

TELLING A NEW SOUTHERN STORY: LGBTQ RESILIENCE, RESISTANCE, AND LEADERSHIP

Executive Summary

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Partner

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.

Campaign for Southern Equality

The Campaign for Southern Equality, based in Asheville, NC, works across the South to promote full LGBTQ equality—both legal and lived. Our efforts are rooted in commitments to empathy and equity in race, gender, and class. Our current work includes grassroots grantmaking, organizing, direct action, litigation, and direct services. Learn more at: www.southernequality.org.

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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>.

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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.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The U.S. South is a region not easily defined. Its history—and present—is one of both traditionalism and progress, racism and resistance, hardship and joy. For lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people, there is added complexity to life in the South. The South has the most hostile policy landscape in the country for LGBTQ issues, as Southern states are far less likely to have LGBTQ-inclusive laws and protections, and instead are far more likely to have harmful, discriminatory laws. Yet at the same time, the South also has the largest LGBTQ population of any region in the country, with roughly one in three LGBTQ people nationwide calling the South home. And in many ways, LGBTQ Southerners are leading the way in effective, creative, and meaningful community building and political advocacy.

As integral members of the broader Southern community, LGBTQ Southerners share in both the joys and hardships of Southern life, right alongside their non-LGBTQ neighbors. Some of the major issues shaping life in the South today include high rates of poverty and economic insecurity; obstacles to health and safety (including violence and policing); and challenges in daily life ranging from isolation to limited opportunities for housing, education, or needed services—all of which are directly shaped by key cornerstones of Southern life, including the legacy of slavery, the centrality of faith and social conservatism, and the predominant one-party control throughout the region. Combined with pre-existing disparities, ongoing discrimination, and the most hostile policy landscape in the country for LGBTQ issues, the South is a complicated place—though still home—for the LGBTQ people who live there.

However, the policy landscape alone does not tell the whole story about LGBTQ life in the South, or prospects for political change in the South. In fact, the South is home to some of the most innovative, resilient, and effective LGBTQ organizing and activism across the country. LGBTQ Southerners often work outside the state legislative context, focusing on community, directly addressing the immediate needs of LGBTQ Southerners, and working in coalition across a broad range of issues. When LGBTQ Southerners do engage in policy work, victories are common, but they may take a different form than in other parts of the country—meaning these victories are often overlooked by outsiders, especially when assessing prospects for change in the region. In

short, judging the South and the quality of life for LGBTQ Southerners solely through the region's state policy landscape minimizes the sophistication, creativity, and resilience of LGBTQ Southerners—not to mention the lessons that LGBTQ advocates across the country can learn from their Southern kin for how to nurture community, build coalitions, and make lasting change, even in the most hostile political settings.

“The South” and LGBTQ Southerners

There are many different ways to think about the South, and even among people who identify as Southerners, there is little agreement as to which states are part of the region or what it means to live in the South. This report focuses on 14 Southern states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

Importantly, the South is an incredibly diverse region. As of 2018, over 117 million people live in the South, each with their own experiences, backgrounds, values, and more.ⁱ Geographically, the region ranges from the Appalachian Mountains to the Gulf and Atlantic shorelines, and from rural Black Belt farmland to large urban areas and more. Demographically, the South is home to the majority (53%) of all Black people in the country, as well as more than one in three (36%) Hispanic or Latino people in the country.ⁱⁱ

The diversity of the South also includes LGBTQ people: roughly one out of every three (32%) LGBTQ^a adults in the United States—including nearly two out of every five (38%) transgender people—live in the South, more than in any other region in the country.ⁱⁱⁱ This means that roughly 3.6 million LGBTQ adults, including over 525,000 transgender adults, live in the U.S. South—more than in any other region.

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^a This report generally uses “LGBTQ” to refer to the broad community of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual and gender minorities. When referring to specific data sources, the report uses the terms used by those data sources (e.g. “LGBT” when referring to Gallup data).

Additionally, 41% of LGBT people in the South are people of color, according to data from 2014.^{iv} Specifically, more than one in five (22%) LGBT Southerners are Black (the highest of any region), and 16% of LGBT Southerners are Latino.^v More recent data show that the South's Latinx population has grown dramatically, so the number of LGBTQ Latinx people in the South is likely even higher today.

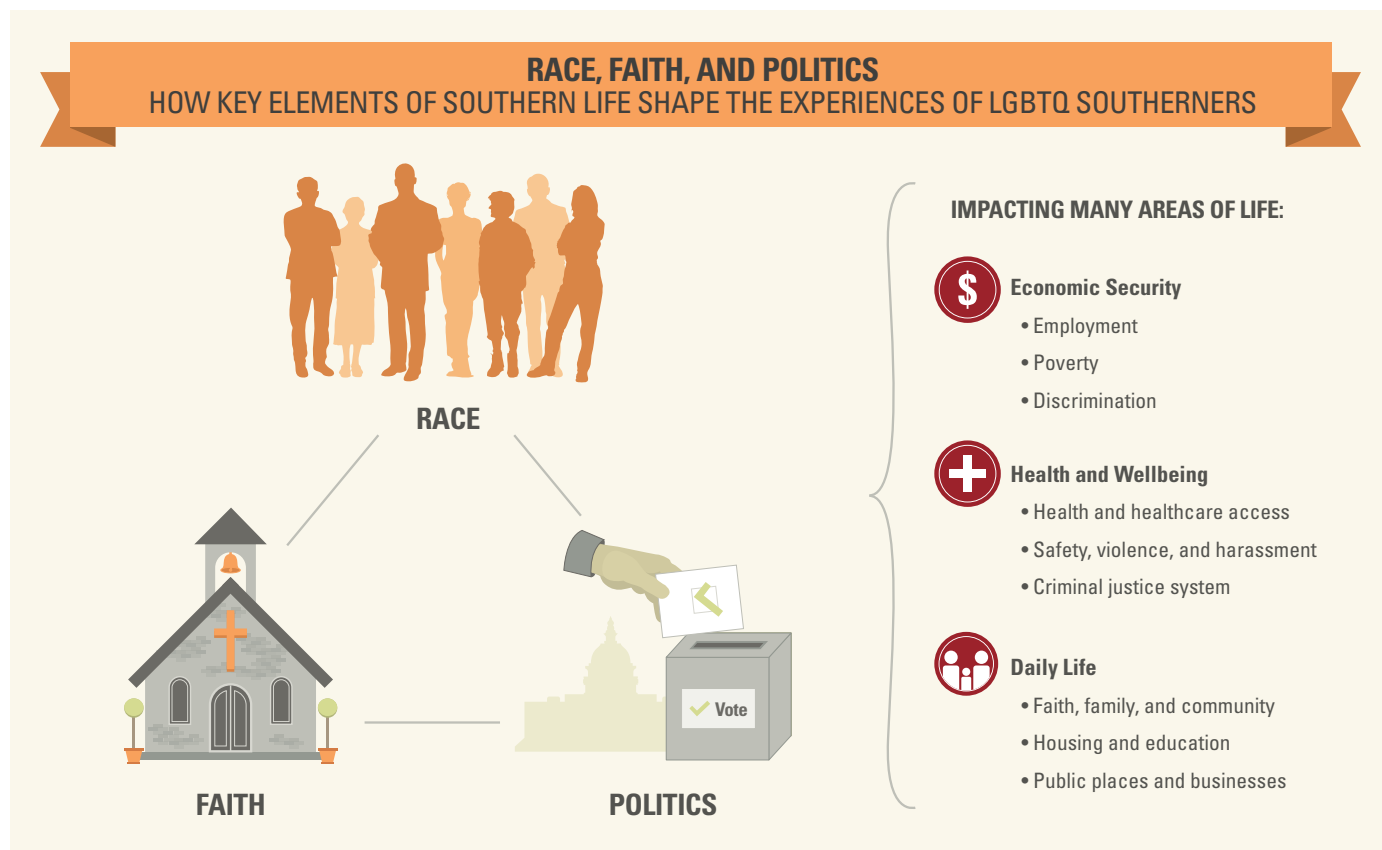
Many LGBTQ Southerners are also people of faith, raising children, or experiencing economic insecurity—and often at higher rates than LGBTQ people in other parts of the country. Rates of HIV are also higher in the South, meaning many LGBTQ Southerners, and especially those of color, are impacted by HIV, whether personally or in their immediate community. Finally, given that nearly two-thirds of Southern counties are rural,^{vi} many LGBTQ Southerners live in rural communities, though many others also live in urban and suburban areas throughout the region.

LGBTQ Life in the South

Life in the South is vibrant and beautiful, even as it contains its own challenges and hardships. While it is difficult to summarize life in a region as geographically, demographically, and culturally diverse as the South, there

are several key elements or cornerstones that uniquely shape the experiences, communities, institutions, governments, and broader society of the region. As shown in the infographic, these elements include race and the legacy of slavery; the intertwined influences of social conservatism and faith; and dominant one-party control across the region's political institutions. Each of these strongly shape the region's culture and politics for all residents, but they also have unique implications for LGBTQ people who call the region home.

For LGBTQ Southerners, these cornerstones inform nearly everything, from daily life and relationships to economic security, health and wellbeing, politics, possibilities for political and social change, and how that change is sought. For example, the legacy of slavery and the contemporary roles of race in the South mean that many LGBTQ Southerners and organizations in the region focus specifically on the unique needs and experiences of LGBTQ communities of color—especially Black LGBTQ communities—and many engage in anti-racism work as a central part of their mission. Faith and conservative social norms are infused throughout Southern daily life, interactions, and political institutions, as evidenced by the fact that



LGBTQ Southerners are more likely to be people of faith than are LGBTQ people in other parts of the country,^{vii} but also that Southern states are far more likely to have harmful religious exemption laws than states outside the South. And the dominant one-party control across many Southern state legislatures means that making progressive policy change, including on LGBTQ issues, is often more difficult than in other parts of the country.



In the South, both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ residents experience higher rates of poverty and **economic insecurity** than the rest of the nation, with even wider disparities for Southerners of color. Additionally, Southern states have few, if any, state-level legal protections against discrimination in the workplace, along with few protections for workers generally.^b These high rates of economic insecurity and the lack of state employment protections in the South are inextricably linked to both the racial legacy of the South and the persistence of concentrated political power in one party.



Both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ Southerners experience significant obstacles to **health and wellbeing**, with even wider disparities for people of color in the region. Southern states have few, if any, legal protections against discrimination in health care, and instead are more likely than those in any other region to explicitly permit discrimination in health care based on religious beliefs. Additionally, many Southern elected officials have resisted expanding Medicaid and other opportunities to provide health care to their residents. LGBTQ Southerners also experience high rates of violence and harassment, including at the hands of police and the criminal justice system. Southern states have some of the harshest and strictest criminal laws, disproportionately targeting Black and LGBTQ Southerners. The South's high rates of health disparities and obstacles to healthcare access, experiences of violence, and the broken criminal justice system are all directly linked to all three cornerstones discussed in this report.



For LGBTQ Southerners going about **daily life**—attending school, going to the doctor, or visiting a local restaurant—each of these spaces and day-to-day settings are potential places to experience discrimination. And, as is the case for LGBTQ Southerners' economic lives and their health and wellbeing, only a

single Southern state has statewide legal protections against discrimination in housing, education, or public places—though increasingly nondiscrimination protections are being sought and won at the local level. Instead, Southern states are more likely than those in the rest of the country to have harmful religious exemption laws that allow businesses and service providers to refuse to serve people—including people of minority faiths, interracial couples, LGBTQ people, and more—if doing so might conflict with their religious beliefs. Additionally, given the central importance of faith, family, and local or regional community in the South, being different from or excluded by that group can be all the more painful and consequential.

LGBTQ Politics in the South

Overall, Southern states are far less likely to have state-level LGBTQ-inclusive laws and policies (such as nondiscrimination protections), and instead are far more likely to have harmful, discriminatory laws (such as religious exemptions and laws limiting access to healthcare for transgender people). Using a measure encompassing nearly 40 LGBTQ-related laws and policies, Southern states have the lowest average overall policy tally, and as a result fully 93% of LGBTQ Southerners live in states with a “negative” or “low” policy score. This leaves LGBTQ Southerners both especially vulnerable to discrimination and with even fewer legal protections than LGBTQ people in the rest of the country.

Importantly, however, the current state policy landscape alone does not convey the **resilience, creativity, and victories of Southern LGBTQ communities seeking to make political and cultural change**. Clear policy progress has been made in the South, with all but one Southern state having improved at least some LGBTQ-related policies over the last ten years. And, LGBTQ Southerners regularly work outside of state legislative contexts altogether in order to build community, directly support each other and address their own needs, and work in coalition across a broad range of issues affecting life in the South. Understanding this diversity of tactics and strategies used by LGBTQ Southerners helps illuminate the strength, leadership, and sophistication of Southern LGBTQ advocacy and communities.

^b In June 2020, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that *federal* employment law prohibits discrimination in the workplace against LGBTQ people. References in this report to workplace protections (or lack thereof) in the South refer to *state* laws.



In the South, **community building efforts**—whether through organized events at community centers, informal gatherings at barbecues and in backyards, or extended

camp-like gatherings for refuge and healing—**take on a special importance and focus**, given the region’s often harsher political and cultural environment. This is especially true for LGBTQ people of color, as they experience the negative impacts of conservatism and discrimination based on multiple aspects of their identity. Community building also **happens in unique ways in the South**, such as through a clear emphasis on the specific needs and experiences of LGBTQ people of color (reflecting the roles of race and legacy of slavery in the region), or through efforts that integrate skill-building and leadership opportunities to help LGBTQ Southerners address the root causes of obstacles and challenges in their home towns or regions.



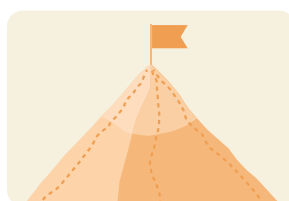
The LGBTQ community has a long history of providing and caring for one another, especially when institutions and governments have failed to do so. In the more

challenging legal and cultural climate of the South, **many LGBTQ Southerners respond directly to community needs and larger political problems by providing the actual service or resources needed**—such as food, clothing, money, medical care, legal assistance, and more—directly to community members in need. In fact, research on patterns of funding for LGBTQ issues shows that funding for direct service work is higher in the South than nationwide. Reflecting the unique cornerstones and issues in the South, many of these efforts are explicitly focused on the needs of LGBTQ communities of color and on key issues like health care and criminalization. And, demonstrating the creativity and leadership of LGBTQ Southerners, many of these efforts come in innovative and effective programs like mobile health clinics and testing units or food pantries, community-generated resource guides, mutual aid funds, and more.



Following the region’s history and tradition of progressive civil rights activism, **LGBTQ advocates in the South have often led the nation in recognizing that LGBTQ**

people don’t live single-issue lives, and that LGBTQ activism must necessarily engage in coalitions across a broad range of issues—including those not commonly or explicitly thought of as “LGBTQ issues” such as voting rights and economic justice. Additionally, given the conservative majorities held in most Southern state governments, working in coalition provides vital opportunities for building public understanding as well as the political power needed to support long-term progressive change toward more inclusive, thriving, and economically just communities in the South, for all Southerners.



While LGBTQ Southerners often pursue change through different (i.e., non-legislative) methods, **when LGBTQ Southerners do engage directly in LGBTQ-specific**

policy advocacy, they have frequent successes—despite what the policy landscape may suggest—but these successes often look different than in other parts of the country. Whether by choice or by necessity, LGBTQ advocates in the South often focus on preventing further policy harm or “holding the line” against opponents of LGBTQ rights, more so than proactively expanding LGBTQ rights (though proactive efforts are certainly a regular part of Southern LGBTQ advocacy). Especially at the state level, such expansion may not currently be a political reality in much of the South. Often, LGBTQ advocates in the South may largely forego the state legislative route, instead pursuing change at the local level or through the judicial system. Across all these avenues for change, LGBTQ Southerners may often engage in a strategy of “losing forward,” engaging even when fighting a losing battle in order to create an opportunity for public education and shifting the larger narrative about LGBTQ life and needs in the South. And again, these efforts often reflect the unique history and culture of the South, such as the role of faith.

Ways to Further the Work of LGBTQ Southerners

Contrary to stereotypes about the possibilities for political progress in the South, LGBTQ Southerners are often leading the way nationwide in innovative programming, organizing, and strategies to support their own communities and make meaningful change on their own terms. Listening to and centering the voices and strategies of LGBTQ Southerners is critical for amplifying the work already being done in the South. And, many of the strategies pioneered and relied upon by LGBTQ Southerners are models for LGBTQ communities across the country to adapt to their own regions and hometowns.

Southern innovation and leadership are especially noteworthy given that, historically, Southern LGBTQ communities received the lowest financial investment and funding for LGBTQ issues of any region in the country, despite having the most LGBTQ residents.^{viii} While funding to Southern LGBTQ communities has been rapidly increasing in recent years, the combination of historical underinvestment and a persistently hostile political climate means that LGBTQ Southerners have had to do more but with significantly fewer resources. With greater and sustained investment, Southern grassroots organizing could lead to significant, material changes in the day-to-day lives of LGBTQ Southerners.

However, significant work remains ahead, and this is why it's critical that the work of LGBTQ Southerners be supported and amplified, and that elected officials take immediate steps to expand LGBTQ protections at the federal, state, and local levels—so that, like LGBTQ people across the country, LGBTQ Southerners don't have to choose between basic protections and the place they call home.

Executive Summary Endnotes

- ⁱ U.S. Census Bureau. 2018 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. Number of individuals who live in the 14 Southern states studied in this report (117,041,604).
- ⁱⁱ U.S. Census Bureau. 2018 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. Number of individuals who are Black or African American alone in the 14 Southern states studied in this report (21,276,253), out of the total number of Black or African American alone nationwide (40,305,870). Number of individuals who are Hispanic or Latino in the 14 Southern states studied in this report (21,813,811), out of the total number of Hispanic or Latino nationwide (60,611,883).
- ⁱⁱⁱ The Williams Institute. March 2019. [Adult LGBT Population in the United States](#).
- ^{iv} Amira Hasenbush, Andrew Flores, Angeliki Kastanis, Brad Sears, and Gary Gates. 2014. [The LGBT Divide: A Data Portrait of LGBT People in the Midwestern, Mountain, & Southern States](#). Los Angeles, CA: The Williams Institute.
- ^v *Ibid.*
- ^{vi} Movement Advancement Project. April 2019. [Where We Call Home: LGBT People in Rural America](#).
- ^{vii} Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI). 2020. [2019 American Values Atlas](#).
- ^{viii} Funders for LGBTQ Issues. [2012–2018 Tracking Reports](#). New York, NY: Funders for LGBTQ Issues.



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