

## **In spite of significant gains, it is still challenging to be LGBTQ in the U.S.**

The movement to gain civil rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) predates the oft-cited 1969 Stonewall riots in New York City. In 1966, there was the Compton's Cafeteria Riot in San Francisco by transgender people protesting discrimination and police harassment. Even earlier, 1950s activists such as Harry Hay, Frank Kameny, Del Martin, Phyllis Lyon, and Barbara Gittings were organizing and protesting harassment/discrimination which during the time was completely legal. Much has changed since those early pioneers for LGBTQ civil rights took such huge risks. The US military policy of Don't Ask, Don't Tell was repealed in 2011. Same-sex marriage was made legal throughout the United States in 2015. Presently, federal employees are protected against discrimination based upon sexual orientation. Transgender individuals do not have the same protection, including that the majority of states do not offer nondiscrimination/non-harassment protection. Just a little over half of the states have laws making discrimination/harassment based on sexual orientation illegal. Fortune 500 companies are important leaders, in that the majority of them now have policies barring discrimination/harassment based on sexual orientation and almost half have policies protecting transgender people. Internationally, 20 countries are ahead of the United States in passing legislation that guarantees the rights of transgender individuals. So, although progress is being substantially made for LGBTQ rights, total equality is far from achieved.

Coming out as LGBTQ may be expected to be easier because of these changes. Although it is incrementally easier in terms of accessibility of information via the internet and the greater number of support organizations, individuals of diverse ages still face challenges in coming out and being known as LGBTQ. Minority stress is the reason. A study published in 2014 (1) found that sexual minority individuals living in communities that have high levels of prejudice manifest at a much higher rate of mortality than those who live in low-prejudice communities. This difference results in a shorter lifespan of approximately 12 years, with death by suicide, homicide/violence, and cardiovascular disease being substantially higher. There also was an 18-year difference in the average age of completed suicide between communities with high levels of prejudice and those with low levels of prejudice. A 2016 survey of transgender people (2) found that 40% had attempted suicide in their lifetimes, which is nine times the U.S. population rate; 7% had attempted during the previous year, which is 12 times the U.S. population rate. This survey documented significant discrimination and harassment of transgender people across many aspects of their lives, including education, housing, and employment. Sixty percent of the individuals were out to their families. Family support was associated with reduced risk of homelessness, attempted suicide, and serious psychological distress. Still, 10% had experienced violence directed toward them by a family member, 7% had been kicked out of their homes, and 10% had run away. Nineteen percent had left a religious/spiritual community due to rejection.

A risk particularly for LGBTQ youth is that there are still mental health practitioners who offer so-called "conversion therapy." This approach, often entwined with religious beliefs, is not empirically proven and has significant ethical and clinical problems. Professional health organizations have issued statements against the practice of conversion therapy, and some states have outlawed its practice with minors. Especially for youth, the support of family can be crucial for their well-being. A 2010 study (3) found family acceptance for LGBT youth predicted greater self-esteem, social support, and overall health. Family acceptance was found to be protective against depression, substance use, and suicidal ideation/behaviors. A 2012 study (4) found that 97% of rural LGBT youth heard "gay" being used negatively as a term in school. Rural students also reported significant rates of verbal and physical harassment based upon sexual orientation and/or gender expression. Seventy percent reported lies and rumors being

spread about them, and 40% reported being cyber bullied. These negative experiences resulted in students missing school because they did not feel safe and having lower GPAs. School staff were said to rarely intervene regarding anti-LGBT harassment, and their responses were said to be ineffective. If a teacher says, "Don't do that," without there being consequences for the offending student, behavior will not change. School staff themselves were reported by 25% of the youth to have made homophobic remarks, by 30% to have made sexist remarks, and by 35% to have made anti-gender expression remarks. In a 2016 study (2), 77% of transgender individuals reported mistreatment during K-12 schooling, with 54% reporting verbal harassment, 24% reporting physical assault, and 13% reporting sexual assault. Twenty-four percent of the transgender individuals in college reported experiencing verbal, physical, or sexual harassment. Regarding harassment/discrimination for all LGBTQ individuals, it needs to be recognized that the intersection of racial/ethnic status often results in individuals experiencing even higher rates of discriminatory/harassing behavior. So, although progress is being substantially made for LGBTQ rights, total equality is far from achieved.

A 2010 study (5) found persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or heterosexual with any same-sex partners over their lifetime reported a statistically significant greater risk of childhood maltreatment, interpersonal violence, trauma to a close friend or relative, and unexpected death of someone to whom they were close. All of these individuals were at twice the risk of PTSD onset compared to heterosexuals who had not had any same-sex partners over their lifetime. A 2011 report (6) identified that two-thirds of LGBT older adults reported being victimized three or more times during their life. More than 20% of those older adults do not disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity to health professionals. This finding is paralleled elsewhere and is thought to be the result of fearing discrimination, based on past experience, while seeking medical treatment. Older adults living in rural areas face the additional challenges of fewer resources and an increased risk of isolation.

Even while great advances have been made for LGBTQ civil rights, serious challenges are still faced by this community. On the positive side, LGBTQ individuals have long demonstrated strengths and resiliency. During the U.S. AIDS epidemic, starting in 1981, it was the LGBTQ community and its allies that demonstrated heroism and compassion in the face of death, discrimination, and governmental inaction. In spite of ongoing minority stress, LGBTQ individuals have built communities and institutions to support and protect community members. "Family of choice" is a term the LGBTQ community has contributed to the American lexicon. It represents the wisdom that family is not limited to those to whom one is biologically or legally related. Many LGBTQ people throughout life provide support for others in the community. So while it can still be challenging to live as an LGBTQ person, there are presently more supportive and varied communities and resources. Also, the majority of Americans now favor equal rights for LGBTQ people. Allies to the LGBTQ community have been and are an important part of the community and its movement for equal rights. Together, we can all accomplish the goals set by the LGBTQ pioneers for civil rights.

#### References

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