accommodations (and other areas of life), are less common in rural states (see page 57). Second, religious exemptions laws, which are more common in rural states (see page 59), can allow people or businesses to simply opt out of nondiscrimination protections if they conflict with their religious beliefs.

Religious exemptions in public accommodations extend far beyond wedding-related industries and are frequently found in vital areas such as health care, child welfare and social services, and more. For example, a law passed in 2016 in Mississippi allows *any* business owner to refuse to serve customers, so long as that refusal is based on "sincerely held religious beliefs or moral convictions." However, these religious beliefs can *only* be about three issues: 1) that marriage is or should be only between one man and one woman; 2) that sexual relations should be reserved to such a marriage; and 3) that sex is immutable and determined at birth.²⁰⁴ This law not only allows business owners and service providers to deny services based on their own religious beliefs, but it also *directly targets* LGBT people, as well as unmarried or interracial couples, single parents, and potentially others. This exemplifies the ways in which religious exemptions are used to allow businesses of

any kind to refuse to serve LGBT people, as well as other community members and neighbors.

Taken together, a lack of nondiscrimination protections coupled with religious exemptions creates an environment in which businesses, business owners, or even staff working behind the counter can reject customers based on their personal religious beliefs. In rural areas where LGBT people have fewer alternatives, this is particularly harmful.



BOTTOM LINE: PUBLIC PLACES AND BUSINESSES

“Public accommodations” refers to a wide range of businesses, services, and spaces that are part of everyday life, from restaurants and coffeeshops to public libraries and healthcare providers. Rural areas generally have fewer providers of such services, and as a result, if an LGBT person in a rural area is discriminated against when seeking such a service, they are unlikely to have an alternative place to get that service. Combined with a lack of nondiscrimination protections, and a higher likelihood of religious exemption laws, LGBT people in rural areas are especially vulnerable to discrimination in public accommodations and have few options for overcoming such discrimination.



Health Care

Access to health care is critical for the health and wellbeing of all people, including those living in rural communities. Healthcare providers are also an integral part of rural infrastructure and communities. Hospitals, for example, are often one of the largest employers in rural areas, providing not only much needed medical care, but also jobs and economic opportunity.²⁰⁵ Though it can be difficult to compare rural and urban providers because they operate in such fundamentally different contexts,²⁰⁶ rural healthcare providers score better than urban providers on (at least some measures of) quality, collaboration, and patient satisfaction.²⁰⁷ And yet, rural communities face a changing and challenging healthcare landscape.

Fewer Alternative Providers

Across the country, rural communities are contending with a scarcity of healthcare providers, particularly for specialty services. Rural areas have significantly fewer primary care doctors, dentists, and other healthcare providers—including mental health care and addiction treatment services—than do urban areas.²⁰⁸ The number of rural healthcare providers is also declining: for example, since 2010, 84% of rural hospitals have closed, with many of those that remain now also at risk of closing.²⁰⁹ As a result, people in rural communities may have to travel a great distance to reach any of these providers, and they may have to wait significantly longer to receive emergency services. Additionally, people living in rural areas face significantly higher healthcare costs than those in other areas.²¹⁰ All of these challenges pose even greater consequences to rural areas given the ongoing opioid crisis (see *Deeper Dive: The Opioid Crisis and Rural America*).

Provider scarcity and other challenges facing rural health care have profound health consequences for rural residents across demographic lines. For LGBT people in rural areas, these challenges and consequences are compounded by a lack of LGBT-competent health care, the risk of outright discrimination, and the increasing role of religious exemptions in health care, which can even further jeopardize access to care and increase already high rates of discrimination. Simply put, if an LGBT person in a rural setting is discriminated against by their doctor—which religious exemptions may increasingly allow—it can effectively eliminate all healthcare options for that person.

Lower Cultural Competency

Having a healthcare provider who is accessible, understanding of difference, and able to provide the health care that individuals need is crucial to the health and wellbeing of all people. Improving cultural and linguistic understanding between healthcare providers and patients removes barriers that stand in the way of effective health care.²¹¹ Such cultural competency also strongly influences the quality of and access to health care for many minority groups, including LGBT people, who often experience health disparities and particular health concerns.

LGBT people in rural America experience significant health disparities, compared to both non-LGBT rural residents and to LGBT people living in urban or suburban

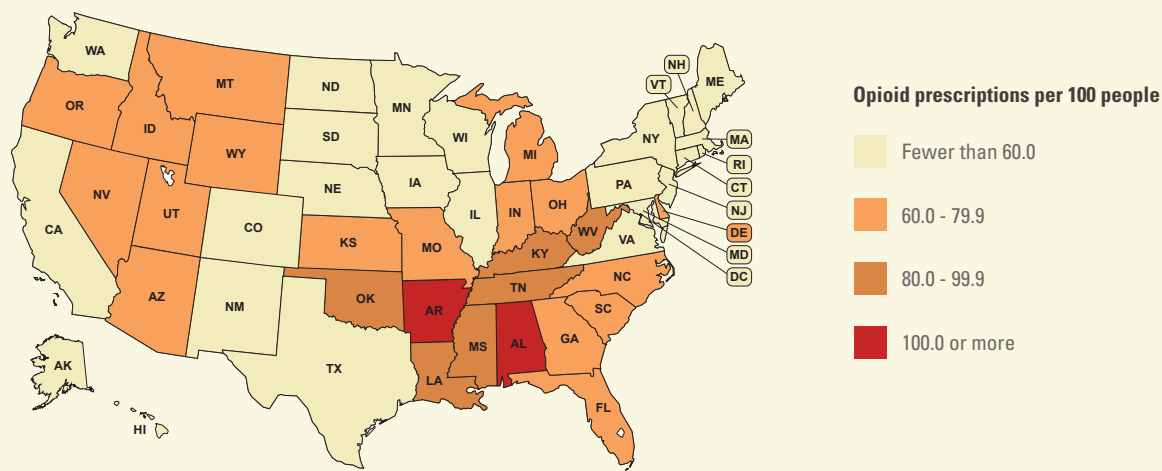


Since 1999, opioid overdose deaths in the United States have steadily grown. In 2013, this growth rate dramatically increased, largely attributed to synthetic opioids such as Tramadol and Fentanyl. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), nearly 70% of drug overdose deaths in 2017 involved an opioid, and now nearly 130 Americans die every day from an opioid overdose.

This ongoing opioid crisis has hit rural America particularly hard. According to the CDC, the highest rates of opioid prescriptions are in the heavily-rural South and Midwest²¹² (see *Figure 12*), meaning higher availability of these drugs in these areas. Additionally, research shows that the highest rates of opioid overdose deaths are in Appalachia (see *Figure 13*).²¹³

Figure 12: Southern States Have Highest Rates of Opioid Prescriptions

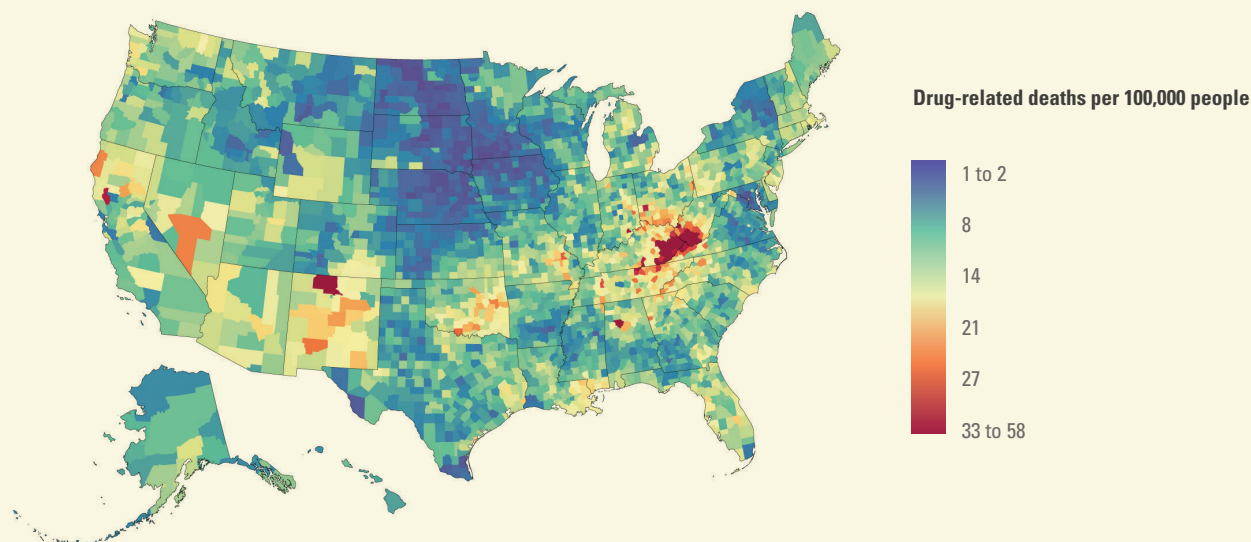
Rates of Opioid Prescriptions, 2017



Source: Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. State Opioid Prescribing Rates, 2017.

Figure 13: Appalachian States Have Highest Rates of Drug-Related Deaths

Age-Standardized Mortality Rate From Drug Use Disorders, 2014



Source: Dwyer-Lindgren L, Bertozzi-Villa A, Stubbs RW, et al. 2018. "Trends and Patterns of Geographic Variation in Mortality From Substance Use Disorders and Intentional Injuries Among US Counties, 1980-2014." JAMA 319(10):1013-1023.



Deeper Dive: The Opioid Crisis and Rural America

(continued from the previous page)

Rates of substance misuse, including opioids, are higher among LGBT people than the general population, which research attributes to higher experiences of discrimination and trauma.²¹⁴ As a result, LGBT people—including those in rural areas, where LGBT people are more vulnerable to discrimination—are more likely to be affected by the opioid crisis.

For LGBT people in rural areas, the opioid crisis (as well as addiction or medical issues more broadly) may cause additional harm beyond medical or health concerns. Given the relatively few healthcare providers available in rural areas, if a person is discriminated against for being LGBT—or for struggling with addiction—they may have no other alternatives for receiving care. Additionally, many providers in rural areas are religiously affiliated and may not serve LGBT people.

Furthermore, addiction recovery is an ongoing process, often including frequent and regular participation in group meetings. However, these meetings can also suffer from a lack of LGBT cultural competency or be a source of potential discrimination, and one that some people cannot avoid, whether to maintain their recovery or because they are legally required to attend such meetings. In a poll conducted by Queer Appalachia (see page 20) of LGBT people in recovery, only four out of 100 had sponsors, and “[s]ome drove up to 8 hours round trip on their one day off to be able to go to a ‘more accepting meeting.’”²¹⁵ Transgender participants described introducing themselves at meetings only to be interrupted and asked, “What’s your real name?” Addiction recovery is challenging enough, let alone with the added burdens of facing disrespect, misgendering, discrimination, or even violence simply for being an LGBT person trying to recover.

settings.^{e,f} For example, LGBT people living in rural areas are more likely to smoke or engage in high-risk alcohol use,²¹⁶ and lesbians are less likely to get preventative screenings for cancer and to avoid healthcare services in general.²¹⁷ These disparities are particularly troubling given that LGBT people overall—and LGBT people in rural areas especially—are less likely to have health insurance, and therefore have less access to much needed medical care.²¹⁸ Additionally, different parts of the LGBT community may have specific concerns, such as transition-related care for transgender people, or access to HIV-prevention medication like pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), which is highly effective in preventing the transmission of HIV.

When healthcare providers lack basic knowledge about these disparities or the types of health care that LGBT people may require, providers may struggle to properly meet the needs of their LGBT patients, and as a result, LGBT people may not receive the care they need.²¹⁹ The same is true when providers simply don’t ask about their patients’ sexual orientation or gender identity. In any of these circumstances, patients may withhold medically-relevant information or be less likely to actually seek health care, thus further

potentially harming their health.^{220,g} Particularly when medical care relates to sex or sexuality, a lack of provider cultural competency can also lead to “LGBTQ people having a poor grasp of sexual safety and health, making them more at risk for sexual health” concerns.²²¹ For example, in a national survey of LGB people, men in rural areas are far less likely to be on PrEP or to have been recently tested for HIV.²²²

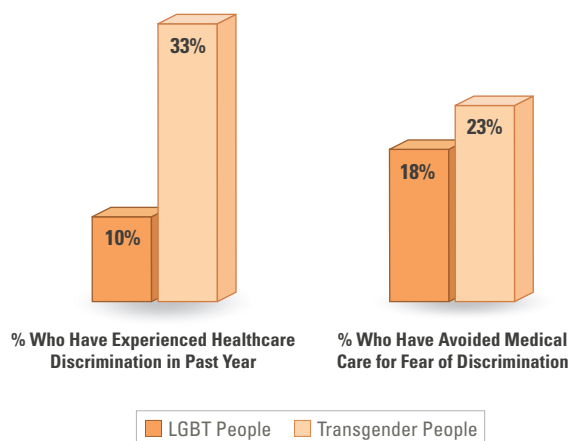
For LGBT people of color, the challenge of finding culturally competent medical providers is further compounded, as providers may also be unfamiliar

^e For an overview of LGBT health issues, see Healthy People 2020’s [emphasis on LGBT Health](#). For a meta-review of existing research on LGBT health and health care in rural areas, see Rosenkrantz et al. (2017), “[Health and Health Care of Rural Sexual and Gender Minorities: A Systematic Review](#),” *Stigma and Health* 2(3):229—243.

^f Research on rural LGBT health shows mixed findings on mental health disparities. Some studies show that LGBT people in rural areas report worse mental health compared to LGBT people in urban areas, while other studies find no difference (see Rosenkrantz et al. 2017 for review). Yet others show that LGBT people in urban areas report worse health (e.g. Wienke & Hill 2013), and instead suggest that “rural LGBTQ people appear to find identity in their geographic location and the specifics of their rural culture, while suburban and urban LGBTQ people may not have this identity anchor to protect them from social stress. ...For some, a rural community may provide space for the development of healthy identity” (Impact Texas LGBTQ Needs Assessment, Part 2, 2017, p117). <http://www.txpif.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Impact-Texas-LGBTQ-Needs-Assessment-Part-2.pdf>

^g The same research, however, shows this is not the case for transgender people in rural areas. Transgender people’s outness is not correlated with their use of health care; rather, transgender people in rural areas are more likely to travel farther away for primary care, suggesting a stronger desire for LGBT-specific care than for a doctor in their rural area.

Figure 14: Many LGBT People Have Experienced Healthcare Discrimination in the Last Year Alone, and Many Also Avoid Medical Care for Fear of Discrimination



Sources: Center for American Progress, 2018, "Discrimination Prevents LGBTQ People From Accessing Health Care." NPR/RWJF/Harvard, 2017, "Discrimination in America: Experiences and Views of LGBTQ Americans." James et al, 2016, "The Report from the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey," National Center for Transgender Equality.

with the unique needs or experiences of communities of color. And for LGBT youth, this "lack of connection to positive, affirming [health-related] resources also isolates LGBTQ youth, making them more susceptible to self-destructive behavior patterns. Isolation continues further into adulthood, when LGBTQ populations are more likely to experience depression and engage in high-risk behaviors."²²³

Despite the clear importance of cultural competency, rural healthcare providers throughout the country are less likely than urban providers to prioritize LGBT (and other forms of) cultural competency. For example, in a survey of physicians in Colorado, physicians in rural Colorado were less likely than those in the Denver metro area to say it was important to take steps to show LGBT patients they should feel comfortable in medical settings. They were also less likely to ask their patients about their sexual orientation or gender identity.²²⁴

While LGBT-specific or -competent health resources may exist within a state, LGBT people in rural areas are less likely to have access to LGBT-specific healthcare providers.²²⁵ Furthermore, these resources are not even well distributed throughout the country. In a recent study that identified 213 LGBT community health centers operating around the country, there were 13 states with no LGBT community health center at all; these states are primarily in the central U.S., and nearly all are majority-rural states (Alaska, Arkansas, Hawai'i, Iowa, Kansas,

Louisiana, Maine, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Dakota, South Dakota, West Virginia, and Wyoming).²²⁶

LGBT people in rural areas are more likely to say a lack of LGBT cultural competency is a key problem in health care:



51% of LGBT Texans in rural communities say that LGBT competency for healthcare providers is "very important," compared to just 27% of those living in urban communities.²²⁷



33% of LGBT people living outside New York City say that not having enough LGBT-trained health professionals is a significant barrier to their health care, compared to 27% of those in New York City.²²⁸



LGBT Nebraskans in rural areas are less likely to be out to their healthcare provider and more likely to be concerned about being refused service or that their healthcare provider will tell others about their LGBT identity.²²⁹



3X: Transgender and non-binary people in rural areas are over three times more likely than cisgender LGB people to:

- See a particular healthcare provider because the provider was known to see other LGBT patients.
- Travel over an hour to their doctor's office, suggesting that trans-competent care may be even more difficult to find in rural areas than LGB-competent care.²³⁰

Discrimination in Rural Health Care

LGBT people face high rates of healthcare discrimination, leading to serious health consequences. Unfortunately, some LGBT people throughout the country experience discrimination by healthcare providers, beyond simply a lack of knowledge or cultural competency. Roughly one in six (16%) LGBT people say they have ever been personally discriminated against because of their sexual orientation or gender identity when going to a doctor or health clinic,²³¹ and, as shown in *Figure 14*, roughly one in ten say they have been discriminated against in the past year alone.²³²

The 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey shows that 33% of transgender people who have seen a healthcare provider in the past year report having at least one



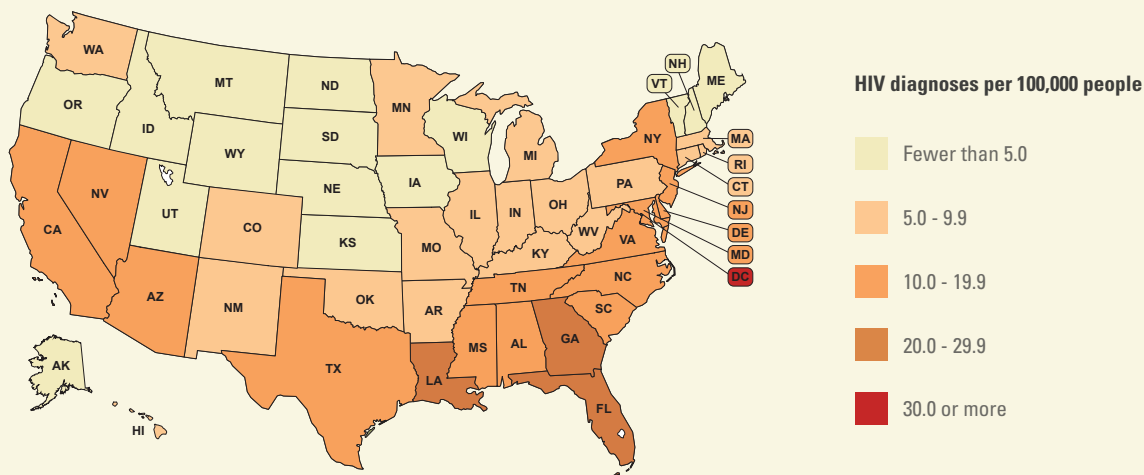
Deeper Dive: HIV in the U.S. South

(continued on the next page)

HIV remains a significant health issue in the United States, and particularly in the South and among Black Americans. For Black Americans in the South—and especially those in the rural South—the disproportionate impacts of HIV are further amplified by limited access to health care, stigma, and more.

As shown in *Figure 15*, the South faces the highest rates of both new HIV diagnoses²³³ and HIV-related deaths in the country, even after adjusting for factors including age, gender, population density, and method of transmission.²³⁴ Among all people in the U.S. currently living with HIV, nearly half (46%) live in the South,²³⁵ and more than a quarter of those live in rural areas.²³⁶ Among people in the U.S. who were diagnosed with HIV in 2017 alone, people living in the South made up over half (52%) of these new diagnoses, despite having only 38% of the total U.S. population.²³⁷

Figure 15: Southern States Have Highest Rates of HIV Diagnoses
Rates of HIV Diagnoses, 2017



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Diagnoses of HIV Infection in the United States and Dependent Areas, 2017." HIV Surveillance Report 2017;29.

Of these new diagnoses in the South, over half (53%) were among Black people, and nearly 75% were among Black or Latinx people.²³⁸ In fact, HIV disproportionately impacts Black Americans across the country, and Black Americans make up the plurality of new diagnoses in every U.S. region except the West.²³⁹

Research shows that many factors contribute to these disparities in the South, including "rampant stigma, racism, uneven access to education, poverty, and lack of insurance coverage—an issue exacerbated by the lack of Medicaid expansion" in many Southern states.²⁴⁰ Stigma around HIV and sexuality also contributes to an avoidance of health care, even when it is available in rural areas. For example, an HIV clinic based in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, hired a case manager in rural Woodward County over two hours away, to serve rural residents and spare them the long drive to the urban clinic's services. However, the clinic ultimately eliminated the position because, as the clinic's medical director says, "Nobody would go see her... because they didn't want to be seen walking into the HIV case manager's office in that tiny town—that can only mean one thing."²⁴¹

Additionally, while more than half of new HIV diagnoses occurred in the South, less than one-quarter (22%) of HIV-related funding went to the South,²⁴² and every Southern state but Texas has an HIV criminalization law, which criminalizes the transmission or perceived exposure to HIV.²⁴³ While Texas does not have (continued on the next page)



Deeper Dive: HIV in the U.S. South

(continued from the previous page)

a law that specifically mentions HIV in this way, people living with HIV in Texas have been prosecuted under state criminal law for a crime related to their HIV status.²⁴⁴ These laws and prosecutions not only unfairly punish people living with HIV—who are disproportionately people of color and therefore already disproportionately targeted by the criminal system—they also create a strong disincentive for being tested for HIV. Additionally, when religious exemption laws apply to medical professionals—as they do in Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee—this may allow doctors to refuse to treat HIV or pharmacists to refuse to fill prescriptions for PrEP, a medication that can help prevent HIV. All these factors perpetuate the disproportionate impact of HIV in the South, and particularly on Black Southerners.

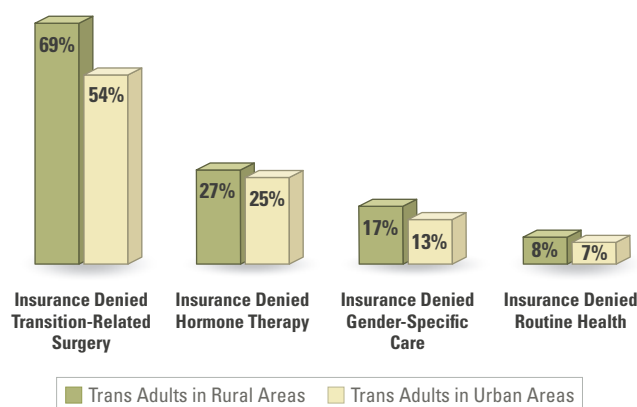
However, there are numerous advocates on the ground working against these structural obstacles. For example, a Southern Alabama clinic named Medical Advocacy and Outreach of Alabama treats nearly 2,000 HIV/AIDS patients, and in 2012 began seeing patients remotely using telemedicine. As reported by Pew, rather than asking rural-based patients or urban-based providers to make a multi-hour roundtrip, “Nurses at the [rural] sites use Bluetooth stethoscopes and other equipment so an HIV-trained doctor or nurse practitioner in Montgomery or Dothan can administer a full medical exam remotely. Patients can also get treatment for mental illness or drug addiction through the telemedicine program.”²⁴⁵ Similarly, research shows that mobile health clinics can successfully improve health outcomes for vulnerable or hard-to-reach populations, including rural communities.²⁴⁶ However, as noted above, it is important that such programs and intervention efforts provide a range of healthcare services in addition to HIV services, to reduce the risk that participating in the program or clinic would out someone’s HIV status to their neighbors or community members.

negative experience related to being transgender, including being refused medical care or being verbally or physically harassed.²⁴⁷ Figure 16 shows that, among transgender adults with health insurance and who asked their insurers for various forms of healthcare, transgender adults in rural areas are much more likely to be denied vital health care.

Experiencing such discrimination has significant and negative impacts on physical, emotional, and mental health.²⁴⁸ Even the anticipation of or mental preparation for discrimination, whether or not discrimination actually occurs, has significantly harmful effects on health.²⁴⁹ To the extent that rural LGBT people are more likely to experience discrimination, they are also therefore more likely to experience worse health.

Experiencing or expecting discrimination can also lead LGBT people (and other minority groups) to avoid seeking health care at all. Figure 16 also shows that in two independent studies by Harvard²⁵⁰ and the Center for American Progress,²⁵¹ both conducted in 2017, nearly one in five (18%) LGBT Americans say they have avoided going to a doctor or seeking health care to avoid discrimination. Both studies, as well as the 2015 U.S.

Figure 16: Trans Adults in Rural Areas More Likely to Be Denied Trans-Related Health Care By Their Insurers



Source: MAP original analysis of USTS 2015.

Transgender Survey, also show that transgender people avoid medical care at even higher rates (22-23%) due to fear of discrimination.²⁵²

The expansion of religious exemption laws in health care can exacerbate discrimination faced by LGBT people in rural areas. Rural states are more likely

STORY: The Harm When Doctors Refuse Medical Care

In a 2001 documentary *Southern Comfort*, Robert Eads, a transgender man from rural Georgia, who is dying of cervical and ovarian cancer, struggles to attend one Southern Comfort Conference, a transgender conference held in Atlanta for many years. Robert was diagnosed with cancer in 1996, and for years, more than a dozen doctors refused to treat him. By the time he found a physician to care for him, the cancer had spread. He died in 1999. Robert's story, highlighted both in the film and a play adaption, puts direct focus on the support, grace, and importance of the Southern Comfort conference and gatherings like it for transgender people in rural communities—as well as the discrimination and disregard for his health that Robert experienced.

Such discrimination continues today. Stefani, who has lived in rural areas in both Michigan's Lower Peninsula and the heavily-rural Upper Peninsula, describes her experiences living at the intersection of being bisexual, Latina, fat, and living with a chronic condition. From a young age, Stefani struggled with physical symptoms that doctors could not diagnose. In her rural town outside of Traverse City (in the Lower Peninsula), the doctors she went to in search of support didn't believe her when she described her symptoms, or instead dismissed them as related to her weight or potential anxiety. "When the doctors are uncomfortable with your body and who you are, they speak from that place of discomfort rather than medical knowledge," she said.

Facing such hostility, Stefani coped with her symptoms for years until moving to the Upper Peninsula (U.P.) for college. When she sought medical help again, the student center doctors believed her, but referred her to specialists outside the university system. Stefani recalls, "The specialists couldn't get over the fact that I was queer, let alone fat, let alone Latina. All of which prevented them from seeing me as a serious patient with serious symptoms." Again, the doctors attributed her symptoms to her weight, or dismissed them as anxiety attacks. One doctor even told her, "Women have these attacks." Eventually, Stefani's mom, who had extensive experience navigating the medical system after working as a medical interpreter for migrant workers, drove over eight hours to go with her daughter to the doctor. "Just having her as a validator of my experiences," Stefani said, "was so important. If I wouldn't have had that back up, I don't think I ever would've gotten my diagnosis. But I had the privilege of her experiences, and her ability to make that trip for me."

"I really believe I would've had a different experience in a non-rural environment because I could've gone to a different doctor who believed me. ...It's just like any rural place: we don't have enough access to health care outside of the big cities." Even in the heavily-rural U.P.'s largest city, Stefani points out, "there are extremely few specialists, so you're stuck with them unless you can afford to travel or go somewhere elsewhere. And even when you find an accepting doctor, they may have never knowingly treated an LGBT patient. So you end up having to educate your own doctor about how they need to treat you."

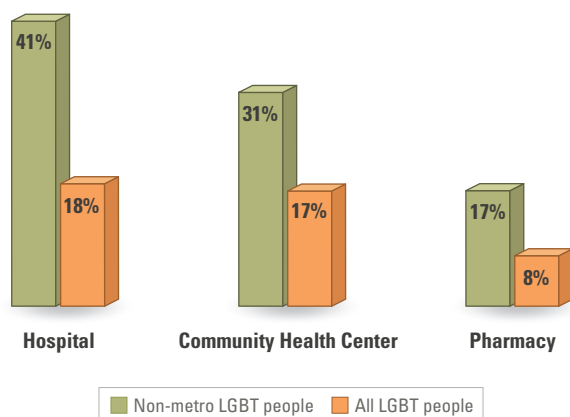
Stefani has also personally witnessed her friends and partners be denied health care, particularly those who are transgender and/or masculine-presenting. For example, when Stefani took a transgender male friend to the hospital after he dislocated his shoulder, doctors refused to even touch him after learning he was transgender. Thankfully, the student health center's two doctors are LGBT-affirming and culturally competent, but these providers are available only to those affiliated with the university. "It's frustrating," Stefani says, "that we have this incredible health provider but not everyone can access it." Having only two doctors available to the entire campus, including students, staff, faculty, and their families, also means these doctors are unable to spend time or resources to support local, non-university providers in improving their own LGBT competency.

Despite these experiences, Stefani loves where she lives. "What I love definitely outweighs the negative experiences I've had. I wouldn't still be living in a rural environment if it didn't call to me," she says. "My parents live in Detroit and I could easily move there if I wanted. There's a lot of community mentality, that Yooper mentality that says we're all here surviving the winter together, we might as well band together even when we're different. That keeps me here."

Source: Original MAP interview.

Figure 17: More Difficult for Rural LGBT People to Find Health Care If They Are Discriminated Against

% of LGBT people saying that, if they were turned away by each provider, it would be “very difficult” or “not possible” for them to find those services somewhere else



Source: Center for American Progress, 2018, “Discrimination Prevents LGBTQ People From Accessing Health Care.”

than urban states to have statewide religious exemption laws (see *Policy Landscape* section for further discussion). In health care, these laws provide a legal avenue to discriminate by allowing healthcare providers to decide which patients to serve and which procedures to perform based solely on personal beliefs, rather than medical standards.²⁵³ Doctors can refuse to see LGBT patients or to provide routine care for sexual health (such as STI screening), and both doctors and pharmacists can even refuse to write or fill prescriptions (such as birth control, PrEP, or hormones). What’s more, under these laws even healthcare providers like nursing homes can refuse to serve LGBT elders in need of care.²⁵⁴ In rural areas, where LGBT people have many fewer options for both family services and healthcare providers, such exemptions may mean that LGBT people have no options at all.

Religious exemptions in health care are also of particular concern to LGBT people in rural areas because a significant share of rural hospitals and healthcare systems are religiously-affiliated. In 2010, 13% of all hospitals and 20% of hospital beds were religiously-affiliated,²⁵⁵ and today Catholic hospitals alone now account for nearly 15% of all hospitals throughout the country.²⁵⁶ In rural areas, these numbers are even higher: there are ten states where more than 30% of all hospital beds are provided by Catholic hospitals—and eight of these ten states are majority-rural.^{257,h} As of 2016, at least 45 isolated communities around the country had *only* a Catholic hospital in their entire geographic region to provide medical care.²⁵⁸

In rural areas, when LGBT people experience discrimination by healthcare providers, they may have extremely limited options for finding alternative care. Given rural areas’ baseline scarcity of providers and the geographic distance to other providers, discrimination by a healthcare provider can be especially devastating. In fact, in a 2017 survey by the Center for American Progress, LGBT people living outside of metropolitan areas are *roughly twice* as likely to say it would be “very difficult” or “not possible” to find a similar type of medical service if they were turned away (see *Figure 17*).²⁵⁹

Figure 17 shows that, if they were turned away by a hospital, 41% of LGBT people living outside a metropolitan area said that it would “very difficult” or “not possible” to find those services elsewhere, compared to 18% of all LGBT people. Similarly, 31% of non-metro LGBT people would struggle to find a different community health center or clinic, and 17% would struggle to find a different pharmacy. While the study did not report the responses of rural transgender people specifically, it did show that transgender people in general are more likely to report that they would have a difficult time finding alternative health care. Taken together with the non-metro finding, this means that transgender people in rural areas likely face even greater difficulty in finding alternative services when they are turned away.



BOTTOM LINE: HEALTH CARE

The changing healthcare landscape in rural communities, with hospitals closing and fewer providers available—not to mention the ongoing opioid crisis—makes it extremely challenging for LGBT patients to find knowledgeable and affirming health care in rural areas. Adding to the challenge, rural areas are more likely to be served by religious healthcare providers who are covered under religious exemptions laws that provide a legal avenue for discrimination. When LGBT patients do experience discrimination, they may have no alternative healthcare provider from whom to seek help. Experiences or fear of discrimination may also lead LGBT people to avoid health care or receive inadequate care or no care at all, putting the health and wellbeing of LGBT people in rural communities especially at risk.

^h These eight states are Alaska, Colorado, Iowa, Kentucky, Missouri, Nebraska, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. Washington and Oregon also have more than 30% Catholic hospital beds, but are not majority-rural by this report’s definition.



The Legal System

Many rural areas depend on jobs provided by the legal system, as well as the revenues collected by that system, to support their economy. Rural, suburban, and urban areas alike can collect significant portions of their annual revenue from legal fines and fees like parking or speeding tickets, court costs, and more.²⁶⁰ In rural areas, however, where there are fewer residents and therefore a smaller tax base, local governments may be even more likely to rely on fines and fees to extract additional revenue from their residents. Additionally, jails and prisons are often considered a source of employment for rural communities, so much so that during the 1990s—a decade of significant prison expansion—a new prison was opened in rural America every 15 days. Today, over 70% of American prisons are now in rural areas.²⁶¹ Immigration detention centers are also frequently built in rural America.²⁶²

In the United States, there are more people in prisons than there are farmers.

—Tracy Huling, in *Invisible Punishment: The Collateral Consequences of Mass Imprisonment*. 2002.

However, research shows that the current system and its practices have a negative (or at best neutral) impact on rural communities.²⁶³ Though some argue that prisons provide economic benefits to rural areas, numerous studies conclude that jails and prisons rarely, if ever, provide the economic boost that rural communities hope for.²⁶⁴ As many as two-thirds of new prison-related jobs go to people living outside the local community,²⁶⁵ and those few jobs that do go to local residents are insufficient to create significant, long-term economic improvement for the broader community.²⁶⁶ Furthermore, these jobs may actually be detrimental to local community members, as research shows that working in prisons may also increase mental health issues and substance abuse due to prison conditions (an issue also affecting those incarcerated).²⁶⁷ Research further shows that a local prison may actually stifle rural towns' long-term growth or potential new economic investments due to the associated stigma of being a "prison town."²⁶⁸

For LGBT people in rural communities, the impact of the legal system can be especially damaging. Throughout the country, LGBT people are disproportionately impacted by the criminal justice system, especially those who are also people of color and/or transgender. And as mentioned earlier on page 13, LGBT people navigating the legal system may find themselves face-to-face with individuals in positions of power—including judges, prosecutors, and juries—who may be biased against LGBT people.

Legal Bias

Throughout the country, LGBT people are disproportionately impacted and failed by the criminal justice system, and especially those who are also people of color and/or transgender.²⁶⁹ Widespread stigma and discrimination, unfair laws, and targeted policing strategies mean that LGBT people are more likely to interact with law enforcement and be pushed into the criminal justice system.²⁷⁰ Once LGBT people have entered the legal system (and especially after they have spent time in a jail or prison), they face significant challenges in the struggle to rebuild their lives.

In rural areas, this cycle (see *Figure 18* on the following page) may be even more challenging. Rather than being protected by the legal system against harassment and violence, LGBT people in rural areas are even less likely to have key legal protections than those in urban areas (see Political Landscape section). Additionally, the local legal system may not be supportive of LGBT people, even when they are victims of crime. For example, an LGBT person who is a victim of a hate crime but fought back may be punished for their acts of self-defense. Furthermore, in rural communities, there are fewer legal service providers in general and similarly fewer outside resources (such as legal clinics, LGBT community centers, and more) that could provide support to LGBT people interacting with the legal system. Taken together, this means that LGBT people in rural areas are less likely to receive necessary and needed supports at every step of this cycle.

While there is little data available that distinguishes between LGBT people in rural and urban areas with regards to the legal system, existing data reveal the bias against LGBT people within the system more generally.

LGBT Adults. Research shows that the incarceration rate of LGB people is more than three times the rate of the general population,²⁷¹ and similarly that more than three times as many transgender adults as the general population have spent time in a jail or prison.²⁷² In a 2017 Harvard

Figure 18: LGBT People, Including Those in Rural Communities, Experience A Cycle of Bias in the Legal System



survey, at least one in five LGBT people said they have been personally discriminated against because of their LGBT identity when interacting with the legal system.²⁷³

LGBT Youth. While best estimates currently suggest that about 10% of youth identify as LGBTQ, research shows that at least 20% of youth in the juvenile justice system identify as LGBT and/or gender non-conforming.²⁷⁴ Among these LGBT youth in juvenile justice facilities, 85% are youth of color.²⁷⁵ Girls, and especially girls of color, are particularly overrepresented in the criminal justice system, with as many as 27-40% of incarcerated girls identifying as LGBT or gender-nonconforming.²⁷⁶ One of the major forces funneling youth into prison is the “school-to-prison pipeline,” which describes the growing national practice where school officials use police and the legal system to discipline and punish children who act disruptively. LGBT youth may be especially vulnerable to the school-to-prison pipeline. For example, a national longitudinal

study found that youth who reported identifying as LGB or having same-sex attractions were more likely to be expelled from school, as well as to be stopped by police, arrested, or convicted.²⁷⁷ In rural communities, where LGBT youth may experience more bullying and fewer support systems (as discussed on page 23), these experiences may be even more likely to occur.

LGBT People of Color. LGBT people of color experience multiple forms of bias at the same time, and as a result experience even higher rates of discrimination than white LGBT people. For example, LGBT people of color are more than twice as likely as white LGBT people to have been personally discriminated against when interacting with police, and are six times more likely to have avoided calling the police due to concern they would be discriminated against.²⁷⁸ Additionally, there are an estimated 267,000 LGBT-identified unauthorized immigrants,²⁷⁹ a large majority of whom are people of color. These individuals

are caught at the intersection of the immigration and criminal justice systems, and are often without the same legal protections guaranteed to citizens (such as legal counsel).²⁸⁰ Again, structural barriers in rural communities mean LGBT people of color may have an even harder time finding good representation and being treated fairly.

Transgender People. Transgender people face significant bias in many aspects of the legal system, including in the processes required for changing names and gender markers on key identity documents such as driver's licenses and birth certificates. Having identity documents that match one's gender identity reduces the risk of facing harassment, discrimination, and even violence. Rural states are more likely to have complex, burdensome processes for updating identity documents (see *Policy Landscape* section), if they even allow these changes at all. As a result, transgender people in rural areas are put at further risk for harm by the legal system.

Additionally, the National Transgender Discrimination Survey found that 16% of all transgender adults have spent time in jail or prison, more than three times the rate of all U.S. adults (5%).²⁸¹ Transgender women were especially likely to have spent time in jail or prison (21%), with lower rates for transgender men (10%). Transgender people are overrepresented in the American prison system because they are more vulnerable, both socially and legally, and because they are targeted by the legal system.²⁸² They face routine rejection from their families and discrimination across many areas of life, such as employment, housing, and health care, and are also often without key legal protections against such discrimination.²⁸³ Transgender people are further targeted by the legal system through bad laws such as HIV criminalization policies, religious exemptions, and bathroom bills, all designed to exclude transgender people from public life.²⁸⁴

In sum, LGBT people already face significant bias in the American legal system. In rural areas, LGBT people may be more visible, making them a target for law enforcement. Additionally, given that rural areas may have fewer legal protections and fewer LGBT-competent resources, this bias may be amplified or harder to overcome.

Fines, Fees, and Cash Bail

Beyond incarceration, there are many financial tools that the legal system can use to punish individuals or require restitution for wrongdoing, and again, these can be particularly detrimental to LGBT people in rural areas. In recent decades, towns and counties across the

country have increasingly turned to fines and feesⁱ not only for punishment, but to increase revenue in the face of tightening budgets or decreasing populations and tax bases.²⁸⁵ This practice only continues to grow: for example, since 2010, at least 48 states have increased or added new civil and criminal court fees.²⁸⁶ The amount of fines and fees is typically determined without regard for the individual's ability to pay such costs, and as a result may quickly add up to a burden that people already in poverty or struggling to make ends meet cannot bear. Given that people in rural areas are already more likely to experience poverty—and LGBT people in rural areas even more so—this tactic is especially harmful to rural, and rural LGBT, residents.

Similarly, cash bail describes a practice where a judge requires an individual accused, though not yet convicted, of a crime to pay money to be set free, or otherwise stay in jail until their court date—which could be days, weeks, or months in the future. Cash bail can be imposed for even minor accusations, such as unpaid parking tickets, and is often at the sole discretion of an individual judge and without regard for an individual's ability to pay. However, setting a cash price tag on release from jail often puts freedom out of reach, and especially for people in poverty or struggling to make ends meet. As a result, the cash bail system imprisons people who have not been convicted of any crime, simply because they cannot afford bail. In fact, over 65% of people currently in jail have *not yet been convicted of any wrongdoing*.²⁸⁷ What's more, research shows that people who couldn't pay bail and are held in pretrial detention are significantly more likely than people who had the means to pay their bail to (1) be convicted of a crime, (2) receive a prison sentence, and (3) receive a longer prison sentence, even controlling for other factors like the type or severity of the crime.²⁸⁸

While these financial tools are often harmful to rural (and indeed all) communities in general, they may be particularly harmful to LGBT residents in rural areas. The determination around fines, fees, and especially bail amounts is often left to the discretion of an individual judge, creating opportunities for personal bias or beliefs to influence these decisions. In rural areas, where residents are less likely to know an LGBT person and to support LGBT policies (see *Public Opinion* section), these personal beliefs may lead to higher fines and harsher penalties for LGBT people.

ⁱ Fines describe financial charges for specific acts of wrongdoing, such as a speeding ticket or expired registration, and are meant to deter such wrongdoing. Fees refer to additional charges assigned to the individual while they go through the legal system, such as court fees (the cost to appear before a judge), late fees (an added charge for not paying a fine on time), or supervision fees (e.g. the cost of electronic monitoring or probation services).

Additionally, given that people in rural areas—and especially LGBT people—are more likely to live in poverty, these financial penalties can create a poverty trap: once an individual in poverty enters the legal system, it becomes a nearly impossible task to make it out. For example, in the case of cash bail, people may be forced to wait for their court date from behind bars, sometimes losing their job or even custody of their children since they are not able to fulfill their responsibilities while in jail. In the cases of unpayable fines or fees, a person may also be jailed or punished in other ways, such as having their license suspended and therefore becoming unable to legally drive themselves to work. They must therefore risk further fines (driving with a suspended license) or losing their job (not attending work or at all). This is especially likely in rural areas, where alternative modes of transportation such as buses or rideshares are less common.

What's more, an estimated 80-85% of people leaving prison owe court-imposed costs, even after serving their time.²⁸⁹ Such debt can prevent individuals from passing background checks for housing, employment, and more, thus further undermining their ability to stabilize their own financial situation.²⁹⁰ In rural areas where housing and employment options are even more scarce, especially for LGBT people, any additional obstacle may mean the difference between finding shelter or income or going hungry and homeless.

Certainly, while rural areas do contain varying levels of homophobia, the power of small-town loyalty and familial ties should not be overlooked. In places built upon solidarity, familiarity, and belonging, and where familiar locals are valued above any other identity claim, such ties work to transform the 'stranger' into someone who is both recognizable and familiar. This is especially true for those who were born and raised, and continue to live, in their rural hometowns.

Kelly Baker, 2016,
in *Queering The
Countryside: New
Frontiers in Rural
Queer Studies*



BOTTOM LINE: LEGAL SYSTEM

In rural areas, local economies often rely on revenue from the legal system. But the reliance on fines, fees, and cash bail can create poverty traps, particularly in rural areas (where poverty rates are higher) and for LGBT people (who are more likely to experience poverty). Further, LGBT people—particularly people of color and/or transgender people—experience significant bias and discrimination in the legal system. In rural areas where there are fewer legal providers and outside resources, such as legal clinics or LGBT community centers, LGBT people may be even more vulnerable to legal discrimination.

The Strengths, Structures, and Challenges Shaping LGBT Life in Rural Communities

This section focused on the lived experiences of LGBT people in rural communities, including the meaningful family and community connections that sustain people, and the interconnectedness of community, work, faith, education, and more that provide meaning and support to those living in rural communities. While LGBT people in rural communities experience many of the same benefits and challenges of rural life as their neighbors, they may also face increased vulnerability due to higher visibility, fewer support structures, fewer alternatives in the face of discrimination, and ripple effects that intensify the already existing challenges of rural life.

But just as many rural residents want to stay in their own communities and not have to move away to find stable jobs or good health care, so too do many LGBT people in rural areas want to stay in their own community and not have to move away to find acceptance or protections. And, contrary to many societal images of rural areas, many rural communities embrace their LGBT neighbors and family members.

While this section examined LGBT people's unique experiences in rural America, the following section turns to the political landscape of rural America, illustrating what opportunities or obstacles may lie ahead for those working to improve LGBT people's, and indeed all people's, experiences in rural America.

SOCIAL & POLITICAL LANDSCAPE: RURAL LGBT PEOPLE ARE MORE VULNERABLE TO DISCRIMINATION



PUBLIC OPINION

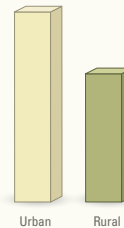
Rural residents are less supportive of LGBT issues than urban residents, but more supportive than imagined



Less likely to know an LGBT person



Less supportive of LGBT policies

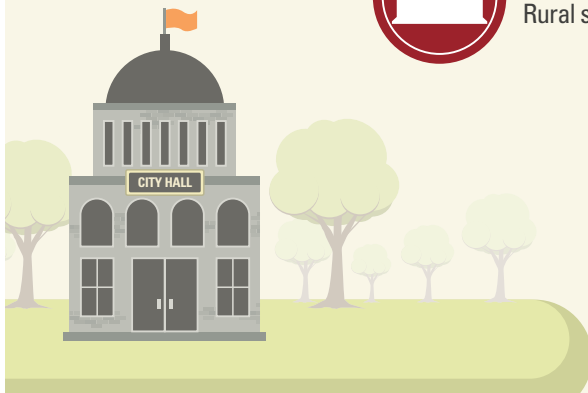


But majority—especially rural women, people of color, and younger people—still support LGBT protections



POLICY LANDSCAPE

Rural states have fewer protections and more discriminatory laws



Less likely to have LGBT protections, including nondiscrimination laws



More likely to have discriminatory laws, including religious exemptions



POLITICAL POWER

LGBT people have less political power in rural areas



Fewer LGBT elected officials



Political organizing more difficult due to distance and fewer resources



THIS LANDSCAPE MEANS THAT LGBT PEOPLE IN RURAL AREAS ARE MORE VULNERABLE TO DISCRIMINATION AND LESS ABLE TO RESPOND TO ITS HARMFUL EFFECTS.



SECTION 3: SOCIAL AND POLITICAL LANDSCAPE: LGBT PEOPLE IN RURAL AREAS ARE MORE VULNERABLE TO DISCRIMINATION

The lived experiences of LGBT people across the country, whether they live in rural communities or the country's largest cities, are immensely impacted by the social and political landscape of where they live, such as the opinions and beliefs of their neighbors, the legal and policy protections available under federal, state, and local laws, and the extent to which LGBT people are able to meaningfully participate in local politics, including elected office and direct advocacy.

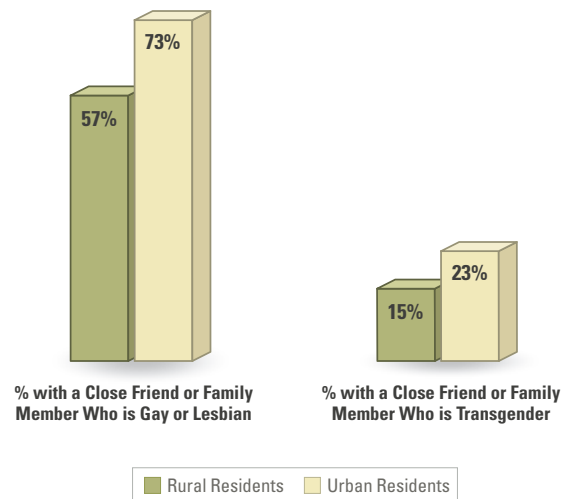
This section examines the broader social and political landscape of rural America specifically, and what it means for LGBT people in rural communities. As shown in the infographic on the previous page, this section argues that LGBT people in rural communities are more vulnerable to discrimination due to three factors. First, rural public opinion is generally less supportive of LGBT people and issues: residents are less likely to know an LGBT person, are on average more politically conservative, and are less supportive of LGBT-inclusive laws compared to urban residents. Second, rural areas are less likely to have LGBT-inclusive laws and policies, meaning that LGBT people who do face discrimination in rural areas have less recourse and fewer protections against discrimination. Finally, LGBT people in rural communities often have less political power, making it more difficult to effect needed change.



Public Opinion: Less Supportive, But More Diverse Than Imagined

Rural Americans' opinions on LGBT people and issues are complex—and, of course, not identical to one another. While rural Americans are generally more likely than urban Americans to be Republicans and/or to oppose certain pro-LGBT policies, it is also true that a majority of rural voters nonetheless support many LGBT policies. For example, 62% of rural residents support nondiscrimination protections for LGBT people, as do 72% of urban residents.²⁹¹ Rural residents are also not a single entity and have significantly differing opinions both across and within geographic regions, age groups, racial groups, and more.

Figure 19: Rural Residents Are Less Likely to Have a Close Friend or Family Member Who Is Gay, Lesbian, or Transgender



Source: PRRI American Values Atlas 2017

Rural Americans are less likely to know an LGBT person. Compared to urban residents, people living in rural areas are much less likely to say they have a close friend or family member who is gay, lesbian, or transgender. *Figure 19* shows that 57% of rural residents, compared to 73% of urban residents, say they have a close friend or family member who is gay or lesbian. Similarly, only 15% of rural Americans say they have a close friend or family member who is transgender, compared to 23% of urban residents.

While knowing a gay or transgender person does not necessarily or automatically lead to more positive attitudes toward LGBT people or policies, research shows that, on average, knowing someone who is LGBT can reduce prejudice toward LGBT people and increase support for LGBT-friendly policies.²⁹²

Rural Americans are more likely to be Republican and less likely to support LGBT policies. Rural Americans are generally more likely to be Republicans: more than half (54%) of registered voters in rural counties are Republican or Republican-leaning, compared to 45% in suburban and only 31% in urban counties.²⁹³ To the extent Republican policies are less supportive of LGBT issues, then more than half of rural voters are also less likely to support LGBT issues. Additionally, *Figure 20* on the next page shows that, while Democrats in rural, suburban, and urban areas

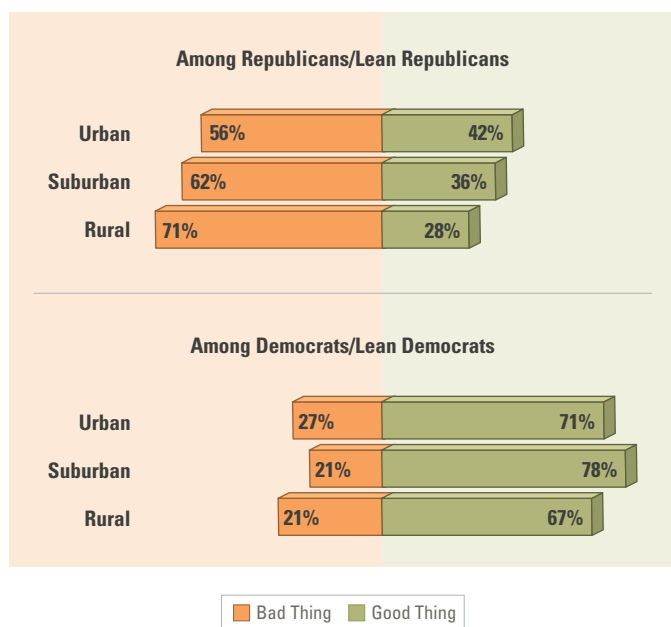


generally share similar political views with one another, rural Republicans hold more conservative beliefs than Republicans in suburban and urban areas. For example, 71% of rural Republicans say that same-sex marriage is a bad thing for U.S. society, compared to 62% of suburban and 56% of urban Republicans.²⁹⁴

Irrespective of party identification, rural voters are, on average, less likely to support a wide range of pro-LGBT policies, from marriage to nondiscrimination. According to the 2017 American Values Atlas, and as shown in *Figure 21*, rural residents are somewhat less supportive of marriage equality and nondiscrimination protections, and more supportive of allowing businesses to refuse to serve LGBT people.²⁹⁵ However, as noted above, a majority of rural residents nonetheless support pro-LGBT policies.

Heavily-rural regions are also generally less LGBT-friendly. A 2014 report by the Williams Institute examined differences by geographic region in an “LGB social climate index.”²⁹⁶ The index is based on four measures of public opinion of LGB people and

Figure 20: Rural Republicans Are More Likely Than Urban Republicans To Say Same-Sex Marriage is Bad for Society
% Saying it is a Very/Somewhat ____ for Our Society that Same-Sex Marriage is Now Legal in the U.S.

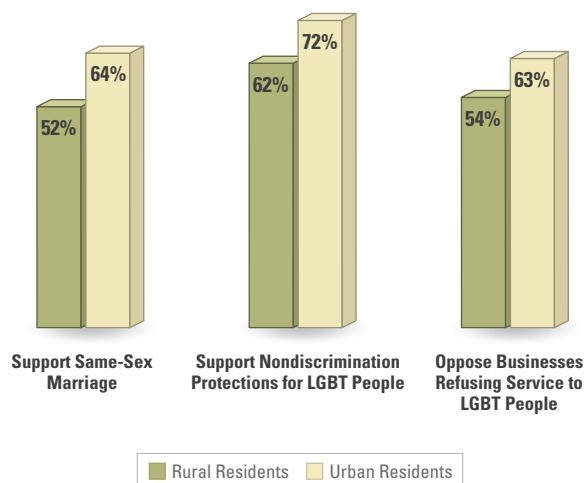


Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.
Source: Adapted from Pew 2018, “What Unites and Divides Urban, Suburban, and Rural Communities”.

legal protections: access to marriage and adoption, support for nondiscrimination laws, and the belief that homosexuality is a sin. While this analysis did not explicitly compare rural and non-rural communities, it did find that the South, Mountain, and Midwestern regions—which are predominantly rural²⁹⁷ and also home to nearly two-thirds of the U.S. LGBT community²⁹⁸—had the lowest LGB social climate index scores in the country (with the South having the lowest score of all). Research also shows that outside measures of social or community climate (such as the one above) directly correspond to the support or hostility that people living in those communities actually experience,²⁹⁹ so a low LGB social climate score is likely a good indicator that LGB people living in these regions of the country feel less support and more hostility, on average.

But rural public opinion is still more LGBT-friendly, and diverse, than it's imagined to be. Though rural residents are generally less likely than urban residents to support LGBT legal protections, it is also true that in many cases, a majority or significant portion of rural residents support these policies. For example, Figure 21 shows that, though urban residents are more likely to support LGBT nondiscrimination policies than rural residents, a large majority—62%—of rural residents still support such protections, and over half support marriage for same-sex couples.

Figure 21: Many Rural Residents Support LGBT Policies, But On Average Are Less Supportive Than Urban Residents
% of Rural/Urban Residents that Hold Each Belief



Source: PRRI American Values Atlas 2017.

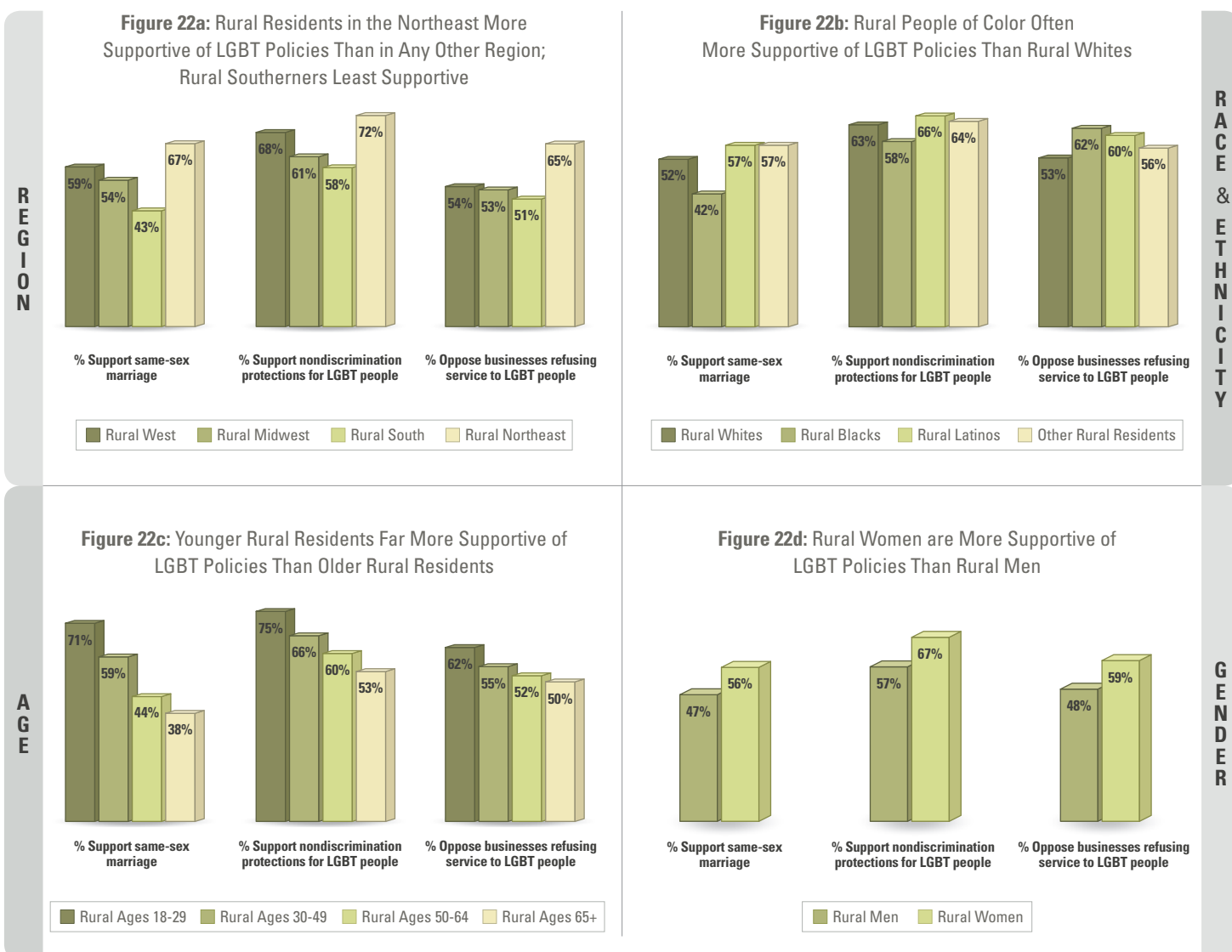
Even in cases when rural attitudes trend conservative, it is important to remember that rural residents—like any other group in the country—are not monolithic in their beliefs. For example, rural opinions vary by geographic region. As shown in *Figure 22a*, rural residents in the Northeast are significantly more likely than rural residents in any other region to support LGBT policies. Rural Southerners are consistently the least likely to support these LGBT issues.

Rural people of color are generally more supportive than rural Whites of LGBT policies. *Figure 22b* shows that Latinos in rural areas are significantly more likely than

Whites in rural areas to hold pro-LGBT positions across all these issues. While Black rural residents are slightly less supportive than rural Whites of LGBT nondiscrimination protections, they are significantly more opposed to businesses refusing service to LGBT people.

Rural residents' age also matters. As shown in *Figure 22c*, rural young adults (ages 18-29) are more likely than any other age group to support same-sex marriage and LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination protections, and to oppose businesses refusing service to LGBT people. A majority of rural adults ages 30-49 also hold these beliefs, while rural residents ages 50 and over are less likely to do so.

Figure 22: Rural Support for LGBT Policies Varies By Region, Race, Age, and Gender



Source: PRRI. 2017. American Values Atlas.



Finally, *Figure 22d* on the previous page also shows that rural women are significantly more likely than rural men to support these LGBT policy issues, and frequently by double-digit margins. For example, while 57% of rural men support LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination protections, more than two-thirds (67%) of rural women do. In fact, rural women's opinions on LGBT issues are closer to urban public opinion than they are to rural men's opinions: for example, 61% of urban residents and 59% of rural women oppose businesses refusing to serve LGBT people, while only 48% of rural men hold this belief.



BOTTOM LINE: PUBLIC OPINION

The complexity of public opinion in rural America illustrates that it must not be written off as opposing equality for LGBT people. Certainly, the public opinion landscape may be more challenging in rural areas than outside them, but support for LGBT people exists—and has always existed—within rural America. As the next sections will make clear, significant policy and legal work still needs to be done to protect LGBT people in rural areas, but public opinion data show that this significant work *can* be done.



Policy Landscape

As described previously, discrimination against LGBT people continues to occur throughout the country, including in rural areas. Explicit legal protections for LGBT people are important because they act as statewide standards for how LGBT people must be treated, enforceable by government. These laws can also be a form of public education to increase knowledge about and support for LGBT people, their experiences, and their rights. In rural America, however, these protective policies are far less common, while harmful policies are far more so. This increases the vulnerability of LGBT people in rural America: not only may they be surrounded by neighbors who are less supportive of their rights, but when they do face discrimination, they often have limited or no legal recourse.

Federal Laws: No Clear, Consistent Protections

Currently, there are no federal laws explicitly prohibiting discrimination against LGBT people in employment, housing, public accommodations, education, health care, and many other areas of daily life.

Though no federal legislation grants these protections, there are some jurisdictions that have ruled that existing federal protections against sex-based discrimination also apply to discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and/or gender identity (see *Figure 23* on the next page). As a result, some states or areas of the country have recognized legal protections for LGBT people in employment and housing even in the absence of state or federal legislation explicitly providing these protections.

However, federal laws are meant to create national standards, ensuring that all residents are treated fairly and equally no matter where they live. And though more and more U.S. courts are affirming that existing federal law can and should be applied to LGBT people, other courts have disagreed, and the U.S. Supreme Court has yet to rule on this issue. Combined with the fact that no federal legislation clearly and explicitly provides protections to LGBT people, this means that LGBT people in the U.S. experience significantly different policy and legal protections from one state to the next. Federal legislation explicitly recognizing the rights of all people to be protected against discrimination on the basis of their sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression is critical to ensuring that everyone in the U.S. can experience the same rights and protections in every part of the country.

As the following sections will illustrate, some states and localities, including in rural areas, have taken it upon themselves to expand various laws and protections to include LGBT people. But despite the importance and real impact of these efforts, the lack of clear federal law nonetheless creates a patchwork of protections that is particularly harmful to LGBT people in rural areas, where there are fewer alternatives for employment, housing, public services, and more.

State Laws

Given the absence of clear federal legislation protecting LGBT people, some states—including rural states—have taken the initiative to expand their state's laws to explicitly include LGBT people. On the



Figure 23: Five Federal Court Districts Apply Existing Sex Protections to Gender Identity, But Only Two Districts Apply Sex Protections to Sexual Orientation

Figure 23a: Gender Identity Equality by State

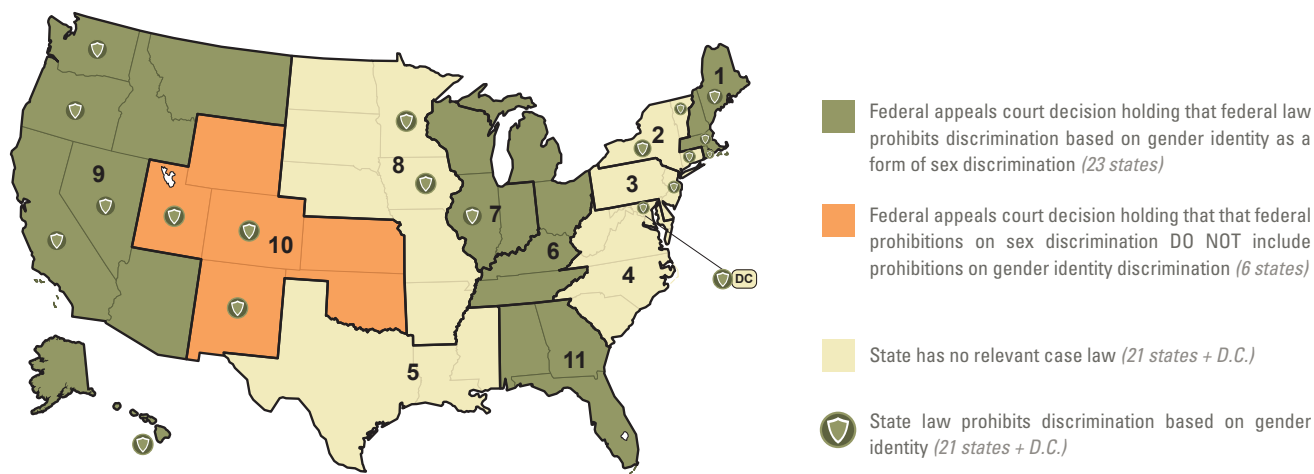
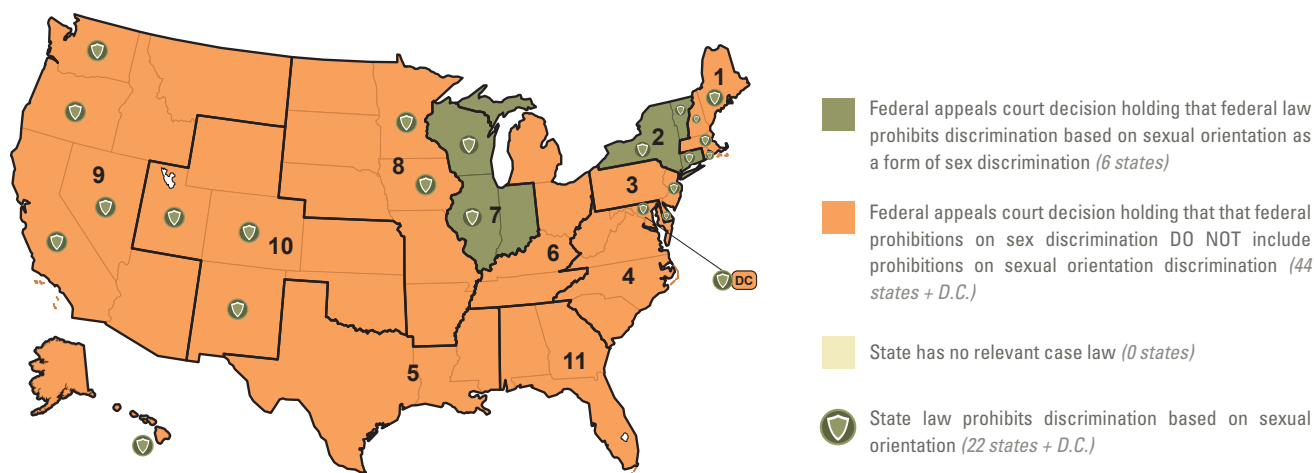


Figure 23b: Sexual Orientation Equality by State



Source: MAP's "Federal Court Decisions" Maps, as of 2/1/19. http://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/federal_court_decisions

other hand, some states have passed explicitly anti-LGBT laws, or laws that exclude LGBT people from various protections and rights. Though some rural states have expanded LGBT protections, majority-rural states have worse policy climates overall, because they are (1) significantly less likely to have LGBT-inclusive protections and (2) significantly more likely to have harmful, LGBT-exclusive laws.

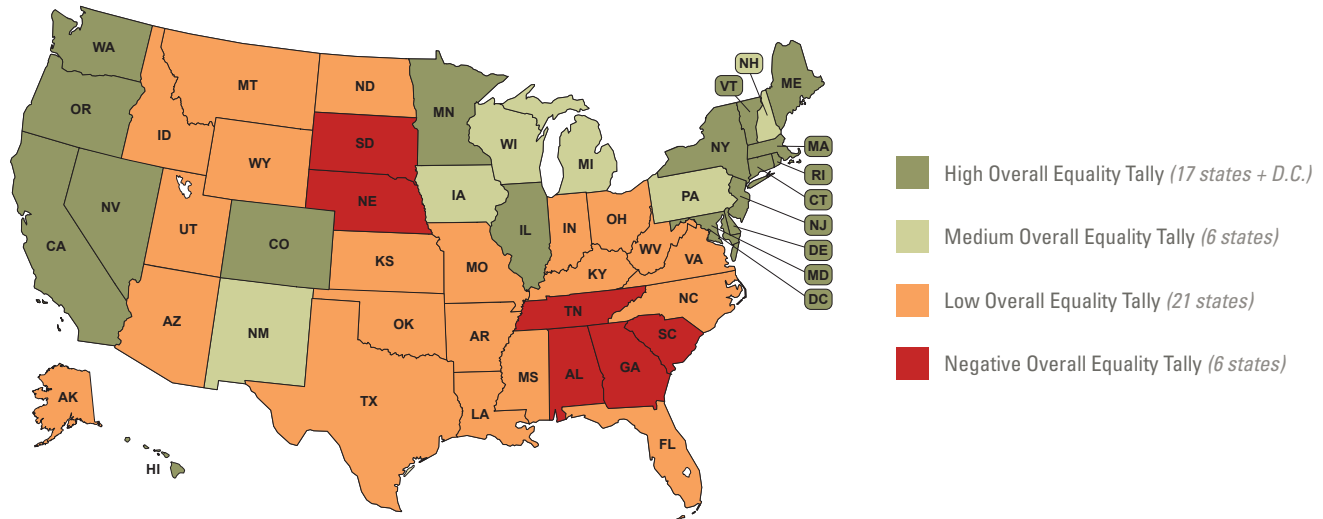
Research shows that policy disparities such as these have important consequences for people's

everyday lives. For example, LGBT people living in states without employment protections are significantly more likely to report poverty-level (or lower) household incomes, compared to both non-LGBT people in their same state and LGBT people living in states with employment nondiscrimination protections.³⁰⁰ In other words, significant policy disparities lead to similarly significant disparities in economic stability, health, and social acceptance for LGBT people in states with and without these key laws.



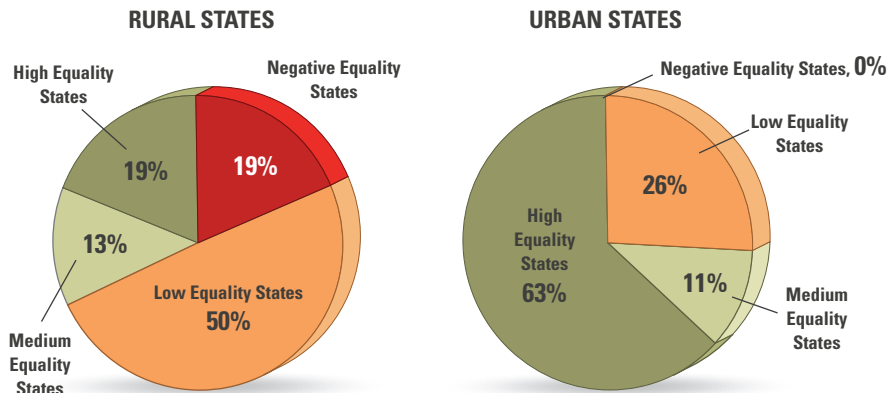
Figure 24: States Vary in their LGBT Policy Climate, With Rural States Offering Fewer Protections for LGBT Residents

Figure 24a: Over Half of States Have a Low or Negative LGBT Equality Tally



Source: MAP's "Overall Policy Tally" Maps, as of 2/1/19. <http://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps>

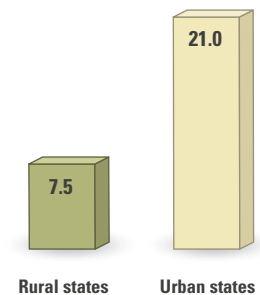
Figure 24b: More Rural States Are Low or Negative LGBT Equality States



Source: Majority-rural determination based on Census data. State laws based on MAP's Equality Maps, as of 2/1/19. Figure 24b numbers may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Figure 24c: Rural States Have Significantly Lower LGBT Equality Scores

Average LGBT Equality Score (Out of 38)

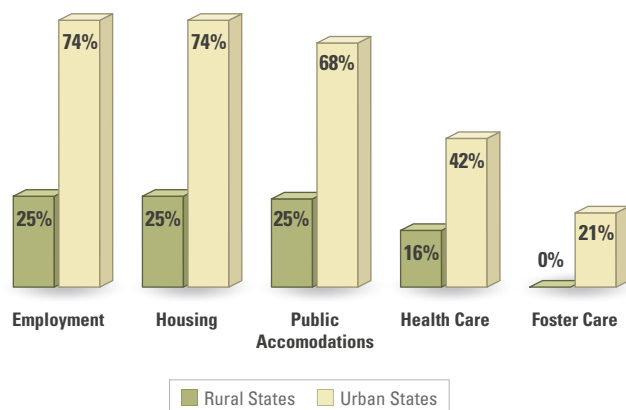


As this report argues, the unique features and challenges of rural life mean that LGBT people in rural areas face worsened impacts of discrimination and isolation. The relative absence of positive protections in rural areas leaves LGBT people without legal cover when they are already facing a shortage of employment, housing, and healthcare options. Similarly, the higher likelihood of discriminatory laws in rural states means that LGBT people in these areas are at even higher risk for experiencing discrimination.

Rural States Have Worse Overall LGBT Policy Climate

An original analysis of over 35 LGBT-related laws and policies across all 50 states and Washington D.C. shows significant variation in the overall LGBT policy climate from state to state.³⁰¹ Each policy was assigned a positive (for protective) or negative (for discriminatory) point value, and then each state's policy score is added to create an overall score, or "equality tally," categorized as negative, low, medium, or high (see *Figure 24*). Negative equality tallies show an extremely hostile policy climate,

Figure 25: Rural States are Significantly Less Likely to Have LGBT-Inclusive Nondiscrimination Protections, Across Many Policy Areas
% of Rural and Urban States with Each Type of LGBT-Inclusive Nondiscrimination Law



Source: Majority-rural determination based on Census data. State laws based on MAP's Equality Maps, as of 2/1/19.

while high equality tallies show a supportive and protective policy environment for LGBT people.

This analysis further reveals that majority-rural states have worse LGBT policies overall, compared to majority-urban states. *Figure 24b* on the previous page shows that majority-rural states are far more likely to have “negative” or “low” LGBT equality scores, while majority-urban states are far more likely to have “high” equality scores.

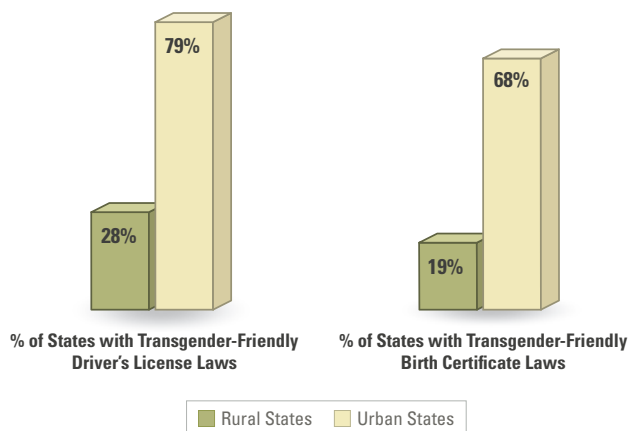
Overall, 69% of majority-rural states have either negative or low equality scores, compared to only one-quarter (26%) of majority-urban states with these scores. In fact, no majority-urban state has a negative equality score, and nearly two-thirds (63%) of urban states have a high equality score.

This overall discrepancy in legal protections is due to two main factors, as the next sections address. First, rural states are less likely to have LGBT protections, and second, they are more likely to have discriminatory laws.

Rural States Have Fewer LGBT Protections

There are many kinds of laws that are intended to protect LGBT people from discrimination, harassment, and harm. Rural states are significantly less likely than urban states to have these LGBT-inclusive laws and protections at the state level, across a wide range of policy areas including nondiscrimination laws, transgender-

Figure 26: Rural States are Less Likely to Have Transgender-Friendly Laws to Change Gender Marker on Key Identity Documents
on Key Identity Documents



Source: Majority-rural determination based on Census data. State laws based on MAP's Equality Maps, as of 2/1/19.

friendly laws, hate crime laws, conversion therapy bans, and safe schools and anti-bullying laws.

Rural states are less likely to have LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination laws. These laws prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity in specific areas, such as employment, housing, public accommodations, health care, and adoption or foster care. Looking only at nondiscrimination laws, *Figure 25* shows that nearly three quarters (68-74%) of urban states have LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination protections in employment, housing, and public accommodations. Only one quarter (25%) of rural states, however, offer these protections. Similarly, urban states are more likely to include sexual orientation and gender identity in their nondiscrimination laws regarding health care and foster care.

In the case of foster care, only three states and Washington D.C.—all majority-urban states—explicitly prohibit discrimination against LGBT people.

Rural states are less likely to have transgender-friendly laws to allow updating one's name and/or gender marker on important identity documents, such as driver's licenses and birth certificates. Having ID documents that match one's gender identity minimizes the possibility that simply showing one's ID can lead to potential harassment or harm. *Figure 26* illustrates that rural states are significantly less likely than urban states

to have relatively trans-friendly processes for updating gender markers on driver's licenses and birth certificates.^j

Rural states are less likely to have LGBT-inclusive hate crime laws (see *Figure 27*),^k which require law enforcement agencies to investigate and prosecute crimes committed with bias against LGBT people. Some state laws require collection of data on anti-LGBT hate crimes.

Rural states are less likely to have laws protecting youth, such as LGBT-inclusive school non-discrimination laws, anti-bullying laws, and bans on conversion therapy. In the context of education, currently only 14 states and Washington D.C. have state laws prohibiting discrimination in schools based on sexual orientation or gender identity—and importantly for students with LGBT parents, two states also prohibit discrimination based on “association.”³⁰² However, only 22% of rural states have LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination laws in education, compared to nearly twice as many (42%) urban states (see *Figure 28*).

Similarly, *Figure 28* shows that less than one-third (31%) of rural states have LGBT-inclusive anti-bullying laws, compared to more than half (53%) of urban states with these laws. Anti-bullying laws protect LGBT students from bullying by other students, teachers, and school staff on the basis of sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

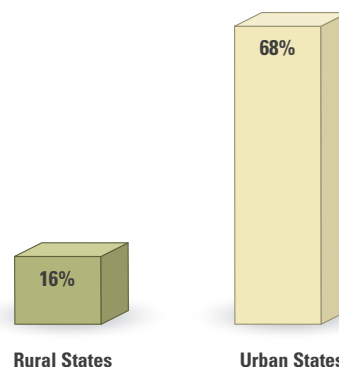
Beyond the school setting, conversion therapy is a dangerous and discredited practice that attempts to change people's sexual orientation or gender identity but instead causes significant harm, including significantly increased risk of depression and suicide attempts among youth.³⁰³ Conversion therapy bans prohibit licensed mental health practitioners from subjecting LGBT minors to this harmful practice. However, *Figure 28* also shows that only 13% of rural states have such a law, compared to 63% of urban states.

Rural States Have More Discriminatory Laws

LGBT people in rural states not only have fewer state-provided protections against discrimination, harassment, and violence, but they also face more state-sponsored harmful and discriminatory laws. As *Figure 29* shows on the next page, rural states are significantly more likely to have these discriminatory laws.

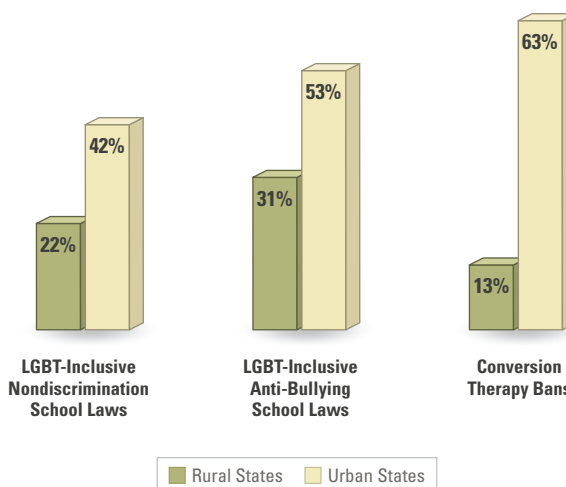
Rural states are more likely to have laws that harm LGBT students. As seen in *Figure 29*, one quarter of rural states have explicitly anti-LGBT school laws—five

Figure 27: Rural States are Less Likely to Have LGBT-Inclusive Hate Crimes Law
% of States with LGBT-Inclusive Hate Crimes Law



Source: Majority-rural determination based on Census data. State laws based on MAP's Equality Maps, as of 2/1/19.

Figure 28: Rural States are Less Likely to Have Laws that Protect LGBT Youth
% of Rural or Urban States with Each Type of Pro-LGBT Law



Source: Majority-rural determination based on Census data. State laws based on MAP's Equality Maps, as of 2/1/19.

^j Note: For driver's licenses, states are coded as having relatively trans-friendly processes if they score a “B-” or better on the National Center for Transgender Equality's grading system. These are states that use easy to understand forms, though they may or may not require provider certification. For birth certificates, states are coded as having relatively trans-friendly processes if they issue new birth certificates without surgical requirements or court orders, as tracked in MAP's Equality Maps.

^k Hate crimes laws are intended to deter bias-motivated crimes, but there is no consensus as to whether these laws actually prevent or deter such crimes. Additionally, research shows that enforcement of these laws, particularly through additional sentencing or “penalty enhancements,” disproportionately impacts already marginalized communities, especially communities of color. Read more about how criminalization impacts people of color [here](#).

times as many urban states with such laws. These laws take on many forms, including laws that prohibit school districts from explicitly protecting LGBT students in anti-bullying or nondiscrimination policies, as well as laws that prohibit teachers from even discussing LGBT people or issues at all.³⁰⁴ Given that rural areas already have fewer support structures for LGBT people and youth, further limiting potential sources of support and affirmation can only harm LGBT youth.

Rural states are also significantly more likely to criminalize HIV. Nearly 90% of majority-rural states have HIV-specific criminal laws, such as those that make perceived or potential exposure to HIV or other infectious diseases (which could include HIV) a crime.³⁰⁵ In addition to stigmatizing and punishing people living with HIV, these laws discourage people from being tested for HIV and further create many negative public health outcomes.³⁰⁶

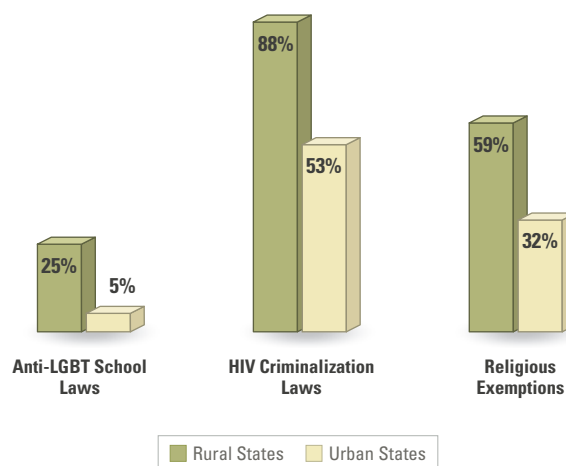
Rural states are more likely to have statewide religious exemption laws, one of the most potentially harmful laws. Nearly 60% of rural states also have some form of a statewide religious exemption law on the books, which allow businesses, healthcare or child welfare providers, or others to refuse service to an LGBT person if they claim that it violates their own religious beliefs.³⁰⁷ Religious exemptions cause harm to LGBT people throughout the country, and especially in rural areas where fewer alternative providers are available. Importantly, when LGBT people were asked what their top priorities were for the LGBT movement over the next ten years, the number one answer—including nearly two-thirds of LGBT people in small towns and rural areas—was stopping harmful religious exemption laws.³⁰⁸

Vast Differences in Legal Protections Across and Within Regions

As discussed above, across the country, rural states are less likely than urban states to have LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination protections and more likely than urban states to have harmful laws. However, there are also important differences in which regions of the country are more likely to offer protections to LGBT people. For example, *Figure 30* shows that, while rural states have significantly lower overall equality scores, the average score across different regions varies widely.

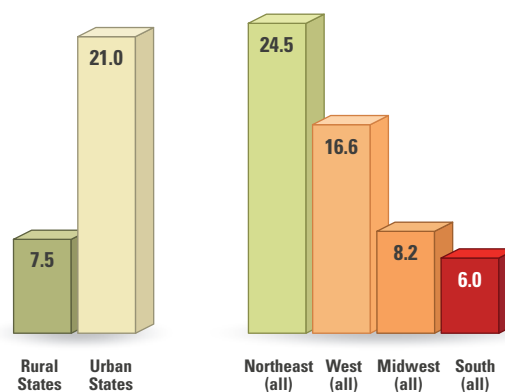
Not only do rural states, on average, have a significantly lower LGBT equality score, but the South and Midwest—where a majority of LGBT people live—have

Figure 29: Rural States are Significantly More Likely to Have Harmful, Discriminatory Policies
% of Rural or Urban States with Each Type of Anti-LGBT Law



Source: Majority-rural determination based on Census data. State laws based on MAP's Equality Maps, as of 2/1/19.

Figure 30: Rural States Have Significantly Lower LGBT Equality Scores, and Regions Vary Widely
Average LGBT Equality Score (Out of 38)



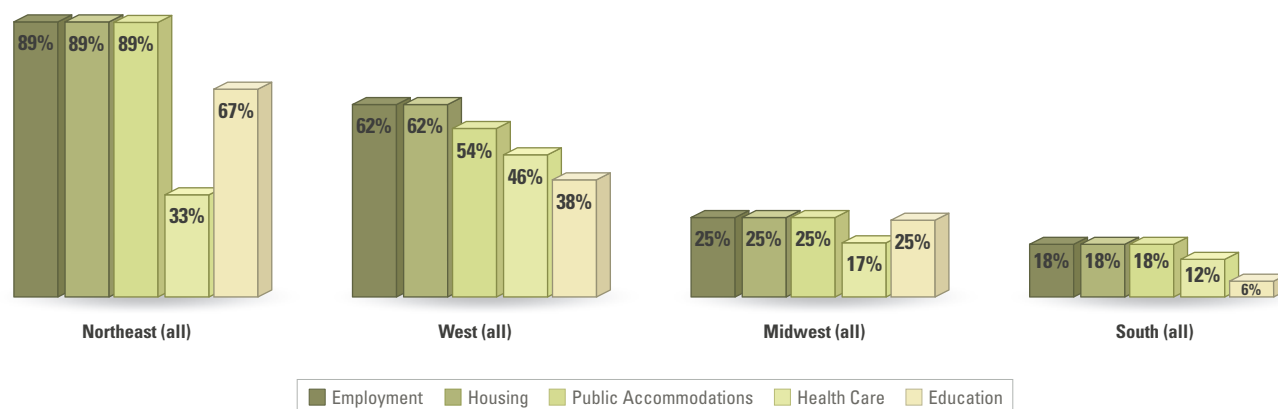
Source: Majority-rural determination based on Census data. State laws based on MAP's Equality Maps, as of 2/1/19.

the lowest scores. In other words, despite having the most LGBT residents, these regions have the fewest protections.

The South is also home to a majority of Black Americans,³⁰⁹ and so this regional effect further means that Black LGBT people are systematically less protected and more vulnerable to discrimination.

The South and Midwest are least likely to have laws that protect LGBT people. *Figure 31* on the following page shows a regional analysis of nondiscrimination laws

Figure 31: States in the South and Midwest are Least Likely to Have LGBT-Inclusive Nondiscrimination Protections, Across Many Policy Areas
 % of All States in Each Region With Each Type of LGBT-Inclusive Nondiscrimination Protections



Source: Regions based on Census 4-region division. State laws based on MAP's Equality Maps, as of 2/1/19.

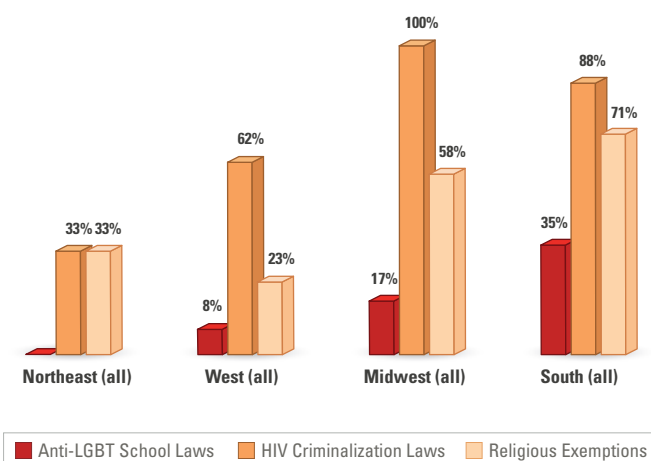
only (for brevity), illustrating the significant differences in where LGBT-inclusive protections can be found across regions. For example, states in the Northeast are the most likely to provide nondiscrimination protections to LGBT residents: 89% of all states in the Northeast have laws explicitly prohibiting discrimination against LGBT people in employment, housing, and public accommodations, though fewer Northeast states have LGBT-inclusive laws for education (67%) and health care (33%).

By contrast, the Midwest and Southern regions—which are heavily rural—have far fewer states with any of these LGBT protections. At most, only one quarter (25%) of Midwestern states have LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination laws. Only 18% of Southern states include LGBT people in their nondiscrimination laws in employment, housing, and public accommodations, and even fewer Southern states have LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination laws in health care and education.

Given that the South is home to nearly half of all people living in rural America, and further that nearly all Midwestern states (11 out of 12) are majority-rural, these regional differences in LGBT-inclusive policies magnify the likelihood that LGBT people in rural areas are less likely to have key nondiscrimination protections.

The South and the Midwest are most likely to have discriminatory laws. Figure 32 shows that discriminatory laws, and particularly religious exemptions, are especially common in the South, where nearly half of all rural residents live and where 35% of LGBT Americans live.³¹⁰

Figure 32: States in the South and Midwest are Most Likely to Have Discriminatory Laws
 % of All States in Each Region with Each Type of Discriminatory Law



Source: Regions based on Census 4-region division. State laws based on MAP's Equality Maps, as of 2/1/19.

Looking at rural-urban differences within each region of the country, further patterns emerge. Though these analyses rely on a relatively small number of states within each region, the findings continue to illustrate how LGBT people in rural America face significantly different policy climates depending on the part of the country in which they live.

In Western states, the pattern follows the larger national trend: rural states are significantly less likely than urban states to have LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination laws (see Figure 33a on the following page).

Figure 33: Regions Have Significantly Different Patterns of Having LGBT-Inclusive Nondiscrimination Laws
% of State Type With Each Type of LGBT-Inclusive Nondiscrimination Law

Figure 33a: In the **West**, Rural States Are Less Likely Than Urban States To Have LGBT-Inclusive Nondiscrimination Laws

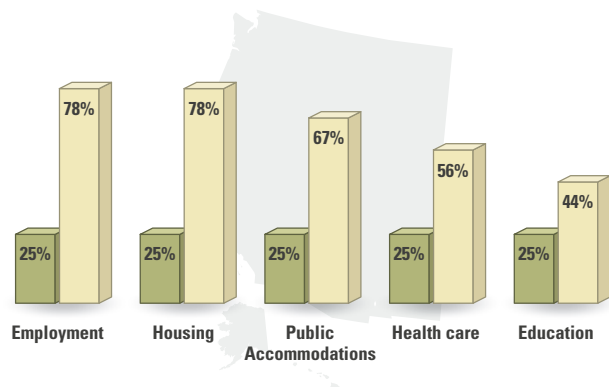


Figure 33b: In the **South**, Only Urban States Have Any Type of LGBT-Inclusive Nondiscrimination Laws

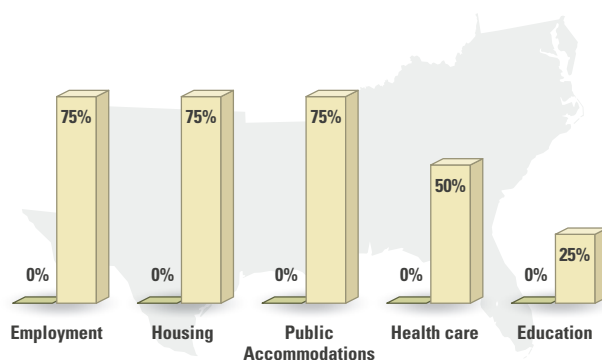


Figure 33c: In the **Midwest**, All But One State Is Rural, and Very Few Have LGBT-Inclusive Nondiscrimination Laws

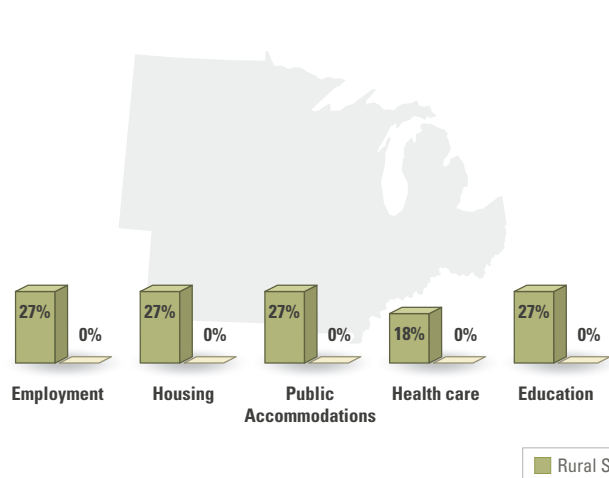
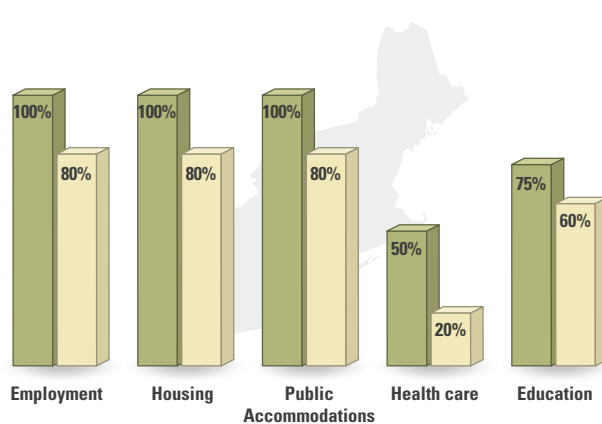


Figure 33d: In the **Northeast**, Rural States Are More Likely to Have LGBT-Inclusive Nondiscrimination Laws



■ Rural States ■ Urban States

Source: Majority rural determination based on Census data. Regions based on Census 4-region division. State laws based on MAP's Equality Maps, as of 2/1/19.

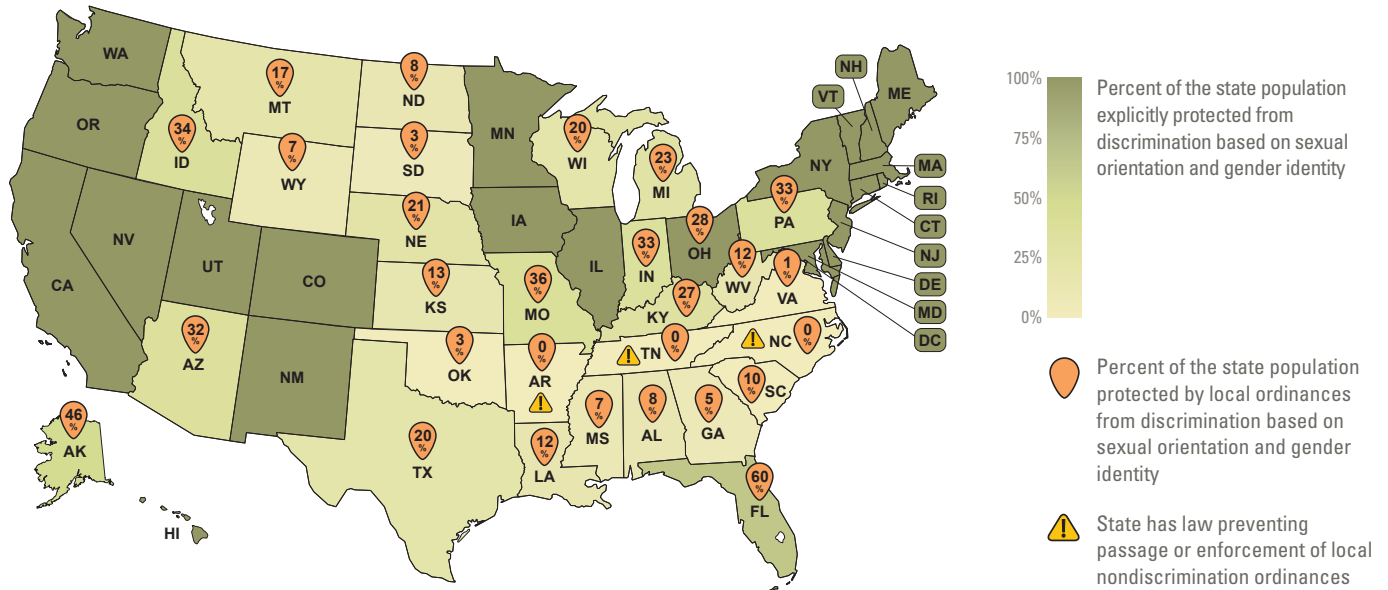
Southern states again reflect the national trend, as shown in *Figure 33b*. None of the 13 majority-rural states in the South have LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination protections in any of employment, housing, public accommodations, health care, or education, compared to 25-75% of Southern urban states.

In the Midwest, only one—Ohio—out of 12 states is classified as majority-urban. States are coded as majority-rural if at least 50% of their counties are majority-rural: in Ohio, 49% of counties are majority-rural, making the state majority-urban, but barely so. This means that the Midwest is nearly entirely majority-rural states. However, Ohio currently has no LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination protections, while several Midwestern majority-rural

states do. Therefore, as *Figure 33c* shows, rural states in the Midwest are more likely (than the Midwest's only urban state) to have LGBT protections.

Finally, as *Figure 33d* shows, rural states in the Northeast are actually more likely than urban states to have LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination protections. All Northeastern states except Pennsylvania (an urban state) explicitly include sexual orientation and gender identity in their nondiscrimination laws in employment, housing, and public accommodations. Pennsylvania's Human Rights Commission, however, has stated it interprets state law to include LGBT people, but the state's law does not explicitly enumerate sexual orientation or gender identity.

Figure 34: Local Nondiscrimination Ordinances Provide Some Protections When States Do Not



Note: Utah's statewide law explicitly enumerates sexual orientation and gender identity, but only in employment and housing. Wisconsin's state law explicitly enumerates sexual orientation only. Michigan and Pennsylvania's statewide nondiscrimination laws do not explicitly enumerate sexual orientation or gender identity. However, the Michigan Civil Rights Commission and the Pennsylvania Human Rights Commission have both stated they explicitly interpret the state's existing protections against sex discrimination to include protections for both sexual orientation and gender identity. Source: State and local laws based on MAP's Equality Maps, as of 2/1/19.

In sum, there are important geographic variations—both across and within regions of the country—in where LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination laws are more likely to be found. Western and Southern U.S. states follow the national trend: rural states within each region are less likely than urban states within the region to have nondiscrimination laws. In the Midwest, virtually all states are majority-rural, and very few have any such protections. Finally, the Northeast reverses the trend, with rural states more likely to have such laws. Given that LGBT protections are least common in the Midwest (almost entirely majority-rural states) and in the South (where more than half of rural Americans live), this highlights one of this report’s key arguments: LGBT people in rural areas, on average, have fewer policy protections than those in other parts of the country.

Local Laws: Fewer Protections in Rural Areas

In many states where state legislatures have refused to adopt LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination protections, towns and municipalities have taken it upon themselves to include LGBT people in local-level protections. Most commonly, such protections come in the form of nondiscrimination ordinances (NDOs). These ordinances can vary greatly in what areas of life they cover (such as

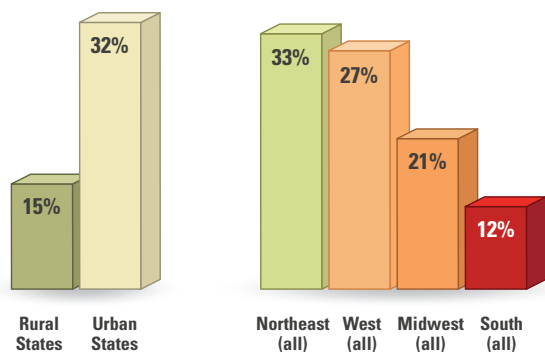
employment, housing, public accommodations, credit and lending, schools, and more), how they define such areas or categories, and how or if these protections are locally enforced. But simply passing such an ordinance is an important signal to employers, landlords, business owners, community residents, and LGBT people themselves about the community's values, and may itself be a deterrent to discrimination.

Figure 34 shows that in states without statewide protections, NDOs have created local-level, LGBT-inclusive protections for as many as 60% of a state's residents, as in the case of Florida. Across all states without statewide protections, local ordinances protect an average of 18% of a state's population.

However, *Figure 35* on the next page shows that, in states without statewide protections, rural states have fewer residents protected by local nondiscrimination ordinances, and further that there are significant differences by region. Again, the Midwest and the South are the regions least likely to have LGBT-inclusive protections.

As noted previously, the South and Midwest are home to a majority of LGBT people, and the South is home to a majority of Black Americans. This regional variation therefore means that, not only are the majority

Figure 35: Rural States Have Fewer Residents Protected by Local Ordinances, and Local Protections Vary Widely by Region
% of State Population Protected by LGBT-Inclusive Local Nondiscrimination Ordinances (In States Without Statewide Protections)



Source: Majority-rural determination based on Census data. Regions based on Census 4-region division. State laws based on MAP's Equality Maps, as of 2/1/19.

of LGBT people living in regions least likely to have legal protections, but that Black LGBT people specifically are disproportionately without legal protections and are particularly vulnerable to discrimination.

While rural areas on average provide fewer protections to LGBT residents than urban areas, it is important to note that many small towns and rural areas continue to act as leaders in providing protections to their LGBT residents. *Table 1* shows the smallest town (by population) with LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination protections in each state, among states that currently lack statewide protections.

Thurmond, West Virginia, for example, is the smallest town in the country with an LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination ordinance. Thurmond's population—of five people—unanimously voted in 2015 to prohibit discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations on the bases of both sexual orientation and gender identity.³¹¹

The next smallest town with an LGBT-inclusive ordinance is Vicco, Kentucky, with a population of 307. In 2013, Vicco's city commissioners adopted an LGBT-inclusive ordinance, making national headlines as the "tiny coal-mining community"³¹² or "map dot in the Appalachian coal fields"³¹³ bucked stereotypes about rural communities' attitudes toward LGBT people.

These small towns across the country demonstrate that, while rural areas are on average less likely to have legal protections for LGBT residents, many rural communities actively welcome and protect their LGBT neighbors.

Table 1: Each State's Smallest Town with LGBT Nondiscrimination Protections (In States That Lack Statewide Protections)

State	Town	Population (2017)	Year ordinance passed
Alabama	Montevallo	6,723	2018
Alaska	Sitka	8,830	2017
Arizona	Winslow	9,754	2018
Arkansas*	-	-	-
Florida	Mascotte	5,538	2015
Georgia	North High Shoals**	733	2014
Idaho	Driggs	1,805	2015
Indiana	Whitestown**	8,179	2015
Kansas	Roeland Park	6,772	2014
Kentucky	Vicco	307	2013
Louisiana	Shreveport	201,867	2013
Michigan***	Douglas**	1,317	1995
Mississippi	Magnolia	2,283	2017
Missouri	Kirkville	17,505	2013
Montana	Whitefish	7,279	2016
Nebraska	Omaha	466,893	2012
North Carolina*	-	-	-
North Dakota	Grand Forks**	57,056	2013
Ohio	Yellow Springs	3,734	2009
Oklahoma	Norman	122,843	2015
Pennsylvania***	West Conshohocken	1,320	2018
South Carolina	Folly Beach**	2,726	2012
South Dakota	Brookings	23,938	2017
Tennessee*	-	-	-
Texas	Plano	286,143	2014
Virginia	Charlottesville	48,019	2013
West Virginia	Thurmond	5	2015
Wisconsin	Verona	12,969	2018
Wyoming	Jackson	10,529	2018

* Local LGBT protections are prohibited by state law.

** Local ordinance is not fully inclusive (either covers only sexual orientation or gender identity, or only some of employment, housing, and public accommodations).

*** Michigan and Pennsylvania's state civil/human rights commissions interpret existing protections to include LGBT people, but state nondiscrimination law does not explicitly enumerate sexual orientation and gender identity.



BOTTOM LINE: POLICY LANDSCAPE

LGBT people in rural areas face a challenging policy landscape. There are few, if any, clear and consistent federal protections for LGBT people. At the state level, LGBT people in rural states are less likely to have key legal protections against discrimination, conversion therapy, and bullying in schools, while transgender people in rural states are less likely to have relatively straightforward processes for updating their gender marker on key identity documents. LGBT people in rural states are also more likely to experience harmful, discriminatory laws, including HIV criminalization and statewide religious exemptions. Even at the local level, rural states have a smaller percent of their population protected by LGBT-inclusive local ordinances, compared to the percent protected in urban states. However, many small towns and rural areas are working diligently to welcome and protect their LGBT residents, and these small towns continue to act as role models for local-level leadership in the fight for LGBT equality.

As argued throughout this report, the strengths and challenges of rural life can have a profound and unique impact on the experiences of LGBT people in rural America. Given that rural states are far less likely to have LGBT protections and far more likely to have discriminatory laws, federal protections are all the more urgently needed.



Political Power

In the face of such challenging social and policy landscapes, LGBT people in rural areas (and beyond) may turn to direct engagement in politics to improve their experiences or local community. For example, LGBT people across the country are at least as likely as non-LGBT people—if not more likely—to be registered to vote, to actually vote, and to be politically engaged in other ways, such as attending rallies or protests, contacting elected officials, and participating in political groups.³¹⁴

However, LGBT people—both in general and in rural areas specifically—are significantly less likely to

be represented in the halls of government. Given that elected officials make and vote on policy, being less represented means having less of a voice in the policy creation itself. LGBT people in rural areas also face challenges in political organizing, including from the geographic isolation of rural areas themselves.

Less Political Representation

According to the LGBTQ Victory Institute, an organization that tracks and supports LGBTQ political candidates, out of nearly 520,000 local, state, and federal elected positions in the United States, LGBTQ people hold fewer than 600 seats—only 0.1% of elected officials nationwide.³¹⁵

As seen in *Figure 36* on the following page, majority-rural regions are significantly less likely to have LGBT elected officials.

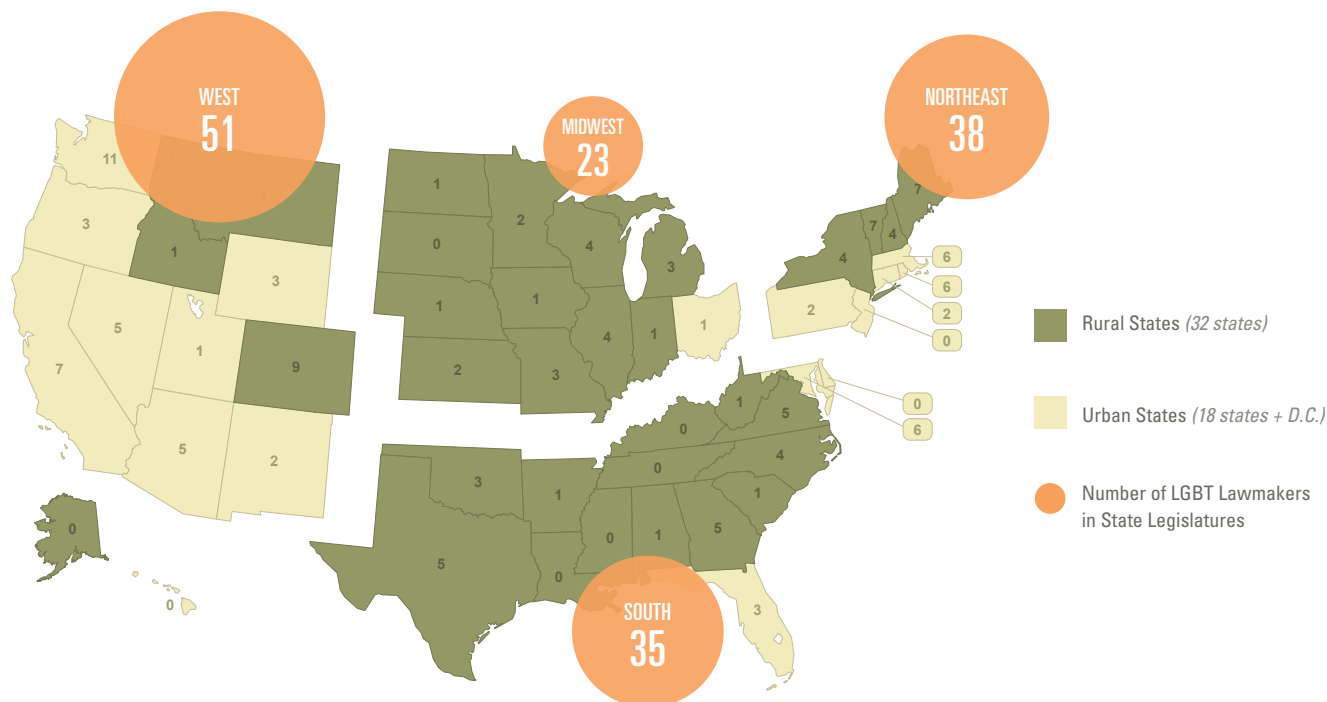
This discrepancy may be because openly LGBT people in rural areas are less comfortable running for office or because voters in rural areas may be less likely to support LGBT candidates. Research shows that voters who are more likely to support LGBT candidates are those who are, on average, more highly educated, more affluent, less religious, and more likely to vote for Democrats and/or lean liberal on social issues.³¹⁶ However, as discussed on pages 51-52, residents of rural areas are generally more likely to identify as Republicans and less likely to support LGBT policies. In other words, the type of voter that researchers expect to be most supportive of LGBT candidates are more commonly found in urban areas. As a result, LGBT people may also be less likely to run for, or successfully be elected in, rural communities.

However, LGBT elected officials can play an important role in improving state policies. *Figure 37* on the next page shows the relationship between the number of LGBT elected officials in a state and the state's overall LGBT policy tally. States with more LGBT elected officials also have higher LGBT equality scores.

Though *Figure 37* shows the strong relationship between the number of LGBT elected officials and the overall LGBT policy climate in a state, these data cannot say definitely that having more elected officials causes changes in states policies. It may instead be the case that states where LGBT-friendly policies have already passed are also states where the public is more open to LGBT people and issues in the first place, and therefore more likely to elect LGBT officials. However, research shows



Figure 36: Despite Having Majority of U.S. LGBT Population, South and Midwest Have Fewer LGBT Lawmakers Than Other Regions
Number of LGBT Lawmakers in State Legislatures, By State and Region



Source: Majority-rural determination based on Census data. Regions based on Census 4-region division. LGBT elected officials data from Victory Institute.

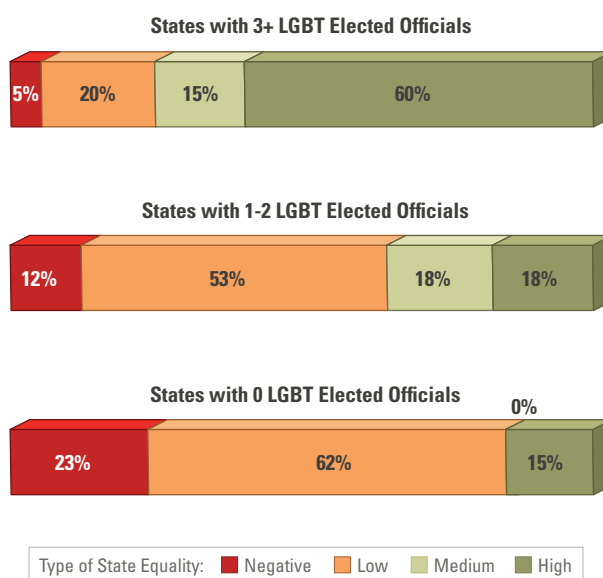
that the presence of even a few LGBT elected officials can have a powerful, positive impact on policies, the public, and other elected officials in that community.³¹⁷

While these findings underscore the need for better representation of LGBT people in elected office, especially in rural areas, these findings also highlight the need for coalition-building and elected officials who understand the intersectional nature of poverty, access to education and employment, and other important issues, regardless of whether they themselves identify as LGBT or not.

Different Political Influence

In addition to serving as an elected official, there are many other ways to influence government, such as organizing and direct action. LGBT people are more likely than non-LGBT people to participate in many of these forms of civic engagement,³¹⁸ but LGBT people in rural areas may face additional obstacles to influencing or participating local politics. Additionally, the priorities of LGBT people in rural areas may simply be different than those of LGBT people in urban areas.

Figure 37: States With More State-Level LGBT Elected Officials Also Have Better LGBT Policies



Source: LGBTQ elected officials data from Victory Institute. State equality scores based on MAP's Equality Maps, as of 2/1/19.

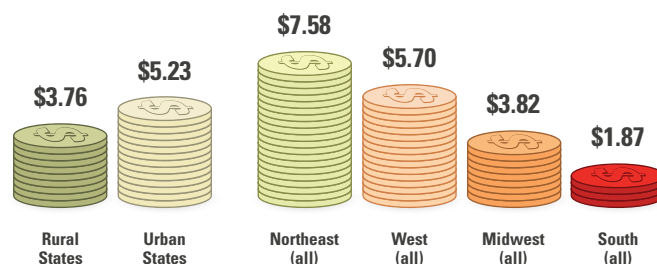
Rural organizing is more difficult. Organizing to make political change can include protests, rallies, lobbying, and many other methods that, at the end of the day, often rely upon gathering people together to show just how many people believe in a particular message or ideal. However, when people are scattered over hundreds of miles, as is often the case in rural areas, gathering in the same place is difficult. This makes organizing harder, whether for political or even social purposes.

Additionally, majority-rural states have fewer LGBT community centers and similar resources that can serve as social or political gathering places for LGBT people. Majority-rural states have an average of 3.4 community centers, while urban states have an average of 5.7 centers, according to CenterLink's listing of member centers. When adjusted for a state's LGBT population, rural and urban states have roughly equal numbers of community centers per capita, but having fewer centers overall likely means that any given LGBT resident may have farther to travel to access the few centers available.

Rural organizing is also more difficult due to under-funding and fewer resources. *Figure 38* shows that rural states receive fewer grant dollars for LGBT issues per capita, with Midwestern and Southern states receiving the fewest. Rural states receive 72 cents to each dollar received by urban states. Regionally, Midwestern states receive only half as many grant dollars as Northeastern states, and Southern states receive only one quarter as many. This relative under-funding of rural states, and particularly the Midwestern and Southern regions where the majority of the LGBT population lives, likely greatly impacts the capacity of rural organizing for LGBT issues.

LGBT people in rural areas may also have different priorities than those in urban areas. (And, of course, LGBT people within regions, states, and towns likely have different priorities from one another.) For example, some rural areas may feature an LGBT-affirming and welcoming landscape, where progress can be easily made and priorities can therefore include gender-neutral bathrooms, LGBT cultural competency trainings, and more. Other rural areas, however, may offer an extremely conservative social and political landscape, while still others may have a generally tolerant but less informed landscape. Both of these pose significant challenges to LGBT people and their

Figure 38: Rural States Receive Fewer Grant Dollars for LGBT Issues Per Capita, And Southern States Receive the Fewest Average LGBT-Related Grant Dollars Received Per LGBT Adult, 2011



Note: 2011 data are the most recently available data.

Source: Majority-rural determination based on Census data. Regions based on Census 4-region division. Funding data from Funders for LGBTQ Issues, 2014, *Out in the South: Building Resources for LGBTQ Advancement in the U.S. South (Part 1)*.

allies, and may require LGBT advocates to focus on more fundamental priorities, such as starting with public education about LGBT people.

Furthermore, when rural communities face challenges in meeting even the most basic of needs around economic security, quality education, public transportation, and adequate health care, LGBT residents may also choose to prioritize advocating for these needs, rather than protections based on sexual orientation or gender identity.³¹⁹



BOTTOM LINE: POLITICAL POWER

In rural areas, LGBT people are less likely to be represented by LGBT elected officials and less likely to have the types of social infrastructure, such as community centers, that can often serve as spaces for organizing and public education to improve support for LGBT people and issues. LGBT people in rural areas may also face different political challenges than LGBT people in urban areas, such as needing to focus on more basic public education about LGBT people. Given the relative scarcity of resources in rural areas, LGBT people may have different (i.e., not LGBT-specific) priorities altogether.

SPOTLIGHT



#RuralPride Campaign – LGBT Equality Across the Country

As a national organization focused on advancing legal equality for LGBT people through impact litigation, public policy, and public education, the National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR) leads [Rural Pride](#), an initiative focused on rural communities and the LGBT people and their families who live there.

For the past nine years, NCLR has crisscrossed the country to more than 15 communities in places like Lost River (WV), Visalia (CA), Des Moines (IA), and Hunstville (AL). The centerpiece of Rural Pride campaign is a series of day-long convenings alongside local partners based in rural communities across the country. These gatherings focus on the unique needs of the rural LGBT community, highlight the important federal policy efforts underway to protect this community, and identify next steps to ensure all rural communities have access to the resources they need to thrive. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has served as a partner in the project, providing direct assistance to communities and highlighting its nondiscrimination regulations prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

In discussions with attendees, many said that they wanted to “challenge the assumption that LGBT folks living in rural communities would move out if they could. LGBT people aren’t just living and working and going to school and raising kids and making their homes in rural America. They’re proud to be doing it,” shared Julie Gonen, an NCLR attorney.

The Social and Political Landscape for LGBT People in Rural Communities

This section examined the major factors shaping the social and political landscape for LGBT people living in rural areas. Public opinion shows that, while rural residents are somewhat less supportive of LGBT policies than are urban residents, a majority of rural residents—and especially rural people of color, women, and young people—nonetheless support these protections.

When it comes to policy, at the federal level there are no clear and consistent protections for LGBT people in many domains (e.g., housing). At the state level, rural states are significantly less likely than urban states to have vital protections for LGBT people, and they are more likely to have harmful, discriminatory laws. At the local level, many municipalities (including small towns and rural areas) have passed laws to protect their LGBT friends, family members, and neighbors, but in rural states these local-level ordinances are less common. LGBT political power in rural areas is also constrained due to multiple factors, including that there are fewer LGBT elected officials in rural regions

and that political organizing is more difficult in rural areas, due to geographic isolation, relative underfunding, and a lack of LGBT-supportive resources that can help facilitate change.

Taken together, these factors create a landscape where LGBT people in rural areas are more vulnerable to discrimination and less able to respond to its harmful effects. However, despite these challenges, LGBT people and allies in rural areas continue to build community and understanding, and to make strides toward equality. The next section offers numerous recommendations, from federal and state policies to methods of supporting grassroots organizing, to help elevate and accelerate the already ongoing work for LGBT equality in rural areas.



RECOMMENDATIONS

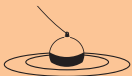
As this report demonstrates, LGBT people in rural areas experience both the joys and the hardships of rural life alongside their neighbors, friends, and family. Given the structures and challenges of rural life and the ways these affect LGBT people in rural areas, it is critical that federal, state, and local governments enact LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination protections and prevent or overturn harmful religious exemption laws, so that LGBT people in rural areas don't have to choose between vital protections and the place they call home.

The following recommendations offer guidance for policymakers, as well as for supporting and building on the already ongoing grassroots work toward LGBT equality in rural areas. While these recommendations are by no means exhaustive, they do offer a path forward for improving the lives of LGBT, and indeed all, people in rural America.

Recommendations to Better Understand LGBT People in Rural Communities	
Improve data collection	
Expand research and data collection on LGBT people in rural areas, including adding questions about sexual orientation and gender identity to government surveys.	Rural America is home to many LGBT people. However, data on LGBT people, let alone LGBT people in rural areas or other demographic groups within the LGBT community, are extremely limited. National, state, and local governments, as well as researchers and nonprofits, should include questions about sexual orientation and gender identity on their survey instruments, including the U.S. Census; state health, labor, and other surveys; and data collection tools. This will allow the collection of comprehensive and more accurate data, which in turn will allow a better understanding of how many LGBT people live in the U.S. (including in rural areas). This will also enable a better understanding of the unique experiences, challenges, and needs of LGBT people (including in rural areas). Such data would also guide government programming, resource investments, and more. ¹

Recommendations (by Theme) to Address Structural Challenges of Rural Life		(continued on the next page)
 Improve familiarity and visibility of LGBT people, rural people, and LGBT people in rural areas		
Improve rural people's familiarity with LGBT people and issues.	Due to fewer people overall in rural areas, including fewer LGBT people, people living in rural areas may be less familiar with LGBT people and issues. LGBT advocates and organizations should: • Work to improve rural communities' familiarity with LGBT people and issues. However, rather than communicating with rural communities in the same manner as urban communities, outreach and communication strategies and programs need to be tailored to rural communities' unique experiences, needs, and values. • Intentionally present diverse images of LGBT people in rural settings, including for example Black transgender women, Latinx gender non-conforming people, LGBT people with disabilities, and more, as positive representation helps expand the image of who lives in and who belongs in rural areas. • Build rural-based chapters wherever possible and actively participate in the local community, including on non-LGBT-specific issues, as relationship-building and familiarity require time to cultivate.	

¹ For additional recommendations, particularly regarding data collection, LGBT health disparities, cultural competency, and population-specific services, see Hunter College's "A Blueprint for Meeting LGBT Health and Human Services Needs in New York State."

Recommendations (by Theme) to Address Structural Challenges of Rural Life (continued)	
 Improve familiarity and visibility of LGBT people, rural people, and LGBT people in rural areas (continued)	
Improve urban and suburban people's familiarity with rural people and issues.	People living outside of rural areas may not understand the unique experiences, challenges, and needs of those living in rural communities. This unfamiliarity with rural life may lead urban-based, suburban-based, state, and national organizations to not fully realize the needs of rural communities and the potential impacts of their decisions on rural communities. Therefore, proactive work should be done to center and elevate the voices of rural residents, including in LGBT advocacy. • For example, LGBT groups at every level (national, state, local), community centers, and other organizations located in non-rural areas should: • Ensure representation of people living in rural areas in leadership positions, staff, boards, and so on. • Conduct both research and public education about the unique needs and experiences of rural LGBT people. • Review events and programming to make it easier for rural residents to attend or participate (such as phone-call town halls, live-streaming events, or other ways of virtual participation, as well as hosting events in rural areas as funding allows). • Build and strengthen relationships with other organizations and providers (LGBT-specific or otherwise) in rural areas, to facilitate opportunities for collaboration and mutual education. • Additionally, funders should invest in efforts to improve the capacity of state and local organizations, particularly those that already operate in rural areas, to serve rural communities (such as rural-specific programming, in-person events in rural areas, technology grants to support virtual participation, and more).
 Leverage the ripple effect	
Local employers, organizations, churches, and individuals should take a stand for equality and leverage their ripple effect.	The close-knit, interwoven nature of rural communities means that any rejection or acceptance in one area of life can ripple into other areas. This key feature of rural communities can be leveraged to better support LGBT people in rural areas. For example: • Family, faith, schools, employers, and other community cornerstones all play key roles in rural life, and leaders in each of these areas can play a guiding role in rural communities' efforts to support LGBT people. • Employers can enact LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination practices even if the local community or state does not have such protections. • Faith leaders and other community leaders can work within their organizations to improve LGBT-related policies and program offerings, and make their support publicly known. • City councils or county commissions can pass LGBT-inclusive laws in nondiscrimination and other areas. Leadership in these key community institutions can set standards that will ripple outward across the community and broaden support for LGBT people in rural areas.

Recommendations (by Theme) to Address Structural Challenges of Rural Life

(continued)



Improve LGBT competency of service providers and their programming/offerings

Increase the cultural competency of existing service providers, and make support, services, and programs inclusive of LGBT people and needs.

Structural differences in rural communities, such as fewer healthcare providers, have a unique impact on LGBT people, who may have fewer alternatives if they are discriminated against. While it would be ideal (for all rural residents) to expand the number of available providers, this may not always be realistic. Therefore, it is important to improve the cultural competency of existing providers, so that they may provide the best service for all rural residents, including LGBT people. Improving LGBT cultural competency is particularly important in education, health care, and elder services, given that LGBT youth, elders, and those in need of medical care are especially vulnerable.

In all cases, cultural competency training and support should intentionally acknowledge the ways in which, for example, Black LGBT people or LGBT immigrants have unique or compounded experiences, and discuss how services can and should be responsive to the unique needs and experiences of LGBT people of different backgrounds.

Service providers—including those in child and family services, education, employment and human relations, housing, health care, elder care, and the legal profession—should:

- Regularly seek out and participate in LGBT educational events, cultural competency trainings, professional development, community service opportunities, and so on, as relevant to their profession.
- Work with rural community-based organizations to assess the needs of LGBT people in rural areas and target outreach and programs to them.

LGBT organizations, advocacy groups, funders, and allies should:

- Encourage local service providers to participate in LGBT trainings and offer LGBT-inclusive programming and services.
- Support the development of tools and resources to educate service providers about LGBT people and their needs, including the unique needs of those in rural areas.
- Support the development and delivery of model policies, best practices, and provider trainings to ensure that local providers are willing and able to support LGBT people, and that LGBT people feel welcome when working with rural service providers and organizations.
- Help existing community-based organizations and service providers in rural areas strengthen or create programs that are explicitly inclusive of LGBT people—or at a minimum, help general community-based organizations provide information and referrals to LGBT-inclusive resources.
 - For example, MAP and SAGE jointly developed a one-page resource on social isolation facing LGBT older adults and distributed it to community centers across the country. The document provided resources where LGBT elders could find help (including online and phone resources) as well as a space for local providers to add information about local programs.



Improve LGBT competency of service providers and their programming/offerings

(continued)

Provide tools, information, and services directly to LGBT people in rural areas.

Advocates can empower LGBT people in rural areas with direct services, tools, resources, and information they may need to support or advocate for themselves.

Providing services directly to LGBT people in rural areas is key. Given the higher rates of poverty and fewer available providers (of all types) in rural areas, when rural residents experience unmet need, it is likely urgent. Direct services immediately impact and improve the lives of LGBT people in rural areas.

- Support and fund programming that provides material support, such as clothing, fresh food, health care, legal services, and more. For example, in November 2018, Queer Appalachia—an online-only presence—organized a winter coat drive for LGBT people in need in the Appalachian region, after receiving hundreds of requests for assistance. People from all over the country mailed coats and donated money to support the drive and provide winter clothing to those in need.
- Advocates should provide direct, hands-on assistance whenever possible, such as legal workshops or clinics. These efforts can help LGBT people in rural areas navigate existing inequalities under the law, and to help them redress illegal discrimination when it happens.

Tools and resources can also empower LGBT people in rural areas. Advocates should only provide tools that are actually needed in the area or that the community can incorporate into its existing infrastructure—which requires working with rural communities to know their actual needs and current capacity.

- For example, the David Bohnett Foundation provides computers to many LGBT community centers around the country, increasing their ability to support those without regular computer access.³²¹ Though rural areas have fewer LGBT community centers, similar financial or technological support could be provided to existing and everyday parts of rural communities, such as local schools and libraries.
- Similarly, support for broad-based community resources (rather than LGBT-specific ones) can directly improve LGBT residents' lives. For example, additional funding for an existing mobile health clinic would expand healthcare access for all rural residents in the area, including LGBT residents. This approach would also protect LGBT residents against being potentially outed if they were to be seen visiting, for example, an LGBT-specific health clinic.

Finally, advocates can empower LGBT people in rural areas with useful information about a variety of issues, including LGBT-related health matters, legal protections and policies in their town or state, and more. Where possible, advocates should provide information and assistance that is detailed and geographically appropriate (including referrals to local LGBT-friendly experts).

Recommendations (by Theme) to Address Structural Challenges of Rural Life



Improve rural support structures

Improve rural support structures.

The geographic isolation of rural areas often means LGBT people in rural areas experience a greater distance to the nearest LGBT people, organizations, or resources. This relative lack of (or distance from) support makes any experience of hardship or discrimination even more difficult to face. Efforts to improve rural connection and support structures are therefore critical. Importantly, many such efforts will benefit all rural residents, not only LGBT people in rural areas.

- Government and organizations should invest in resources that can increase connection and decrease isolation, such as high-speed, affordable internet access. This will strengthen LGBT people's (and indeed all rural residents') ability to find meaningful connection, support, information, and even educational or job training opportunities that will then enrich their local rural community.
- Funders and allies should support efforts to identify existing resources, providers, and other rural-based spaces that support and affirm LGBT people, so that LGBT people in rural areas know where they can currently find the support they may need. For example, the Campaign for Southern Equality recently published *Trans in the South: A Guide to Resources and Services*, a directory of over 400 "trans-friendly mental health providers, primary care physicians, HIV care specialists, attorneys, endocrinologists, and more across 13 Southern states." The guide is available in both Spanish and English, and "also includes resources to assist with funding medical transition, and helpful information about insurance coverage."³²⁰
- State and urban-based LGBT organizations should conduct regular outreach and community building with individuals and community service organizations in rural areas, to improve the connection between rural service organizations and LGBT-competent and affirming resources.
- Government, organizations, and others should direct funding to existing community resources—including non-LGBT-specific resources such as libraries, local community centers, mobile health clinics, and more—to improve their capacity and LGBT-inclusivity. Expanding the ability of these existing resources to serve all rural residents, while also improving their competency and ability to specifically serve LGBT residents, helps ensure that rural LGBT residents don't have to choose between needed support and the place they call home.

Cross-Cutting Recommendations

- Pass federal, state, and local LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination protections in employment, housing, and public accommodations. For further policy recommendations, see the next section.
- Because LGBT people living in rural places are, by definition, part of rural communities, improving the infrastructure and resources of rural communities overall will also improve the experiences of LGBT people in rural communities. Therefore, efforts such as improving rural areas' school funding, employment opportunities, healthcare options, internet access, transportation options, and other basic services will improve the lives of all rural residents, including LGBT people in rural areas.
- See previous section for other cross-cutting recommendations, including LGBT competency trainings and coalition building across regions and organizations.



Family, Faith, and Community

Family and child welfare service providers should:

- Regularly take LGBT competency trainings and other professional development opportunities to continue to provide the best service to LGBT parents and youth.
- Make their support of LGBT families known on their website, in their offices, and in their printed materials.
- Support and advocate for lawmakers to pass LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination laws in adoption and foster care.

Faith groups should:

- Work to improve their LGBT-related policies and programming, and make these easily available online and in their resources and services.
- Make their support publicly known in the community, including when instances of discrimination or violence occur.
- Act in leadership roles when opportunities arise to support LGBT people in the local community.

Community organizations should:

- Update their membership policies to include, affirm, and welcome LGBT people, and make these policies easily available and well-known.
- Act in leadership roles when opportunities arise to support LGBT people in the local community.

Recommendations (by Topic Area) to Address Structural Challenges of Rural Life

(continued)

 Education and Schools	Schools officials, parents, and advocates and allies should: • Support the formation and activities of gender and sexuality alliances (GSAs, also known as gay-straight alliances) in schools. See the GSA Network for more resources.^m • Provide and ensure students have access to appropriate and affirming mental health and social supports, such as school counselors. • Implement suicide prevention policies, given the higher risk of bullying, harassment, self-harm, and suicide experienced by LGBT youth and the lower rates of supportive schools or staff in rural areas.³²² • Include age-appropriate, LGBT-inclusive school curriculum, teaching practices, and resources (such as library books). • Ensure that school computers allow access to LGBT content. The internet may be the primary, if not the only, place where many LGBT youth in rural areas can access LGBT-affirming information, but youth in rural areas are more likely to use a computer at school than at home.³²³ • Advocate for district-level and state-level anti-bullying policies and laws that prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and association. Ensure that these policies take a restorative justice approach focused on healing communities and addressing the need for increased understanding. • Work against new laws that would harm LGBT youth, and to overturn existing such laws.
 Employment and Economic Security	Advocates and allies should: • Work to reduce poverty and raise the minimum wage. People in rural areas, including LGBT people, are more likely to be in poverty and work minimum wage jobs. Raising incomes would increase the economic security of many rural residents, including LGBT people. Employers in rural areas should: • Implement LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination policies in their hiring and business practices. • Select healthcare plans that are inclusive of LGBT and transition-related health care • Pay their employees a living wage, and include broad definitions of family in family leave policies that may exist. • Make their LGBT-inclusivity publicly known in the community, and act in leadership roles when opportunities arise to support LGBT people in the local community. • Advocate for lawmakers to pass LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination employment laws.

^m For example, “10 Steps for Starting a GSA.” <https://gsanetwork.org/resources/10-steps-for-starting-a-gsa>.

Recommendations (by Topic Area) to Address Structural Challenges of Rural Life

(continued)


Housing and Homelessness

Rural residents and allies should:

- Advocate for more, more affordable, and more quality housing options in their local communities. This includes stronger public investment in affordable housing options.
- Work with local nonprofit or housing-related organizations to ensure their policies and practices are LGBT-inclusive.
- Work to promote family and community acceptance of LGBT people, especially LGBT youth, such as through the resources available from the Advancing Acceptance campaign.³²⁴ While family rejection is not the only cause of LGBT youth homelessness, promoting family acceptance will reduce harms and may also reduce the rate of LGBT youth homelessness.
- Encourage lawmakers to pass LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination laws in both housing and public accommodations. This will prohibit discrimination against LGBT people when renting or buying housing, as well as when seeking the help of shelters or other services for those experiencing homelessness.

Lawmakers, researchers, and advocates should:

- Work to pass LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination laws in housing and public accommodations.
- Review local zoning and land use ordinances for potential opportunities to expand quality, affordable housing options.
- Revise data collection and research efforts on homelessness in rural areas, given the ways in which rural homelessness may manifest differently than in urban areas.


Public Places and Businesses

Local residents should:

- Encourage local organizations, service providers, and businesses to commit to serving all residents—including LGBT residents—on the same terms.^a
- Patronize and support organizations that make their LGBT-inclusivity known.

Local businesses should:

- Join the Open to All coalition, a national coalition of businesses committed to serving all customers on equal terms.
- Adopt LGBT-inclusive policies regarding customers, employees, and community engagement.
- Provide single-user, accessible, gender-neutral bathrooms whenever possible. These benefit many residents, including parents with young children, people with disabilities, those who may need assistance, as well as LGBT people.
- Act in leadership roles when opportunities arise to support LGBT people in the local community.
- Encourage lawmakers to pass LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination laws in public accommodations.

^a See <http://www.opentoall.com>.

Recommendations (by Topic Area) to Address Structural Challenges of Rural Life

(continued)

 Health Care	Medical professionals and healthcare providers should: • Regularly seek out and participate in LGBT-competency trainings and professional development opportunities. • Update their intake forms and other paperwork to ensure these are inclusive of LGBT identities (including chosen name and pronouns) and experiences (such as sexual health). • Evaluate their programs and services, including opioid and addiction recovery efforts, and update wherever needed to make sure these offerings are LGBT-inclusive and affirming.^o • Encourage lawmakers to pass LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination laws in health care and private insurance. Health insurers should: • Explicitly include HIV prevention, testing, and treatment in all plans, and fund these efforts in rural communities. • Explicitly include opioid and addiction recovery treatment in all plans, and fund these efforts in rural communities. • Explicitly include LGBT-related services, such as reproductive assistance or transition-related treatments, in all plans.
 Legal System	Legal professionals and service providers, including judges, police, lawyers, prison officials, and others should: • Regularly seek out and participate in LGBT-competency and implicit bias trainings. • Allow for the regular and consistent collection of data related to sentencing, fines, and other aspects of the legal process, so that patterns or manifestations of bias can be detected and addressed. Rural residents, allies, and advocates should: • Work to end cash bail (without replacing it with other financial penalties or risk assessment tools that may further exacerbate existing biases in the legal system).

^o For more specific recommendations on LGBT-inclusive health and addiction recovery efforts, see Hunter College's "A Blueprint for Meeting LGBT Health and Human Services Needs in New York State."

Recommendations to Help Strengthen the Social and Political Climate for LGBT People in Rural Areas

(continued on the next page)

77



Improve LGBT-related public opinion and beliefs

Target and tailor public education efforts to rural areas.

Invest in public education and messaging campaigns in rural areas with, for example, targeted outreach through geographically targeted social media, door-knocking efforts in rural areas, and more. It is critical that these efforts are specifically tailored to rural communities' unique experiences, needs, and values, rather than replicating existing national or urban-based strategies.



Improve the policy landscape

Pass federal laws to protect LGBT people, and in the meantime, pass laws statewide.

Passing the laws listed below at the federal level (and state level) is critical so that LGBT people across the country have the same rights and protections, no matter whether they live in a rural or urban area. As it currently stands, the patchwork of state (and even local) laws means that LGBT people in rural communities have far fewer legal protections and face far more harmful and discriminatory laws, compared to LGBT people in other parts of the country.

Pass nondiscrimination laws that explicitly protect LGBT people.

Rural states are less likely to have vital state-level protections and more likely to have discriminatory policies, leaving LGBT people particularly vulnerable to discrimination or without the legal standing to seek recourse. Therefore, lawmakers should pass laws to explicitly protect LGBT people from discrimination in employment, housing, public accommodations, health care, foster care, education, and more.

Pass laws that protect LGBT parents and recognize the diversity of LGBT families.

Nondiscrimination protections in adoption and foster care should include LGBT people and youth, so that both prospective parents and LGBT youth already in the system are protected against discrimination. Importantly, these laws should not provide religious exemptions to family and child welfare providers. Religious exemptions in these areas would allow, for example, adoption service providers to refuse to work with LGBT parents, thus reducing the chance that a child in need will find their forever home.

Pass laws protecting LGBT youth and overturn those that harm them.

Lawmakers should pass laws protecting LGBT youth, including:

- Nondiscrimination protections in education, which protect LGBT students from being unfairly denied access to school facilities, sports teams, or clubs or activities.
- Anti-bullying laws in schools. These prohibit bullying not only by other students, but also by teachers or staff, and can act as important standards for creating a supportive and inclusive environment for all students, including LGBT students.
- Conversion therapy bans. Youth need to be protected from this harmful and discredited practice that attempts to change their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

Lawmakers and allies should fight against or overturn laws that harm LGBT youth, including:

- Anti-LGBT school laws, which forbid school districts from passing anti-discrimination or anti-bullying policies to protect LGBT youth.
- "Don't Say Gay" laws, which restrict teachers and staff from even discussing LGBT people or issues.
- Other legislation designed to restrict transgender students' access to school bathrooms or limit their participation in school activities and extra-curriculars.

Recommendations to Help Strengthen the Social and Political Climate for LGBT People in Rural Areas

(continued)



Improve the policy landscape

(continued)

Pass laws protecting LGBT people's health care access, and overturn those that deny or limit access.

Lawmakers should:

- Pass LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination laws in health care. These laws protect people from being unfairly denied health insurance coverage or from being unfairly excluded from coverage on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Pass laws ensuring that transgender people's medical needs are covered by health insurance, including Medicaid.
 - Currently, 30 states allow insurance companies to explicitly refuse to cover transition-related medical care. However, 20 states and D.C. have passed laws that bar health insurers from denying or limiting coverage based on gender identity and require the removal of "transgender exclusions" from health plans. Remaining states should follow suit.
 - Only 17 states and D.C. explicitly cover transition-related medical care in their state's Medicaid policies. Other states should update their policies to ensure equal access to health care for transgender people.
- Repeal existing HIV criminalization laws. These laws are based on fears and stereotypes, and they punish and criminalize people (disproportionately LGBT people and people of color) simply for being HIV-positive. They further create a strong disincentive for being tested for HIV, leading to adverse public health outcomes. These laws should be repealed, and states' HIV-prevention policies should instead be based in science and public health best practices.

Pass laws allowing transgender people to easily update identity documents.

State officials and lawmakers should adopt laws and policies that ensure transgender people can easily and affordably update their identity documents—including driver's licenses and birth certificates—to match their gender identity. These processes should be simple and easy to access; they should not require applicants to show proof of surgery, meet burdensome process requirements, or pay prohibitive fees.

Fight or overturn religious exemptions laws that allow service providers and businesses to discriminate against LGBT people.

Finally, laws or legislation that would allow for religious exemptions should be fought or overturned. Such laws allow individuals or organizations—including important service providers from health care and foster care to homeless shelters and food banks—to refuse to serve certain people, such as LGBT people. While freedom of religion is a value shared across the country, taxpayer-funded service providers should serve everyone equally and not be allowed to discriminate.



Nurture LGBT political power and organizing capacity

Nurture and expand the needed infrastructure for rural organizing and LGBT advocacy.

Due to the geographic distance and isolation of rural areas, organizing or even holding in-person meetings can be challenging. LGBT and allied organizers, groups, and advocacy organizations should:

- Create or adopt alternative methods of organizing that reflect this reality, such as online groups, conference calls or group chats, and other digital methods of organizing.
- Create, identify, or support physical spaces that work well for in-person meetings or gathering spaces. While digital or online efforts go a long way to help rural organizing, in-person interactions are still important for creating the social and political network needed to create change. What's more, in-person contact is likely preferred by many LGBT people in rural areas, given rural communities' value of connection and community.
- Cultivate relationships with rural community-based organizations and faith communities, as these are often central organizing and networking opportunities in rural areas.

Funders and allies should:

- Support state and local groups already doing advocacy work in rural areas, and invest in these organizations so they can to expand their efforts and services. In many cases, the type of work that "needs to be done" in rural areas is already underway by local residents, but without the financial or logistical means to support their efforts.

Engage in and support coalition building.

Given the lower population of rural areas and the interconnected nature of rural communities, coalition building across different groups or organizations is likely even more important in rural areas than elsewhere. Additionally, coalition building and participation is important for advancing equality for all people, not just for LGBT-specific issues. Therefore, rural residents and LGBT advocates and allies should:

- Regularly partner with other community members and organizations to advance equality and opportunities for all rural residents, not only on LGBT-specific issues.

Provide forums, training, and technical assistance to help grow the political power of rural LGBT people.

Rural states generally have fewer LGBT elected officials, community centers, and other forms of sociopolitical infrastructure that are often key to advancing understanding of LGBT people and issues. Indeed, a 2017 national survey showed that 29% of LGBT people think that increasing LGBT roles, visibility, and influence in rural areas should be a key priority for the LGBT movement in the next ten years.³²⁵ Among LGBT people living in rural areas and small towns, that number increases to nearly two in five (39%) who think this should be a key priority for the LGBT movement in the coming decade.³²⁶ Therefore, advocates and allies in rural areas should:

- Work to build LGBT political leadership and influence in rural areas. For example, local political party chapters can make their LGBT-inclusivity known, and further host recruitment or training events for LGBT people interested in running for office, or sponsor their attendance at national trainings like those offered by the Victory Institute.

CONCLUSION

Many LGBT people call rural America home. However, the strengths, structures, and challenges of rural life mean that any experience of rejection—and acceptance—are easily amplified. The social and political landscape of rural communities also shows that LGBT people face weaker public support, fewer policy protections, and more discriminatory laws.

Despite these challenges, there are many opportunities to improve the experiences of LGBT people in rural America. By addressing the overall needs and challenges of rural areas, while also directly addressing LGBT-specific experiences in rural areas, meaningful and long-lasting change is possible in rural America—the place that so many LGBT people call home.

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