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# Fading Rainbows: A Case for Bolstering Social Infrastructure in the Rural Queer South

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## Introduction

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In just the first two weeks of 2023, over 100 bills targeting LGBTQ+ populations were filed across 22 states, keeping in line with the yearslong political onslaught of targeted attacks on LGBTQ+ life and culture. Beyond the bills that seek to ban transgender students from competing on sports teams that align with their gender identity and restrict access to gender-affirming medical care, attacks on queer cultural institutions such as drag performances and other queer displays of community are also increasing in prevalence. Reactions and responses to these destructive efforts are well documented in big cities that have large queer populations, but we should also listen to the responses of a large portion of the queer community that is most directly affected by some of these policies: Black queer people living in rural regions of states in the South where many of these harmful bills originate.

According to reports from the Movement Advancement Project, there are anywhere from 2.9 million to 3.8 million lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people living in rural America. While estimates of exactly how many LGBTQ+ Black Americans live in rural America are vague due to lack of research, nearly 9 out of 10 of Black Americans living in rural and small towns reside in the South. Nine of the 10 states with the highest concentration of Black same-sex couples are also in the South, seven of which are “majority rural” states. Unfortunately, many of these Southern states lack any kind of protections for LGBTQ+ populations and, given the legacy of racism in the U.S., Black LGBTQ+ Americans living in the rural South experience higher rates of poverty and unemployment, more educational disparities, and greater health challenges than their Black non-LGBTQ+ counterparts.

Despite significant adversity, LGBTQ+ Black Americans continue to survive and thrive even in the most under-resourced, underserved areas in the country. The legacy of Black mutual aid efforts — one of the best known being the Black Panther Party’s Survival Programs of the late 1960s through the early 1980s — is well documented, and the impacts have been widely felt. Community care has long been a central part of Black LGBTQ+ survival and continues to be significant today as more threats to the community’s economic, physical, and emotional safety emerge. Data scarcity leaves room for a number of questions surrounding these social support systems, however, including: What does this community care look like in rural spaces? And what kinds of social infrastructure support the development of community in areas where access to things like well-resourced LGBTQ+ centers or queer clubs is severely limited?

Through a survey of 1,042 LGBTQ+ adults in the Southern states of Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia, Data for Progress explored the significance of LGBTQ+-affirming community spaces, Southern LGBTQ+ people’s relationships to their communities, and the specific threats faced by marginalized, rural LGBTQ+ communities in order to offer policymakers more information about how they can better support the needs of their LGBTQ+ constituents.

## Importance of Queer Space in Queer Communities

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The Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York City's Greenwich Village, represents a preeminent space for the LGBTQ+ community and is largely hailed as one of the [birthplaces of the Gay Liberation Movement](#). The role of queer establishments and spaces cannot be understated when examining the evolution of LGBTQ+ rights in America. [Gay bars, clubs, and speakeasies](#) were major sites of safety for many LGBTQ+ people in big cities across the United States. These spaces served as places for people to come together and mingle, organize politically, and to simply exist as their most authentic selves. [After Stonewall](#), gay rights groups began to pop up across the country and LGBTQ+ spaces grew beyond the shadows of smoky bars and into the forefront of society.

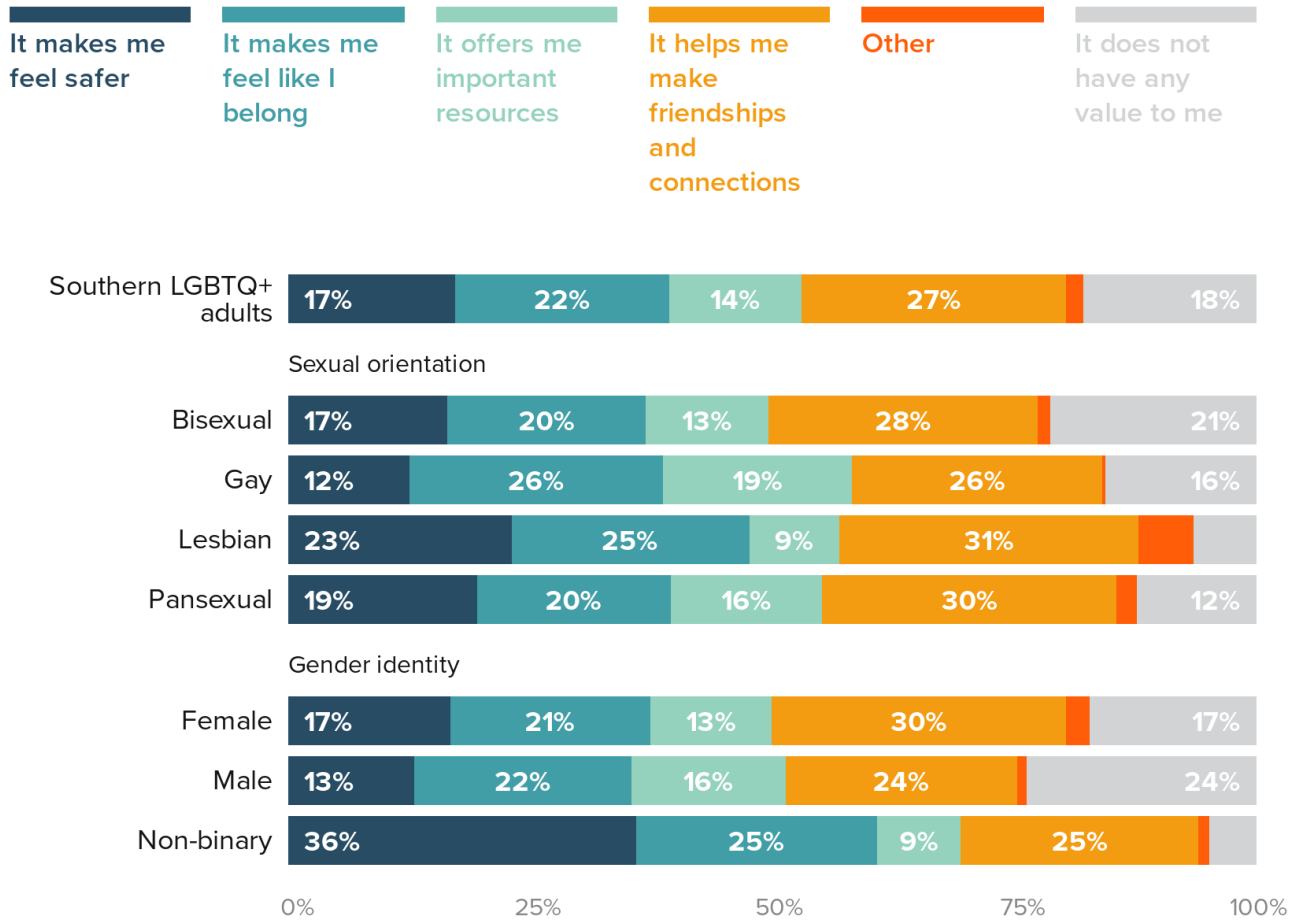
Today, LGBTQ+ spaces are expansive in big cities and metropolitan areas. Libraries, community centers, schools, and even coffee shops have joined the traditional LGBTQ+ bar in the efforts to connect LGBTQ+ people, and the positive impacts are well documented. The [American Library Association](#) notes that LGBTQ+ populations can benefit greatly from “the access to information which libraries provide and the sense of community which library programs can help foster.” [LGBTQ+ community centers](#) serve a similar purpose and are sometimes the only source of targeted social, educational, health, and economic services for LGBTQ+ people in certain areas.

Data for Progress polling shows that LGBTQ+ adults in the South find value in having access to LGBTQ+ spaces. When respondents were asked what they find “most valuable” about having access to these spaces, more than a quarter of respondents (27 percent) say that the greatest value of this access comes from making friendships and connections. Seventeen percent of Southern LGBTQ+ adults say the most valuable aspect of access is that they feel safer, while 22 percent say that the greatest value of these spaces comes from how they create feelings of belonging. For 14 percent of LGBTQ+ Southerners, access to important resources is the most valuable aspect of having LGBTQ+ community centers, organizations, and groups in their community.

Only 5 percent of nonbinary adults do not find any value in access to LGBTQ+ spaces, indicating that transgender and gender nonconforming people may particularly appreciate access to safe queer spaces as society grows [increasingly hostile](#) toward them.

# LGBTQ+ Southerners Value LGBTQ+ Spaces in Their Local Community

What, if anything, do you think is **most valuable** about having access to LGBTQ community centers, organizations, or groups in your local community?



February 22 - March 6, 2023 survey of 1,042 LGBTQ+ adults in Southern states

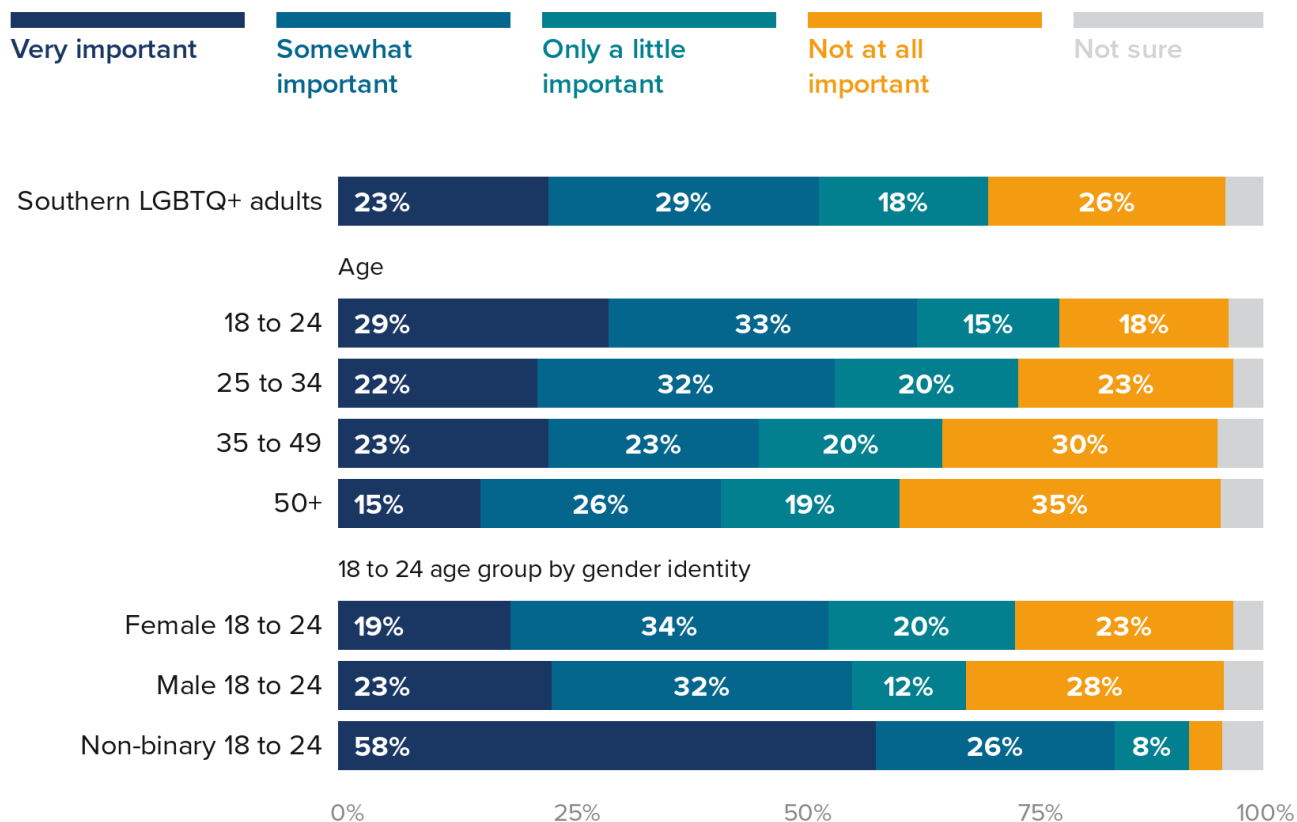
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New LGBTQ+-centered public charter schools are also popping up across the country in states like Ohio, Connecticut, California, and more recently, Alabama, offering young LGBTQ+ students the opportunity to build better relationships to the identities that they hold and the community of people who share those identities. Data for Progress polling finds that, although beyond primary school age, a strong majority (62 percent) of people ages 18 to 24 believe that it is somewhat or very important to interact with other LGBTQ+ people. Socializing with the LGBTQ+ community is especially valuable to Southern nonbinary adults. Eighty-four percent of nonbinary people between 18 and 24 find interacting with other LGBTQ+ people somewhat or very important, compared to 53 percent of women and 55 percent of men in the same age category. LGBTQ+-centered schools offer an invaluable opportunity for young LGBTQ+ individuals to build community with their peers.

# Young LGBTQ+ People Value Interacting With Others in the LGBTQ+ Community

How important, if at all, is it for you to interact with other LGBTQ people in your social life?



February 22 - March 6, 2023 survey of 1,042 LGBTQ+ adults in Southern states

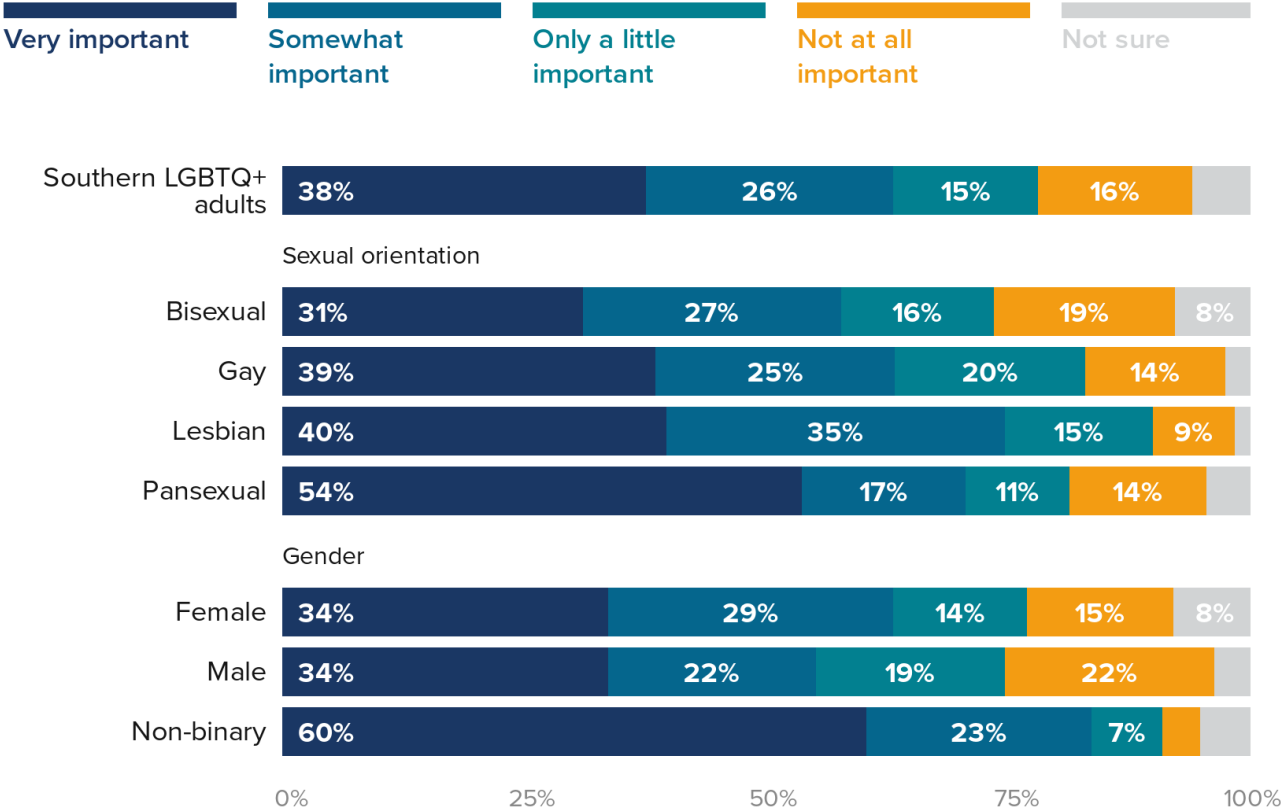
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While the value of LGBTQ+-affirming space is well known, there is still much to be learned about how the presence (or lack thereof) of an accepting community impacts the mental health of LGBTQ+ adults. The Trevor Project’s [2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health](#) found that LGBTQ+ youth ages 13 to 24 who attended LGBTQ+-affirming schools reported lower rates of attempting suicide than LGBTQ+ youth who did not. Similarly, the survey found that LGBTQ+ youth who live in communities that are accepting of LGBTQ+ people also reported significantly lower rates of attempting suicide than those who do not. LGBTQ+ adults also benefit substantially from affirming community spaces. Data for Progress polling finds that 64 percent of LGBTQ+ Southerners feel that it is very or somewhat important for local communities to have spaces for LGBTQ+ people to congregate and engage in social activities. Local queer spaces are most important to lesbian and nonbinary Southerners, with 75 percent and 83 percent, respectively, finding these community spaces either very or somewhat important.

# LGBTQ+ Communities in the South Believe It Is Important to Have Local Queer Spaces

How important, if at all, is it for you to have spaces in your local community for LGBTQ people to congregate and engage in social activities?



February 22 - March 6, 2023 survey of 1,042 LGBTQ+ adults in Southern states

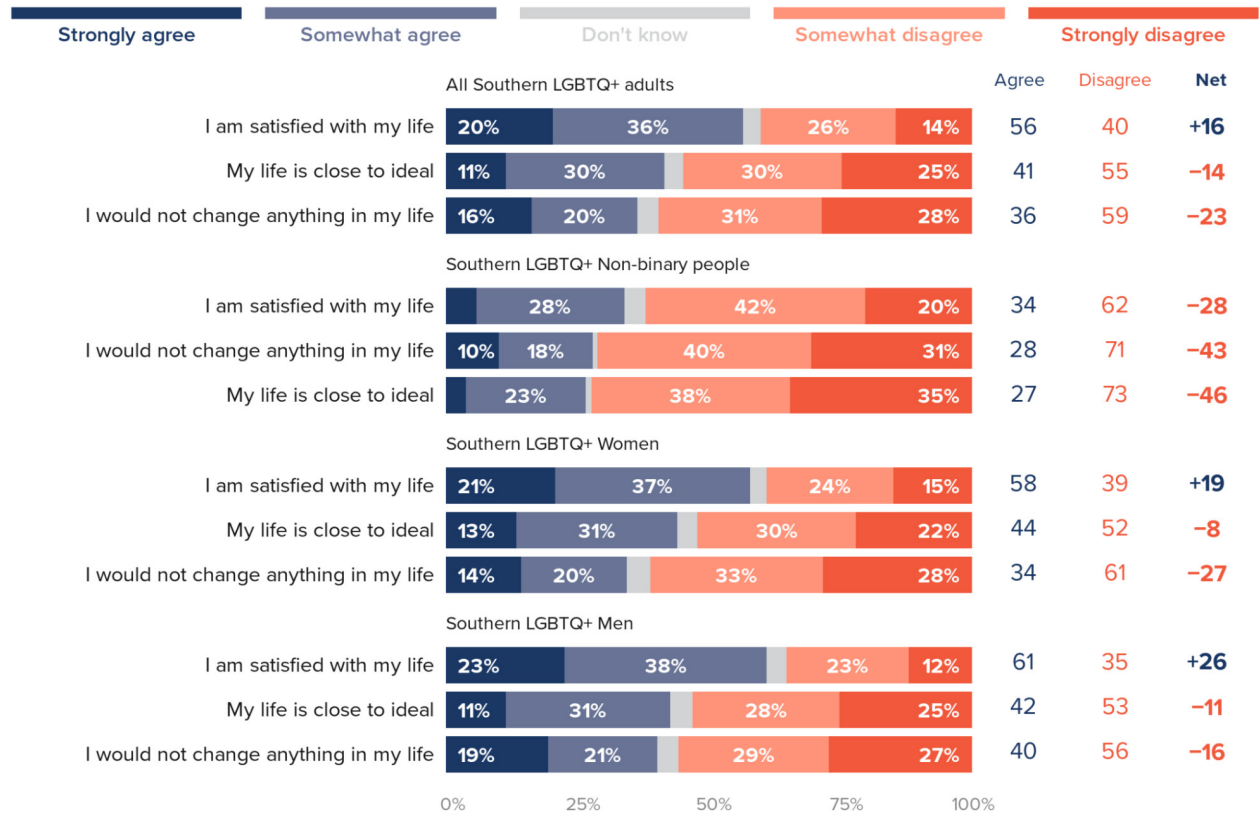
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Given that LGBTQ+ people are more likely to experience mental health issues, loneliness, and social disconnection as a result of discrimination and marginalization, the importance of developing space for people to find community, friendship, and social support becomes much greater. A lack of social infrastructure can translate to devastating declines in quality of life. Data for Progress polling shows that 55 percent of LGBTQ+ Southerners disagree that their life is close to ideal, and 59 percent disagree that they would not change anything in their life if they could do it over again. Of every gender identity, nonbinary people are least likely to agree that they are satisfied with their life compared with LGBTQ+ men and women. While 61 percent of men and 58 percent of women are satisfied with their lives, only 34 percent of nonbinary people agree that they are satisfied (a -28-point margin of agreement).

# A Majority LGBTQ+ Southerners Agree That Their Lives Are Not Ideal

When thinking about your life and past experiences, please say whether you agree or disagree with the following statements.



February 22 - March 6, 2023 survey of 1,042 LGBTQ+ adults in Southern states

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Social connections can improve life satisfaction and help protect against premature death from all causes, but in order to develop social connection, there must first be a space for that connection to be formed.

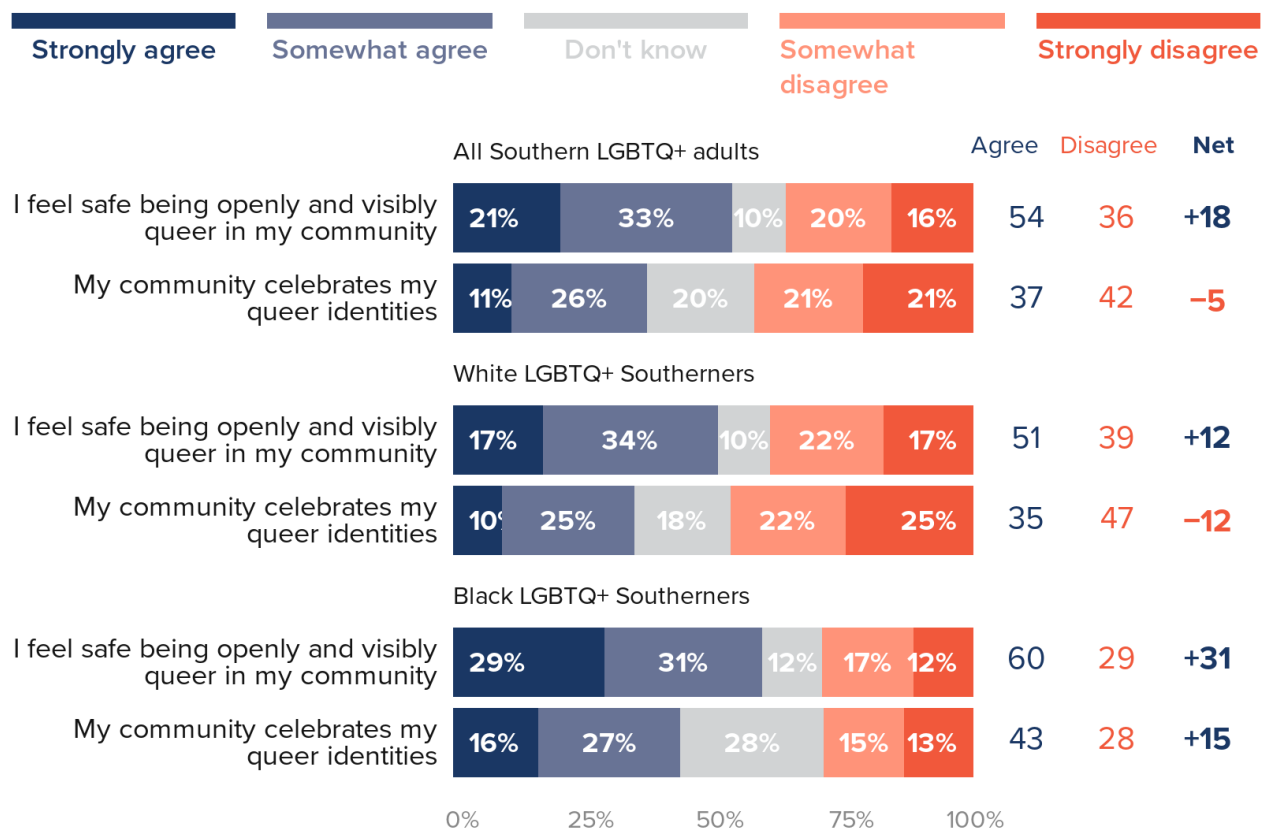
With the advent of modern social media, more and more LGBTQ+ people are finding their ways into online spaces of acceptance and affirmation, but online relationships can only go so far. Furthermore, millions of people across rural areas and tribal lands lack fast or reliable internet access as providers often overlook rural areas due to low population density and barriers such as poor infrastructure. Even when internet access is available, for many rural residents it is still not affordable. Polling from Pew Research Center suggests that a significant portion of individuals without internet access lack it due to cost alone. While the value of queer spaces is well established, poor social and telecommunication infrastructure along with economic barriers limit access to queer space for many rural Americans.

Social isolation, which is understood as a lack of regular contact with friends, family members, neighbors, and society at large, is a major threat to public health and is associated with poor health outcomes, ranging from increased blood pressure to suicide. Until recently, many researchers assumed that residents of rural areas experience higher amounts of social isolation and loneliness due to geographic isolation, but current research seems to suggest just the opposite. Urbanicity does not necessarily impact an individual's likelihood of experiencing social isolation, but race does. Non-Hispanic Black residents

living in small rural areas experience much higher levels of loneliness than their white counterparts. For LGBTQ+ Black people living in small rural areas, it is generally perceived that their experience is comparable to, if not slightly worse than, their non-LGBTQ+ peers. Due to gaps in research on queer Black rural communities, it is challenging to validate this assumption. Polling does indicate, however, that in general, 43 percent of Black LGBTQ+ adults in the South agree that their community celebrates their queer identities compared with 35 percent of white LGBTQ+ adults. Similarly, more Black LGBTQ+ adults agree that they feel safe being openly and visibly queer in their community than white LGBTQ+ adults, by margins of +31 points and +12 points, respectively.

## Many Black LGBTQ+ Adults Feel Celebrated and Safe in Their Local Communities

When thinking about your local community generally, please say whether you agree or disagree with the statements.



February 22 - March 6, 2023 survey of 1,042 LGBTQ+ adults in Southern states

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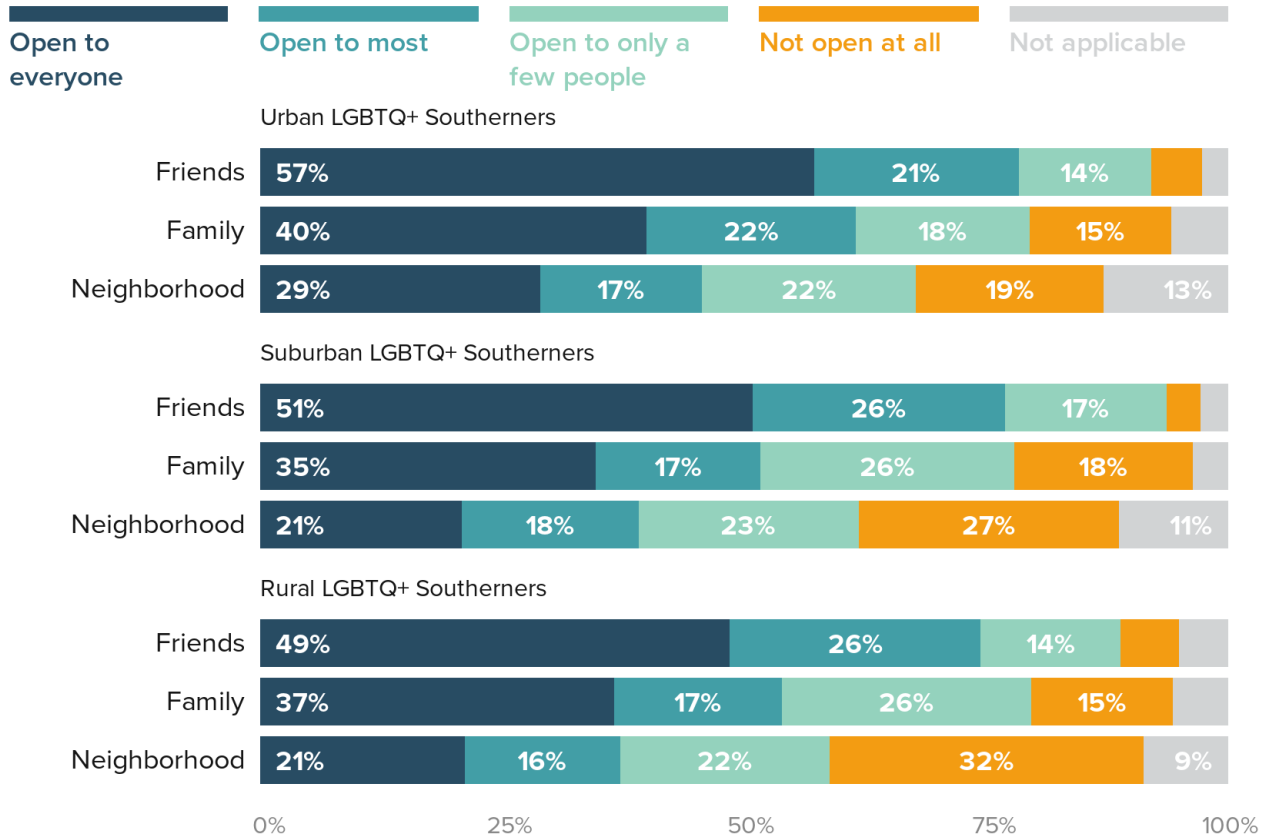
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Relatedly, people in both large and small rural areas report feeling closer to family than their urban peers, and report more confidence relying on family and friends in times of need. This does not mean, however, that rural LGBTQ+ people are more open about their sexual orientation or gender identity with their families. Polling from Data for Progress shows that more urban LGBTQ+ people are open to most or everyone in their family (62 percent) than suburban LGBTQ+ people (52 percent) or rural LGBTQ+ people (54 percent).



# LGBTQ+ People Across the South Are Out to Friends and Family

In each of the following communities, how open are you about your sexual orientation or gender identity?



February 22 - March 6, 2023 survey of 1,042 LGBTQ+ adults in Southern states

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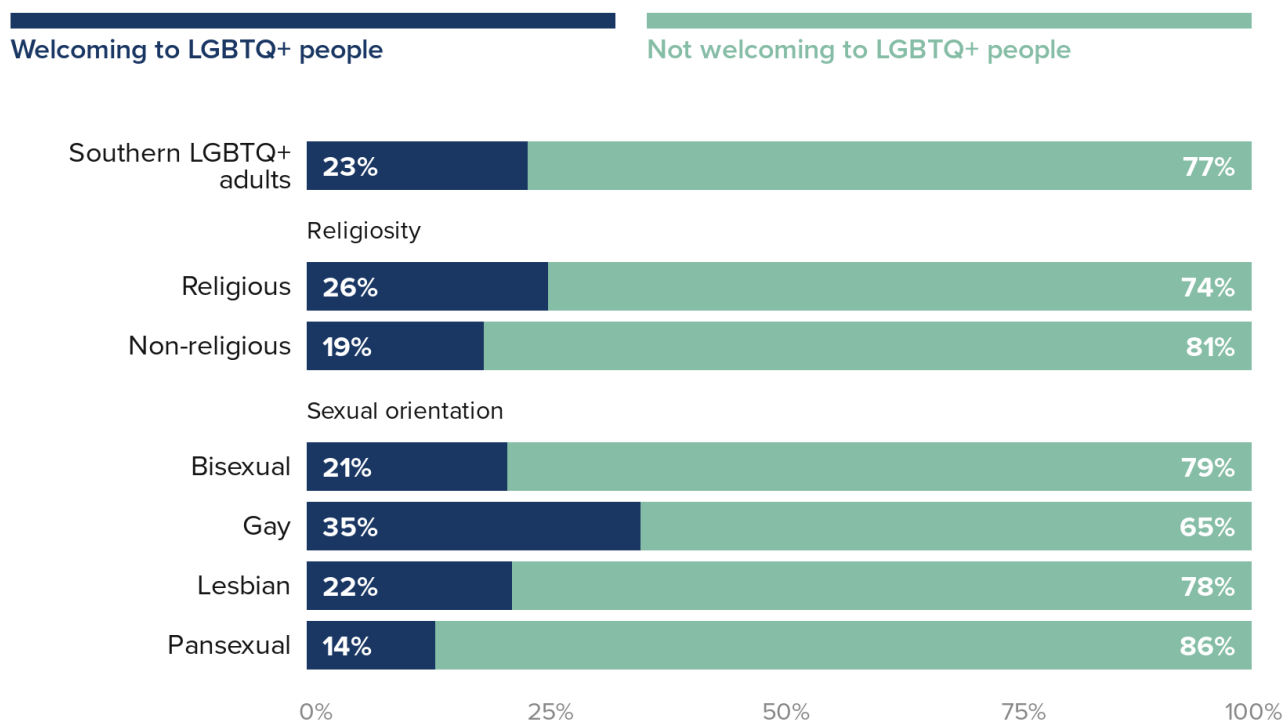
Research indicates that LGBTQ+ youth in rural America experience more lifetime distress in relationship to their sexual/gender identities, as well as increased symptoms of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, than LGBTQ+ youth living in urban areas. The cause for this disparity in mental health outcomes is not clear, but data suggests that the threat of familial rejection; lack of access to LGBTQ+-affirming groups in school; low levels of access to LGBTQ+ peers, community spaces, and affirming services; and high levels of anti-LGBTQ+ religiosity may create conditions for more experiences of discrimination and trauma.

Data for Progress polling finds that more than two-thirds of LGBTQ+ Southerners are members of a religious community; however, we see that 77 percent of LGBTQ+ Southern adults do not have access to churches or religious institutions in their local communities that welcome LGBTQ+ people. More than 4 in 5 (81 percent) non-religious LGBTQ+ adults believe that their local religious community is not welcoming to LGBTQ+ people, compared with 74 percent of LGBTQ+ Southerners who are religious. While 35 percent of gay people find local religious institutions welcoming, less than one-quarter of bisexuals (21 percent), lesbians (22 percent), and pansexuals (14 percent) feel that they have access to an accepting religious establishment in their community.

# LGBTQ+ Southerners Believe That Religious Communities Are Not Welcoming to LGBTQ+ People

Which, if any, of the following establishments are welcoming to LGBTQ people in your local community? Select all that apply.

— Churches or religious institutions



February 22 - March 6, 2023 survey of 1,042 LGBTQ+ adults in Southern states

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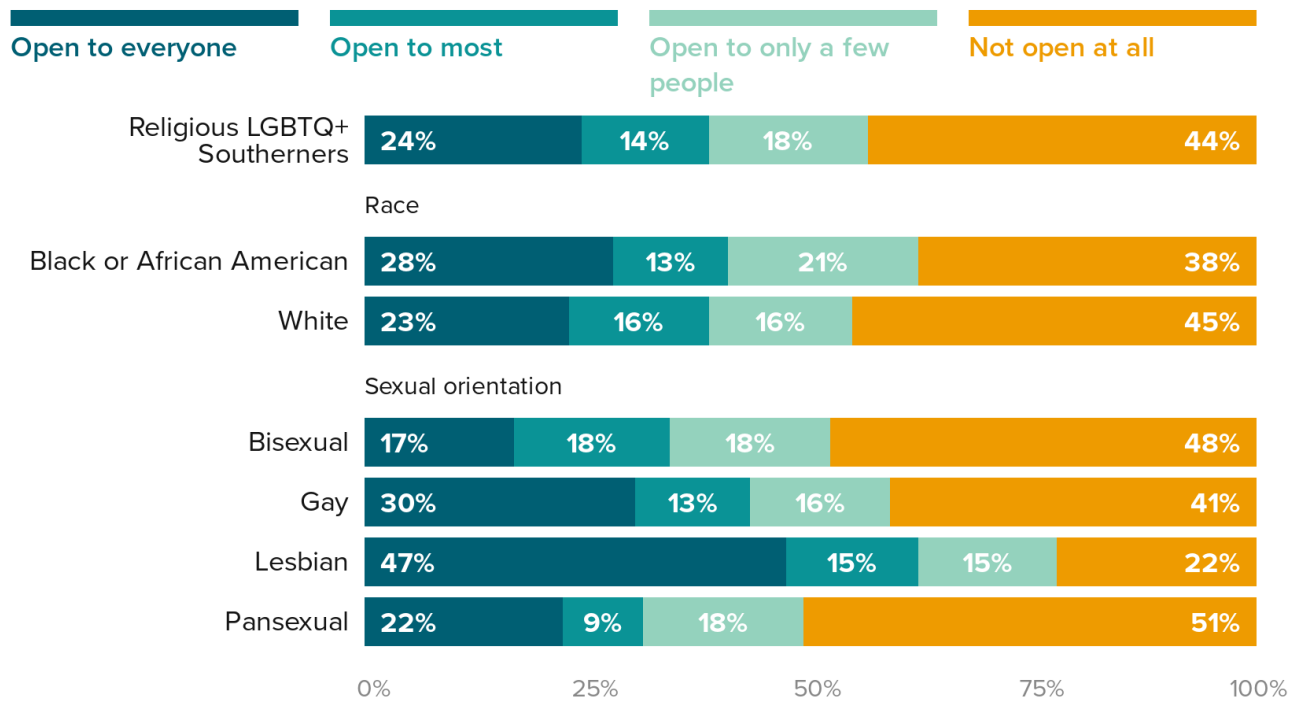
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Furthermore, of the LGBTQ+ Southerners who are part of a religious community, 44 percent are not open to anyone in that community about their sexual or gender identity. This includes 38 percent of Black and 45 percent of white LGBTQ+ Southerners. Pansexual and bisexual people are most likely to not be out in their religious community, with 48 percent of bisexuals and a majority (51 percent) of pansexuals not open at all.

# Forty-Four Percent of Religious LGBTQ+ Southerners Are Not Out in Their Religious Community

In each of the following communities, how open are you about your sexual orientation or gender identity?

— Religious community



February 22 - March 6, 2023 survey of 709 religious LGBTQ+ adults in Southern states. Respondents who selected “not applicable” are excluded in this analysis.

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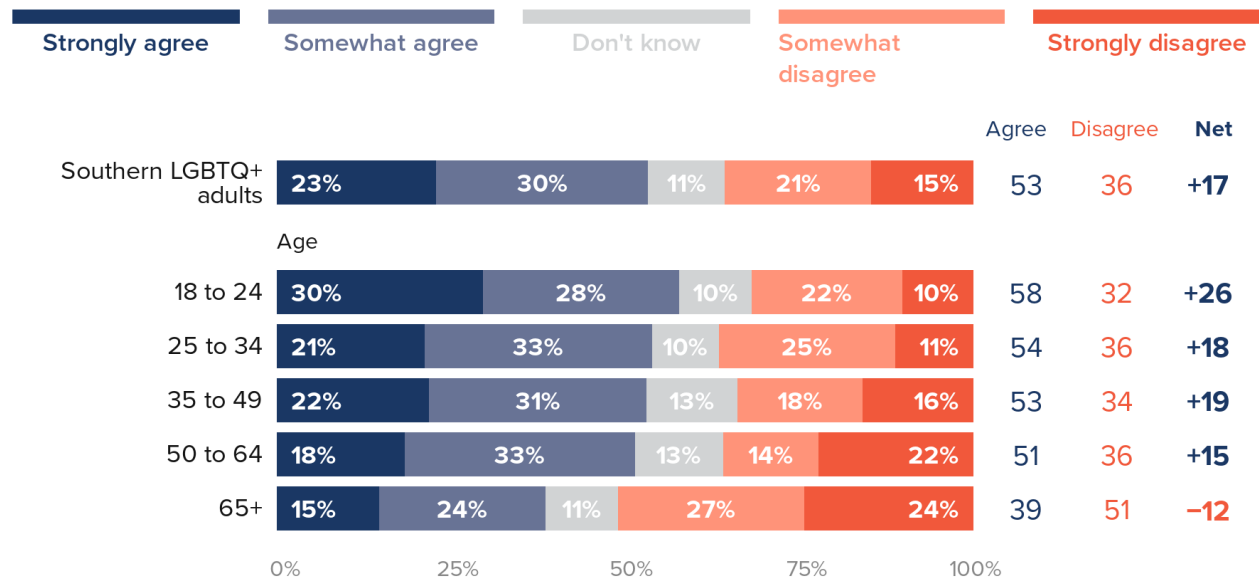
Given the centrality of religion in Southern culture and the legacy of religious institutions as spaces for both community and communion, this is not something to be overlooked. The GALIP (“God’s Agape Love (Put) Into Practice”) Foundation has made a concerted effort to identify LGBTQ+-affirming churches across the country for LGBTQ+ Christians, but other religious communities lack such a structure, leaving some religious LGBTQ+ people isolated. Religious LGBTQ+ people are not the only ones suffering from social isolation, however.

Older LGBTQ+ adults also face unique challenges to building and maintaining active social lives in comparison with their non-LGBTQ+ peers. According to recent reports from SAGE and the National Resource Center on LGBTQ+ Aging, LGBTQ+ elders are twice as likely to be single and live alone and four times less likely to have children in comparison with non-LGBTQ+ elders. Relatedly, more than half of the participants in the study indicated that they suffer from a lack of companionship and feel isolated from others. Polling from Data for Progress finds that LGBTQ+ people 65 or older are more likely than those in younger groups to feel disconnected from their local LGBTQ+ community. By margins of at least +15 points, LGBTQ+ Southerners in every age group between 18-64 agree that they feel like they are a part of their local LGBTQ+ community, while a majority of those 65 and older disagree (51 percent).

# A Majority of LGBTQ+ Southerners Older Than 65 Do Not Feel a Part of Their Local LGBTQ+ Community

When thinking about your local LGBTQ community, please say whether you agree or disagree with the following statements.

— I feel like I am a part of my local LGBTQ community



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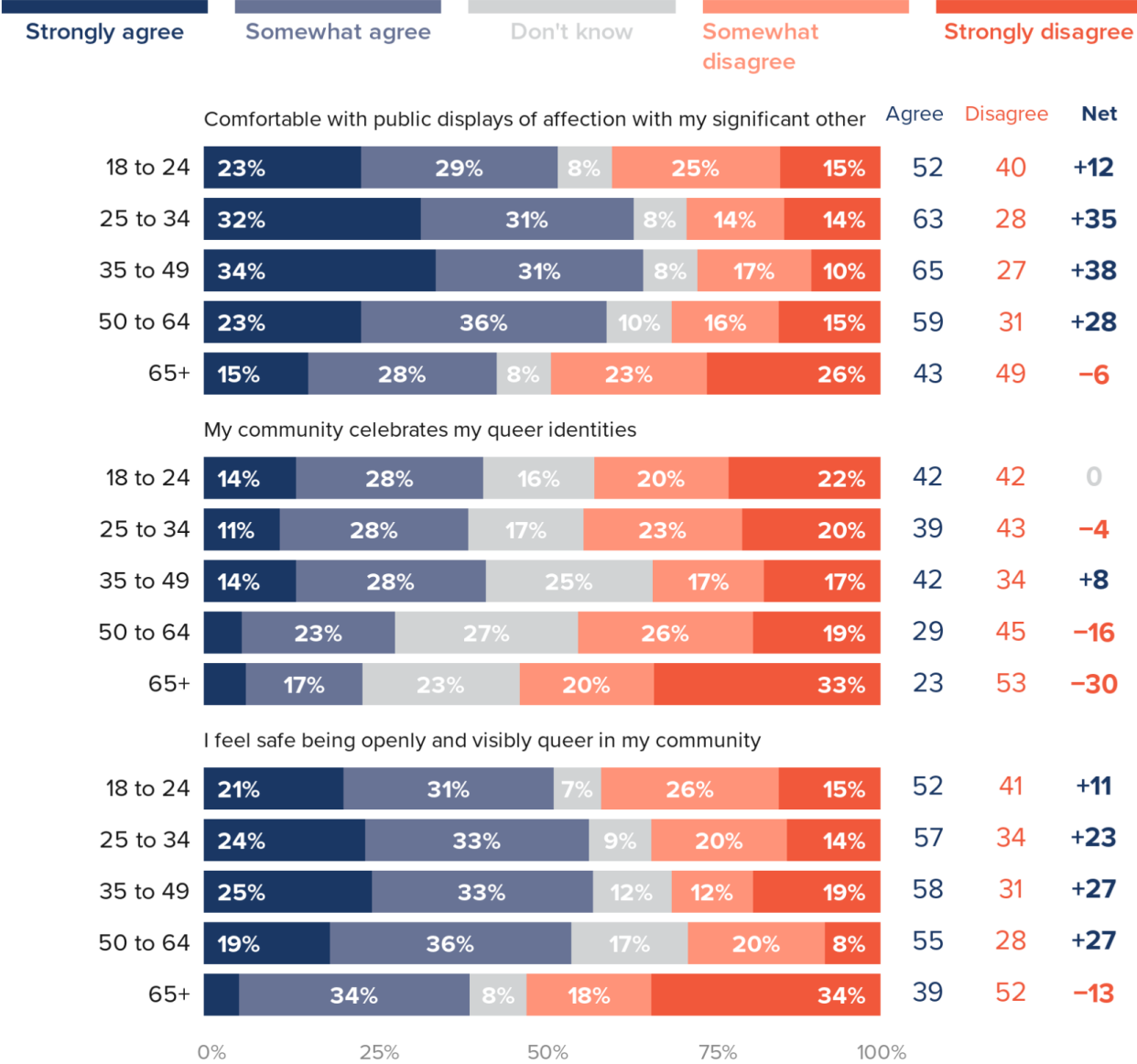
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Even when older LGBTQ+ adults have access to senior centers or community centers, many are still hesitant to engage with these spaces due to fear of discrimination or harassment on the basis of their identities. Polling demonstrates older LGBTQ+ people in the South are most likely among all age groups to be uncomfortable being open about their queer identity in their community. Unlike younger people in the community, nearly half of LGBTQ+ Southerners 65 and older (49 percent) disagree with a statement saying that they would feel comfortable publicly displaying affection with a partner. Similarly, only 39 percent of people 65 and older agree that they feel safe being openly and visibly queer in their community, while 52 percent disagree. This is unique to this age group, as a majority of people in every other age group agree that they feel safe being openly and visibly queer in the community. People 50 and older also feel disconnected from their community in relation to their identity, as 45 percent of people between 50-64 and 53 percent of people 65 and older do not believe that their community celebrates their queerness.



# Older LGBTQ+ Adults in the South Do Not Feel Safe or Comfortable Being Open in Local Communities

When thinking about your local community generally, please say whether you agree or disagree with the statements.



February 22 - March 6, 2023 survey of 1,042 LGBTQ+ adults in Southern states

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Generations of intolerance toward LGBTQ+ people, in addition to the increased political attacks seen in the modern political landscape, have taken pride away from many LGBTQ+ elders and could have serious social and emotional implications for upcoming generations.

## Codifying Protections of LGBTQ+ Rights

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There are no federal protections against LGBTQ+ discrimination in public accommodations and facilities, education, federally funded programs, employment, housing, or credit systems, leaving LGBTQ+ people open to attacks on the basis of sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Since the 1970s, multiple bills have been proposed to alleviate this issue, but the most recent legislative effort has been significantly more successful. Introduced in early 2021 by Representative David Cicilline and Senator Jeff Merkley, the Equality Act would amend the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to: 1) expand the definition of public accommodations to include recreation centers, transportation services, and goods and services; 2) offer equal protection from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity; and 3) prohibit people from being denied access to shared facilities that are in accordance with the individual's gender identity.

Polls from the Public Religion Research Institute indicate that public support for nondiscrimination protections is the highest it has ever been, with nearly 80 percent of Americans favoring laws that would protect LGBTQ+ people against discrimination in employment, public accommodations, and housing.

The majority of Southern states lack explicit prohibitions for discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity when it comes to public accommodations and credit lending. Beyond this, several states have negative laws that specifically allow public accommodations to discriminate against LGBTQ+ patrons on the basis of religious exemption laws, bar the discussion of LGBTQ+ people or issues in schools, prevent transgender students from participating in sports and using school facilities consistent with their gender identity, and even ban municipalities from enacting nondiscrimination ordinances that create a protected class not already in state law.

Legislators in Arkansas, Missouri, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Florida have also recently introduced legislation aiming to restrict or censor drag events, seeking to classify drag shows as adult or sexualized in nature, and/or expand the definition of sexually oriented businesses to include any establishment that hosts drag performances. One of South Carolina's proposed bills goes as far as seeking to make it a felony to allow minors to view drag performances, potentially limiting freedom of speech and taking away opportunities for community-based celebration of queer identities and queer fellowship. Drag performances, especially those held in libraries and schools, are often conducted with the goal of destigmatizing nonbinary, trans, and gender-nonconforming identities and expressions. The impact of these drag events is multifold: They offer education that can help reduce hatred and violence against LGBTQ+ populations, provide creative and positive representation of LGBTQ+ people and culture, and create an environment for celebration and fellowship among LGBTQ+ folks and those in their communities.

The politicization and demonization of drag shows has resulted in some strong, violent reactions from the public. The shooting at Club Q in Colorado Springs, Colorado, in 2022 was just one of many recent attacks on drag performers and patrons attending their shows. In 2022 alone, over 141 different incidents of protests or threats were made against drag events, some escalating to violence. These attacks, often led by neo-Nazi, white supremacist, and alt-right organizations like the Proud Boys, are just the beginning. As drag performances remain under fire, we are likely to see more and more violence against LGBTQ+ people and culture.

Public institutions are also under attack: Libraries and schools are facing major restrictions on the books that they can offer and the content they're allowed to teach, respectively. Some states are also seeking to fine people affiliated with publicly funded schools or institutions for using gender pronouns other than those assigned at birth for themselves or others. Other bills seek to ban books that include topics around sexual identity and gender identity.

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis is at the forefront of political attacks on the LGBTQ+ community. In addition to spreading misinformation about gender-affirming care for LGBTQ+ youth and urging state medical boards to ban children from receiving gender-affirming care, in 2022 DeSantis signed into law the “Don’t Say Gay” bill that forbids instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in kindergarten through third grade under the guise of protecting children from “indoctrination.”

In spite of these mounting attacks, a number of organizations are fighting to defend and preserve the rights of LGBTQ+ people across the country, some of which have branches that focus specifically on the needs of doubly marginalized LGBTQ+ folks living in rural America. Current organizational efforts, however, are not sufficient in ensuring that LGBTQ+ communities in the rural South can continue to survive and thrive without undue persecution. By protecting and developing local social infrastructure in rural areas, supporting anti-discrimination efforts, and expanding research and data collection on LGBTQ+ people in the rural South, community leaders and policymakers alike will be better poised to advocate for increased investment in resources that will have immeasurable positive impacts on rural Southern LGBTQ+ communities.

## Policy Recommendations

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There are a number of actions that federal, state, and local governments, as well as community members and organizations, can take to provide marginalized rural LGBTQ+ people with the resources that they deserve and need to live happily and safely in their communities. Specifically, they should:

### 1 — PROTECT AND DEVELOP LOCAL SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE IN RURAL AREAS

Local and state officials have the power to promote the growth and expansion of local LGBTQ+ centers and programs like LGBTQ+ advisory groups, youth drop-in areas, and LGBTQ+-affirming health clinics. For example, New York City Mayor Eric Adams announced an investment of nearly \$6.7 million to provide new and expanded services for the LGBTQ+ community in 2022. Some of these new services include legal services to combat discrimination, parental acceptance groups to protect against family rejection, and the funding of transgender and gender nonconforming/nonbinary-led nonprofits to allow them to continue to serve their communities.

In order for elected officials to more clearly assess the needs of their LGBTQ+ constituents, there must be an opportunity for community members to express their needs and concerns without fear of discrimination or harm. Regularly scheduled community needs assessments conducted in collaboration with local LGBTQ+ advocates and organizations could allow for the early spotting and resolution of new and recurrent issues experienced locally in different LGBTQ+ communities.

Elected officials can also collaborate with nonprofit organizations such as Open to All, a campaign created to build awareness and understanding about the importance of nondiscrimination laws, to promote nondiscriminatory practices among local businesses and organizations.

## 2 — SUPPORT ANTI-DISCRIMINATION EFFORTS TO PROTECT LGBTQ+ COMMUNITIES

Amid a lack of federal protections for LGBTQ+ people, it is the responsibility of legislators, advocates, and everyday Americans to challenge the dangerous rhetoric circulating about LGBTQ+ people and culture, and hold accountable those who perpetuate misleading information that endangers the well-being of LGBTQ+ people.

Constituents have the ability to push back on efforts that specifically target LGBTQ+ populations by becoming informed about how these efforts affect their communities. The ACLU has been mapping new anti-LGBTQ+ bills state by state with regular updates on their statuses, giving constituents a clear view of what is happening and which state officials are leading these charges.

In the same vein, while the Equality Act is significant, it is not the only tool accessible to advocates, legislators, and policymakers. State and local officials can develop anti-discrimination policies of their own until federal protections are available. Executive action is also a viable opportunity to combat LGBTQ+ hate, as President Biden has already issued over 100 executive orders since entering office in 2021, one of which aims to advance LGBTQ+ equality.

## 3 — EXPAND RESEARCH AND DATA COLLECTION ON LGBTQ+ PEOPLE IN RURAL AREAS

While the study of rural experiences and life is becoming more centralized in some academic disciplines, people of color are especially underrepresented in research about rural America, and LGBTQ+ people of color are seldom mentioned in the few studies that do exist. To resolve this issue, several steps can be taken:

- 1. WORK DIRECTLY WITH MEMBERS OF RURAL LGBTQ+ COMMUNITIES TO CONDUCT IN-DEPTH RESEARCH ON THEIR EXPERIENCES.** The best way to gather accurate information about any group of people is to talk to them, listen to their stories, and be open to working with the people who live in their communities rather than relying on insights from uninformed sources. In-person and virtual focus group studies, community needs assessments, and local town halls are just a few ways that this can be accomplished.
- 2. DISSEMINATE RESEARCH OPENLY AND ACCESSIBLY.** Of the little research that does exist about rural LGBTQ+ experiences or the LGBTQ+ community writ large, much of it is in forms that are either inaccessible to most Americans or behind paywalls that leave many people out of these important conversations. Using more public-focused dissemination techniques can get more people educated and motivated to act. Data for Progress aims to model data transparency and accessibility by making resources that support the LGBTQ+ movement, like our Accountable Allies Pride Project, openly available online. Similarly, LGBTQ+-centered organizations such as the Trevor Project and the Movement Advancement Project have been consistent in their efforts to produce compelling, comprehensible research for a variety of audiences.



**3. PRIORITIZE THE EXPERIENCES OF MARGINALIZED PEOPLE IN RURAL SPACE.** Data on marginalized LGBTQ+ populations living in rural America is scarce, leaving major gaps in research that prevent us from obtaining a comprehensive view of the rural experience. One major challenge that prevents researchers from collecting data about rural America is the lack of a clear definition of what can be considered rural. Developing better language for researchers to describe and differentiate rural space from urban space is foundational to future research efforts. Relatedly, government surveys such as the Census should collect both gender identity and sexual orientation data along with the other demographic data already collected. Adding these questions is a simple way to make a significant difference in all LGBTQ+ research projects.

Beyond these more structural changes, more qualitative data about the unique experiences of rural LGBTQ+ people can be collected to expand current conceptions of rural life. Public opinion polling can also offer insight into the diversity of political priorities and opinions of rural Americans, giving both policymakers and community leaders the power to be more effective in their roles. Ultimately, we desperately need research that shows the diversity of life in rural America to change the harmful narratives that have come to define what rural America is.

## Conclusion

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The importance of accessible and affirming social infrastructure for rural LGBTQ+ people cannot be understated. Beyond fostering social connection and friendship, queer space provides LGBTQ+ people with valuable resources that leave them feeling seen, empowered, and celebrated. Meeting such a basic need for safe connection will surely combat the poor mental health outcomes of this multiply marginalized community. The very existence of queer communities, specifically multiply marginalized members of the LGBTQ+ community, is crucial, as diversity — of race, gender, sexuality, and geographical origin — kindles ingenuity.

Despite conflicting beliefs on and within the rural LGBTQ+ community, it is clear that policymakers and academics alike must take action to protect the unalienable rights of every individual. Data — both qualitative and quantitative — is one of our strongest tools as it illuminates disparities and gives affected communities the chance to name their experience in no uncertain terms. The failure to act not only enables the violence against and erasure of Black and elderly LGBTQ+ people living in rural areas, but lays the groundwork for discrimination against other vulnerable communities.

Fortunately, the work to protect and uplift rural LGBTQ+ people — in the South and across the country — is already well underway. Organizations like [the Campaign for Southern Equality](#), [Gender Benders](#), and [Southerners on New Ground \(SONG\)](#) have been doing intentional work for years to serve Southern LGBTQ+ populations through various means. And think tanks like [the Movement Advancement Project](#) have been leaders in advancing knowledge about the rural LGBTQ+ experience. As more individuals and organizations join this fight for equality, our ability to make a difference only becomes stronger. The future is ours to shape and our power to make change is unlimited. But only if we act now.

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