

# WHERE WE CALL HOME: TRANSGENDER PEOPLE IN RURAL AMERICA

November 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](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>.

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**This is the third report in MAP's Where We Call Home series. For more, see:**

*Where We Call Home: LGBT People in Rural America* (April 2019)

*Where We Call Home: LGBT People of Color in Rural America* (September 2019)

and additional related resources, infographics, and recommendations at [www.lgbtmap.org/rural](http://www.lgbtmap.org/rural).



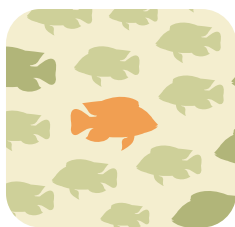
## INTRODUCTION

Transgender people live in communities across rural America. As friends and family members, small business owners and local elected officials, farmers and factory workers, transgender people live alongside and experience many of the same joys and hardships as their non-transgender rural neighbors.

Yet stereotypes and pop culture portrayals often overlook the rich diversity of rural America, omitting its many millions of residents who are people of color, immigrants, disabled, and/or lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT). These images instead frame rural communities as mainly, if not entirely, made up of white, politically conservative, non-LGBT people, many of whom are further portrayed to be uneducated and uniquely prejudiced—stereotypes working together to paint a picture of a place where no LGBT person, and especially no transgender person, would want to live. But the reality is that millions of LGBT people—including transgender people—*choose* to live in rural areas, and for many, living in a rural community is just as important to their sense of self as is being LGBT.<sup>1</sup>

As part of the ongoing *Where We Call Home* report series focusing on LGBT people in rural America, this report focuses specifically on transgender people in rural America. This series of reports shows that LGBT people, including transgender people, are part of the fabric of rural and urban communities alike. The series also shows that LGBT people in rural areas experience many of the same challenges as their non-LGBT rural neighbors, such as fewer healthcare providers, the ongoing opioid and HIV epidemics, over-policing and criminalization, and numerous obstacles to economic security.

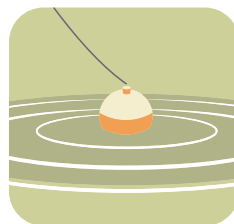
At same time, rural life also uniquely shapes the experiences of LGB and transgender people. This is because the unique structures and challenges of rural life amplify the impacts of discrimination and rejection, in at least four interrelated ways:



**Increased visibility.** The smaller population in rural communities means that anyone who is “different” may be more noticeable, which in turn may increase the risk of targeting or mistreatment. For

transgender people who are gender non-conforming (relative to the norms of their rural community), they

may be even more visible or vulnerable to potential harassment. Additionally, the often tight-knit nature of rural communities means that when someone is different, more people know it: if a transgender 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 or learn they are transgender.



**Ripple effects.** This interconnected, tight-knit aspect of rural life and communities may also lead to ripple effects that are not as profound in urban areas. What happens in one part

of life, whether supportive or discriminatory, can ripple outward to other areas of life. This means that experiencing rejection in one part of the community (such as one’s faith community), especially if by someone influential or in a leadership position in that 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. For transgender people in rural communities, this can mean that the risks (and benefits) of transitioning can be particularly high, or that having one’s transgender status disclosed can even more dramatically change day to day life than it might in a more densely-populated setting.



**Fewer alternatives.** 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 transgender people, who may have fewer options to find doctors or work if they are discriminated against because of their gender identity. Transgender people may be especially vulnerable to this aspect of rural life, given the unique medical concerns of transgender people.<sup>a</sup> Some (though not all) transgender people seek

<sup>a</sup> LGBT communities more broadly also have unique medical needs or concerns, such as various disparities in higher likelihood of alcohol, tobacco, or substance use; mental health care in the face of persistent stigma and discrimination; HIV prevention or treatment; assisted reproduction; and more. See the April 2019 report for further discussion of LGBT, and specifically rural LGBT, health needs or concerns.

medical care or interventions to more closely align their physical bodies with their gender identity, and therefore having medical providers who are knowledgeable about and affirming of these medical needs is critical to transgender people's health and well-being. And all transgender people, irrespective of whether they seek or undergo transgender-related medical care, need routine and non-transgender related care throughout their lives, so having medical providers who are knowledgeable and supportive of transgender people remains critical for health and well-being. In rural areas, such providers may be less common, and the relative lack of alternatives therefore means that not only do rural transgender people face difficulty accessing routine care, but extreme difficulty accessing gender-affirming care. Further amplifying this problem, many service providers in rural areas are religiously affiliated, and state religious exemption laws may enable these providers to discriminate or refuse service outright.



#### Fewer support structures.

Finally, the relative geographic isolation of rural areas means there are fewer people and resources overall, and that what, if any, supportive resources exist are fewer and

farther between. Rural-based resources focused on LGBT people may be uncommon, and resources for rural transgender people even less common. This means that when transgender people in rural areas face discrimination or are struggling with acceptance or coming out, there are fewer places to turn for social support, legal support, or even basic information.

By examining data about transgender people's lives and experiences, including new and original analysis of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey (USTS), as well as data about the legal and policy climate in rural communities, and much more, this report finds:

- **Roughly one in six (16%) transgender people live in rural areas**, according to a recent analysis by the Williams Institute of 2014-2017 data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).<sup>2,b</sup> This is the same share of heterosexual, non-transgender people who live in rural areas (16%), according to the same study.

- Original analysis of the 2015 USTS, the largest survey to date of the transgender community, shows that, among other key findings:

- **Transgender people in rural areas face significant health disparities:** they are nearly three times more likely than their rural neighbors to have a disability and are twice as likely to lack health insurance. Rural transgender people are also nearly six times more likely to be living with HIV than the general U.S. population.
- **Transgender people in rural areas also face significant obstacles to economic security:** even though they are more likely than their rural neighbors to have a college degree, they are also far more likely to live in poverty or be unemployed.
- **Transgender people in rural areas commonly experience mistreatment, harassment, discrimination, and violence.** However, in most cases, such experiences occur at rates similar to the broader transgender population.
- **Racial disparities in rural transgender people's experiences of discrimination, economic insecurity, and health mirror those in the broader transgender population.** Transgender people of color often report higher rates of these experiences than the general transgender population, in both rural and non-rural areas.
- **Majority-rural states are significantly less likely to have transgender-inclusive laws and policies** in health care, nondiscrimination protections, and processes for updating key identity documents. Rural states are instead more likely to have harmful, discriminatory laws like HIV criminalization and religious exemptions, which disproportionately harm transgender people.

Ultimately, this report shows that transgender people in rural areas routinely experience discrimination in health care, employment, housing, and public accommodations, as well as regular experiences of violence and harassment and significant obstacles to obtaining accurate identity documents.

<sup>b</sup> One previous study estimated that 29% of transgender people live in rural areas (Crissman et al. 2017), based on CDC data from 2014 alone across 19 states. The Williams Institute's estimate is based on CDC data from 2014 through 2017, drawing across 35 states. While both estimates are drawn from reliable, large scale surveys, the gap in these two estimates further illustrates the need for consistent and repeated federal data collection (e.g., the Census) across all 50 states to better understand the size and characteristics of the U.S. transgender population.

However, and importantly, most of these experiences are generally *no more likely* in rural areas than in other areas, highlighting that rural areas are not uniquely hostile toward transgender people. Rather, as discussed herein (and in further detail in the first *Where We Call Home* report), the limited availability of alternative options in rural areas amplifies the impact of experiences of discrimination. Put another way,

transgender people face discrimination in rural and urban areas alike, but in rural areas, the fact that there are significantly fewer employers, doctors, housing options, and other vital services and spaces means that any experience of discrimination can have an even more profound effect—often effectively preventing transgender people from accessing employment, health care, housing, and more.

## What Do We Know (and Not Know) About Transgender People? Data Challenges and Opportunities

Existing data about transgender people and their experiences are extremely limited. The U.S. Census and many other federal and federally funded surveys do not ask questions about gender identity or transgender status (or, for that matter, sexual orientation), severely restricting the ability of researchers, advocates, and the general public to learn about transgender people in the United States.

Another challenge is that the transgender population is small,<sup>c</sup> difficult to define,<sup>d</sup> and internally diverse,<sup>e</sup> all characteristics that pose significant obstacles to conducting quality research.<sup>f</sup> Even among transgender-identified people, there is no agreed upon definition of who is transgender, and there are similarly many different ways that researchers ask people if they are transgender. Though expert recommendations for asking about transgender identity exist, these recommendations also vary, sometimes widely.<sup>g</sup>

These challenges are even further magnified when researching smaller parts of a broader population, such as transgender people in rural communities. Data on transgender people are generally rare, and data on transgender people in rural areas are even more so.

In this report, we present new findings based on MAP original analysis of one of the leading sources of data about transgender people in the United States: the U.S. Transgender Survey (USTS). The USTS, last conducted in 2015 by the National Center for Transgender Equality, was taken by over 28,000 transgender and nonbinary people across the country, including in all 50 states and Washington, D.C. While this survey is not nationally representative, its large sample and extensive questionnaire contribute to its status as the “the largest survey ever devoted to the lives and experiences of trans[gender] people.”

This report also includes findings from state-based surveys such as the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), qualitative research, and based on interviews with individuals and organizations working in rural communities.

There is great need for more and better data on the LGBT population generally, including about the transgender population. Federal, state, and local surveys—including those examining health, school environments, economic security, and housing and homelessness, and more—all need to include questions about sexual orientation and gender identity so that LGBT experiences can be better understood and addressed. Additionally, studies focusing on the LGBT population or any part thereof should be sure to include questions about geographic location, so that the unique impacts of rural, suburban, urban, or other settings on LGBT people’s experiences can also be better understood and addressed.

<sup>c</sup> Andrew Flores, Jody Herman, Gary Gates, and Taylor Brown. 2016. *How Many Adults Identify as Transgender in the United States?* Los Angeles, CA: The Williams Institute.

<sup>d</sup> Gary Gates. 2012. “LGBT Identity: A Demographer’s Perspective.” *Loyola of Los Angeles Law Review* 45(3): 693–714.

<sup>e</sup> Sandy James, et al. 2016. *The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey*. Washington DC: National Center for Transgender Equality.

<sup>f</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2018. *Improving Health Research on Small Populations: Proceedings of a Workshop*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

<sup>g</sup> See for example: (1) Federal Interagency Working Group on Improving Measurement of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Federal Surveys. 2016. *Current Measures of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Federal Surveys*. (2) The GenU.S.S. Group. 2014. *Best Practices for Asking Questions to Identify Transgender and Other Gender Minority Respondents on Population-Based Surveys*. J.L. Herman (Ed.). Los Angeles, CA: The Williams Institute.

## Identifying Rural Respondents in the U.S. Transgender Survey

While the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey did not ask respondents to characterize their place of residence as urban, suburban, or rural, it did ask for respondents' state and zip code of residence.

Following the U.S. Census's approach to identifying mostly or entirely rural counties, MAP used Census data to identify mostly or entirely rural zip codes (henceforward, majority-rural zip codes).<sup>h</sup> Census data were used to determine the percent of each zip code's population living in rural or urban areas within that zip code. If 50% or more of the zip code's population lives in a rural area, that zip code is identified as majority-rural. For this report, USTS respondents are identified as living in a rural area if they said they lived in one of these majority-rural zip codes. Based on this process, approximately 6% of USTS respondents, representing all 50 states, lived in rural areas.

This is an imperfect variable, as a respondent may live in an urban area within a majority-rural zip code, and other respondents may live in rural areas within majority-urban zip codes. However, given that the USTS did not collect any more specific geographic information, this is simply a limitation of the available data. This importantly protects the anonymity of USTS respondents, but it also means the results reported here should be interpreted with care.

This further highlights the importance of the U.S. Census and other federal and federally funded surveys including questions about sexual orientation and gender identity as part of standard demographic data collection, so that we may better understand the experiences and needs of all American residents.

Thank you to Dr. Jody Herman at the Williams Institute for her assistance and to the Missouri Census Data Center at the University of Missouri Office of Social and Economic Data Analysis for their tools and resources that assisted in this effort.

<sup>h</sup> Michael Ratcliffe, Charlynn Burd, Kelly Holder, and Alison Fields. December 2016. "Defining Rural at the U.S. Census Bureau." ACSGEO-1, U.S. Census Bureau. Washington, D.C.



## SECTION 1: A SNAPSHOT OF TRANSGENDER PEOPLE IN RURAL AMERICA

There are an estimated 1.4 million transgender adults in the United States, or about 0.6% of all U.S. adults.<sup>3</sup> Based on the 2014 CDC survey mentioned earlier, nearly half (45%) of U.S. transgender adults are people of color, and in fact people of color are more likely than white people to identify as transgender.<sup>4</sup>

Research finds that transgender people live in every state in the country, with some states and regions home to more transgender people than others, as shown in *Figure 1* on the next page.<sup>5</sup> The U.S. South, for example, has the highest average concentration of transgender residents and the largest number of transgender adults (567,000) of all regions in the United States.



### Transgender people live in rural communities across the country.

Because the U.S. Census does not ask about gender identity, it is difficult to definitively state how many transgender people live in rural communities. However, a recent analysis by the Williams Institute of four years of CDC data (2014-2017) across 35 states found that transgender people are just as likely as cisgender (i.e., non-transgender) people to live in rural communities: roughly 16% of both transgender people and cisgender, heterosexual people live in rural areas.<sup>6</sup> In fact, an earlier study, based on CDC data from 19 states, showed that transgender women were more likely to live in rural communities than cisgender women, while transgender men were equally as likely as cisgender men to be living in rural areas.<sup>7</sup>

Another analysis of CDC data also shows that more than half (54%) of transgender adults, or more than 750,000 transgender adults, live in majority-rural states.<sup>8,i</sup> Given that the largest population of transgender adults lives in the South (*Figure 1*) and that nearly two-thirds of counties in the South are mostly or entirely rural,<sup>9</sup> it may be that many of the South's transgender residents also live in rural areas.

In the largest survey of transgender adults to date, the U.S. Transgender Survey (USTS), 6% of respondents lived in majority-rural zip codes.<sup>j</sup> The USTS was conducted online, which may have posed an obstacle in rural communities where internet access

is less common or more difficult to obtain.<sup>10</sup> Despite this, the USTS remains the largest survey to date of the transgender population and contains extensive data about the experiences of transgender people. Results reported here are weighted to better reflect the national population. Key findings from the USTS's rural respondents include:



### Rural transgender residents mirror the racial and ethnic diversity of rural America.

Analysis of the USTS data shows that 82% of rural transgender respondents are white, which mirrors Census data showing that, at the time of the USTS, 84% of all rural residents were white.<sup>11</sup>



### Rural transgender people are more highly educated than their rural neighbors.

Overall, rural residents are less likely than the general population to have a college degree. *Figure 2* on page 7 shows that this is true for rural transgender residents as well: more than half (53%) of transgender adults ages 25 and over have a college degree, compared to 39% of transgender adults in rural areas. However, *Figure 2* also shows that rural transgender residents are more likely to have a college degree than their rural neighbors: 39% of rural transgender people have a college degree, compared to 22% of all rural residents.<sup>12</sup>



### Nearly one in five rural transgender people have served in the military.

Among the rural population, 18% of rural transgender respondents to the USTS are currently serving or have ever served in the military. Specifically, 15% of rural transgender residents are veterans, compared to 10% of all rural residents at the time of the USTS.<sup>13</sup> Among the veteran population, 8% of USTS veterans live in majority-rural zip codes, while 24% of all U.S. military veterans live in all rural-designated areas.<sup>14</sup>



### More than one in four rural transgender adults have children.

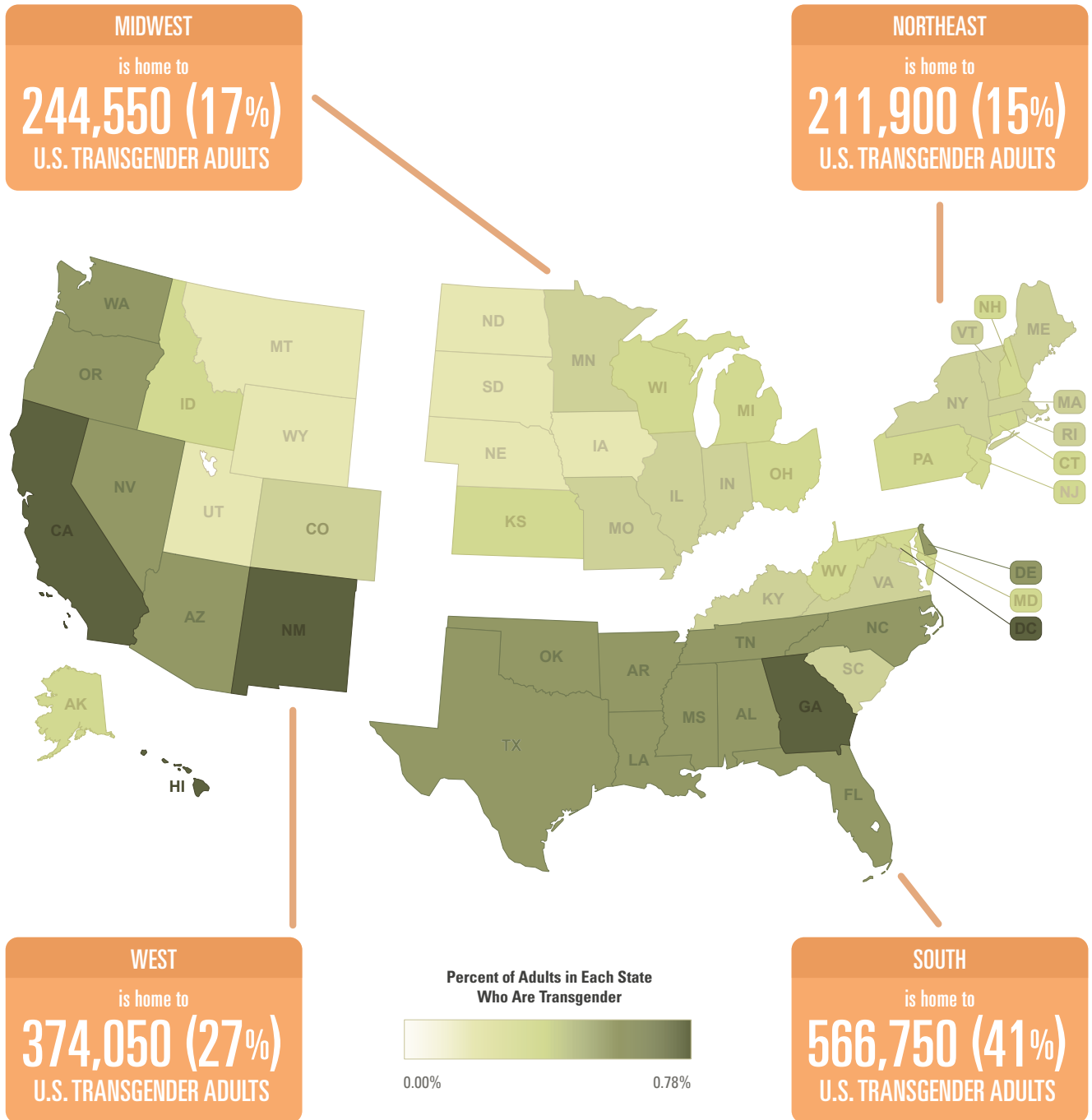
Overall, 28% of rural transgender people in the USTS have ever had children, including 30% of rural white transgender people and 22% of rural transgender people of color. This compares to 18% of all respondents to the USTS.

<sup>i</sup> Majority-rural determination is based on Census data. See April 2019 report for further detail.

<sup>j</sup> For more, see *Identifying Rural Respondents in the U.S. Transgender Survey* on page 4.

**Figure 1:** Transgender People Live in Every U.S. State, With the Highest Concentrations in the South

# 1.4 MILLION TRANSGENDER ADULTS LIVE IN THE UNITED STATES



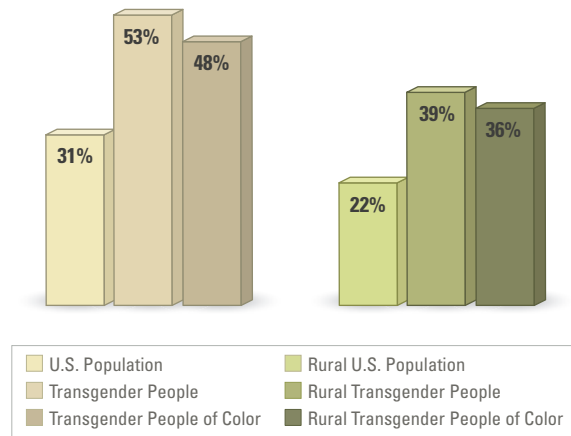
Source: Regions based on Census 4-region division. Figure adapted from Andrew Flores, Jody Herman, Gary Gates, and Taylor Brown. 2016. *How Many Adults Identify as Transgender in the United States?* Los Angeles, CA: The Williams Institute.



Rural transgender people are more likely than their rural neighbors to have a disability, to be living with HIV, and to lack health insurance. As shown in *Figure 3*, rural transgender people are three times as likely (45%) as their rural neighbors (15%) to have at least one disability, and half of rural transgender people of color (50%) have at least one disability. *Figure 4* on the next page shows that rural transgender people are nearly six times more likely (1.7%) than the U.S. population (0.3%) to be living with HIV.

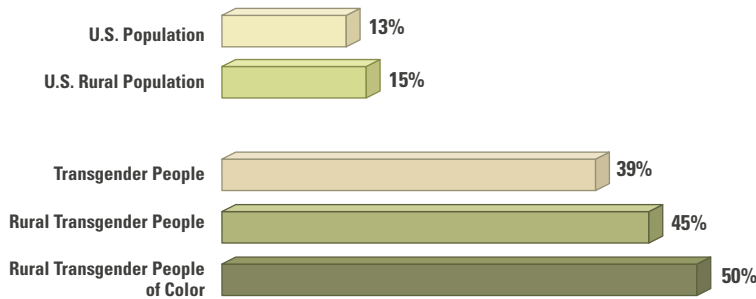
Finally, *Figure 5* on the following page shows that rural transgender people are twice as likely (18%) as their rural neighbors (9%) to lack health insurance. For rural transgender people of color, nearly one in three (30%) lack health insurance.

**Figure 2: Transgender People, Including in Rural Areas, Are More Likely to Have College Degrees**  
% Ages 25+ With Bachelor's Degree or Higher



Source: MAP original analysis of USTS 2015. 2015 American Community Survey (ACS).

**Figure 3: Transgender People, Including in Rural Areas, Are More Likely to Have a Disability**  
% of Each Group That Has One or More Disabilities



Rural transgender people are **3x** as likely to have a disability as their rural neighbors

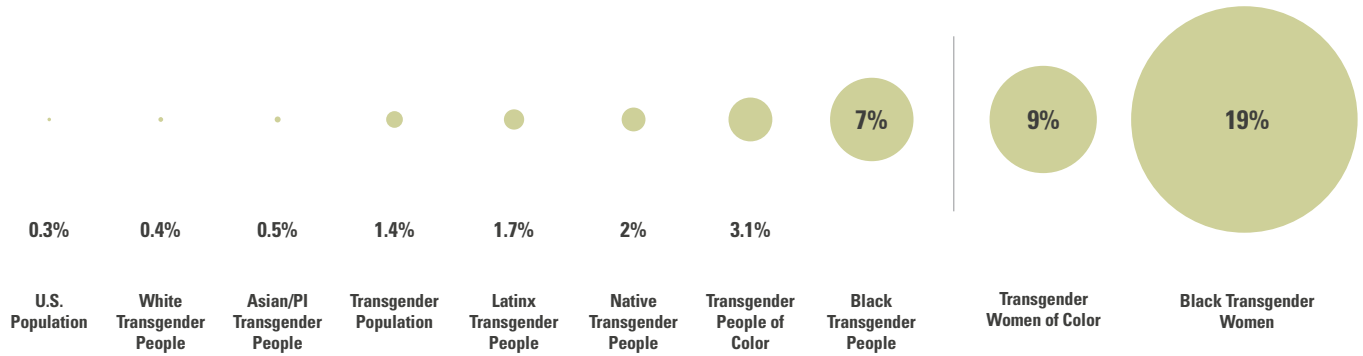
**Half** of rural transgender people of color have at least one disability

Note: Disabilities are those as described in the American Community Survey (ACS).

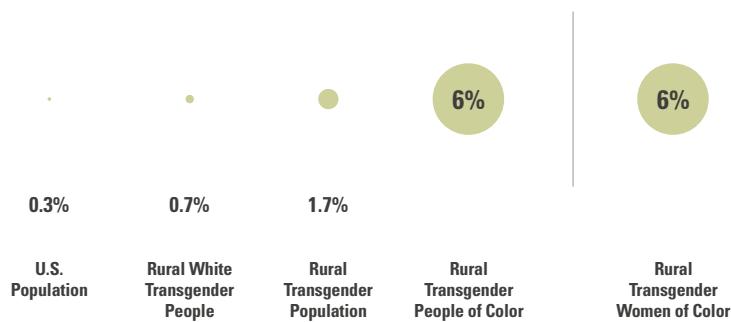
Source: MAP original analysis of USTS 2015. 2015 ACS 1-Year Estimates. U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. Table GCT1810, "Percent of People With a Disability—United States—Urban/Rural and Inside/Outside Metropolitan and Micropolitan Area." Accessed October 2019.

**Figure 4: Transgender People, Including Transgender People of Color and Rural Residents, Are More Likely To Be Living With HIV**

**Figure 4a: Rates of HIV in the U.S. General Transgender Population**



**Figure 4b: Rates of HIV in the U.S. Rural Transgender Population**



Note: USTS 2015 had too few respondents from rural areas to report on HIV rates of specific communities of color (e.g. Black, Latinx, Native, etc).  
 Source: U.S. Transgender Survey 2015, including MAP original analysis of USTS 2015 data.

**Figure 5: Transgender People In Rural Areas Are Significantly More Likely to be Uninsured**

Transgender people are **2x** more likely to be uninsured

Transgender people of color are more than **3x** likely to be uninsured



...than their rural neighbors.

Source: MAP original analysis of USTS 2015. 2015 ACS 1-Year Estimates. U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. Table GCT2701, "Percent Without Health Insurance Coverage—United States—Urban/Rural and Inside/Outside Metropolitan and Micropolitan Area." Accessed October 2019.

## SECTION 2: STRENGTHS, STRUCTURES, AND CHALLENGES: HOW RURAL LIFE IMPACTS TRANSGENDER PEOPLE

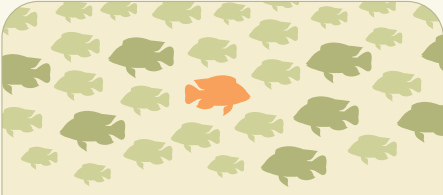
The structures and challenges of rural life impact transgender people in four key ways: increased visibility, ripple effects, fewer alternatives, and fewer support structures. These themes shape the experiences of transgender people in rural areas across many areas of life, including family, faith, and community; education; employment and economic security; housing and homelessness; public places and businesses; health care; the legal system; and more. In the first *Where We Call Home* report, each of these themes and areas of life is examined in detail.

This report focuses on several areas of particular impact and importance to transgender people in rural communities: health care, identity documents, employment, housing, and public places, including experiences of violence and harassment.

### Health Care

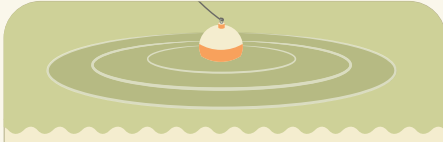
Access to health care is critical for the health and wellbeing of all people, including those who live in rural communities. For transgender people, many of whom seek medical care or interventions to more closely align their physical body with their gender identity, access to affirming health care is necessary for both mental and physical health. Additionally, all transgender people, whether or not they seek transgender-related care, need routine and non-transgender-related care throughout their lives. As a result, it remains important for all medical providers to be knowledgeable and supportive of transgender people and their unique medical experiences or needs. In rural areas, such providers may be less common, and the relative lack of alternatives therefore means that not only are rural transgender

### STRENGTHS, STRUCTURES, AND CHALLENGES: HOW RURAL LIFE AMPLIFIES THE IMPACT OF ACCEPTANCE AND REJECTION FOR TRANSGENDER PEOPLE




**INCREASED VISIBILITY**

Fewer people in rural communities means any difference is more noticeable. People who are gender non-conforming may be even more visible or vulnerable to potential mistreatment.



**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). Transgender people may face even higher stakes when coming out or transitioning.



**FEWER ALTERNATIVES**

In the face of discrimination, the already limited number of rural service providers can be limited even further. Transgender people also have unique health and service needs, which may be even more rare in rural areas.



**LESS SUPPORT STRUCTURE**

More social and geographic isolation means less ability to find supportive resources, build supportive community, and endure challenges or discrimination. Resources focused on transgender people and needs may be even less common.

- IMPACTING MANY AREAS OF LIFE:**
-  Family, Faith, & Community
  -  Education
  -  Employment & Economic Security
  -  Housing & Homelessness
  -  Public Places & Businesses
  -  Health Care
  -  Legal System
  -  Identity Documents
  -  Violence & Harassment

people more likely to face difficulty accessing routine care, but also to face extreme difficulty accessing gender-affirming care.

**Transgender people in rural communities experience many disparities in both health and health care.** The U.S. Transgender Survey shows that transgender people, and especially those in rural areas, are more likely to have disabilities, to be HIV-positive, and to lack health insurance (Figures 3-5). Additionally, many transgender people in rural communities avoid seeking needed health care due to both cost (35%) and fear of mistreatment or disrespect (23%) (*Figure 6*).<sup>k</sup> Transgender people of color in rural areas are even more likely to avoid seeking medical care: nearly half (48%) of rural transgender people of color have avoided medical care due to cost, while nearly one in three (30%) have avoided care due to fear of mistreatment (Figure 6).

This fear is well-founded: **transgender people in rural areas experience frequent mistreatment by both their healthcare providers and, among those who have insurance, their healthcare insurers.**<sup>l</sup> One in three transgender people in rural areas have been mistreated by their healthcare provider in the past year alone, as shown in *Figure 7*. Among transgender people with health insurance and who sought each type of care, nearly seven in ten rural transgender adults were denied coverage for transition-related surgery, and one of every four were denied coverage for hormone therapy (see *Figure 8* on the following page).

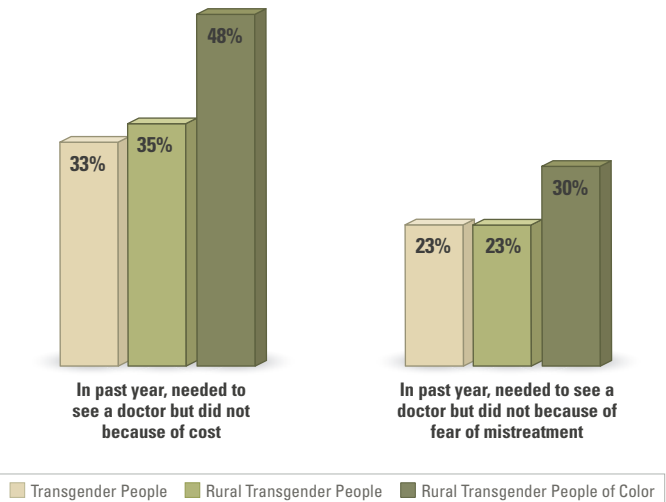
While any such mistreatment is unacceptable, in most cases transgender people in rural areas experience such mistreatment by both providers and insurers at the same rates as transgender people in other areas, with one exception: rural transgender people are more likely to be denied coverage for transgender-related surgeries (69% of rural transgender people, compared to 55% of all transgender people, among those who sought coverage from their insurers; Figure 8).

**What further sets apart the experiences of rural transgender people is the distance traveled to seek health care.** Rural transgender people travel significant distances to see their providers of both transgender-related care (*Figure 9a*) and routine care (*Figure 9b*).

<sup>k</sup> A 2017 Harvard study similarly found that 22% of transgender people have avoided doctors or health care out of concern they would be discriminated against because they are transgender. See NPR/RWJF/Harvard, 2017, *Discrimination in America: Experiences and Views of LGBTQ Americans*.

<sup>l</sup> There were too few HIV+ rural respondents to analyze experiences with HIV-related health care.

**Figure 6: Transgender People, Especially Rural Transgender People of Color, Face Financial Obstacles and Fear of Discrimination in Health Care**



Source: MAP original analysis of USTS 2015.

*Nearly 7 in 10* rural transgender adults who sought transition-related surgery were denied coverage by their insurers.

MAP original analysis of 2015 USTS.



**Figure 7: In the past year...**

**1 in 3**

transgender people in rural areas were mistreated by their healthcare provider in one or more ways, including:

**23%** who **had to teach their provider** about transgender people in order to get the care they needed

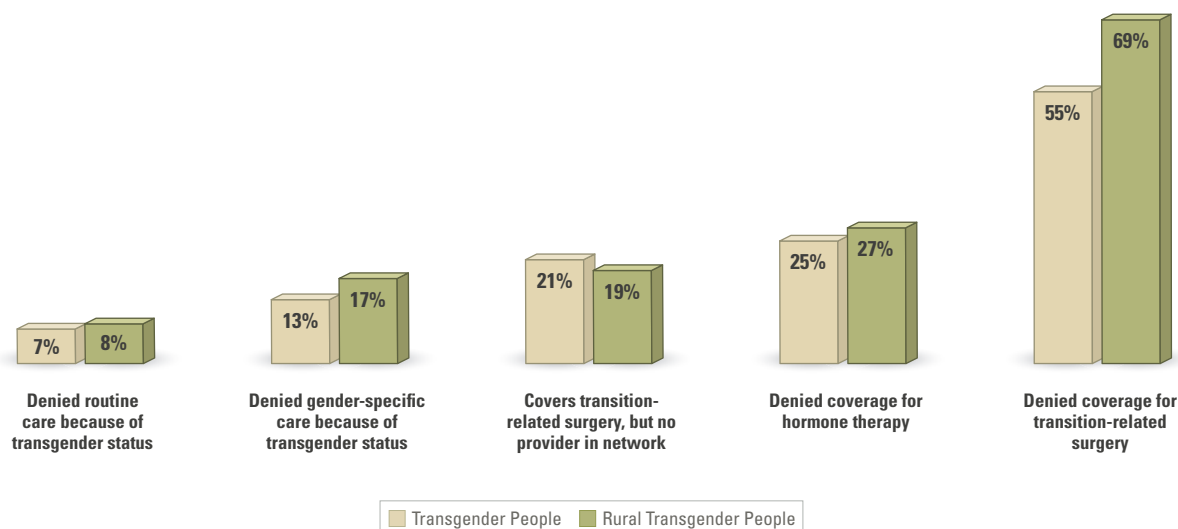
**14%** whose **provider asked unnecessary or invasive** questions about their transgender status that were unrelated to the reason for their visit

**11%** whose **provider refused** to give transgender-related treatment

**5%** who were **verbally harassed** in a healthcare setting (such as hospital, office, or clinic)

Source: MAP original analysis of USTS 2015.

**Figure 8:** Transgender People Are Routinely Denied Health Care By Their Insurers, and Rural Transgender People Are Especially Likely to Be Denied Coverage for Transition-Related Surgery



Source: MAP original analysis of USTS 2015.

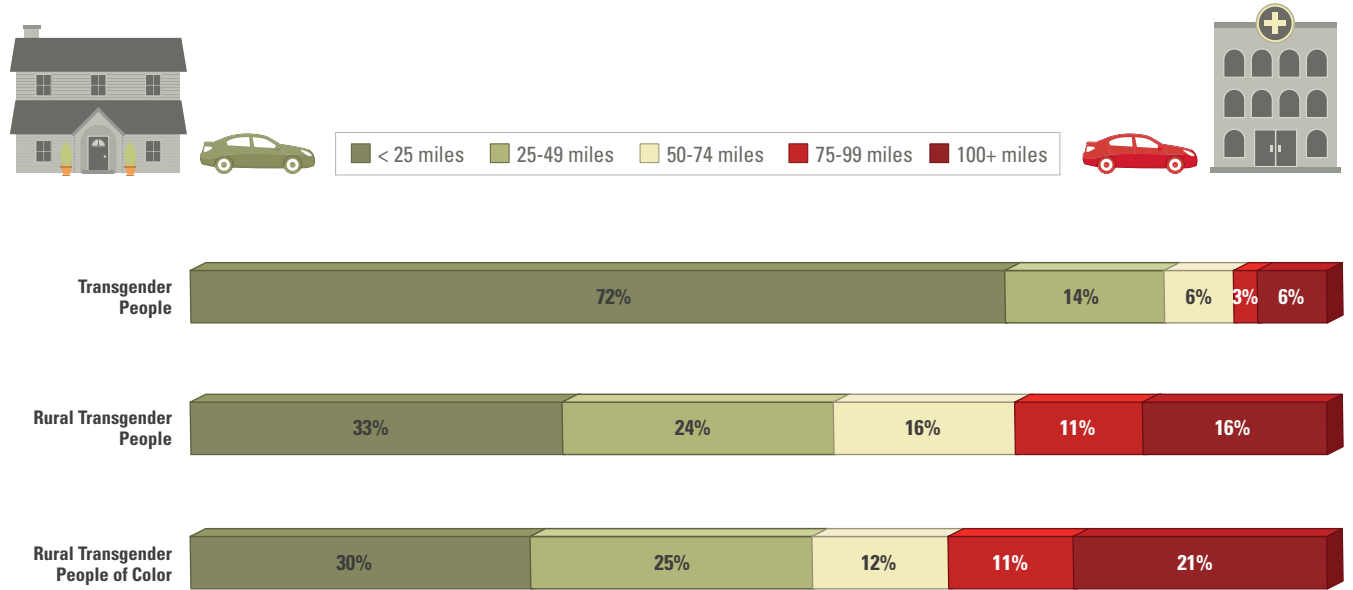
Figure 9a on the following page shows that, among all transgender people who have a medical provider of transgender related-care, 72% travel less than 25 miles to see this provider, but only 33% of rural transgender people and 30% of rural transgender people of color travel this distance. Instead, rural transgender people on average travel much further to seek such care: for example, more than one in four (27%) rural transgender people travel 75 miles or more to see their transgender-related medical care provider. Rural transgender people of color travel even more remarkable lengths to seek care, with more than one in five (21%) traveling 100 miles or more to see their transgender-related care provider.

Figure 9b on the next page shows that transgender people travel on average less distance to receive routine care than transgender-related care, but rural transgender people and especially rural transgender people of color still travel further even for routine care. Among all transgender adults with a routine care provider, 89% travel less than 25 miles to see their routine care provider. However, in rural areas, that number falls to 76% of transgender adults and 64% of transgender adults of color. Rural transgender people of color are more than five times more likely (32%) and rural transgender people overall are three times more likely (18%) than all transgender adults (6%) to travel 25-49 miles for routine care.

**These findings illustrate a repeated theme of the report series:** while discrimination occurs in rural and urban areas alike, rural areas' relative lack of alternative options (e.g., of medical providers) can amplify such experiences, forcing transgender people to travel significant distances for needed services or to simply go without.

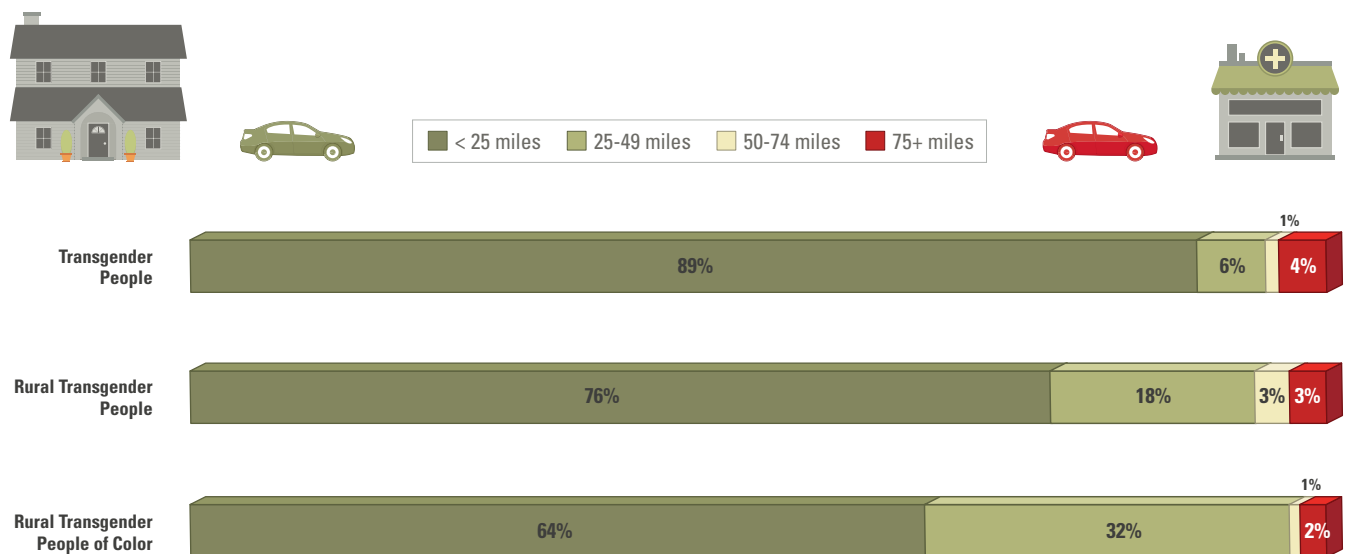
**Figure 9:** In Rural Areas, Transgender People and Especially People of Color Travel Remarkable Distances to Receive Health Care

**Figure 9a:** Most Transgender People Travel Less than 25 Miles to See Their **Transgender-Related Medical Care Provider**, But Rural Transgender People, and Especially People of Color, Travel Significantly Farther  
*% of Each Group Traveling Each Distance for Transgender-Related Medical Care*



Note: Percentages are among the 56% of transgender people (including 51% of rural transgender people) who reported having a transgender-related medical care provider.  
 Source: MAP original analysis of USTS 2015.

**Figure 9b:** Most Transgender People Travel Less than 25 Miles to See Their **Routine Medical Care Provider**, But Rural Transgender People, and Especially People of Color, Travel Farther  
*% of Each Group Traveling Each Distance for Routine Medical Care*



Note: Percentages are among the 85% of transgender people (including 84% of rural transgender people) who reported having a routine care provider.  
 Source: MAP original analysis of USTS 2015.





## Identity Documents

Identity documents, such as driver's licenses and birth certificates, play an important, if often overlooked role, in daily life. These documents allow people to access both vital and everyday services, from a bank account or health care to public transportation or a library card.

Many transgender and nonbinary people choose to update their name and/or the gender marker on their identity documents (IDs) so that it matches their gender identity. Having accurate and consistent IDs that reflect a person's name and gender identity helps ensure access to these important services, as well as dramatically reducing the risk that a transgender person will face harassment, discrimination, or even violence because their ID's gender marker does not reflect their gender identity.

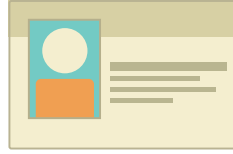
**In the past year, three in ten (31%) transgender people in rural communities have had negative experiences when showing IDs that do not match their gender identity.** *Figure 10a* on the following page shows that 31% of transgender people in rural communities have had a negative experience when showing incongruent identification in the past year, including 27% who have been verbally harassed. These experiences occur at similar rates among transgender people in rural and non-rural areas alike. This lack of differences in harassment, denial of service, and other negative experiences when showing mismatched identification illustrates that rural areas are not uniquely prejudiced. Instead, it is the structural issues, such as the lack of alternative businesses or places of service, that amplify the harm of discrimination.

**Despite the significant risk from IDs that do not reflect a person's gender, only a minority of rural transgender people have been able to update their IDs to reflect their name or gender.** *Figure 10b* shows that only one quarter (27%) of rural transgender people have their preferred name on all their IDs, and only one out of ten (11%) have their gender identity on all their IDs. These rates are generally similar to those of the broader transgender population, though rates among rural transgender people of color are slightly lower (*Figure 10b*).

Transgender people face many obstacles, as well as significant bias, in many aspects of the legal system, including in the processes required for changing names and gender markers on key identity documents. For updating IDs, these obstacles include prohibitive costs. For example, only one in three (33%) rural transgender people have ever tried to legally change their name.<sup>15</sup> Among those in rural areas who have not tried to change their name, nearly two out of five (38%) did not attempt to change their name because of the financial cost of the process.<sup>16</sup> The cost and processes for changing the gender marker on these same documents is often even more prohibitive.<sup>17</sup>

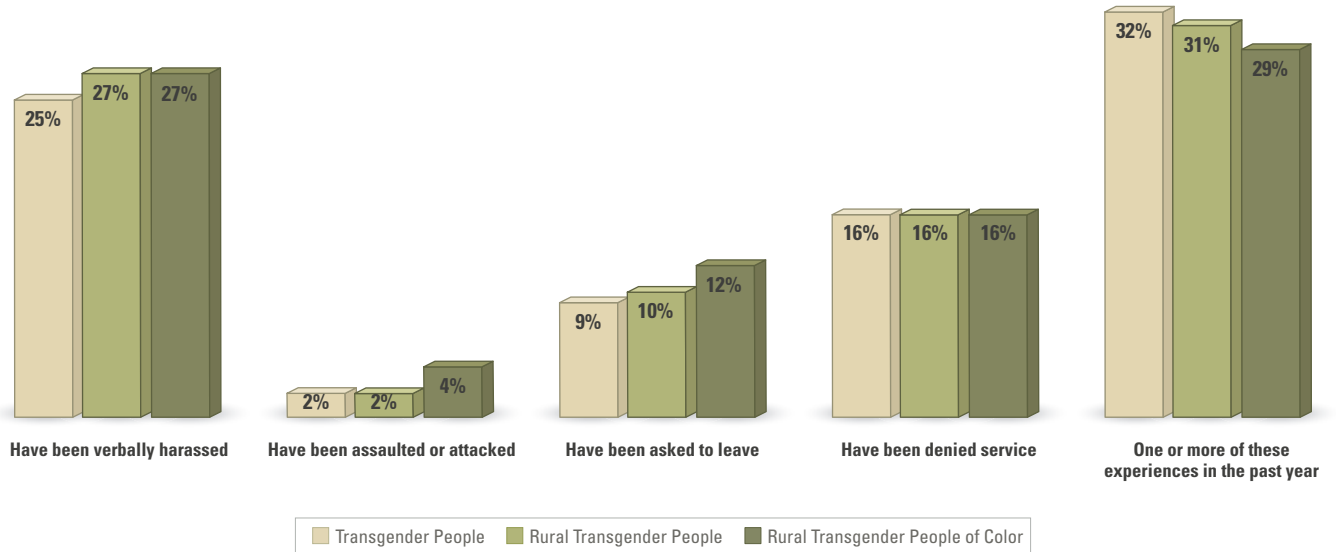
Other obstacles include burdensome processes or legal requirements, the available options (male or female) not fitting one's gender identity, the fear of losing benefits or services, or—given that many states require publication or announcement of name changes in local newspapers—the fear of being outed during the process of updating identity documents. In rural communities, this fear of being outed or losing access to important services may increase, given the smaller population and higher likelihood of personally knowing the community members who oversee official documents or government services.

Laws and processes regarding updating a person's name or gender marker vary widely by state, and rural states are significantly less likely than urban states to have relatively transgender-friendly processes for legal name changes or for updating gender markers on driver's licenses and birth certificates, as discussed in the policy landscape section.

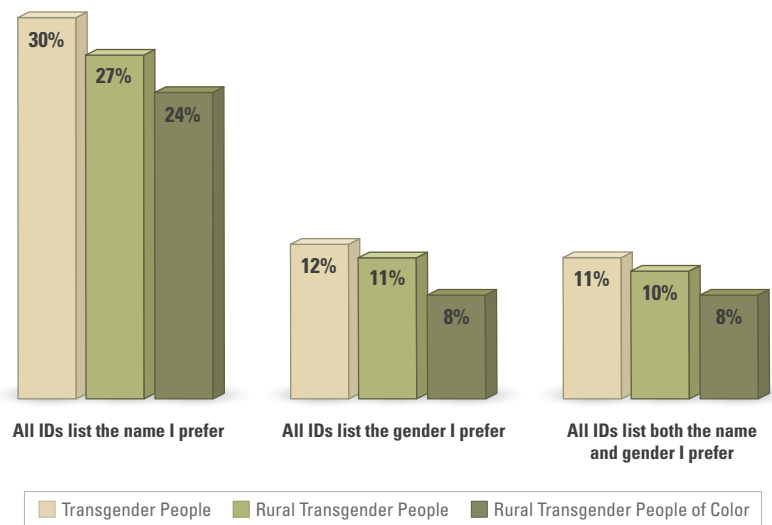


**Figure 10:** Transgender People, Including in Rural Areas, Face Harassment When Their Identity Documents Don't Match Their Gender, But Few Transgender People Have Been Able to Update Their Documents

**Figure 10a:** When Transgender People Show IDs That Don't Match Their Gender Identity, They Face Harassment and Discrimination, But Are No More Likely to Experience Such Mistreatment in Rural Areas  
*% Reporting Each Experience, Among Those Who've Shown Incongruent ID in the Past Year*



**Figure 10b:** Relatively Few Transgender People Have IDs That Match Their Name and/or Gender, and Rural Transgender People Roughly as Likely as Other Transgender People to Have Updated ID



Source: MAP original analysis of USTS 2015.



## Employment & Economic Security

Transgender people in rural areas are significantly more likely than their rural neighbors to be unemployed and living in poverty, and rural transgender people of color are far and away the most likely to experience such economic insecurity. Generally, transgender people in rural areas face similar rates of unemployment, poverty, and employment discrimination compared to the broader transgender population, but rural transgender people of color face significantly higher rates of economic insecurity and discrimination.

**Rural transgender people, especially people of color, are far more likely than their rural neighbors to be unemployed.** As shown in *Figure 11a* on the following page, the unemployment rate for rural transgender people is nearly three times higher (15%) than for all rural residents (6%). The unemployment rate for rural transgender people of color is nearly five times higher (28%) than all rural residents, and nearly twice as high as among all rural transgender people.<sup>18</sup>

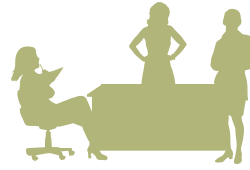
**Similarly, rural transgender people, and especially transgender people of color, are far more likely to be living in poverty.** *Figure 11b* on the following page shows that over one in four (27%) rural transgender people have at or below poverty level incomes, a rate more than twice as high as all rural residents (13%) at the time of the USTS.<sup>19</sup> Nearly half (48%) of rural transgender people of color are living in poverty, a rate more than three times as high as all rural residents (Figure 11b).

These rates are consistent with those found in a more recent and representative survey: analysis by the Williams Institute of 2014-2017 CDC data found that roughly 28% of transgender people in rural areas are living in poverty, compared to 16% of cisgender, heterosexual people in rural areas.<sup>20</sup> The same study also shows that transgender people and cisgender bisexual women have the highest rates of poverty in both urban and rural areas.

**Transgender people are frequently discriminated against in employment.** *Figure 11c* on the next page shows that, in the past year alone, more than one in four (27%) rural transgender people have experienced at least one form of employment discrimination, among those who had or applied for a job in the past year. This discrimination includes being fired or forced to resign, being denied a promotion, or not being hired specifically because of their gender identity. For rural transgender people of color, that number climbs to 38%, or nearly two in five, who have experienced employment discrimination in the past year alone (Figure 11c).

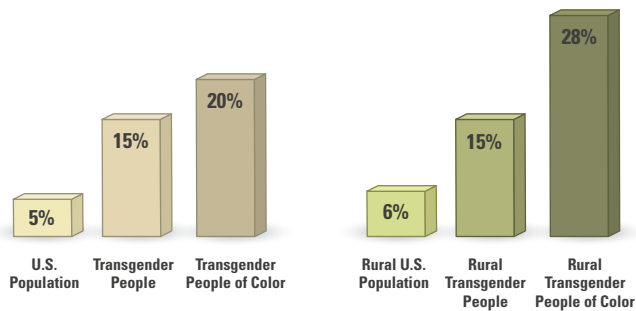
While Figure 11c shows experiences of employment discrimination in the past year, the USTS also asked about lifetime experiences of losing a job (including being laid off, fired, or forced to resign) due to discrimination based on their gender identity. Among transgender people who had ever lost a job, more than one in four (28%) of those in rural areas had lost their job because of their gender identity.<sup>21</sup>

These rates mirror findings from other studies of LGBT experiences of discrimination, such as a 2017 nationally representative survey of LGBT people that found 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.<sup>22</sup>



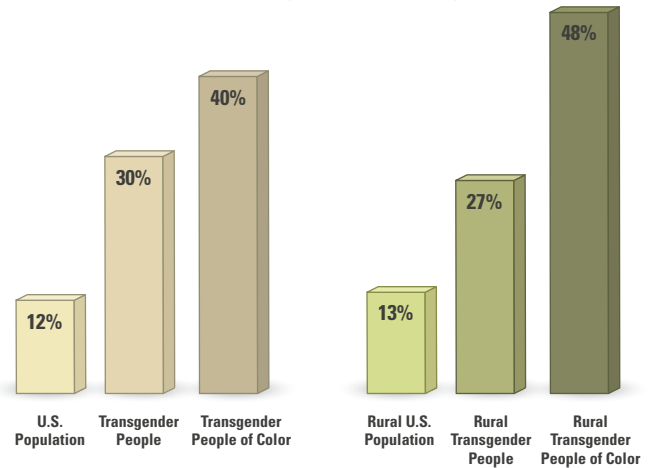
**Figure 11:** Transgender People, Including in Rural Areas and Especially Among People of Color, Experience Economic Insecurity and Employment Discrimination

**Figure 11a:** Transgender People, Especially People of Color, Are More Likely to be Unemployed  
*Unemployment Rate in Each Group*



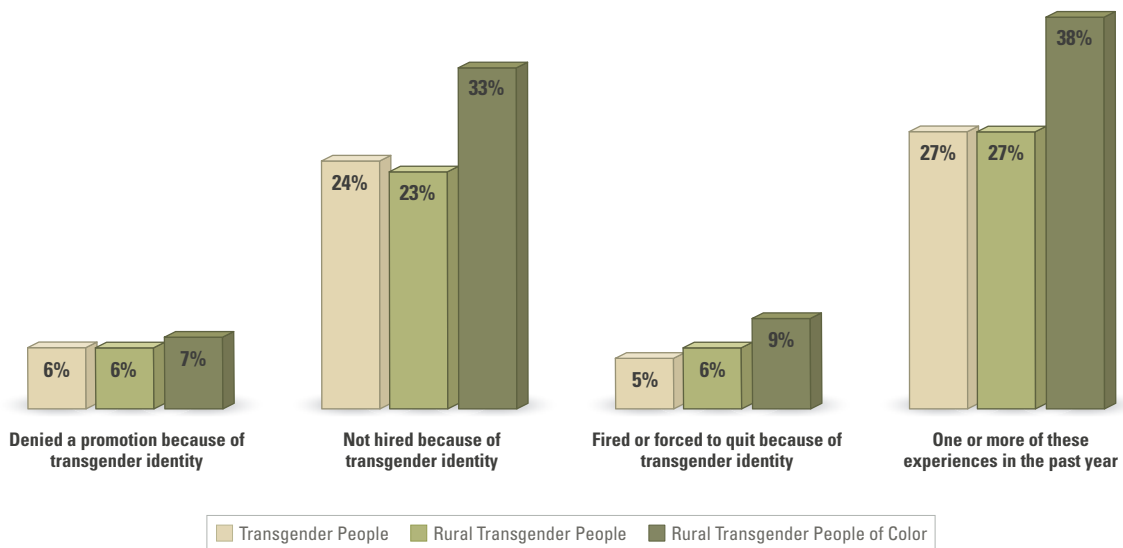
Source: MAP original analysis of USTS 2015. USDA 2016.

**Figure 11b:** Transgender People, Especially People of Color, Are More Likely to be Living in Poverty  
*Poverty Rate in Each Group*



Source: MAP original analysis of USTS 2015. 2015 CPS for U.S. population. 2015 ACS for rural U.S. population.

**Figure 11c:** Transgender People Experience Routine Employment Discrimination, and Rural People of Color Report Even Higher Rates of Discrimination  
*Among Those Who've Had or Applied For a Job in the Past Year*



Note: Percentages reported are among those who had or applied for a job in the past year (e.g., among transgender people who had or applied for a job in the past year, 24% were not hired because of their gender identity). "Any employment discrimination" refers to any (or at least one) of these three experiences in the past year.  
Source: MAP original analysis of 2015 USTS.



## Housing & Homelessness

The challenges of finding quality, affordable housing in rural areas are many,<sup>23</sup> and for transgender people can be compounded by the fear or actual experience of discrimination. USTS data show that rural transgender adults are far less likely than their rural neighbors to own their home, and further that they commonly experience housing discrimination and homelessness. Rural transgender people of color are even less likely to be home owners and more likely to report discrimination and homelessness.

**While 81% of rural American adults are home owners, only 26% of rural transgender adults own their homes** (see *Figure 12* on the following page).<sup>24</sup> However, rural transgender people are more likely (26%) than the broader transgender population (16%) to be home owners. The same patterns hold for rural transgender people of color (*Figure 12*).

**In the past year, nearly one in 10 rural transgender people—and one in six rural transgender people of color—have experienced at least one form of housing discrimination because of their gender identity.** *Figure 12c* on the next page shows that in the past year alone, roughly one in 20 rural transgender people have been evicted (6%) or denied housing (7%) because they are transgender, with nearly one in 10 (9%) reporting one or both of these experiences.

*Figure 12c* also shows that rates of rural housing discrimination are nearly twice as high for rural transgender people of color: one in nine (11%) have been evicted and one in eight (13%) were denied housing in the past year alone. Overall, roughly one in six (16%) rural transgender people of color have had one or both of these experiences in the past year.

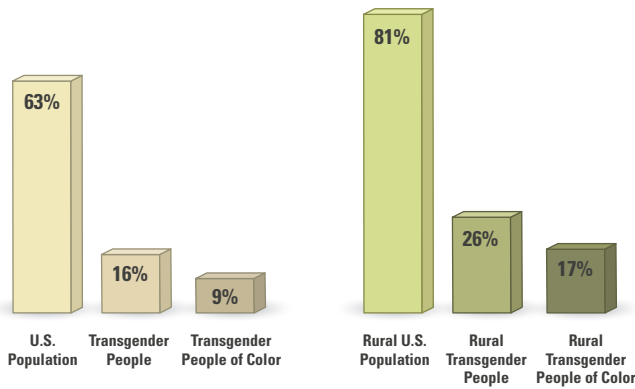
**Many rural transgender people, and especially transgender people of color in rural areas, have experienced homelessness.** *Figure 12b* on the next page shows that more than one in three (34%) transgender people in rural areas have ever experienced homelessness, and more than one in seven (15%) have experienced homelessness in the past year alone. Among transgender people of color in rural areas, one in four (25%) have been homeless in the past year and nearly half (47%) have ever been homeless (*Figure 12b*).<sup>m</sup>

<sup>m</sup> There were too few rural respondents who had experienced homelessness to examine experiences in shelters or other homelessness-related questions in the USTS.

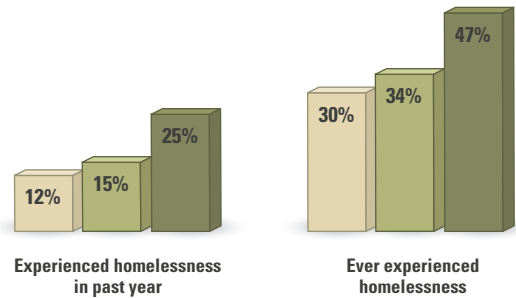


**Figure 12: Transgender People Experience Low Rates of Homeownership, High Rates of Homelessness, and Housing Discrimination**

**Figure 12a: Transgender People, Especially People of Color, Are Less Likely To Be Home Owners**  
*Homeownership Rate in Each Group*



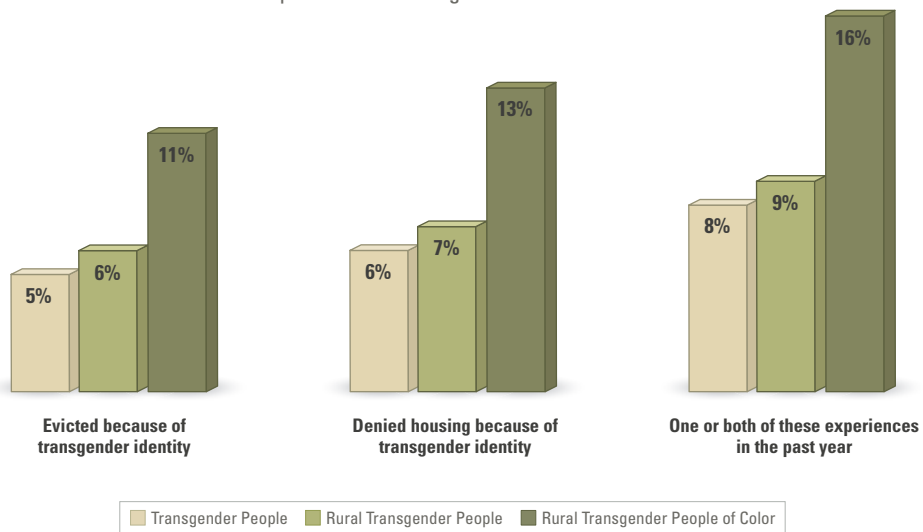
**Figure 12b: Rural Transgender People of Color Are Far More Likely to Have Experienced Homelessness**



Source: MAP original analysis of USTS 2015, 2015 ACS.

Legend: Transgender People (light tan), Rural Transgender People (light green), Rural Transgender People of Color (dark green)

**Figure 12c: In Rural Areas, Nearly 1 in 10 Transgender People and 1 in 6 Transgender People of Color Have Experienced Housing Discrimination in the Past Year**



Legend: Transgender People (light tan), Rural Transgender People (light green), Rural Transgender People of Color (dark green)

Source: MAP original analysis of USTS 2015.



## Public Places and Businesses

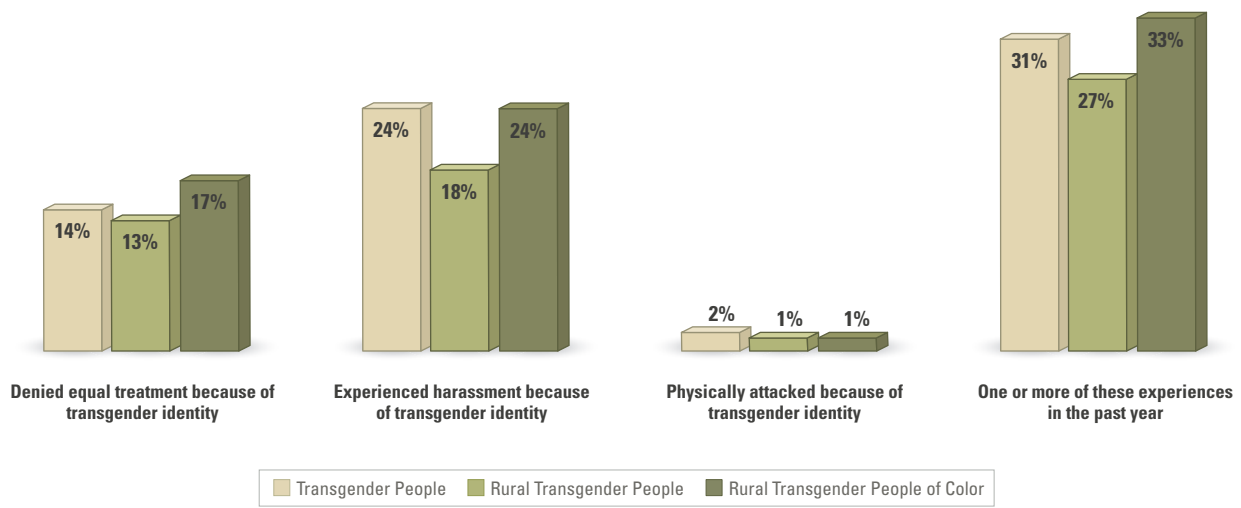
“Public accommodations” refers to a wide range of businesses, services, and spaces that are part of everyday life, from restaurants and coffeeshops to public libraries and healthcare providers. Rural areas generally have fewer providers of such services, and as a result, if a transgender person in a 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 (see policy landscape section), transgender people in rural areas are especially vulnerable to discrimination in public accommodations and have few options for overcoming such discrimination.

Figure 13 shows that, in the past year alone, over one quarter (27%) of rural transgender people—and one third (33%) of rural transgender people of color—who have visited a place of public accommodations have experienced at least one form of discrimination or harassment.



**Figure 13: Transgender People Experience Routine Discrimination in Public Places**  
% Reporting Each Experience in the Past Year



Note: Percentages are among those who went to a place of public accommodation in the past year and staff there knew or thought they were transgender.  
Source: MAP original analysis of USTS 2015.



## Violence and Harassment

**More than two in five (43%) transgender adults in rural areas have experienced at least one form of anti-transgender violence or harassment in the past year alone.** This includes 41% of rural transgender adults who were verbally harassed, 13% who were denied equal treatment, and 8% who were physically attacked in the past year because of their transgender identity (see *Figure 14a* on the following page).

**Additionally, in the past year, one in four (25%) rural transgender people have experienced at least one form of harassment or violence specifically in bathrooms** (*Figure 14c* on the next page). This includes 22% of rural transgender people who have been told they were in the wrong bathroom, 12% who have been verbally harassed, and 10% who were stopped from entering or denied access to a bathroom.

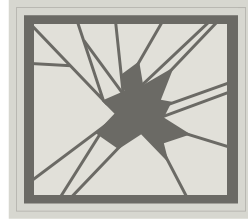
**Nearly one in 10 rural transgender adults have been sexually assaulted in the past year, and more than four in 10 (44%) have been sexually assaulted in their lifetime** (see *Figure 14b* on the following page). For comparison, the CDC shows that, as of 2015, “43.6% of [U.S.] women (nearly 52.2 million) experienced some form of contact sexual violence in their lifetime, with 4.7% of women experiencing this violence in the 12 months preceding the survey.”<sup>25</sup>

Additionally, a majority of transgender people in rural areas generally do not feel comfortable turning to the police for help. Over half (53%) of rural transgender respondents in the USTS—and 65% of rural transgender people of color—said they would be very or somewhat uncomfortable asking the police for help even if they needed it. What’s more, fewer than half (44%) of transgender people in rural areas who interacted with police or law enforcement officers in the past year said that the officers treated them with respect.<sup>n</sup>

In conclusion, transgender people in rural areas routinely experience discrimination in health care, employment, housing, and public accommodations, as well as regular experiences of violence and harassment. They also are unlikely to have identity documents that reflect their name and/or gender. Importantly, however, such experiences are generally no more likely in rural areas than in other areas, highlighting that rural areas are not uniquely hostile toward transgender people, and in fact, as discussed in the next section, many rural communities embrace their LGB and transgender neighbors and family members. Rather, as discussed earlier (and in further detail in the first *Where We Call Home* report), the limited availability of alternative options in rural areas, along with other structural challenges facing rural areas, can further amplify the impact of discrimination, harassment, or violence when it does occur.

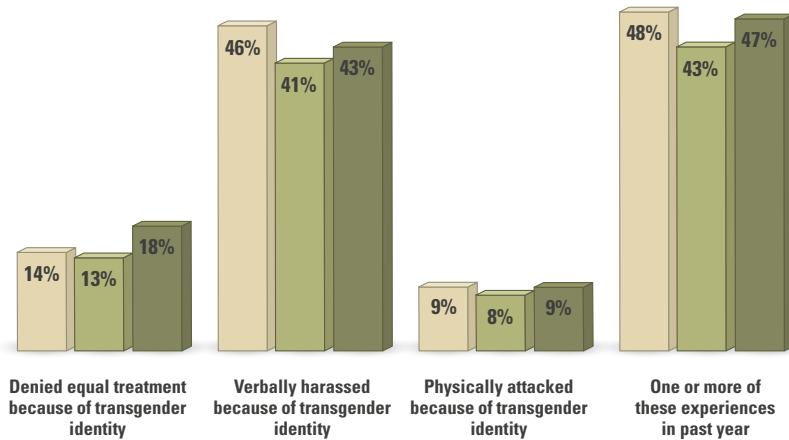
<sup>n</sup> For this USTS question, there were too few respondents of color in rural areas with this experience to report their answers separately.



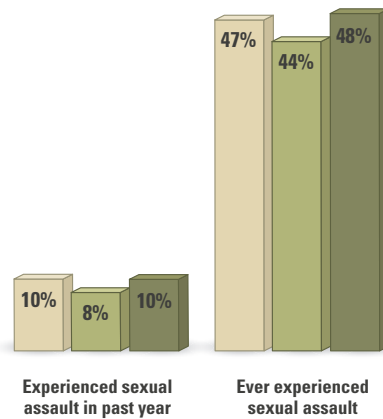


**Figure 14:** Transgender People, Including in Rural Areas, Experience Routine Violence and Harassment

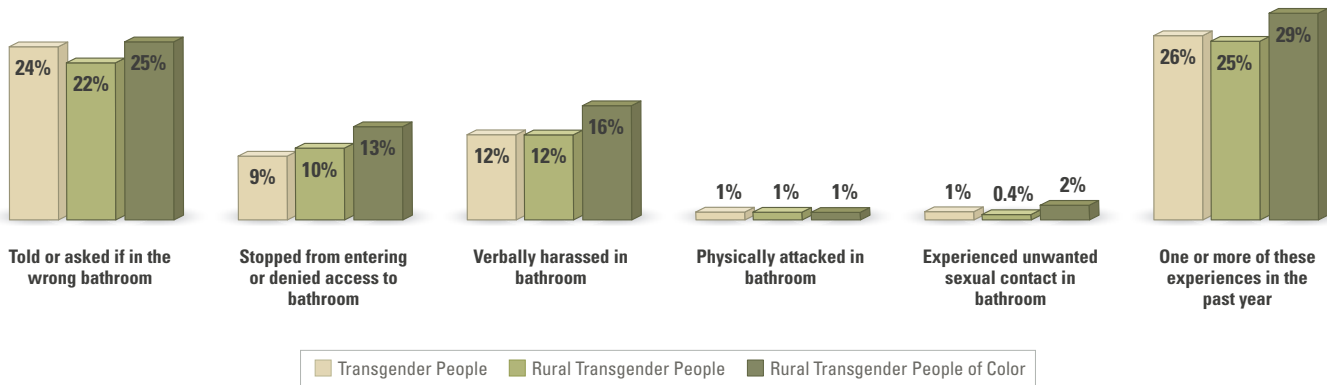
**Figure 14a:** More Than Two in Five Transgender People, Including in Rural Areas, Have Experienced Violence or Harassment in the Past Year Alone  
*% Reporting Each Experience in the Past Year*



**Figure 14b:** One in 10 Transgender People, Including in Rural Areas, Have Experienced Sexual Assault in the Past Year, and Nearly Half Have in their Lifetimes



**Figure 14c:** Transgender People, Including in Rural Areas, Experience Routine Harassment in Bathrooms  
*% Reporting Each Experience in the Past Year*



Source: MAP original analysis of USTS 2015.

## SECTION 3: POLITICAL LANDSCAPE FOR TRANSGENDER PEOPLE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Transgender people live across the country, including in rural communities. And across the country, the social and political climate of rural and urban communities can vary widely, with these variations impacting the lives and day-to-day experiences of transgender people. The political landscape for transgender people in rural areas is marked by several key features, including that rural residents are less likely to know a transgender person and are slightly less supportive than urban residents of LGBT-related policies. Additionally, rural states are significantly less likely to have transgender-inclusive laws and are more likely to have discriminatory, harmful laws.



**Rural Americans are less likely to know a transgender 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. Further, rural residents are far less likely to know a transgender person than to know someone who is gay or lesbian: *Figure 15a* shows that, while a majority (57%) of rural residents have a close friend or family member who is gay or lesbian, only 15% know someone close to them who is transgender.

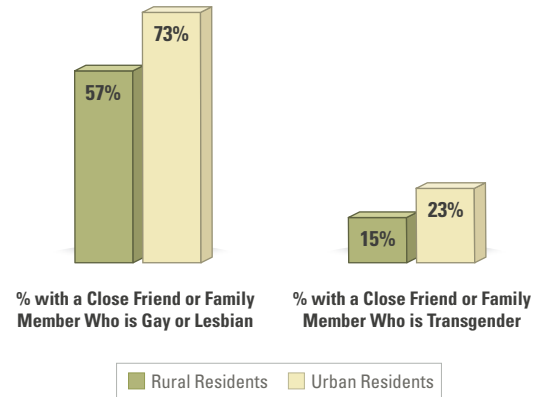
While knowing a gay or transgender person does not necessarily or automatically lead to more positive attitudes toward LGBT people or policies, research shows that, on average, knowing someone who is LGBT can reduce prejudice toward LGBT people and increase support for LGBT-friendly policies.<sup>26</sup> The fact that rural residents are less likely in general to know LGBT people—and especially less likely to know a transgender person—suggests that rural residents may be less familiar with the unique experiences and needs of transgender people.



**Rural residents are slightly less supportive of LGBT policies than urban residents, but still more supportive than likely imagined.** For example, *Figure 15b* shows that, though urban residents are more likely to support LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination policies than rural residents, a large majority—62%—of rural residents still support such protections, and over half (54%) oppose businesses refusing to serve LGBT people. Even in cases when rural attitudes trend conservative, it is important to remember that rural residents—like any other group in

**Figure 15:** Rural Residents Are Less Likely To Know a Transgender Person, But a Majority Support LGBT Rights

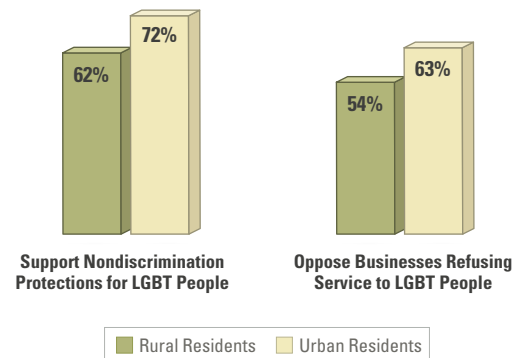
**Figure 15a:** Rural Residents Are Less Likely to Have a Close Friend or Family Member Who Is Gay, Lesbian, or Transgender



Source: PRRI American Values Atlas 2017.

**Figure 15b:** Majority of 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.

the country—are diverse in their beliefs. Rural residents of color, rural women, and younger rural residents are all far more supportive of LGB- and transgender-related policies than their rural counterparts (i.e., rural whites, rural men, older rural residents).<sup>27</sup>

**Overall, rural states are less likely to have transgender-inclusive laws and policies and are more likely to have discriminatory and harmful laws.** Given that more than half (54%) of transgender adults, or more than 750,000 transgender adults, live in majority-rural states, these disparities leave transgender people particularly vulnerable to discrimination and less able to respond to its effects.<sup>28,9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Majority-rural determination is based on Census data. See April 2019 report for further detail.



**Rural states are less likely to have healthcare laws that protect and support transgender people's unique medical needs.** As shown in *Figure 16*, rural states are far less likely to prohibit insurers from

excluding medically necessary transgender-related care, to explicitly include transgender-related care in the state's Medicaid policy, and to prohibit health insurance discrimination of any kind if based on gender identity (e.g., refusing to see a patient, even for routine care, simply because they are transgender).

Currently, 30 states allow insurance companies to explicitly refuse to cover transition-related medical care, and 25 of those 30 states are majority-rural.<sup>29</sup> Only 22% of rural states have laws that prohibit insurers from refusing to cover transgender care, compared to 74% of urban states (Figure 16). Similarly, only 16% of rural states prohibit gender identity discrimination of any kind in health insurance, compared to 42% of urban states (Figure 16).

Given that transgender people experience higher rates of poverty and economic insecurity, state and federal programs like Medicaid are extremely important for improving access to basic human needs like healthcare. But as with other transgender-related healthcare policies, rural states are far less likely to explicitly include medically necessary transgender-related care in the state's Medicaid program: only 25% of rural states do so, compared to 63% of urban states (Figure 16).



**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, as discussed earlier. However, *Figure 17* illustrates that rural states are significantly less likely than urban states to have relatively transgender-friendly processes for updating gender markers on driver's licenses and birth certificates and for legally changing one's name.<sup>P</sup>

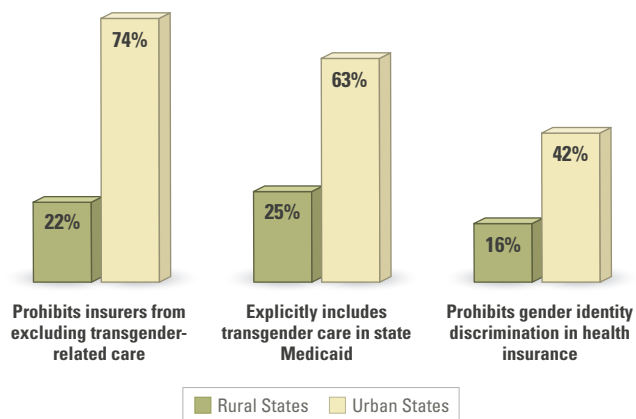


**Rural states are far less likely to have transgender-inclusive employment, housing, and public accommodations nondiscrimination laws, at both the state and local level.** Nondiscrimination laws

prohibit discrimination in specific areas, such as employment, housing, public accommodations,

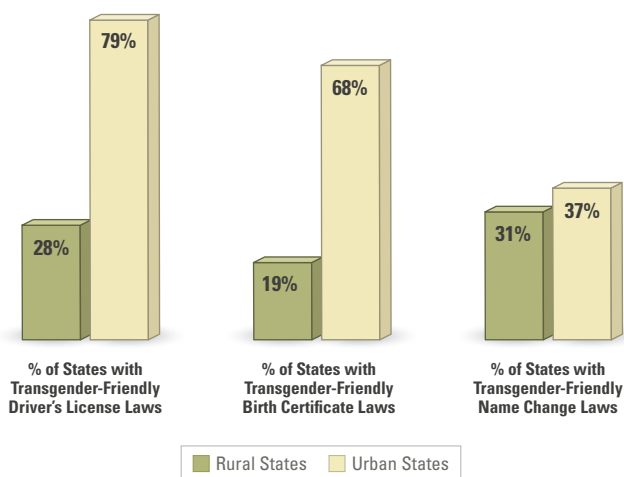
education, and adoption or foster care, among others. *Figure 18* on the next page shows only one in four rural states have transgender-inclusive nondiscrimination laws in employment, housing, and public accommodations, compared to nearly three times as

**Figure 16: Rural States are Less Likely to Have Transgender-Inclusive Healthcare Laws and Policies**  
% of States with Each Type of Law



Sources: Majority-rural determination based on Census data. State laws from MAP's Equality Maps, as of 10/1/19.

**Figure 17: Rural States are Less Likely to Have Transgender-Friendly Laws to Update Name and Gender on Identity Documents**



Sources: Majority-rural determination based on Census data. State laws from MAP's Equality Maps, as of 10/1/19.

<sup>P</sup> Note: For driver's licenses, states are coded as having relatively transgender-friendly processes if they use easy to understand forms, though they may or may not require provider certification. For birth certificates, states are coded as having relatively transgender-friendly processes if they issue new birth certificates without surgical requirements or court orders. For name changes, states are coded as having relatively transgender-friendly processes if they do not require individuals to publish or publicly announce their legal name change request. All these policies are tracked in MAP's Equality Maps and by the National Center for Transgender Equality's Identity Documents Center.

many urban states. Across the board, gender identity nondiscrimination protections are even less common in education and foster care, but again rural states are less likely to have these laws.

Among all states (both rural and urban) that lack statewide nondiscrimination protections, some municipalities have taken steps to protect their LGBT friends, family, and neighbors from discrimination at the local level. But again, rural states are less likely to have such protections: urban states without statewide protections have local ordinances that protect an average of 32% of the states' population against gender identity discrimination, but in rural states only an average of 12% are protected.<sup>30</sup>

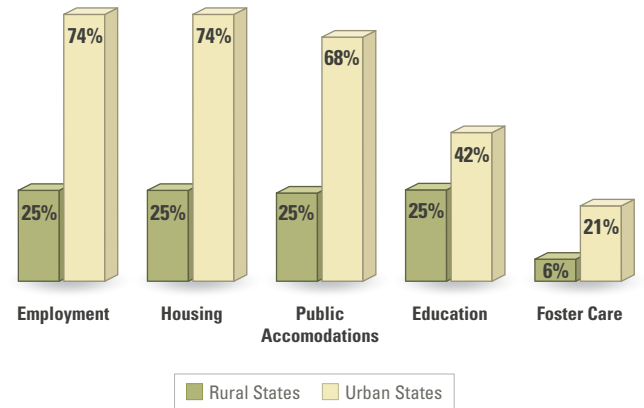


**Rural states are more likely to have harmful, discriminatory laws, including HIV criminalization laws.** HIV criminalization laws make perceived or potential exposure to HIV or other infectious diseases (which could include HIV) a crime.<sup>31</sup> Based in prejudice and outdated beliefs, these laws not only stigmatize and punish people living with HIV, they also discourage people from being tested for HIV and therefore create many negative public health outcomes.<sup>32</sup> Given that transgender people, and especially transgender people of color, are more likely to be living with HIV (Figure 4), these laws disproportionately target and harm transgender people. *Figure 19* shows that 84% of majority-rural states have HIV-specific criminal laws, compared to 53% of urban states.

**Rural states are also more likely to have dangerous religious exemptions laws, which can further jeopardize transgender people's access to medical care or other basic services.** Religious exemptions are laws that allow people or businesses to simply opt out of nondiscrimination protections if they conflict with their religious beliefs. Such laws can extend far beyond wedding-related industries and are frequently found in vital areas such as health care, child welfare, social services, and more. When religious exemption laws apply to medical professionals—as they do in Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee<sup>33</sup>—this may allow doctors to refuse to treat transgender people even for routine care, or allow doctors to refuse to write and pharmacists to refuse to fill prescriptions for hormone therapy, PrEP (a medication that can help prevent HIV), and even birth control.<sup>34</sup> As shown in Figure 19, 59% of rural states have such laws, compared to 32% of urban states. Given that transgender people in rural areas already face fewer healthcare providers and routine

**Figure 18:** Rural States are Significantly Less Likely to Have Transgender-Inclusive Nondiscrimination Protections, Across Many Policy Areas

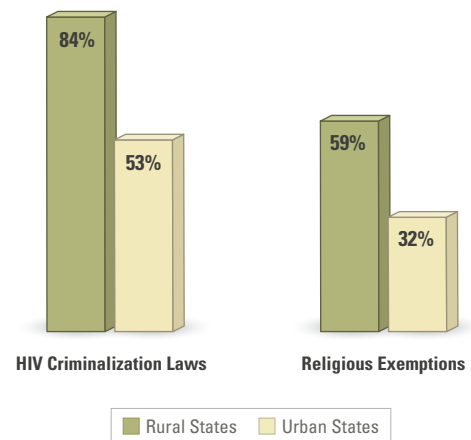
% of States with Each Type of Transgender-Inclusive Nondiscrimination Law



Source: Majority-rural determination based on Census data. State laws from MAP's Equality Maps, as of 10/1/19.

**Figure 19:** Rural States are More Likely To Have Discriminatory or Harmful Laws

% of States With Each Type of Anti-LGBT Law



Sources: Majority-rural determination based on Census data. State laws from MAP's Equality Maps, as of 10/1/19.

discrimination and obstacles to care (Figures 6-9), these harmful religious exemption laws can even further limit the ability of transgender people to access basic needs, services, and medical care.

In conclusion, the political landscape of rural communities leaves transgender people in rural areas with fewer protections against discrimination and more obstacles to needed care and services.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The April 2019 report, *Where We Call Home: LGBT People in Rural America*, contains a comprehensive set of recommendations across numerous areas, including:

- Improving visibility of LGBT people in rural communities and rural people in LGBT communities;
- Improving the experiences of LGBT people in rural areas in faith communities, schools and education, employment, housing, public accommodations, health care, the criminal legal system, and more;
- Addressing the disproportionate vulnerability of LGBT people to discrimination in rural states;
- Addressing the lack of policy protections and the prevalence of discriminatory laws in rural areas; and
- Supporting LGBT organizing and advocacy in rural areas.

MAP's website also contains a "Rural" topic page.<sup>9</sup> This page includes a set of stand-alone recommendations documents for supporting LGBT people in rural communities, with each document geared toward a specific audience, including community organizations, educators, healthcare providers, policymakers, and more.

MAP also maintains an online list of resources for LGBT people in rural communities, including resources geared specifically toward transgender people, people of color, LGBT youth, LGBT older adults, and more.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the fuller set of recommendations in the April 2019 report and resources available on MAP's website, there are several key recommendations that are particularly critical for transgender people in rural America.



**Improve access to transgender-inclusive health care that is both affordable and culturally competent.** Rural areas face a scarcity of healthcare providers, and transgender people in rural communities further face significant obstacles to accessing care and routine discrimination when attempting to receive care. Providers and insurers in rural areas should participate in cultural competency and continuing education programming to improve their ability to serve transgender patients with care, respect, and medical expertise. This includes updating forms, paperwork, and any programming (e.g. recovery treatment, sexual health clinics, and more) to use LGBT-inclusive language and approaches.

Additionally, providing direct services to rural residents is key. Supporting or expanding programs such as mobile health clinics, transportation assistance, telehealth or technology access, in-person assistance to enroll in health insurance, and more can all directly impact rural residents' access to needed care. For transgender people specifically, efforts to identify existing resources, providers, and other rural-based spaces that provide gender-affirming care are also critical. 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." Direct service efforts like these help bridge the gap between long term change and immediate needs.

Lawmakers should also pass laws ensuring that transgender people's medical needs are covered by health insurance (including Medicaid) and prohibiting any form of gender identity discrimination in health care.



**Modernize laws and processes to allow transgender and nonbinary people to easily and affordably update their identity documents.** State officials and lawmakers should adopt laws to ensure transgender people can update their identity documents—including driver's licenses and birth certificates—to match their name and gender identity. These processes should be simple and easy to access; they should not require applicants to show proof of surgery or other provider attestations, to meet burdensome process requirements, or to pay prohibitive fees. Additionally, state and local officials should be trained on cultural competency and these administrative processes to ensure that transgender people, should they update their IDs, are given equal and respectful treatment.



**Pass—and enforce—transgender-inclusive nondiscrimination laws prohibiting discrimination in all areas of life including employment, housing, public accommodations, education, health care,**

<sup>9</sup> [www.lgbtmap.org/rural](http://www.lgbtmap.org/rural)

<sup>7</sup> [www.lgbtmap.org/rural-lgbt-resources](http://www.lgbtmap.org/rural-lgbt-resources)

**and beyond.** Nondiscrimination laws are vital in ensuring full participation in all aspects of life. This report shows that residents of rural states are far less likely to be protected under such state laws, leaving rural LGB and transgender people especially vulnerable to discrimination. While state nondiscrimination laws are therefore needed, so too is full, comprehensive federal nondiscrimination legislation that will update the country's civil rights laws to ensure that discrimination against LGBT people is explicitly prohibited nationwide.



**Repeal discriminatory laws that disproportionately harm transgender people, such as HIV criminalization laws and religious exemptions.**

HIV criminalization laws are based on fears and stereotypes, and they punish and criminalize people (disproportionately those who are people of color, LGB, and/or transgender) simply for being HIV-positive. These laws should be repealed, and states' HIV-prevention policies should instead be based in science and public health best practices.

Additionally, religious exemption laws 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, including transgender people. This is especially dangerous in rural areas where there are already fewer alternative providers of such services, and given that transgender people may have unique medical needs or higher likelihood of seeking such services due to higher rates of poverty, homelessness, and discrimination. 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.



**Expand research and data collection efforts, including adding questions about sexual orientation and gender identity to government surveys and adding questions about geographic location to LGBT-focused surveys.**

Data on LGBT people are extremely limited, and data on transgender people are even more so. This limits the possibilities for meaningful analysis of the experiences and demographics of LGB and transgender people, especially in rural communities or other subsets of the broader LGBT population. 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; the CDC's BRFSS and YRBS; state health, labor, and other surveys; and data collection tools. LGBT advocates and researchers should also include questions about rurality or geographic location to their work or research instruments.

## CONCLUSION

Millions of LGBT people, including more than one in six transgender people, live in rural communities across the country.<sup>35</sup> Though many transgender people call rural America home, the unique structures and challenges of rural life often amplify the impact of experiences of discrimination or harassment. These challenges for transgender people are especially evident in the areas of health care, identity documents, and economic security, among others, and these challenges are frequently even larger for transgender people of color in rural areas. 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 transgender people in rural areas want to stay in their own communities and not have to move away to find acceptance or protections—especially given that many of these experiences of discrimination or harassment reported here occur just as frequently in urban areas. However, the social and political landscape of rural areas disproportionately leaves transgender people with fewer legal protections against such discrimination, more obstacles to updating their identity documents, and more likely to experience the effects of harmful laws including HIV criminalization and religious exemptions.

This report's extensive new findings illustrate the many needs and opportunities to improve the experiences of transgender people in rural America. By addressing the overall needs and challenges of rural areas (e.g., access to health care), while also directly addressing the specific needs and experiences of transgender people in rural areas (e.g., access to transgender-affirming health care), meaningful and long-lasting change is possible in rural America—the place that so many LGB and transgender people call home.

## ENDNOTES

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