

# WHERE WE CALL HOME: LGBT PEOPLE IN RURAL AMERICA

*Executive Summary*

*April 2019*



movement advancement project ▶

**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](http://www.lgbtmap.org).

### Contact Information

#### Movement Advancement Project

1905 15th Street #1097  
Boulder, CO 80306  
1-844-MAP-8800  
[www.lgbtmap.org](http://www.lgbtmap.org)

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## This report was developed in partnership with:

### 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](http://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](http://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](http://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>.

## 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.<sup>i</sup> 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.<sup>ii</sup>

National surveys of rural areas show that between 3% and 5% of the rural population identifies as LGBT,<sup>iii</sup> consistent with estimates that 4.5% of the U.S. adult population identifies as LGBT.<sup>iv</sup> Additional research shows that roughly 10% of youth identify as LGBT, with rural youth just as likely as urban youth to identify as LGBT.<sup>v</sup> 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.<sup>vi</sup>

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.<sup>vii</sup> 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.<sup>viii</sup> 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.<sup>ix</sup>

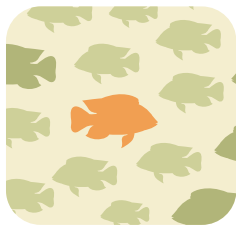
**2.9-3.8 Million**  
LGBT People in Rural America

*-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

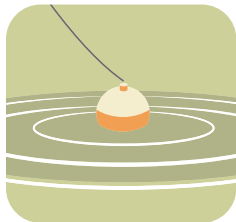
Just as there is no singular LGBT experience, there is no singular rural experience. However, many people in rural parts of the country describe their communities in similar ways: built around family and close-knit community; centered around strong social institutions such as churches, schools, and local 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.<sup>x</sup> 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.<sup>xi</sup>



**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).<sup>xii</sup> 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.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>i</sup> U.S. Census. December 2016. "[New Census Data Show Differences Between Urban and Rural Populations](#)."
- <sup>ii</sup> Daniel Lichter. 2012. "[Immigration and the New Racial Diversity in Rural America](#)." *Rural Sociology* 77(1): 3-35.
- <sup>iii</sup> 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](#).
- <sup>iv</sup> Frank Newport. "[In U.S., Estimate of LGBT Population Rises to 4.5%](#)." 2018. Gallup.
- <sup>v</sup> 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.
- <sup>vi</sup> 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.
- <sup>vii</sup> Summarized in: Luke Andrew Boso. 2014. "[Policing Masculinity in Small-Town America](#)." *Temple Political & Civil Rights Law Review* 23(345).
- <sup>viii</sup> 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.
- <sup>ix</sup> Emily Kazyak. 2011. "Disrupting Cultural Selves: Constructing Gay and Lesbian Identities in Rural Locales." *Qualitative Sociology* 34(4): 561-81.
- <sup>x</sup> 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](#).
- <sup>xi</sup> 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.
- <sup>xii</sup> PRRI. 2017.



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1905 15th Street #1097 • Boulder, CO 80306-1097  
1-844-MAP-8800  
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