

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

July 2020



Authors



Partner

This report was authored by:

Movement Advancement Project

MAP's mission is to provide independent and rigorous research, insight and communications that help speed equality and opportunity for all people. MAP works to ensure that all people have a fair chance to pursue health and happiness, earn a living, take care of the ones they love, be safe in their communities, and participate in civic life. For more information, visit www.lgbtmap.org.

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

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This work contains data generated from the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey, which was conducted by the National Center for Transgender Equality. To find out more about the U.S. Transgender Survey, visit <http://www.ustranssurvey.org>.

Recommended citation: Movement Advancement Project and Campaign for Southern Equality. July 2020. *Telling a New Southern Story: LGBTQ Resilience, Resistance, and Leadership*. www.lgbtmap.org/regional-south.

This report was developed in partnership with:

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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.

MAP is very grateful to the following major funders, whose generous support makes it possible for us to do our work:

David Bohnett Foundation
David Dechman & Michel Mercure
Ford Foundation
Gill Foundation
Esmond Harmsworth
Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund
Jim Hormel
Johnson Family Foundation
Laughing Gull Foundation
The Amy Mandel & Katina Rodis Fund
Weston Milliken
Ineke Mushovic
The Palette Fund
Mona Pittenger
H. van Ameringen Foundation
Wild Geese Foundation

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This is MAP’s first regional-focused report. It builds on content from MAP’s *Where We Call Home* series, focused on LGBTQ people in rural America. For more, visit www.lgbtmap.org/rural.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to those who graciously and generously shared their time, expertise, and experiences during our research and interview process and/or with data support. MAP and CSE would also like to thank those individuals and community members who shared their personal stories for this report.

Gbenga Ajilore, Center for American Progress

Dante Chinni, American Communities Project

Shannon Clawson, Georgia Equality

Jordan Cozby, Yale University

Chantelle Fisher-Borne, Out in the South

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Ana Hernández, Equality Federation

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Lyle Matthew Kan, Funders for LGBTQ Issues

Eva Kendrick, Faith in Public Life

Vee Lamneck, Equality Virginia

Jordun Lawrence, PRRI

Mamone, Queer Appalachia

Jon Harris Mauer, Equality Florida

Zakia McKensey, The Nationz Foundation

Joey McKinnon, Faith in Public Life

Lou Murrey, The STAY Project

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Natasha Stone, Fairness West Virginia

Nicole Townsend, Southerners on New Ground (SONG)

Andrew Wallace, Funders for LGBTQ Issues

Graham Younger, Faith in Public Life

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

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

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

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

“The South” and LGBTQ Southerners

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

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

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

Roughly 3.6 million LGBT adults, including over 525,000 transgender adults, live in the U.S. South—more than in any other region.

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

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

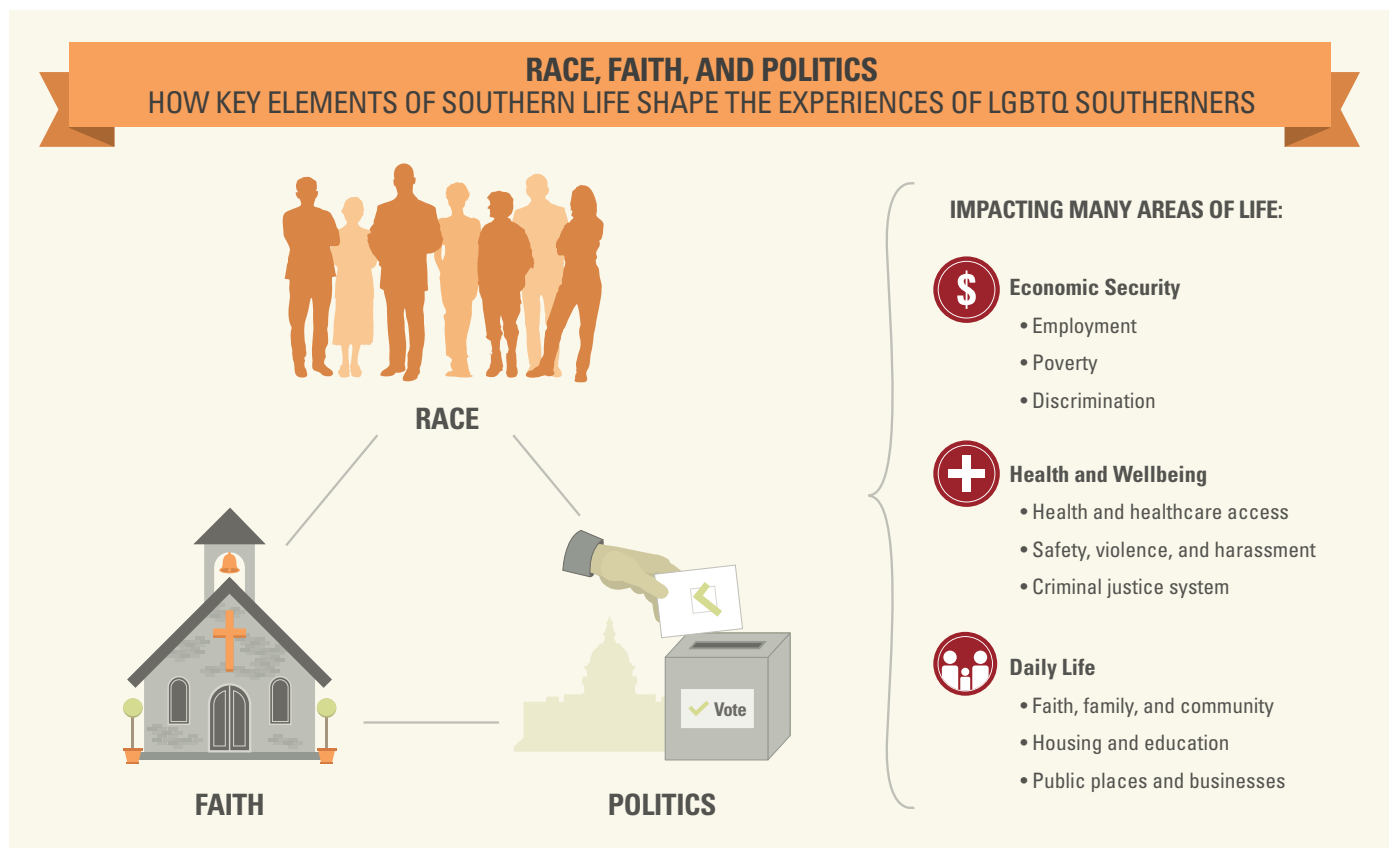
Many LGBTQ Southerners are also people of faith, raising children, or experiencing economic insecurity—and often at higher rates than LGBTQ people in other parts of the country. Rates of HIV are also higher in the South, meaning many LGBTQ Southerners, and especially those of color, are impacted by HIV,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

LGBTQ Life in the South

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

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

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



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



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



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



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

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

LGBTQ Politics in the South

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

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

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



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

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



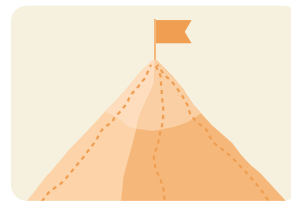
The LGBTQ community has a long history of providing and caring for one another, especially when institutions and governments have failed to do so. In the more

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



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

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



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

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

Ways to Further the Work of LGBTQ Southerners

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

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

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

Executive Summary Endnotes

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

I. INTRODUCTION

The U.S. South is a region not easily defined. Its history—and present—is one of both traditionalism and progress, racism and resistance, hardship and joy. Today, the South is also home to roughly one-third of all lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people in the country, more than in any other region.

For LGBTQ Southerners, there is no singular experience of being LGBTQ in the South. Rather, the South is home to diverse people and diverse experiences, including many LGBTQ people of color (especially Black LGBTQ people), LGBTQ people of faith, LGBTQ parents, and more. Millions live in large Southern cities, while others call the rural South home. Some live in the Deep South, while others live along the coasts of Florida or in the mountains of Appalachia.

As integral members of the broader Southern community, LGBTQ Southerners share in both the joys and hardships of Southern life, right alongside their non-LGBTQ neighbors. Some of the major issues shaping life in the South today include high rates of poverty and economic insecurity; obstacles to health and safety (including violence and policing); and challenges in daily life ranging from isolation to limited opportunities for housing, education, or needed services.

These challenges are often amplified for LGBTQ Southerners—and especially LGBTQ Southerners of color—due to several cornerstones of Southern life, including the history of slavery and the role of race; the centrality of faith and the influence of social conservatism; and the political power often held by one party. These cornerstones shape the lives of all Southerners, but they have a unique impact for LGBTQ people. Combined with pre-existing disparities, ongoing discrimination, and the most hostile policy landscape in the country for LGBTQ issues, the South is a complicated place for LGBTQ people. For example, Southern states are far less likely to have LGBTQ-inclusive laws and protections and far more likely to have harmful, discriminatory laws, leaving LGBTQ Southerners with even fewer legal protections than LGBTQ people in the rest of the country.

Importantly, however, the state policy landscape alone does not tell the whole story about LGBTQ life or prospects for political change in the South. Given the hostile policy landscape and difficulty of change at the state level, LGBTQ Southerners often work outside

the state legislative context, focusing on community, directly addressing the immediate needs of LGBTQ Southerners, and working in coalition across a broad range of issues. In fact, the South is home to some of the most innovative, resilient, and effective LGBTQ organizing and activism across the country. LGBTQ Southerners have an incredible amount to teach the broader LGBTQ community across the country about community building and advocacy—not despite the South’s hostile policy landscape, but exactly because of it. LGBTQ activism in the South often reflects the region’s unique social and political landscape, working on matters of racial justice, in faith communities, and in response to many of the South’s most pressing issues, including health care, poverty, and criminalization. When LGBTQ Southerners do engage in policy work, victories are frequent, but they may take a different form than in other parts of the country—meaning they are often overlooked by outsiders, especially when assessing prospects for change in the region.

Overall, **this report illustrates the unique experiences of LGBTQ Southerners and the innovative ways they build community, provide direct support, and make cultural and political change.** Judging the South and the quality of life for LGBTQ people in the South solely through the region’s state policy landscape minimizes the complexity, creativity, and resilience of LGBTQ Southerners—not to mention the lessons that LGBTQ advocates across the country can learn from their Southern kin for how to nurture community and build strong, diverse coalitions to effectively change hearts and minds, even in the most hostile halls of government.

II. WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “THE SOUTH”?

There are many different ways to think about the South, and even among people who identify as Southerners, there is little agreement as to which states are part of the region or what it means to live in the South. Some describe the South more as an identity or experience than a clearly defined geography, and that “Southernness” itself “may be more cultural than residential”—more a matter of how a person identifies than precisely where that person lives.¹ In many ways, this speaks to the geographic and cultural diversity of the region. Indeed, the South is one of the most diverse regions in the country, and increasingly so.

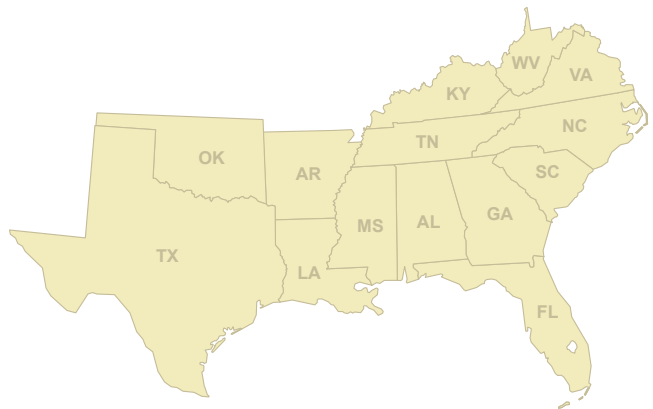
States in the South

This report focuses on 14 Southern states, as shown in *Figure 1*: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. This primarily reflects the U.S. Census Bureau's regional categories, while excluding the states of Maryland, Delaware, and the District of Columbia, which are more commonly thought of as part of the mid-Atlantic region.

That said, there are many ways to define the South. For example, a 2014 survey shows that there is considerable disagreement even among Southerners as to which states are part of the South. As shown in *Figure 2*, nearly 90% of Southerners said Alabama and Georgia are parts of the South, but only around 50% said the same for Virginia, Kentucky, or Arkansas.

One commonly used definition of Southern states is based on the history and continuing legacy of slavery and the Civil War. In this context, the South is often defined as the 11 Confederate states, or those that

Figure 1: Fourteen Southern States Examined in This Report

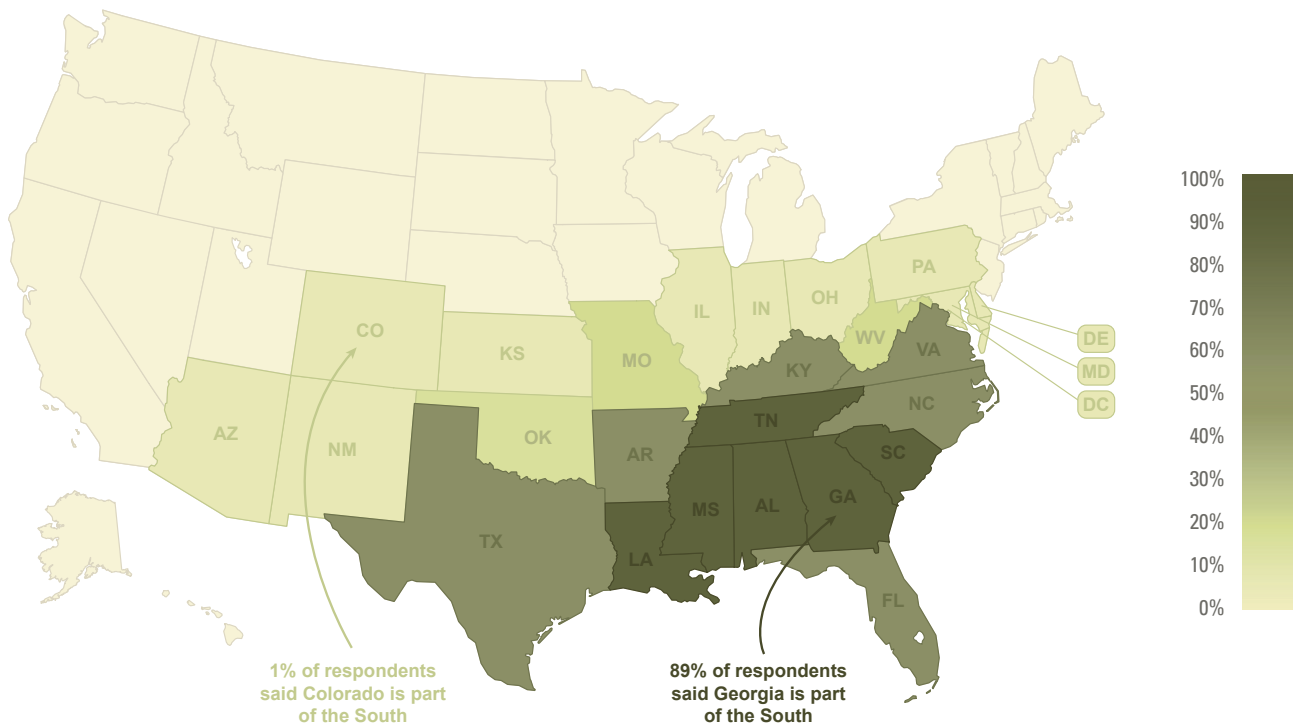


seceded from the Union in 1860 and 1861: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.

By contrast, the U.S. Census Bureau divides the country into regions for the purposes of demographic analysis, and it defines the South more broadly, encompassing the 11 confederate states as well as

Figure 2: Even Southerners Disagree About What States Are Part of the South

% of self-identified Southerners who say each state is a part of the South



Source: FiveThirtyEight. 2014. Graphic by Allison McCann. Survey of 1,135 people identifying "some" or "a lot" as a Southerner.

Delaware, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Maryland, West Virginia, and the District of Columbia.³

Other definitions or components of the South include, but are not limited to:

- **The Deep South**, which itself can vary in definition but generally refers to the states that were the most dependent on slavery and plantation economies, and today experience often extreme disparities in poverty and health. Typically, this definition includes at least Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina; it only sometimes includes Arkansas, Florida, and Texas, and includes other states even less frequently.⁴
- **The Black Belt**, referring to counties and regions in the South that, as Booker T. Washington described in 1901, were first “distinguished by the colour of the soil. The part of country possessing this thick, dark, and naturally rich soil was, of course, the part of the South where [enslaved people] were most profitable, and consequently they were taken there in the largest numbers. Later, and especially since the [Civil War], the term seems to be used wholly in a political sense—that is, to designate the counties where the black people outnumber the white.”⁵ These counties are primarily in the Deep South states of Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia, among others.
- **The Rim, or Peripheral, South**, typically referring to states—such as Arkansas, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia—just north of the states of the Deep South. This can sometimes include Florida and Texas, states on the edges of the Deep South.
- **Appalachia**, a region with its own unique political, social, and cultural history, and that geographically overlaps parts of the South and extends into non-Southern states such as Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York.⁶

Diversity of the South

While the South as a region is unique from other parts of the country, it is also important to recognize the incredible diversity within the South. As of 2018, over 117 million people live in the South,⁶ each with their own experiences, backgrounds, values, and more. Geographically, the region ranges from the Appalachian Mountains to the Gulf and Atlantic shorelines, and from rural Black Belt farmland to large urban areas and more. Demographically, the South is home to the majority

The South is home to:

53% of all Black people

36% of all Hispanic or Latino people

34% of all non-Hispanic white people

32% of all multiracial people

31% of all Native Americans

21% of all Asian people

in the United States.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. 2018 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. “The South” as defined in this report (see Figure 1).

(53%) of all Black people in the country, as well as more than one in three (36%) Hispanic or Latino people in the country. The diversity of the South also includes LGBTQ people: roughly one out of every three (32%) LGBTQ adults in the United States lives in the South, more than in any other region in the country. This diversity unfolds both across Southern states and across the various cities, towns, and communities within each state.



As of 2018, the South is home to 50.6 million people of color, including over 21 million Black residents and nearly 22 million Hispanic or Latino residents.⁷ In addition to Black and Latinx Southerners, there are over seven million more Southerners of color, including Asian, Native American and indigenous, and multiracial people. This means over 43% of Southerners are people of color, higher than the national rate of 40% and second only to the West, where 50% of residents are people of color.

The South is home to more Black people than any other U.S. region and is home to the majority (53%) of all Black residents nationwide.⁸ As of 2018, U.S. Census data show that more than 21 million of the 40 million Black people nationwide live in the South. And, nearly nine out of 10 Black people who live in rural areas and small towns nationwide live in the South.⁹ As a share of the

^c For more on the history of Appalachia, see Elizabeth Catts’s *What You’re Getting Wrong About Appalachia* (2018).

Southern population, 18.2% of all Southerners are Black, a higher share than in the national population (13.4% of U.S. residents are Black). Additionally, the Southern Black population is growing. For example—and in what some researchers are calling the New Great Migration¹⁰—between 2005 and 2010, more than 66,000 Black people moved to the South from other parts of the country, with the cities of Atlanta, Dallas, Houston, and Miami seeing the largest increases.¹¹

The South is also home to the second largest population of Latino people in the country, with nearly 22 million Latinos, or 36% of all Latinos in the country.¹² Only the West has more Hispanic or Latino residents. As a share of the Southern population, 18.6% of all Southerners are Latino. The Southern Latino population is also growing; from 2008 to 2018, the Latino population in the South grew 33%, or by over 5.6 million people, the largest growth of any region during that time period.¹³

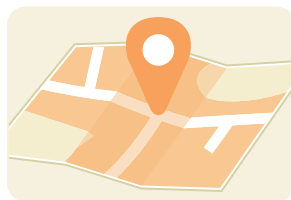
While the South as a region is racially diverse, different communities of color are concentrated in different parts of the South. For example, Latinx Southerners live throughout the South, but are the largest community of color, by percent of the state population, in Texas (40%), Florida (26%), and Oklahoma (11%). Black residents make up the largest communities of color in the remaining 11 Southern states, though the size of the Black community varies widely across Southern states: for example, Black residents are the largest racial minority group in both West Virginia and Mississippi, but in West Virginia, Black residents make up only 3.8% of the state population, while in Mississippi 37.8% of the state population is Black.



According to the CDC, nationwide, 25.6% of adults have some type of disability.¹⁴ The South is home to more people with disabilities than any other region, even when controlling for age.¹⁵ Twelve out of 14 Southern states have a higher rate of adults with disabilities, ranging from South Carolina's 26.3% to West Virginia's 39.2%.¹⁶ Only Texas (25.6%) and Virginia (23.6%) are at or below the national average rate.



In a groundbreaking project, the American Communities Project (ACP) used “a set of 36 different indicators—everything from population density to military service members” and more to identify 15 types of American communities, such as “College Towns,” “Aging Farmlands,” or “Big Cities.”¹⁷ As shown in *Figure 3* on the following page, 14 of these 15 community types are present in the South, which speaks to the geographical and demographic diversity of the South. That said, more than half of Southern counties are classified as “African American South” or “Evangelical Hubs,” followed by “Working Class Country” (13%) and “Exurbs” (9%). See the *American Communities Project* sidebar for a deeper exploration of these various community types.

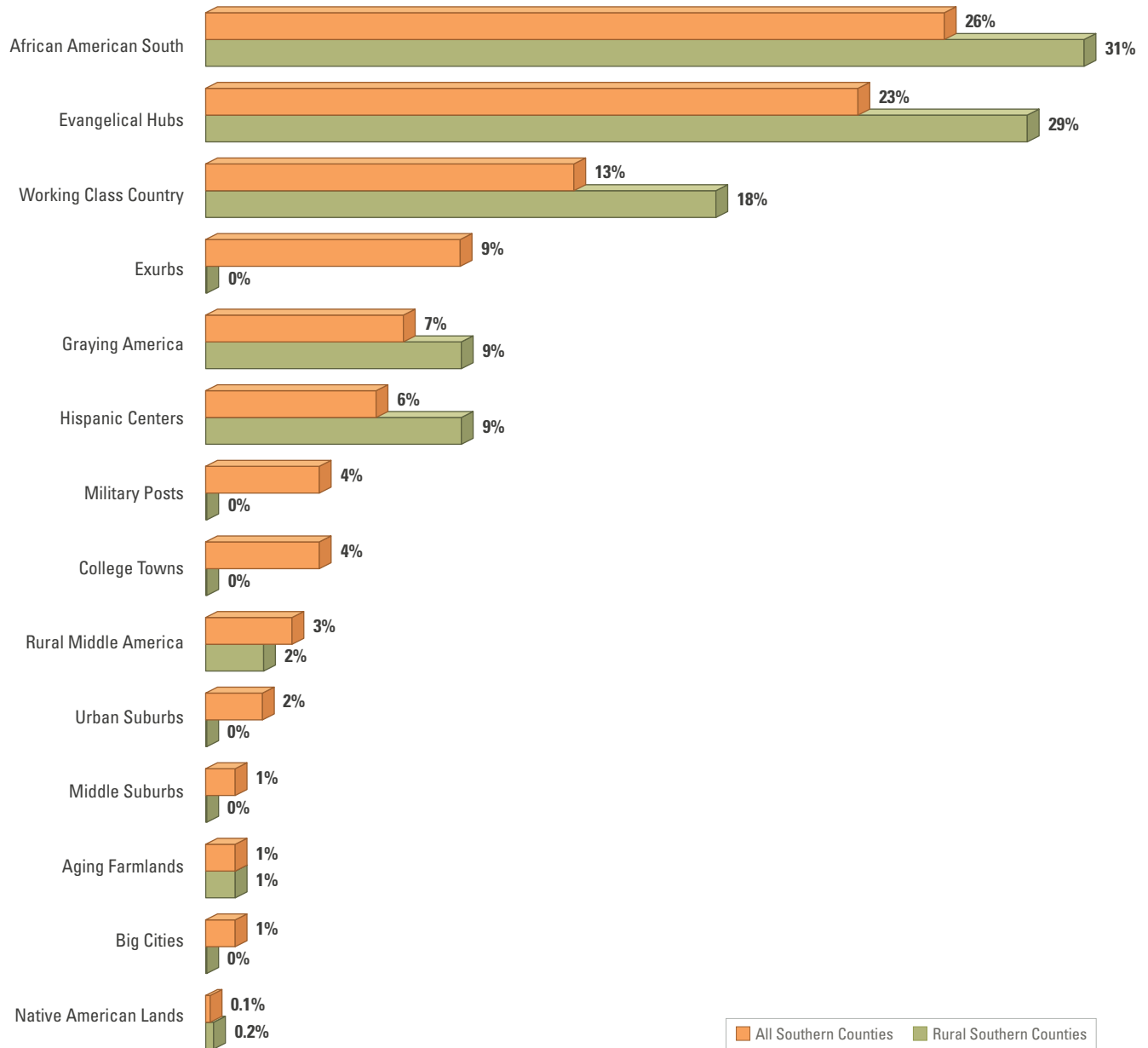


Nearly two out of every three (65%) counties in these 14 Southern states are mostly or entirely rural, according to the U.S. Census. Yet, the South is also home to five of the 15 largest cities in the United States (Houston, San Antonio, Dallas, and Austin in Texas and Jacksonville, Florida).¹⁸ Within the rural South, there are wide-ranging differences in community types and experiences, as shown in *Figure 3* on the following page. Notably, an even larger share of rural counties in the South are predominantly communities of color (“African American South,” “Hispanic Centers,” “Native American Lands”), “Evangelical Hubs,” or “Working Class Country,” as compared to the South as a whole.

Additionally, Southerners are diverse in their incomes and economic security, as well as in their health and access to healthcare. These are discussed in more detail in later sections of the report.

Figure 3: Southern Communities are Diverse, and Rural Communities Are Especially Likely to Be Predominantly People of Color, Evangelical, and Working Class

% of All Southern Counties vs. Rural Southern Counties That Are Each Community Type



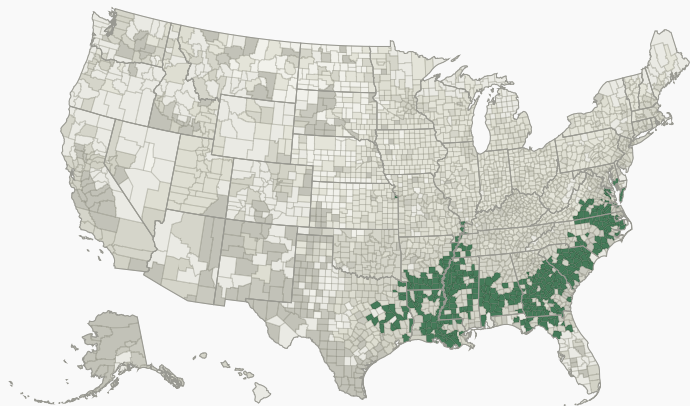
Note: This graph can be read in the following way: the American Communities Project classifies 23% of all Southern counties as "Evangelical Hubs." Looking only at rural Southern counties, an even higher proportion (29%) are "Evangelical Hubs."

Source: MAP analysis of American Communities Project typology in Southern counties. Southern states as defined by this report; rural counties as defined by ACP.

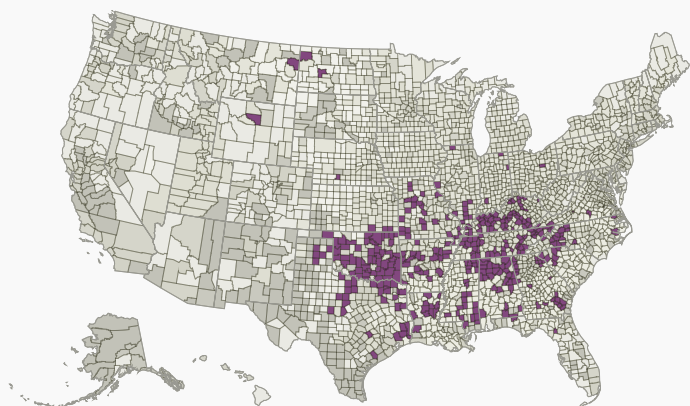


American Communities Project's Key Community Types in the South

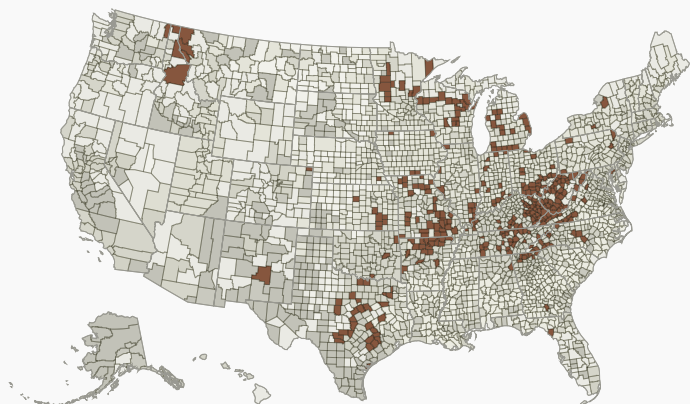
The American Communities Project (ACP) identifies 15 unique types of communities across the country, each with its own distinctive characteristics. These are identified at the county level. While every county may contain elements of multiple "types" (such as a county that has both a large Evangelical population and a large elderly population), ACP classified counties based on their most distinguishing characteristics. The following are descriptions adapted from the American Communities Project about the five county types most prevalent in the 14 Southern states in this report.



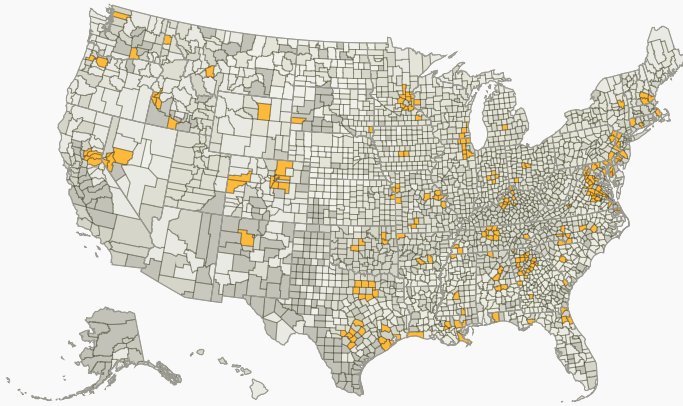
African American South: These counties are home to 16.4 million people and to large African American populations. In these counties, the median Black population is 37%, compared to 13.4% of the national population. The counties also have relatively small Hispanic populations, with a median of 3%. With a median household income of just \$37,500, the African American South is the least wealthy of the 15 county types in the ACP. In these counties, an average of only one in five (20.5%) have a college degree, 10% lower than the national average. At 7%, unemployment is roughly 2% higher in these communities than in the rest of the nation. The African American South also experiences elevated rates of children in poverty, 34% compared to the national average of 20%.



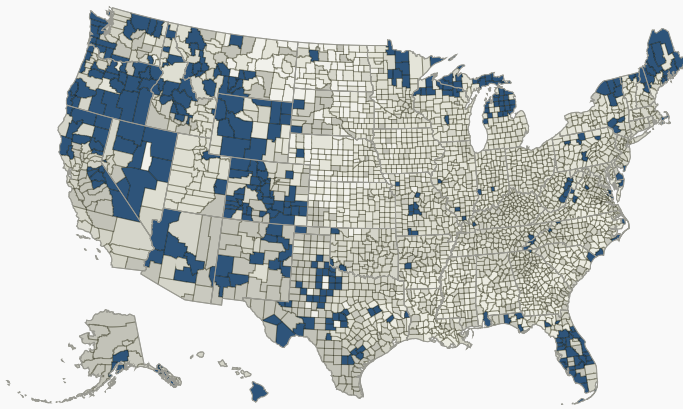
Evangelical Hubs: These counties are heavily concentrated in the South, forming a belt that spans from Texas to North Carolina. They have a high number of people who identify as evangelical and belong to churches such as the Southern Baptist Convention. These counties are among the most politically conservative types, are less diverse (82% white), have lower median incomes and educational attainment, and higher rates of teen pregnancy than other communities. Access to healthcare in these counties is also very difficult, with far fewer providers available compared to national averages.



Working Class Country: Largely rural in nature, Working Class Country counties are perhaps more clearly understood as white working class; they are among the least diverse places in the ACP, with a population that is 95% white, 2% Hispanic, and 1% African American. They also generally have lower incomes and college education rates, and older populations. In the South, these counties are clustered in Appalachia and the Arkansas Ozarks.



Exurbs: These counties are located on the outskirts of metropolitan areas, “in the space between suburban and rural America.” They are both populous and relatively wealthy, with a median household income (nationwide, not only in the South) of about \$65,500. Residents of Exurb counties are among the most educated in ACP’s typology, with over one-third of residents holding a bachelor’s degree. Rates of poverty are lower, including among children, and rates of reported violent crime are less than half the national average. However, access to health care is difficult, with fewer physicians and mental health providers per person than the national average.



Graying America: These communities have a large share of adults ages 62 and older, with only a small percentage of the population under 18. Nearly 80% of the populations in these communities are white. Healthcare access is difficult in these counties, with many fewer medical providers per person than the national average. While these counties comprise 7% of counties across the South, they are primarily in Texas and southern Florida. In fact, Graying America counties are the most common community type in Florida, making up over 40% of Florida’s counties, and the second most common community type in Texas after Hispanic Centers.

For more information about the American Communities Project, including access to the maps and more, visit: www.americancommunities.org.

III. WHO ARE LGBTQ SOUTHERNERS?

Contrary to media depictions of LGBTQ people primarily living on the East or West coasts, **the South is home to more LGBTQ people than any other region in the United States.** Nearly one out of every three (32%) LGBTQ^d people in the United States, and nearly two out of five (38%) transgender people, live in the South (*Figure 4* on the next page).¹⁹ This means that roughly 3.6 million LGBTQ adults, including over 525,000 transgender adults, live in the U.S. South—more than in any other region. Among Southern states, Florida has the largest percent of its population who identify as LGBT: 4.6% of Floridians identified as LGBT in the 2015–2017 Gallup Daily Tracking poll, higher than the 4.5% of the total U.S. population who are LGBT.²⁰ Alabama had the lowest in the South, with 3.1% of adults identifying as LGBT.

Roughly 3.6 million LGBT adults, including over 525,000 transgender adults, live in the U.S. South—more than in any other region.

While it is important to understand the unique experiences of LGBTQ people in the South, LGBTQ Southerners are integral members of the broader Southern population and community. And because the South is a diverse region comprised of millions of people from many different backgrounds and experiences, LGBTQ Southerners—like Southerners more broadly—are also diverse, including many people of color, people of faith, and people raising children. Millions live in large Southern cities, while others call the rural South home. They are neighbors, coworkers, family members, and congregants in communities across the South.

More than four in 10 LGBTQ people in the South are people of color. Overall, 41% of LGBT people in the South are people of color, according to data from 2014.²¹ More than one in five (22%) LGBT Southerners are Black (the highest of any region), and 16% of LGBT Southerners are Latino.²² More recent data show that the South's Latinx population has grown dramatically, so the number of LGBTQ Latinx people in the South is also likely higher today.

LGBTQ Southerners live in rural, urban, and suburban areas. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of counties in the South are mostly or entirely rural, and research finds that nationally many LGBTQ people live in rural communities.²³ Given that

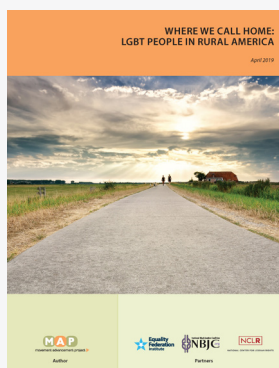
the South is nearly two-thirds rural, and that the South is home to more LGBTQ people than any other region, it is likely that the South is also home to more LGBTQ people living in rural communities than any other region. That said, many LGBTQ Southerners also live in cities and their suburban surroundings: nine of the 21 largest metropolitan areas in the United States with LGBT populations above the national average were in the South.^{24,e}

LGBTQ people, especially in the South, are also people of faith. Data from the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) show that over half of LGBTQ Southerners (55%) are religiously affiliated, slightly more than LGBTQ people outside the South (52%).²⁵ Additionally, LGBTQ Southerners are more likely than LGBTQ people in other parts of the country to be Christian: 42% of LGBTQ Southerners are Christian, compared to 38% of LGBTQ people outside the South. LGBTQ Southerners are also more than twice as likely as their non-LGBTQ Southern neighbors to be people of non-Christian faith, with over 6% of LGBTQ Southerners identifying as Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, or something else.

Many LGBTQ people in the South are raising children. Data from the American Community Survey show that 20% of same-sex couples in the South are raising children, including 12% of same-sex couples who are raising adopted children.²⁶ In fact, same-sex couples in the South are nearly four times more likely than different-sex married couples to be raising adopted children.²⁷ In the 2010 Census, Mississippi

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

^e In the year of the study (2015), 3.6% of people nationwide identified as LGBT. The nine Southern metropolitan areas with higher-than-average LGBT populations were: Austin–Round Rock (5.3%), New Orleans–Metairie (5.1%), Louisville/Jefferson County (4.5%), Virginia Beach–Norfolk–Newport News (4.4%), Jacksonville (4.3%), Miami–Fort Lauderdale–West Palm Beach (4.2%), Atlanta–Sandy Springs–Roswell (4.2%), Orlando–Kissimmee–Sanford (4.1%), and Tampa–St. Petersburg–Clearwater (4.1%).



For more on LGBTQ experiences in rural areas—much of which applies directly to LGBTQ life in the South—see MAP’s (2019) “Where We Call Home” series.

had the highest rate in the nation of same-sex couples raising children, with 25.7% of same-sex couples raising children, compared to the national rate of 17.2%.²⁸

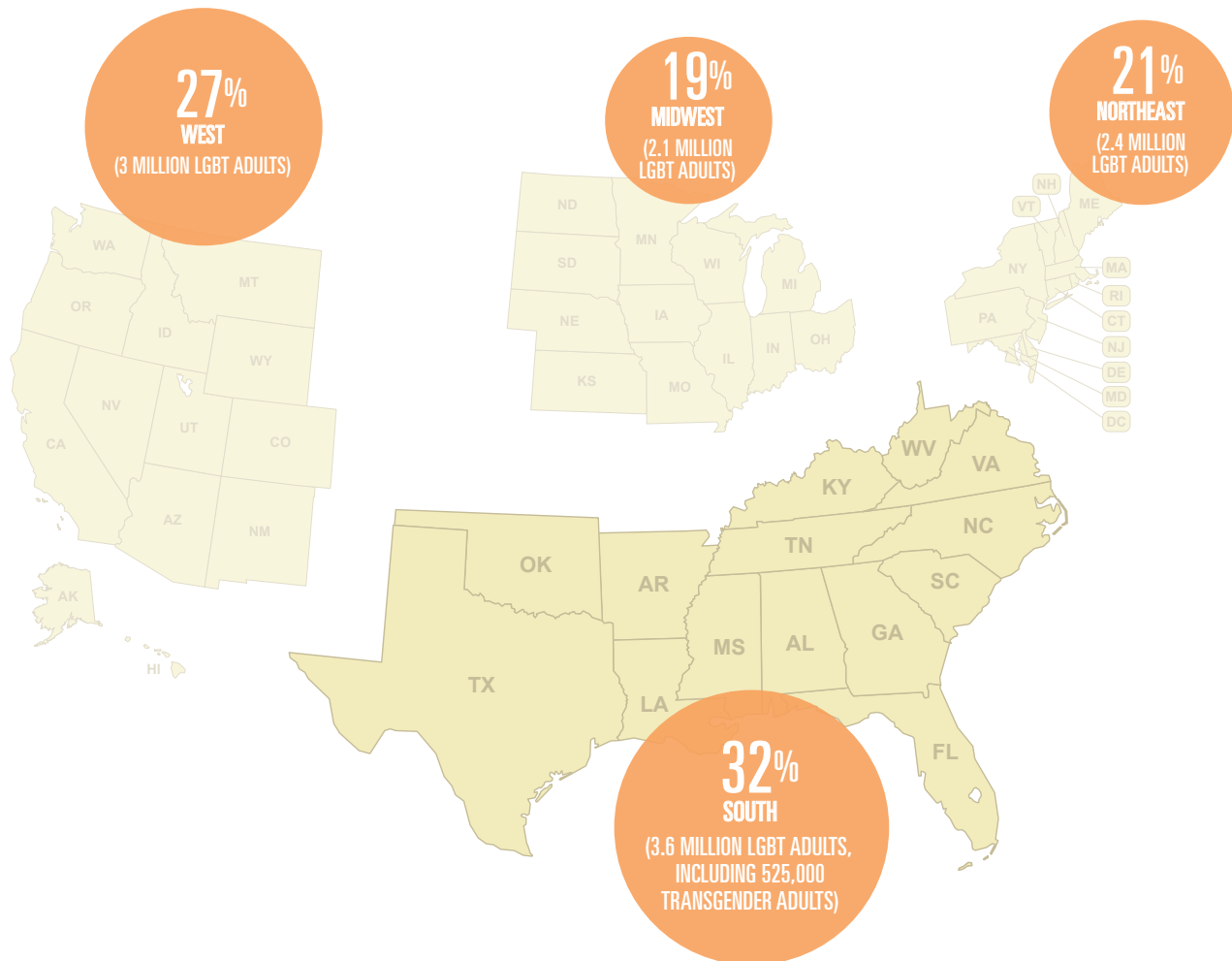
Rates of HIV are higher in the South. The South is home to the highest rates of HIV in the country, with many members of the LGBTQ people impacted by HIV, whether personally or in their community. Data from 2018 show that gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men accounted for 69% of all new HIV diagnoses in the United States, and among these men, roughly two-thirds were either Black or Latino.²⁹ This is discussed in more detail on [pages 16-17](#).

LGBTQ people, including in the South, are more likely to experience poverty and economic insecurity. Nationwide, 22% of LGBT people live in poverty,

compared to 16% of non-LGBT people, with higher rates among Black LGBT people (31%), transgender people (29%), bisexual women (29%), and LGBT people in rural areas (26%).³⁰ Mirroring national trends, LGBTQ Southerners are at increased risk for economic insecurity, as discussed in more detail on [pages 13-15](#).

The U.S. South is diverse and not easily defined. Experiences of Southern life can range widely from one state to the next, as well as from one community to the next or within a given community. Understanding this complexity and diversity in the South helps illuminate how certain features of life in the South, as discussed next, can play out differently or have different impacts even within the South.

Figure 4: One in Three LGBT Adults in the United States Live in the South, More Than in Any Other Region
Percent of National LGBT Adult Population Living in Each Region



Source: LGBT population data from The Williams Institute's (2019) *Adult LGBT Population in the United States*. May not sum to 100 due to rounding.

IV. LGBTQ LIFE IN THE SOUTH

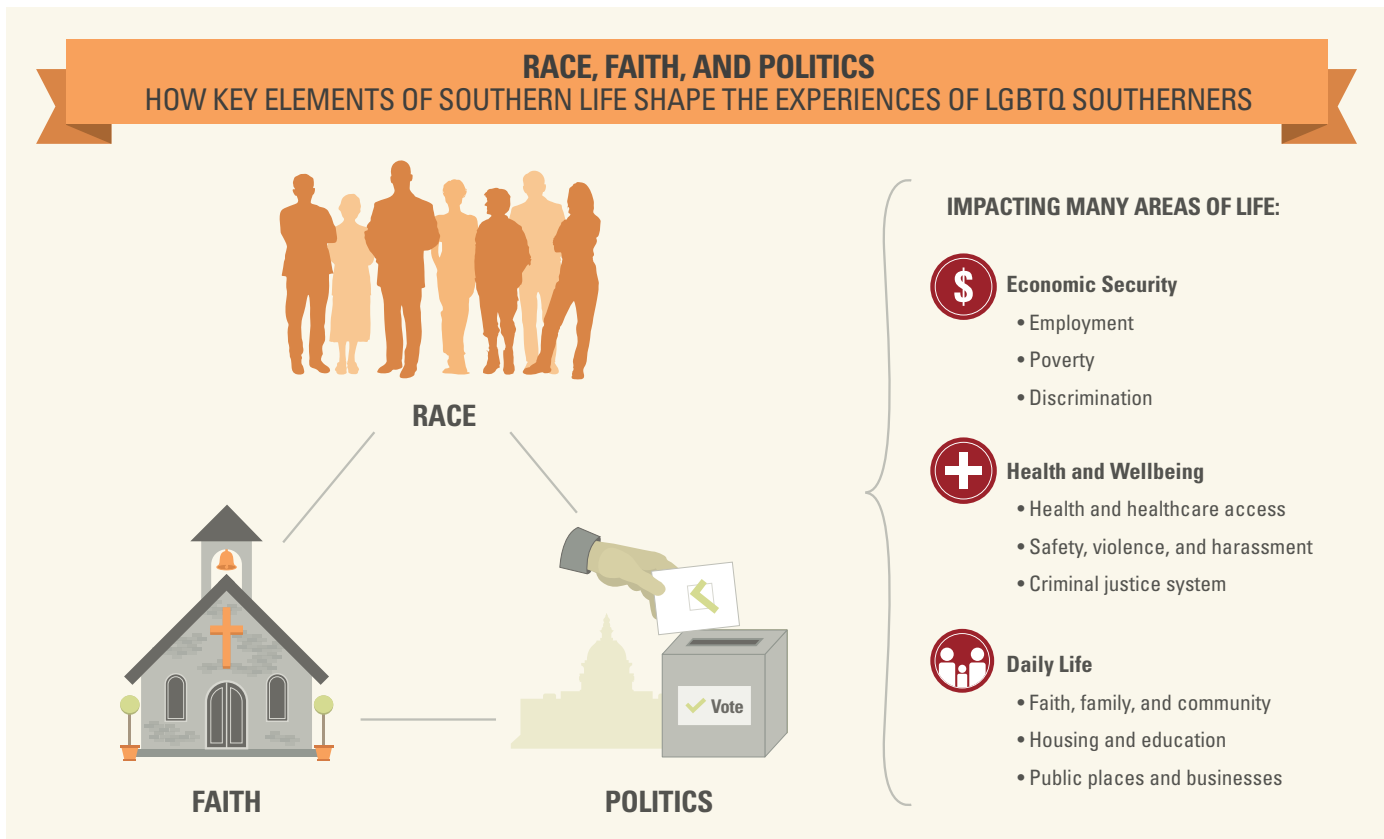
Every region of the country has its joys and its challenges. Life in the South is no different: it is vibrant and beautiful, even as it contains its own challenges and hardships. It is a region deeply rooted in history but shifting and evolving at a faster rate than many parts of the country. But it is also commonly portrayed (especially by those outside the region) mainly by its hardships, and often as a uniquely regressive and prejudiced part of the country. And while the South does indeed have its challenges and a conservative policy landscape, as discussed throughout this report, it remains the case that over 117 million people—including LGBTQ people—choose to call the South home.

In fact, more LGBTQ people live in the South than in any other part of the United States, with 3.6 million—or nearly one in every three (32%)—LGBTQ people calling the South home. Many LGBTQ people grew up in the South and live there to be close to family or to remain part of the culture and community they call home. Others have moved there from other parts of the country, drawn by jobs, family, quality of life, and more. Southern cities like New Orleans, Austin, Fort Lauderdale, and others have been ranked in the top 10 places for LGBTQ retirement,³¹

while other cities like Morgantown (West Virginia) and Fayetteville (Arkansas) have been rated among the top 10 best cities to raise children.³² In fact, research shows that in recent years, LGBTQ people have increasingly been moving to traditionally “red” states, including many in the South, such as Kentucky, Virginia, Louisiana, and Texas.³³

While it is challenging to summarize life in a region as geographically, demographically, and culturally diverse as the South, there are several cornerstones that uniquely shape the experiences, communities, institutions, governments, and broader society of the region, in ways distinct from the rest of the country. These include race and the legacy of slavery; the intertwined influences of social conservatism and faith; and dominant one-party control across the region’s political institutions, as shown in the infographic below. Each cornerstone is infused in the others: race and the legacy of slavery are woven into the religious, social, and political fabric of the South, and conservative cultural norms influence how race, religion, and politics are (or are not) addressed.

Each of these cornerstones strongly shape the region’s culture and politics for all residents, but they also have unique implications for LGBTQ people who call the region home. For LGBTQ Southerners, these



cornerstones inform nearly everything, from daily life and relationships to economic security, health and wellbeing, politics, possibilities for political and social change, and how that change is sought. This section explores these cornerstones and then examines their impact on various aspects of life for LGBTQ people in the South.

Key Cornerstones of Life in the South and Their Impact on LGBTQ People



Race and the legacy of slavery continue to shape life throughout the United States, but in the South, this has distinct elements. First, while much has

changed in the South over past decades, the 400-year legacies of slavery and segregation in the South continue to have clear and harmful impacts on economic, educational, and health outcomes for Black Southerners, especially compared to their white neighbors. For example, Southern communities that historically had high concentrations of enslaved Black people now have high rates of racial segregation in schools, and disparities such as these are often even larger than elsewhere in the South or the nation more generally.³⁴ Second, the South continues to be home to more Black people than any other U.S. region, with 53% of all Black residents nationwide living in the South.³⁵ This concentration of Black residents means that racial disparities and the impacts of racist policies are also concentrated or amplified. Additionally, the legacy of slavery affects Southerners' beliefs about race and politics today,³⁶ and this in turn shapes both policy and the experiences of Southerners of color, including Latinos and other non-Black people of color—especially relevant given the rapidly growing population of immigrants and Latinos in the South. Importantly, this history also means that the region is home to remarkably resilient people and communities of color, as well as a strong history of organizing and resistance that provides the foundation of many progressive movements, including both the civil rights movement and the LGBTQ movement.

For LGBTQ Southerners, the South's relationship to race has several implications. First, LGBTQ communities in the South are racially and ethnically diverse, reflecting the region's diversity and especially its large Black population. There are more Black LGBTQ people in the South than in any other region,³⁷ and as discussed in more detail in the *LGBTQ Organizing and Advocacy in the South* section, there are many organizations in the South

that focus specifically on supporting LGBTQ people of color, particularly Black LGBTQ people. Many other LGBTQ organizations in the South also provide programming and services specifically for LGBTQ communities of color, engage in anti-racism work as part of their mission, and further work to ensure their staff are reflective of the communities they serve. Second, LGBTQ people of color in the region experience the heightened impacts of racism and the legacy of slavery, in addition to and in interaction with the South's generally more conservative attitudes toward sexuality and gender. LGBTQ Southerners of color may experience rejection or discrimination based on multiple aspects of who they are: their race or ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, and more. While this is true across the country, there is no question that race is an especially central part of Southern life and experience.



Social conservatism and the centrality of faith, especially Christianity, are historical and cultural cornerstones of life in the South. Together these infuse everything from where and when socializing and community support

happens, the interactions between individuals, and how political change occurs.

Data from the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) show that the large majority of people in the South (73%) identify as Christians, more so than in any other region.³⁸ While Christianity is the predominant religion in the South and nationwide, it is important to acknowledge the diversity of belief and experience both within the South and within Christianity itself. As shown in *Figure 5* on the next page, 73% of Southerners identify as some denomination of Christian, while 21% of Southerners are religiously unaffiliated. Another 4% of Southern adults are Jewish (1%), Muslim (1%), or a different non-Christian religion (2%). The South's religious diversity is also growing. According to Pew Research Center, from 2009 to 2019, the number of Southerners of non-Christian faith backgrounds, such as Judaism or Islam, has grown from 3% to 5%, and the number of religiously unaffiliated Southerners has grown from 13% to 23%.³⁹

While the South is religiously diverse, Southerners are more likely than residents of any other region to be Christian, Evangelical, "highly religious," and more broadly conservative in their beliefs. Data from Pew Research Center show that Southerners are more likely than

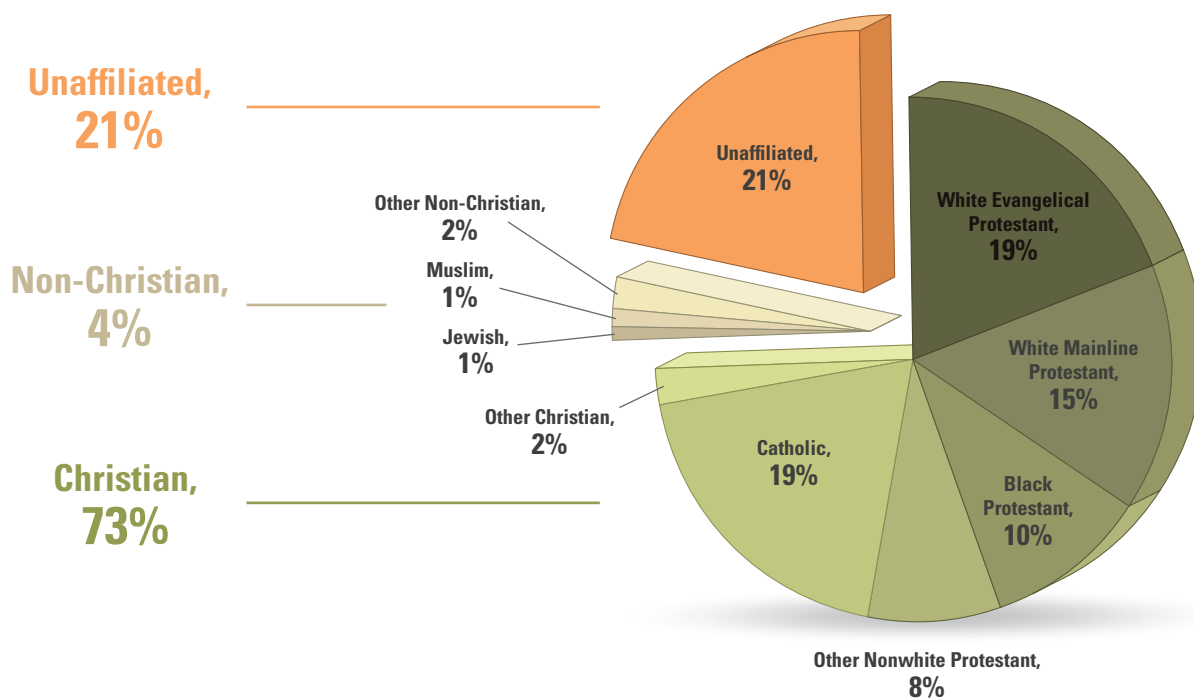
those in any other region to identify as Christian. They are also more likely to specifically identify as Evangelical Protestant, a group with distinctly conservative beliefs and active political participation.⁴⁰ Southerners are also more likely to be “highly religious,” as measured by regular church attendance, participation in church groups and activities, and beliefs about God. As of 2019, more than half (51%) of adults in the South attended religious services at least once a month, with 36% attending at least once a week—the highest of any region in the country.⁴¹ Given that nearly three-quarters of Southerners identify as Christian (and many in conservative Christian traditions), and further, that Southerners are especially likely to be regular and active participants in their faith community, it is clear that Christianity also plays a large role in the social lives of many Southerners.

Pew Research also shows that many “highly religious” Southerners are also socially and politically conservative, reflecting the infusing of faith with social and political life. In much of the South, there is a prevailing feeling of an even broader conservatism, whether explicitly religious or not: a preference for “traditional values,” a desire to move slowly on social

issues and preserve the status quo, a resistance to “outside influence,” and a reverence for the “way things were.” Indeed, Southern states rank the highest on broader measures of cultural conservatism.⁴²

For LGBTQ Southerners, the roles of faith and conservatism, and their impacts on Southern life and culture, can be both a positive and a challenge in many areas of life. For LGBTQ Southerners who are people of faith, having a welcoming faith community that embraces their LGBTQ identity can be powerful and important. Additionally, faith communities provide not only religious connection and fulfillment, but key resources such as meals, transportation, activities, and social connection. Especially in rural areas, faith communities also frequently act as key providers of both physical and mental health care, help with job training or searching, and more. Historically and today, many houses of faith are places for community engagement and action around social justice issues, whether during the Civil Rights Movement or today on issues not only of LGBTQ equality but around racial equity, poverty, and more. Recognizing that faith can be an incredible power for good and improving not only individuals’ lives but

Figure 5: Southerners Are Religiously Diverse, But Majority Christian
 % of Southerners of Each Religious Affiliation



Note: PRRI uses the Census definition of the South, which includes Delaware, D.C., and Maryland. Per PRRI data, numbers may not sum to 100.
 Source: PRRI American Values Atlas 2019.

the broader health and wellbeing of communities, faith communities that are inclusive and welcoming have the opportunity to shift culture in meaningful ways.

Yet at the same time, the strong focus in many communities on faith poses a risk for some LGBTQ people. If faith communities are exclusionary, this can cause many types of harm to LGBTQ people of faith. Not only would it be emotionally and spiritually hurtful for LGBTQ people of faith to be rejected or cut off from their faith communities, but it would also cut off their access to many of the additional benefits and services provided by faith communities, including social connection, professional networking, or assistance with meals, clothing, transportation, and housing. Such rejection can also cause political harm: for example, Evangelical voters in particular have been slower to approve of marriage for same-sex couples and LGBTQ-inclusive nondiscrimination laws, and given that Evangelicals are both politically active and a large share of the Southern population, this faith-based rejection can escalate into political rejection for LGBTQ Southerners.



Another defining element of Southern life and politics is **the historical dominance of a single political party.**

Which party and what those parties each stand for has changed over time,^f but historically, residents of the South have overwhelmingly identified as members of one party (e.g., a Southern Democrat). This integration of party affiliation with (white) Southernness itself remains salient today, even as Southern partisanship continues to evolve. Today, not only does the Republican party hold dominant control of Southern state governments,

In 2020, 93% of Southern state legislatures are Republican controlled, compared to 58% of state legislatures nationwide. Similarly, 71% of Southern governors are Republican, compared to 51% of governors nationwide.

National Conference of
State Legislatures.



but Southern states are much more likely to have Republican governors or Republican-led legislatures than the rest of the country. This means that many of the same obstacles experienced in the 19th century when Democrats had a political hold on the South—little competition for minority votes, a strong ability to prevent federal intervention, selective responsiveness to the will of Southern voters, and more—remain present today.⁴³ This has broad implications for progressive policy change across a range of issues, including LGBTQ policies: the lopsided Republican control, and especially by the wide margins seen in the South, means that change must often be sought through broad coalitions, in more incremental steps, or outside the legislative system entirely.

For LGBTQ Southerners, this overarching one-party control—especially when combined with the region's broader social and religious conservatism—means that the Southern policy landscape is especially hostile to LGBTQ issues, as discussed in detail on [pages 24-30](#). On average, Southern states are far less likely to have LGBTQ-inclusive laws, and instead are far more likely to have harmful, discriminatory laws. Additionally, because the political party that maintains control throughout most of the South is generally unsupportive of LGBTQ issues, political change can be extremely difficult. This reality leads many LGBTQ Southerners and advocates to seek different paths for political change, often through broad coalitions and outside of a state legislative context. The *LGBTQ Organizing and Advocacy in the South* section, beginning on [page 31](#), explores how LGBTQ Southerners have responded to this political climate.

The Economic Lives of LGBTQ People in the South

The ability to make a living and provide for one's family is a critical priority for many people. Yet not all people have the same opportunities or access to make a living wage, to hold a job free from discrimination and mistreatment, or to know the security that comes from even a modest savings or stable employment. As Southerners, LGBTQ people in the South are vulnerable to many of the same economic and financial challenges as their non-LGBTQ neighbors, but research shows they often experience these challenges at even higher rates, while also facing discrimination in the workplace.

^f For more, see Angie Maxwell and Todd Shields's (2019) *The Long Southern Strategy: How Chasing White Voters in the South Changed American Politics*.

In the South, both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ residents experience higher rates of poverty and economic insecurity than the rest of the nation, with even wider disparities for people of color in the region. Additionally, Southern states have few, if any, state-level legal protections against discrimination in the workplace, along with few protections for workers generally. Importantly, a June 2020 U.S. Supreme Court ruling confirmed that, under federal employment law, it is illegal to discriminate in the workplace against LGBTQ people. While this ruling provides critical and long overdue protection for LGBTQ workers nationwide, state nondiscrimination laws remain important for multiple reasons. For example, federal employment nondiscrimination law applies to workplaces with 15 or more employees, but many people work for employers below that threshold. State laws can protect additional workers at smaller workplaces, and further are often passed alongside other LGBTQ-inclusive laws such as nondiscrimination in housing or public places. Additionally, many Southern states have religious exemption laws that provide a license to discriminate, and the lack of LGBTQ-inclusive state nondiscrimination laws in the region means that LGBTQ Southerners remain at heightened risk for discrimination—all while still enduring the economic and personal effects of past discrimination.

These high rates of economic insecurity and the lack of employment protections in the South are inextricably linked to both the racial legacy of the South and the persistence of concentrated political power in one party. Historical and ongoing racial segregation and discrimination mean that many Black people live in communities that have been systematically deprived of economic and educational investment, leading to fewer opportunities for economic mobility and stability. And, as the Southern economy continues its shift from agricultural and manufacturing work to service and other types of industry, there remain high levels of occupational segregation—meaning that women, people of color, and other minorities often have fewer opportunities for jobs and are more likely to work in lower-paying jobs.⁴⁴ Additionally, while many Southern cities and their suburbs are gaining population and the economic gains that come with them, many Southern rural counties continue to experience population decline, factory and hospital closures, and the resulting economic harms. This means that rural Southern communities—where LGBTQ people and people of color in the South already face higher rates of poverty and economic insecurity—are facing an increasingly uphill challenge, with both

fewer protections and fewer resources. Meanwhile, there is deep resistance among Republican political leaders in the South to many pro-worker policies, ranging from laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity to laws guaranteeing a living wage or ensuring the right of labor unions to organize workers.

Rates of Employment Discrimination and Unemployment

Nationwide, Gallup data show that—even pre-COVID-19—LGBT people report unemployment rates nearly twice as high (9%) as non-LGBT people (5%).⁴⁵ And transgender workers are roughly three times more likely than the general population to be unemployed.⁴⁶ LGBTQ people also experience high rates of discrimination in the workplace, ranging from being harassed to being unfairly fired, not hired, or passed over for promotions. A 2017 nationally representative survey of LGBT people found that, overall, 20% of LGBT people have been personally discriminated against when applying for jobs because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and 22% have been discriminated against in equal pay or opportunities for promotion.⁴⁷

In the South, more than 2.6 million LGBT people are in the labor force,⁴⁸ and consistent with national trends, many LGBTQ Southerners have experienced a wide range of discrimination and mistreatment in the workplace. Transgender Southerners report especially high rates. For example, 13% of LGB Southerners and 25% of transgender Southerners report being verbally harassed at work by a coworker or supervisor. Transgender Southerners also report lower incomes and are less likely to have full-time employment, compared to cisgender LGB Southerners.⁴⁹

Despite this, and as discussed in more detail on [pages 24-25](#), only one Southern state (Virginia) bans employment discrimination against LGBTQ people at the state level (though local level protections may exist in some places, and federal workplace protections were affirmed in June 2020). This means that 93% of LGBTQ Southerners live in states where, under state law, they can be fired, not hired, or otherwise discriminated against at work simply because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. And because of the one-party control prominent throughout the South, changing this state policy landscape is extremely difficult. Virginia only passed its employment nondiscrimination law in early 2020, after many years of groundwork, coalition building,

and, in the 2019 elections, breaking the nearly-25-year hold of Republican control of the state's legislature.

Experiencing discrimination in the workplace harms LGBTQ Southerners in many ways, including the loss or reduction of income, not to mention access to health care and other benefits. This in turn contributes to already existing disparities in poverty and economic (in)security.

High Rates of Poverty and Economic Insecurity

Nationally, LGBTQ people are already more likely to experience poverty, but those in the South have the highest rates of poverty. Nationwide, 22% of LGBT people live in poverty, compared to 16% of non-LGBT people. Poverty rates are even higher among Black LGBT people (31%), transgender people (29%), bisexual women (29%), and LGBT people in rural areas (26%).⁵⁰ And just as the South as a region has higher poverty rates compared to the rest of the nation, so too do LGBTQ Southerners have higher poverty rates than LGBTQ people in the rest of the country. Nearly one-quarter (24%) of LGBT adults in the South are living in poverty, higher than any other region.⁵¹

Importantly, LGBTQ Southerners are also more likely to live in poverty than their non-LGBTQ Southern neighbors. One recent study based on CDC data showed that in five Southern states (Kentucky, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Texas and Virginia), LGBT residents have significantly higher rates of poverty than non-LGBT residents in the same state.^{52,9} In Texas, for example, 28% of LGBT residents are living in poverty, compared to 21% of non-LGBT Texans. Again mirroring national trends, Southern LGBT people of color experience even higher poverty rates compared to white LGBT Southerners.⁵³

That LGBTQ Southerners are more likely to live in poverty compared to LGBTQ people living in other regions is not surprising given regional trends in the South that consistently show deep, persistent poverty, particularly among rural and Black residents. The South has the highest rates of poverty in the country. Of the 12 states with the highest rates of poverty in 2018, 10 are in the South: Mississippi, Louisiana, West Virginia, Arkansas, Kentucky, Alabama, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas (starting from highest).⁵⁴ Over 16.8 million Southerners are currently living in poverty, as of 2018.⁵⁵ Poverty in the South is also especially “persistent,” meaning it lasts over longer periods of time rather than improving. One definition of “persistent poverty” is if 20% or more of a county's population is living in poverty

Nearly one-quarter (24%) of LGBT adults in the South are living in poverty, higher than any other region.

when measured across multiple decades. Using this definition, there are 353 persistently poor counties in the U.S., and 84% of them are in the South.⁵⁶

Rural, Black, and rural Black communities in the South face particularly high poverty rates. The South has the largest gap between poverty in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas in the country, with 20.5% of Southerners in non-metro areas living in poverty compared to 14.4% of those in metropolitan areas.⁵⁷ There are also particular regions in the South that are notable for their deep and persistent poverty, including rural communities in the Mississippi Delta, the Southeastern Cotton Belt, Central Appalachia, and the Rio Grande Valley in southern Texas.⁵⁸ For example, there are only 41 counties nationwide with child poverty rates of 50% or greater, but almost all (39) are in the rural South. Ten of these are in Mississippi, and mainly in the Mississippi Delta, which is primarily home to Black residents.⁵⁹

Poverty among Black Southerners can be connected directly to the region's history of slavery, economic and residential segregation, and lack of investment in communities of color. States in the South have among the highest poverty rates for people of color across the nation. For example, according to the U.S. Census, while 22% of Black people nationwide are living in poverty, that rate is even higher in nine out of 14 Southern states, with Mississippi and Arkansas tied for the third highest Black poverty rate in the country (31%). The same is true for other communities of color: nine Southern states have higher rates of poverty for Latino, Asian, and multiracial residents, compared to national poverty rates for each group. In fact, three states—Mississippi, Tennessee, and Texas—have higher poverty rates for every community of color.

The Obstacles to Health and Wellbeing for LGBTQ Southerners

Health, wellbeing, and safety are fundamental parts of being able to pursue happiness and to participate freely in one's community. In the South, both LGBTQ and

⁹ The same pattern was found in Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and West Virginia—LGBT residents in those states had higher rates of poverty—but the differences were not statistically significant. Sample sizes for LGBT respondents were often low in those states, making reliable analyses difficult. Alabama, Arkansas, and Tennessee were not included in the study. In Florida, rates of LGBT poverty were lower, but the difference was not statistically significant.

non-LGBTQ residents experience significant obstacles to health and wellbeing, with even wider disparities for people of color in the region. Southern states have few, if any, state-level legal protections against discrimination in health care, and instead are more likely than those in any other region to explicitly permit discrimination in health care based on religious beliefs. Additionally, Southern states have resisted expanding Medicaid and other opportunities to provide healthcare access to their residents. Southern states also have some of the harshest and strictest criminal laws, disproportionately targeting Black and LGBTQ Southerners in particular.

The South's high rates of health disparities and obstacles to healthcare access, experiences of violence, and the broken criminal justice system are all directly linked to all three cornerstones discussed in this report. The legacy of slavery continues to shape Black Southerners' health and access to health care, and the modern criminalization system evolved directly from the institutions of slavery and Jim Crow.⁶⁰ The predominant role of faith and conservatism, combined with the one-party control, is reflected in the region's many religious exemption laws. Republican leadership in the South has also been instrumental in refusing to expand healthcare access for all Southerners; refusing to pass LGBTQ-inclusive health protections and anti-violence measures; and instead expanding criminalization laws and practices.

Obstacles to Health and Healthcare Access

Access to health care is critical for the health and wellbeing of all people. In the South, there are many challenges related to both health and health care, and for LGBTQ Southerners these challenges are often compounded.

Challenges in Southern health. Southern states consistently rank the lowest in the nation for residents' health and wellbeing, according to the United Health Foundation's annual rankings.⁶¹ People in Southern states have shorter life expectancies, higher rates of many illnesses, including cancer and heart disease, and less access to health-protective spaces such as walkable cities or practices like indoor smoking bans.⁶² The South also faces the highest rates of both new HIV diagnoses⁶³ and HIV-related deaths in the country, even after adjusting for factors including age, gender, population density, and method of transmission.⁶⁴ This especially affects Southerners of color: in 2017, nearly 75% of new HIV diagnoses in the South were among Black or Latino people.⁶⁵

By definition, LGBTQ Southerners share in the challenges facing Southerners generally, but they also experience unique impacts from these challenges. In 2019, the Campaign for Southern Equality (CSE) conducted one of the largest surveys to date about LGBTQ Southerners and their experiences of health and health care. The more than 5,600 LGBTQ Southern respondents reported significant disparities and health concerns across many measures, including high rates of discrimination, delaying care due to both cost and concern about their LGBTQ identity, as well as higher rates of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and more.⁶⁶

Mirroring national trends, the CSE survey also found significantly higher rates of LGBTQ Southerners living with HIV, as compared to the general population.⁶⁷ And, as shown in *Table 1* on the following page, transgender people in the South also experience the highest rates of HIV of any region in the country. According to the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey (USTS), the largest survey of transgender and nonbinary people in the United States, 1.4% of transgender people nationwide are living with HIV, compared to 0.3% of the general U.S. population at the time of the survey. In the South, however, 2.3% of transgender people are living with HIV, and that number rises even higher for transgender people of color (4.8%) and transgender women of color especially (12.9%).

Additionally, rates of substance misuse, including opioids, are higher among LGBTQ people than the general population, which research attributes to higher experiences of discrimination and trauma.⁶⁸ As a result, LGBTQ people—including those in the South—are more likely to be affected by the opioid crisis. This also mirrors the fact that Southern states have the highest rates of opioid prescriptions per person,⁶⁹ and the highest rates of opioid overdose deaths are in Appalachia.⁷⁰



The 2019 Southern LGBTQ Health Survey, conducted by Campaign for Southern Equality, is a leading source of data on Southern LGBTQ health and experiences.

Table 1: Transgender Southerners Have the Highest Rates of HIV.
% of Transgender People Living With HIV, By Region and Demographics

Region	Transgender People Living with HIV	Transgender People of Color Living with HIV	Transgender Women Living with HIV	Transgender Women of Color Living with HIV
South	2.3%	4.8%	5.5%	12.9%
Northeast	1.8%	4.4%	4.4%	11.6%
Midwest	0.8%	2.2%	2.2%	8.4%
West	0.7%	1.25%	1.8%	3.7%
U.S.	1.4%	3.1%	3.4%	8.8%

Source: MAP original analysis of USTS 2015. Regions as defined in this report.

Obstacles to accessing care. Many of the South's health disparities are directly related to high rates of poverty, lack of insurance, and other obstacles to accessing health care. Southern rates of poverty are consistently among the highest in the nation, as discussed above, and Southern residents are more likely to be without health insurance than those in any other region. While 9% of people nationwide are uninsured, 14% of people in Southern states are uninsured.⁷¹ In fact the top five states in the country with the highest rates of uninsured residents are all in the South (Texas, Florida, Oklahoma, Georgia, and Mississippi).⁷² LGBTQ people are also more likely to be uninsured: 15% of LGBTQ adults nationwide lack health insurance, and 11 out of 14 Southern states have even higher rates of uninsured LGBTQ residents.⁷³ In the 2015 USTS, 22% of transgender people in Southern states were uninsured.⁷⁴ This makes accessing health care extremely difficult, if not financially impossible, for millions of Southerners, LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ alike.

Even for those who can afford care, there are fewer medical providers per person in the South than in any other region.⁷⁵ This includes mental health providers and addiction recovery services, which are both especially notable given the disproportionate impact of the opioid epidemic in the South. These obstacles to care are further pronounced in rural areas. Many rural communities are losing healthcare options as more and more providers are forced to close, but this has especially impacted the rural South. For example, since 2005, at least 170 rural hospitals have closed nationwide, and 104 of these—over 60%—were in the South.⁷⁶

Additional challenges for LGBTQ Southerners. LGBTQ Southerners face additional challenges, discrimination, and harmful policies like religious exemptions that exacerbate these disparities in health and health care. LGBTQ Southerners, and especially those in rural areas, face additional challenges to accessing care, including fewer culturally competent and LGBTQ-affirming providers and longer distances to travel to find such care.⁷⁷

LGBTQ people, including in the South, also routinely experience discrimination in health care, potentially contributing to serious health consequences. Roughly one in six (16%) LGBT people say they have ever been personally discriminated against because of their sexual orientation or gender identity when going to a doctor or health clinic.⁷⁸ In just the past year alone, roughly one in ten LGBT people—and one in three transgender people—say they have been discriminated against when seeking health care.⁷⁹ Not surprisingly then, many LGBT people have avoided medical care for fear of experiencing further discrimination. As yet another obstacle to care, such discrimination can directly and negatively impact LGBTQ Southerners' health.

*9% of U.S. residents,
14% of Southerners, and
22% of transgender Southerners
are uninsured.*

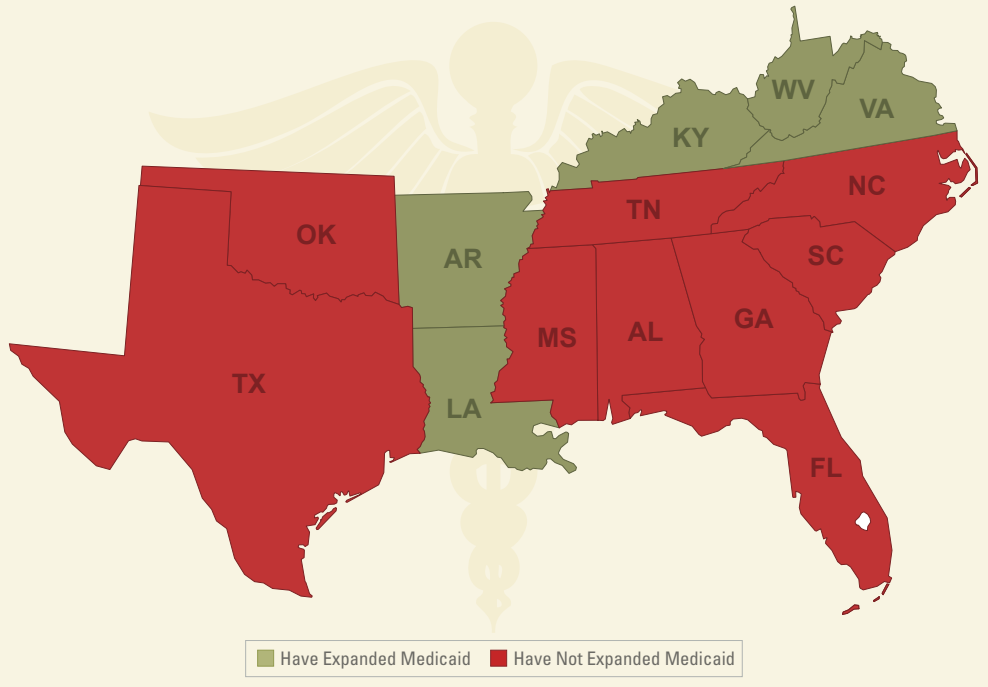
Sources: Census (2018), USTS (2015).

Additionally—and reflecting the influence of both faith and one-party control in the South—the South is home to more religious exemption laws than any other part of the country. As discussed in further detail on [pages 27-28](#), 13 states nationwide have some form of targeted religious exemption law, and eight of these are in the South. Three Southern states—Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee—have religious exemption laws that specifically apply to medical professionals. These laws provide a legal avenue to discriminate by allowing healthcare providers to decide which patients to serve and which procedures to perform based solely on personal beliefs, rather than medical standards.⁸⁰ Doctors can refuse to write or fill prescriptions, to provide even routine care, or to see LGBTQ patients at all. What’s more, under these laws even healthcare providers like nursing homes can refuse to serve LGBTQ elders in need of care.⁸¹ In rural areas, where there are already fewer options for both family services and healthcare providers, such exemptions may mean that LGBTQ people have no options at all.

Lack of leadership among elected officials. Despite these disparities, many Southern elected officials have repeatedly refused to act and have even blocked efforts to expand access to health care for their constituents. For example, following the passage of the Affordable Care Act, state governments had the option to expand Medicaid eligibility in their state, allowing more people to access health care. As of July 2020, 36 states and Washington D.C. have expanded their Medicaid program’s eligibility—leading to clear economic and health benefits⁸²—but only five out of 14 Southern states have done so.^{83,h} The decision by Southern elected officials to not expand Medicaid prevents Southerners from accessing much needed care, and further prevents the South from experiencing the clear economic and health benefits of expansion.

^h As of July 1, 2020, the five Southern states that have expanded Medicaid are Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Virginia, and West Virginia. Additionally, in June 2020, Oklahoma residents voted to expand the state’s Medicaid program, but this will not be effective until July 2021.

82% OF LGBTQ SOUTHERNERS—ROUGHLY 2.9 MILLION LGBTQ ADULTS—LIVE IN THE NINE SOUTHERN STATES THAT HAVE NOT YET EXPANDED MEDICAID



Note: In June 2020, Oklahoma residents voted to expand the state’s Medicaid program, effective July 2021. At that point, assuming no other changes, 79% of LGBTQ Southerners will live in states that have not yet expanded Medicaid access.
 Source: Medicaid expansion states as of 7/1/2020. LGBTQ population data from the Williams Institute’s (2019) *Adult LGBT Population in the United States*.

Nationwide, 15% of LGBT people are uninsured. In 11 out of 14 Southern states, LGBT uninsured rates are even higher. The three states with lower uninsured rates for LGBT people—Arkansas (13%), West Virginia (12%), and Kentucky (4%)—are all Medicaid expansion states.



Source: The Williams Institute. 2019. "LGBT Demographic Data Interactive."

Roughly 2.9 million LGBTQ adults, or 82% of all LGBTQ Southerners, live in the nine Southern states that have yet to expand Medicaid.⁸⁴ Given the higher rates of poverty and economic insecurity experienced by LGBTQ Southerners and Southerners of color, as discussed above, this refusal to expand Medicaid and access to health care harms all Southerners, and disproportionately harms both LGBTQ Southerners and Southerners of color.

Violence, Harassment, and Threats to Safety

LGBTQ people across the country, including in the South, experience violence, harassment, and other threats to their safety and wellbeing, such as having limited access to accurate identity documents.

Experiences of Violence and Harassment. In a 2017 national survey, a majority of all LGBTQ people reported they had personally experienced slurs (57%) and insensitive or offensive comments (53%) about their sexual orientation or gender identity. A majority of LGBTQ people also said that they or an LGBTQ friend or family member had been threatened or non-sexually harassed (57%), been sexually harassed (51%), or experienced violence (51%) because of their sexuality or gender identity.⁸⁵

The 2019 CSE survey found that 71% of LGBTQ Southerners have personally experienced emotional abuse or harassment related to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, and that 23% have personally experienced physical violence.⁸⁶ Transgender Southerners reported higher rates of both forms of violence, and Black and Latino LGBTQ Southerners reported higher rates of physical

One in three (33%) Black LGBTQ Southerners have personally experienced physical violence because they are LGBTQ—the highest of any racial or ethnic group.

Source: CSE's (2019) *Southern LGBTQ Health Survey*

violence than white LGBTQ Southerners. One in three (33%) Black LGBTQ Southerners reported personally experiencing physical violence because of their LGBTQ identity, the highest of any racial or ethnic group. And while these data do not speak to the experiences of LGBTQ people of color's experiences of race-based violence, they do illustrate the already stark experiences of violence faced by LGBTQ Southerners of color.

Despite these high rates of violence and harassment, Southern states have few, if any, legal protections against such experiences. In March 2020, Virginia became the first and so far only Southern state to include both sexual orientation and gender identity in its hate crimes law. So-called "panic defenses" attempt to excuse violent crimes committed against LGBTQ people "on the grounds that the victim's sexual orientation or gender identity is to blame for the [attacker's] violent reaction."⁸⁷ Only 10 states nationwide currently ban the use of such a defense in a courtroom, but none of these is in the South.⁸⁸ And only two states in the South have laws prohibiting bullying of LGBTQ youth in school settings.⁸⁹

Inability to Access Accurate Identity Documents. For transgender people, having identity documents that do not match their name or gender identity is often another obstacle to safety and wellbeing. Identity documents are a necessary, if often overlooked, part of everyday life. They are used for everything from opening or accessing a bank account, applying for jobs, or getting a school or library or membership card, to simply going to public places like movie theaters, restaurants, and so much more. If a person's ID does not match their gender identity, then any time they use their ID, they are at potential risk of harassment, discrimination, or even violence. The 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey shows that, among transgender people who showed an ID that did not match their gender identity, one in three (32%) were harassed, discriminated against, denied service, or even assaulted or attacked as a result.

This is especially relevant in the South, for at least two reasons. First, transgender Southerners are more

likely to have an ID that does not reflect their gender: 74% of transgender Southerners lack at least one form of identification that matches their gender identity, compared to 65% of transgender people living outside of the South.⁹⁰ Second, Southern states are more likely to have laws or policies that make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for many transgender people to update the gender marker on their identity documents. There are currently nine states nationwide that will only allow a person to update the gender on their driver's license if they have a court order, amended birth certificate, and/or proof of "sex reassignment surgery." Eight of these nine states are in the South. Similarly, six Southern states require proof of "sex reassignment surgery" to update a person's birth certificate, and one Southern state—Tennessee—explicitly refuses to update a gender marker on a birth certificate under any circumstance.

Harms of the Broken Criminal Justice System

Throughout the United States, the brokenness of the criminal justice system is increasingly apparent. In the South, this is especially evident given the high rates of racial inequity in the system, harsher sentencing laws, and overcrowded prisons.⁹¹ Many of the criminal justice system's racial disparities are particularly stark in the South, reflecting the legacy of slavery.⁹² For more than 400 years, Black people in the South have had their lives controlled, first by slave owners, then by violence and segregation, and now, in many Southern states, by policing and "tough on crime" policies that disproportionately target Black people and other racial and ethnic minorities. These practices result in higher financial penalties, harsher punishments, and longer sentences in jail or prison.⁹³ For example, while 13% of the national population is Black, 65% of people nationwide serving "life-without-parole" sentences for nonviolent offenses are Black—and in Louisiana, that percentage rises to 91%, the highest in the country.⁹⁴

The South also has the largest prison population of any region in the country. As of 2016, nearly 875,000 Southerners, or one in every 143 Southerners, were incarcerated.⁹⁵ In Oklahoma, one in every 76 adults is incarcerated, with Louisiana and Mississippi close behind at one in every 79 adults incarcerated⁹⁶—the highest rates of incarceration in both the country and the world.⁹⁷ Of the ten states with the highest incarceration rates nationwide, eight are Southern states.^{98,i} Several Southern states have taken key steps to reduce their prison populations: Alabama, South Carolina, Louisiana,

and Mississippi have all seen double-digit decreases in prison populations between 1999 and 2017,⁹⁹ a result of both a decrease in crime and reforms in the areas of sentencing, diversion, and more.¹⁰⁰ However, disproportionate policing and incarceration remains widespread through much of the South.

LGBTQ people, including in the South, are also disproportionately targeted and harmed by the criminal justice system, and this is particularly true for LGBTQ people of color.¹⁰¹ For example, LGBTQ people of color are more than twice as likely as white LGBTQ people to experience discrimination because of their LGBTQ identity when interacting with police, and are six times more likely to have avoided calling the police due to concern they would be discriminated against.¹⁰² In New Orleans, a peer-led survey by BreakOUT! found 87% of LGBTQ youth of color had been approached by police, compared to 33% of white LGBTQ youth, and those youth were far more likely to have been asked for sexual favors by police and to have been arrested when they had called the police for help.¹⁰³ In juvenile justice facilities nationwide, 85% of LGBTQ youth are youth of color, and an estimated 40% of all girls in these facilities identify as LGBTQ or gender nonconforming.¹⁰⁴ Additionally, in the South, nearly all states (11 out of 14) currently have HIV criminalization laws.¹⁰⁵ Given the higher rates of HIV in the South and for LGBTQ people of color, and especially transgender women of color, these discriminatory laws disproportionately criminalize LGBTQ Southerners of color.

Importantly, and as discussed in more detail on [pages 29-30](#), one consequence of these high rates of criminalization and incarceration is that millions of people in the South—including LGBTQ people—are ineligible to vote, limiting their ability to be a part of shaping policy decisions about their lives.

Beyond incarceration, there are many financial tools that the legal system uses to punish people, and these also disproportionately harm LGBTQ people and communities of color, including in the South. Increasingly, municipalities are using fines and fees not only for punishment, but—especially in rural areas—to increase revenue in the face of tightening budgets or decreasing populations and tax bases. Cash bail, for example, describes a practice where a judge requires an individual accused, though not yet convicted, of a

ⁱ Starting from highest, the top ten states by 2016 incarceration rates (local, state, and federal) were: Oklahoma, Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama, Arkansas, Arizona, Texas, Kentucky, and Missouri.

crime to pay money to be set free or otherwise stay in jail until their court date, which could be days, weeks, or months in the future. Setting a cash price tag on release from jail often puts freedom out of reach, and especially for people in poverty or struggling to make ends meet. As a result, the cash bail system imprisons people who have not been convicted of any crime, simply because they cannot afford bail. In fact, over 65% of people currently in jail *have not yet been convicted of any wrongdoing*.¹⁰⁶ What's more, research shows that people who couldn't pay bail and are held in pretrial detention are significantly more likely than people who had the means to pay their bail to (1) be convicted of a crime, (2) receive a prison sentence, and (3) receive a longer prison sentence, even controlling for other factors like the type or severity of the crime.¹⁰⁷ Because both the use and amount of fines, fees, or cash bail are often left to the discretion of individual judges and without regard for ability to pay, this creates opportunities for bias to influence the use and size of these penalties. And, given that rates of poverty are significantly higher for Southerners, for communities of color, and for LGBTQ people, these penalties also disproportionately impact and entrap these same communities.

The Strengths and Challenges in Daily Life for LGBTQ Southerners

For LGBTQ Southerners, in going about daily life—attending school, going to the doctor, or visiting a local restaurant—each of these spaces and day-to-day settings are potential places to experience discrimination. Given the central importance of family, faith, and local or regional community in the South, being different from or excluded by that group can be all the more painful and consequential. And, as is the case for LGBTQ Southerners' economic lives and their health and wellbeing, Southern states have few, if any, state-level legal protections against discrimination in housing, education, or public places. Instead, Southern states are more likely than those in the rest of the country to have harmful religious exemption laws that allow businesses and service providers to refuse to serve people—including people of minority faiths, interracial couples, LGBTQ people, and more—if doing so might conflict with their religious beliefs.

Daily life in the South is shaped by the cornerstones of race, faith and conservatism, and politics, among other factors. Racial disparities are persistent in housing,

education, and more, all directly connected to the South's legacy of slavery. Religion, and especially Christianity, is a regular part of everyday life and social interactions in the South even outside of churches or faith settings, and the broader social conservatism also shapes how Southerners treat (or are expected to treat) others or talk about social issues. And again, the influence of conservatism, faith, and Republican control of Southern state governments means that many Southern states have religious exemption laws that create licenses to discriminate, and further that only one Southern state offers any state-level legal protection against discrimination in housing, education, or public places.

Importance of Faith, Family, and Community

Family, faith, and community comprise the core of how many people create, nurture, and sustain emotional and social connections to one another. Faith institutions and community organizations more broadly also provide valuable opportunities that impact other areas of life, such as employment, housing, and more. Faith communities that are affirming of LGBTQ people, particularly in the South, can provide vital opportunities for broader social inclusion given the important role they play in Southern life. Yet, when these core parts of daily life are not welcoming—or worse, are intentionally exclusionary—the lack of alternatives can result in emotional, spiritual, and economic isolation for LGBTQ people that has substantial impacts for overall wellbeing and success.

This is especially relevant to Southern life, with its central emphases on faith, family, and a community-driven sensibility. As discussed in detail on [pages 11-13](#), Southerners are more likely than those in any other region to identify as Christian and to be highly religious. Data from Pew Research Center show that highly religious Americans are more actively engaged in their extended families and in volunteering in their local community.¹⁰⁸ This suggests that Southerners are especially likely to volunteer and be involved in their local community more broadly, and potentially as an extension of their faith community (such as a church-based soup kitchen or roadside clean-up effort). Indeed, for many Southerners, hospitality and being a good neighbor or community member are particularly important values.¹⁰⁹ And these broader expressions of “family values,” hospitality, and being a good neighbor are often closely tied to Christian beliefs, again speaking to the fusion of faith with Southern social and political life.¹¹⁰

This investment in family and local community—rooted for many Southerners in faith—can have many positive outcomes. Volunteerism and public service serve important purposes in any community, and participating in such work together, especially as an expression of faith or spiritual beliefs, can for many people create a strong sense of tight-knit communities and deep bonds between people, as well as strong ties to the physical or geographic place itself. What it means to be a Southerner or part of a Southern community, can be wrapped up in being active in the community, or being known by or familiar to others there. Deep ties like these help communities solve problems, face challenges, and grow in joy and connection. However, for LGBTQ Southerners and others who might be deemed different, the heightened emphasis in many Southern communities on being “one of us” can also mean that experiences of exclusion or rejection—whether from family, a faith community, or a broader social community—can be all the more painful and consequential.

Additionally, religion is a part of everyday life in the South even outside of faith spaces. For example, over half (56%) of teenagers in public schools in the South say that their classmates pray before a sporting event, far more than the next closest region (34% of Midwestern public school students).¹¹¹ Similarly, about one in eight (12%) teenagers in Southern public schools say a teacher has led their class in prayer, and 13% say a teacher has read from the Bible to the class—both the highest of any region by far.¹¹² This broader infusion of faith throughout daily life in the South means that the stakes for LGBTQ people, especially youth, are particularly high; inclusive faith communities can create ripples into many other areas of life, while faith communities that reject or condemn LGBTQ people can similarly influence spaces far beyond their church walls.

Discrimination in Daily Life

Housing and education. For many people, daily life begins and ends at home. Safe and affordable housing is a fundamental need, but far too many people in the United States, including in the South, routinely experience housing insecurity and other obstacles to shelter. Additionally, where a person lives directly affects their educational opportunities. In the South, there are significant racial disparities in both housing and education, and rural areas experience even further challenges. LGBTQ Southerners also face these same challenges to housing and education, as well as a persistent lack of state-level legal protections against discrimination.

There are significant racial disparities in the South for both housing and education. For example, in a study of the 100 cities nationwide with the largest number of Black households, Black households were much less likely to own their home than white households in all 100 cities, including those in the South.¹¹³ However, the homeownership gap was smaller in Southern cities than in the Midwest and Northeast. Throughout much of the South, school segregation rates are even higher than in the rest of the country, and Black students are more likely than white students to be disciplined and less likely to be placed in advanced classes.¹¹⁴ And because where a person lives (or can afford to live) affects what schools they may be able to access, these disparities can reinforce and exacerbate one another. Indeed, racial disparities in poverty and economic factors—which shape where a family can afford to live—are directly related to racial disparities in educational access.¹¹⁵

These disparities are directly linked to the legacy of slavery. For example, Southern communities that historically had higher concentrations of enslaved Black people now have higher rates of racial segregation in schools, compared to Southern communities that had fewer enslaved people.¹¹⁶ And both past and present racial segregation and discrimination mean that many people of color, especially Black Southerners, live in communities that have been systematically deprived of economic and educational investment, suppressing access to education, quality housing, and economic opportunity.

In rural areas—and nearly two-thirds of Southern counties are rural—there are also significantly fewer housing and education options. The number of rural schools has also significantly declined after decades of consolidation—and especially so in the South—leaving remaining schools having to serve more students with fewer resources.¹¹⁷

Across both housing and education, LGBTQ people generally, including LGBTQ people in the South, face additional and unique challenges. Nationwide, more than one in five (22%) LGBT people have personally been discriminated against because of their LGBT identity when seeking housing. LGBT adults are also far less likely to own a home and are more likely to have experienced homelessness, reflecting the economic disparities discussed on [pages 13-15](#).¹¹⁸ And in schools, LGBTQ youth of color are especially vulnerable to discrimination, mistreatment, and even criminalization.¹¹⁹

Additionally, LGBTQ Southerners have few to no legal protections against discrimination or mistreatment in both housing and education. Only one Southern state (Virginia) prohibits discrimination against LGBTQ people when seeking housing or in credit and lending (such as for a mortgage loan). Similarly, only two Southern states (Arkansas and North Carolina), have laws prohibiting bullying of LGBTQ students at school.

Public accommodations. “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. Most people use at least one place of public accommodation every day,^j and these spaces are a cornerstone of local communities and economies. The same is true for daily life in the South: public places and businesses create employment opportunities and tax revenue, while also providing needed goods, services, and places for social gatherings and community building.

However, discrimination in places of public accommodation is sadly common, both historically and in the present day. Historically, many of the most prominent examples of discrimination in public places happened in the South—such as racial segregation on public buses, at water fountains, in diners and restaurants, and more—though such discrimination of course also occurred across the country. Today, racial and ethnic discrimination in public places continues nationwide, including in the South. Recent incidents that have gained national attention include Black families facing abuse and violence in a diner and Muslim women being asked to leave a restaurant, as well as LGBTQ people being refused services by businesses or service providers.

Despite the fact that legal segregation was outlawed in the 1960s and subsequent court cases clarified that businesses cannot refuse to serve people because of their race or ethnicity, today there are businesses that are seeking the ability to discriminate against customers again, including against LGBTQ people. In a nationally representative survey of LGBT people, fully one-quarter of LGBT respondents experienced discrimination in the past year alone because of their sexual orientation or gender identity in employment, housing, and/or public accommodations.¹²⁰ Similarly, in the past year alone, among transgender people who visited a place of public accommodation and staff knew or thought they were transgender, 31% experienced some or multiple kinds of discrimination or mistreatment, including 24% who

were verbally harassed, 14% of respondents who were denied equal treatment or service, and 2% who were physically attacked because they were transgender.¹²¹

While some people argue that LGBTQ people should just “go somewhere else” if they experience such discrimination by businesses, it may simply not be possible for many LGBTQ people to do so, nor should they have to. In rural communities, for example—and the South is nearly two-thirds rural—there are many fewer businesses and service providers overall. As a result, if an LGBTQ person in a rural area is discriminated against when seeking such a service, they are unlikely to have alternative places to get that service. In a 2017 survey by the Center for American Progress, LGBT people living outside of metropolitan areas are at least twice as likely to say it would be “very difficult” or “not possible” to find a similar type of business service if they were turned away.¹²² Additionally, given the ways that rural communities are often smaller and more closely knit, what happens in one area of life is more likely to affect other areas of life: when a discriminatory business owner might also be a fellow congregant, experiences at that business may also shape experiences in that shared faith community, for example.

Despite these ongoing experiences of discrimination, 13 out of 14 Southern states lack any state-level legal protections for LGBTQ people against such discrimination. Additionally, federal law provides no protections either: while federal law prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of sex, federal law does not prohibit discrimination in public places on the basis of sex. As a result, even with the 2020 Supreme Court ruling affirming that federal law protects LGBTQ people in the workplace (because such discrimination is inherently based on sex and therefore illegal), this ruling would not extend to discrimination against LGBTQ people in public places and businesses. What’s more, eight Southern states have targeted religious exemptions laws that explicitly allow businesses or service providers to refuse to serve people—such as religious minorities, interracial couples, LGBTQ people, and more—if doing so would conflict with their religious beliefs. Today, while the majority of people in the South (53%) oppose denying

^j Now, in the COVID-19 era, people may be less likely to regularly use places of public accommodation. However, grocery stores, healthcare providers, and other essential businesses and services are typically under the category of public accommodations. This era makes it all the more clear that it is vitally important to have nondiscrimination protections in public accommodations, so that no person is turned away from vital goods and services like food, transportation, or even health care, simply because of who they are.

services to LGBTQ people, this is the lowest rate among any region.¹²³ Given that nearly two-thirds of Southern counties are rural, and taking into account both the lack of legal protections and the presence of religious exemption laws, LGBTQ Southerners (and especially those in rural areas) may be especially vulnerable to discrimination in public accommodations.

This section has focused on the lived experiences of LGBTQ people in the South, including as shaped by the major cornerstones of race and the legacy of slavery; the influences of faith and social conservatism; and dominant one-party control across the region's state governments. LGBTQ Southerners experience many of the same joys and challenges as their Southern neighbors, but with added complexities or obstacles, including a systematically harsher political landscape. The next section explores this landscape in more detail, as well as the unique and resilient ways that LGBTQ Southerners respond to this landscape and make change.

V. LGBTQ POLITICS IN THE SOUTH

The South is home to more LGBTQ people than any other region of the country, yet is also home to the most hostile LGBTQ policy landscape in the country. Importantly, however, the current state policy landscape alone does not convey the resilience, creativity, and victories of Southern LGBTQ communities seeking to make political and cultural change. Clear policy progress has been made in the South, and LGBTQ Southerners regularly work outside of state legislative contexts altogether in order to build community, directly support each other and address their own needs, and work in coalition across a broad range of issues affecting life in the South. Understanding this diversity of tactics and strategies used by LGBTQ Southerners helps illuminate the strength, leadership, and sophistication of Southern LGBTQ advocacy and communities.

LGBTQ State Policy Landscape in the South

As a region, the state policy landscape in the South is extremely hostile for LGBTQ people and issues. However, this political landscape varies within and across Southern states, and clear policy progress has been made in the South in recent years.

Fewest LGBTQ Protections and the Most Discriminatory Laws

As shown in *Figure 6* and *Figure 7* on the next page, the South has the most hostile LGBTQ state policy landscape of any region in the country. Overall, Southern states are far less likely to have LGBTQ-inclusive protections, and instead are far more likely to have harmful, discriminatory laws.

Figure 6 shows the overall LGBTQ policy tally for all U.S. states, a measure based on MAP research encompassing nearly 40 LGBTQ-related laws and policies and illustrating the wide differences in LGBTQ policy across the country.^k Each policy is assigned a positive (for protective) or negative (for discriminatory) point value, and then each state's policy score is added to create an overall score, or "policy tally," which is then further categorized as negative, low, fair, medium, or high for easier comparison across states. Negative policy tallies show an extremely hostile policy climate, while high policy tallies show a supportive and protective policy environment for LGBTQ people.

Using this measure, Figure 6 shows that eight of the 14 Southern states are ranked as negative, five are low, and only one is fair. No Southern states have medium or high tallies. This means that 93% of LGBTQ Southerners live in negative or low equality states, compared to 0% of LGBTQ people in the Northeast, 11% of LGBTQ people in the West, and 45% of LGBTQ Midwesterners. Figure 6 shows that Southern states similarly have the lowest average LGBTQ policy tally score, and by a wide margin.

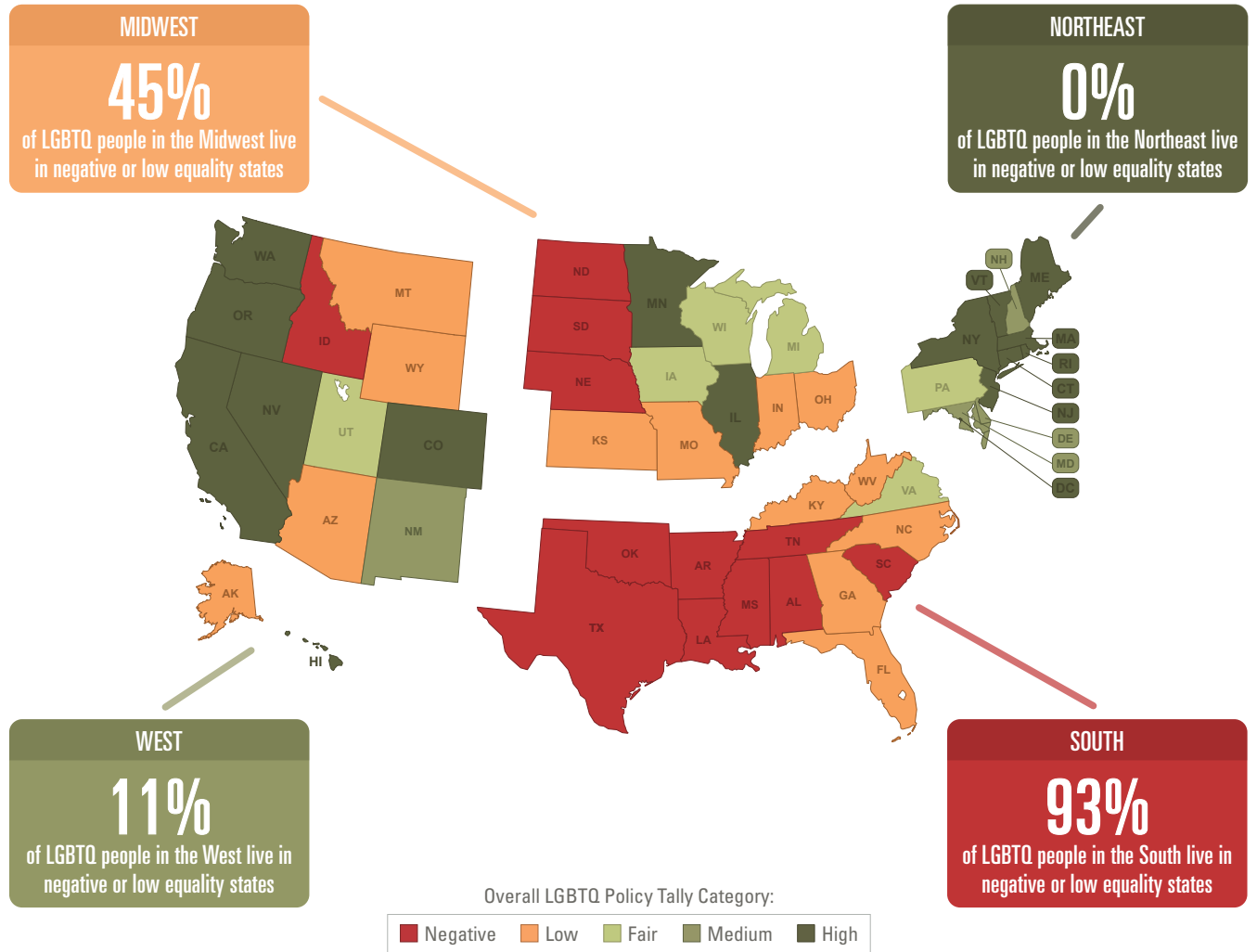
Additionally, across every category of LGBTQ-related laws and policies included in the policy tally, the South consistently has the lowest average scores of any region. Three categories where the Southern policy landscape is especially unique are nondiscrimination, religious exemptions, and health care.^l

- **Nondiscrimination laws** are those that prohibit discrimination in different areas of life, such as employment, housing, or in public places. These laws often prohibit discrimination on the bases of many characteristics, such as race, sex, national origin, and religion. At the time of this report, only 21 states and the District of Columbia explicitly include sexual orientation and gender identity in their

^k For more information on MAP's policy tally and real-time maps, see MAP's *Equality Maps*.

^l For more detailed discussion of these categories in the South, see MAP's *LGBTQ Policy Spotlight: Mapping LGBTQ Equality in the South* (May 2020).

Figure 6: Every Southern State But One Has a Negative or Low LGBTQ Policy Tally

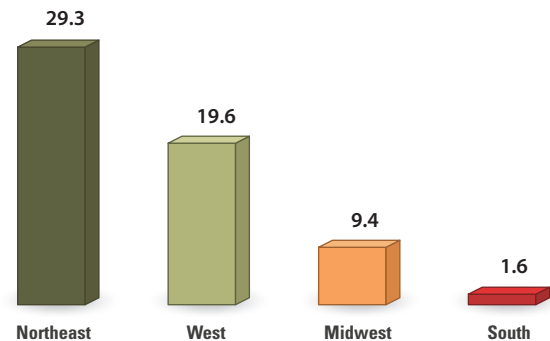


Source: State policies from MAP's Equality Maps, as of 7/1/20. LGBTQ population data from the Williams Institute (2019).

nondiscrimination laws for employment, housing, and public accommodations.¹²⁴ In April 2020, Virginia became the first and only Southern state with such laws. While a June 2020 U.S. Supreme Court decision affirmed that it is illegal under federal law to discriminate against LGBTQ people in the workplace, state nondiscrimination laws remain important for providing protections to a broader range of employers as well as in housing, public accommodations, and other areas that the Supreme Court decision does not yet affect. In some Southern states, nondiscrimination protections are being enacted at the local level (see pages 43-44), but other Southern states explicitly prevent towns and municipalities from passing such ordinances (see *Preemption* on next page).

Figure 7: Southern States Have the Lowest Average LGBTQ Policy Tally

Average State Score by Region, Out of Possible 38.5 Points





Source: MAP's Equality Maps, as of 7/1/20.


Preemption and Efforts to Limit Local Progress

Around the country, an increasing number of cities and counties are taking steps to promote progress on a range of issues, including the minimum wage, paid leave, immigrant rights, public health, environmental protections, nondiscrimination protections for LGBTQ people, and banning harmful conversion “therapy.” Yet state legislatures have tried to limit all these efforts through “preemption,” or state laws that intentionally prevent local governments from passing their own laws on certain issues and often overturn local laws already on the books. Although the reasoning behind current state preemption efforts can vary, the impact remains the same across the board: tying the hands of local lawmakers and preventing them from providing the laws and protections they know are needed in their communities.

While nearly every state in the country has passed some type of preemption law, only states in the South (Tennessee, Arkansas, and North Carolina) have preempted cities and counties from protecting their residents from discrimination, including based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Preemption laws around the country vary widely in what they restrict local governments from doing, including blocking local governments from passing gun safety measures, preventing them from creating “sanctuary cities” for immigrants, and blocking the ability to raise the minimum wage or expand paid leave. All these areas and more are also critical to the lives of LGBTQ people.

 In 2011, Nashville, Tennessee expanded a local nondiscrimination law to include protections for gender identity and sexual orientation in government contracts. In response, that same year, the state legislature passed the misleadingly named “Equal Access to Intrastate Commerce Act” (HB600). This law, which overturned Nashville’s ordinance, prohibits the enforcement of any local nondiscrimination ordinances that offer protections above and beyond those offered in the state’s nondiscrimination law. Additionally, the law explicitly defines “sex” as referring only to the designation on an individual’s birth certificate, essentially cutting off any legal argument that gender identity is a protected category under the umbrella of sex. However, in June 2020, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that gender identity is protected under the umbrella of sex in federal employment law, potentially providing support for a future legal challenge to Tennessee’s preemption law.

 In 2015, Arkansas passed the “Intrastate Commerce Improvement Act” (SB202), invalidating the existing LGBTQ-inclusive nondiscrimination ordinance in the city of Eureka Springs. Advocates and local communities are challenging the constitutionality of the law, and five cities have passed new nondiscrimination ordinances since 2015. The new local ordinances are technically unenforceable due to the state law, but they could be used in a legal challenge of the state law.

 In February 2016, the city of Charlotte, North Carolina added protections against discrimination on the bases of sexual orientation and gender identity. In response, the state legislature called an emergency session specifically to pass the “Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act,” also known as HB2, thus overturning Charlotte’s new ordinance and much, much more. Under HB2, transgender people were effectively banned from using public restrooms that match their gender identity, and the legislation also specifically invalidated all local nondiscrimination ordinances, invalidated all local minimum wage and benefit ordinances, and prohibited localities from passing new ordinances. HB2 also prevented counties and cities from requiring that their local government only contract with private companies that have LGBTQ-inclusive nondiscrimination policies, a practice frequently used to promote diversity and equal opportunity. Although HB2 was repealed in March 2017, its replacement (HB142) still barred cities and counties from passing ordinances that provide nondiscrimination protections for LGBTQ people until December 1, 2020, and it permanently barred cities from protecting transgender people’s access to restrooms.

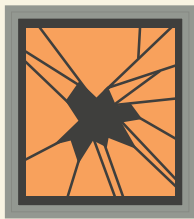
- **Religious exemptions** harm LGBTQ people, women, people of minority faiths, and others by permitting discrimination.¹²⁵ These laws allow doctors and healthcare providers, adoption or foster agencies, and more (depending on how the law is written) to explicitly refuse to work with LGBTQ people and others if doing so would conflict with their religious beliefs. The South is home to more of these harmful laws than anywhere else in the country. Thirteen states across the country have at least one of these laws, and eight of those states are in the South.¹²⁶ Additionally, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Alabama have multiple kinds of religious exemptions, meaning they permit discrimination across multiple areas of life.

For example, in 2016, Mississippi passed a sweeping religious exemption law that created a right to discriminate on the specific beliefs that marriage is only intended for one man and one woman, that sex outside of heterosexual marriage is immoral, and that a person's gender is determined only by their sex at birth and is unchangeable.¹²⁷ The law applies to healthcare providers, child welfare service providers, private businesses, and public officials who issue marriage licenses. One of many consequences of this law is that healthcare providers in the state can explicitly refuse to provide care to transgender people, same-sex couples, any person or couple (e.g. unmarried heterosexual couples, or single women) seeking fertility services, and more.

LGBTQ SOUTHERNERS FACE A PERFECT STORM OF VULNERABILITY TO DISCRIMINATION



The South has the **largest** LGBTQ population of any region in the country, and yet compared to the rest of the country, the South is home to:



The **fewest** state-level legal protections for LGBTQ people against discrimination



The **most** religious exemptions laws, which provide a license to discriminate



Nearly two-thirds **rural** counties, meaning there are fewer alternatives available for needed services if discriminated against

- **Healthcare laws and policies** are those that ensure (or prevent) LGBTQ people’s access to medically necessary care. Southern states are far less likely to have LGBTQ-inclusive protections, and far more likely to have explicitly discriminatory policies. Currently, no Southern state prohibits discrimination in health insurance against LGBTQ people, though in 2020 Virginia passed a law prohibiting insurance discrimination based on gender identity only. Virginia is also the only Southern state to prohibit insurers from refusing to cover medically necessary care for transgender people, and no Southern state explicitly affirms that transgender Medicaid recipients will have their medically necessary care covered.¹²⁸ Instead—and despite federal law prohibiting such discrimination—at least four Southern states explicitly *exclude* such care for Medicaid recipients, while all remaining Southern states have no clear policy either way. This lack of clear policy often leads to transgender people’s care being denied or significantly delayed.¹²⁹

Working for Progress

Despite the South’s hostile policy climate for LGBTQ issues at the regional level, MAP analysis of state LGBTQ policy progress over the past decade shows clear progress at the state level, including in the South.^m In 2010, all 14 Southern states had negative overall policy tallies, as shown in *Table 2*. But by April 2020, all states but one (Alabama) had improved their scores, and five states had improved enough to change category (Florida, Kentucky, North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia).

Most notably, among Southern states, Virginia has made the most significant progress on state-level LGBTQ laws and policies since 2010, though the vast majority of these improvements have come in the early months of 2020 alone. In 2019, Virginia elected a Democratic majority to both chambers of the state legislature for the first time in nearly 25 years, and have since passed numerous laws protecting and expanding the rights of LGBTQ people. Chief among these is the first LGBTQ-inclusive nondiscrimination law in the South, protecting against discrimination in employment, housing, public places, credit and lending, and schools and education.

Showing a different pace of progress in Southern states, Florida has had the second largest change, and West Virginia and Kentucky are tied for the

third largest changes in their policy tally since 2010, achieving that progress incrementally over the decade. Florida, for example, worked to expand nondiscrimination protections at the local level through cities and counties, and now roughly 60% of the state’s population is protected in employment, housing, and public places.¹³⁰ West Virginia expanded protections for LGBTQ parents and children in the child welfare system, won improvements for transgender people in the processes required to update identity documents, and more.

While the overall LGBTQ policy climate in the South is hostile, and much work remains to be done to advance legal equality for LGBTQ Southerners, this shows that progress is already happening. The next section shows how, and shines a spotlight on the innovation, creativity, and resilience of Southern LGBTQ communities.

Table 2: State-by-State Changes in LGBTQ Policy Tally From 2010 to 2020

	2010 LGBTQ Policy Tally	2020 LGBTQ Policy Tally	Change Over Time
Virginia	-2	18.75	+20.75
Florida	-2.75	7.75	+10.5
Kentucky	-0.75	7.75	+8.5
West Virginia	-3	5.5	+8.5
Georgia	-6	0	+6
North Carolina	-2.5	2.75	+5.25
Oklahoma	-6	-1	+5
South Carolina	-5	-0.5	+4.5
Arkansas	-4	-0.5	+3.5
Louisiana	-5	-2.5	+2.5
Texas	-3	-1.5	+1.5
Mississippi	-4.5	-3.5	+1
Tennessee	-4.25	-4	+0.25
Alabama	-5	-6.5	-1.5

Note: As of January 1, 2020, Virginia’s score was 0.25, with all additional point gains occurring during the 2020 legislative session.

Source: MAP’s *Mapping LGBTQ Equality: 2010 to 2020* (data as of 1/1/10) and Equality Maps (as of 7/1/20).

^m To learn more about state LGBTQ policy progress from 2010 to 2020 across the country, see MAP’s (Feb 2020) *Mapping LGBTQ Equality: 2010 to 2020*.



Obstacles to Voting in the South

The South has a long history of creating obstacles to voting, another legacy of slavery in the region. After the abolition of slavery and before the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act (VRA), access to the ballot box for Black people was routinely prevented by literacy tests, poll taxes, voter intimidation tactics, and violence. The 1965 VRA was vital to dismantling barriers to the ballot box for millions of voters, including in many Southern states. However, in 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down key pieces of the VRA in a case called *Shelby County v. Holder*, drastically changing the landscape across the country, but especially in the South. Immediately after the Court's ruling, and continuing to today, states that had previously been required to seek federal permission to make changes to their voting rules instead pushed forward sweeping changes—emboldening other states to do so as well.

Today, there remain many significant obstacles to voting and access to the Southern ballot, primarily impacting Southerners of color, low-income voters, and elderly voters, as well as LGBTQ Southerners. These changes, discussed below, make it more difficult for voters to exercise their constitutional right to vote. They can also limit the ability of individuals to influence who represents them and the policy landscape of their towns, states, and the country.

- ✘ **Voter roll purges.** States can remove registered voters from the rolls, which causes confusion, delays at the polls, and even can result in someone not being able to vote. Analysis by the Brennan Center for Justice found that, as recently as 2016-2018, states with histories of racial discrimination in voting (many of which are in the South) purged 40% more voters than states without. Research suggests the decision in *Shelby County* accounts for more than 1.1 million people being purged from voter rolls nationwide in 2016 to 2018 alone, often without their knowledge until they show up to vote on election day.ⁿ
- ✘ **Polling place closures.** Between 2012 and 2018, nearly 1,700 polling places were closed in places previously covered by the Voting Rights Act—places with histories of racial discrimination in voting. The most polling places were closed in Texas, Arizona, and Georgia, with closures primarily occurring in counties with large Black and Latino populations.^o Closures lead to widespread voter confusion, transportation challenges, longer lines at remaining polling places, and other obstacles that ultimately make it harder to vote.
- ✘ **Strict voter ID laws.** Eleven of 14 Southern states (all except Kentucky, Oklahoma, and West Virginia) have photo identification requirements to vote.^p These laws create obstacles for many voters, including older people, people of color, rural residents, people with low incomes, and transgender people—all of whom are either less likely to have a government ID, less able to travel to or access a state ID-issuing office, or both.^q Transgender people already face numerous obstacles to obtaining accurate identity documents that match their name and gender identity, and Southern states are even more likely to have cumbersome or outdated policies for updating identity documents.^r Combined with the financial cost associated with obtaining a form of ID that meets these states' strict requirements, it is likely that millions of people will be unable to vote because they lack a photo ID.^s
- ✘ **Gerrymandering.** "Gerrymandering" is when politicians intentionally redraw district lines to advantage their own party and to disadvantage others. Research shows that, among Southern states, Florida, North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia have particularly biased maps,^t with obvious efforts to "pack" Black voters into a few districts to dilute their voting power beyond those districts.^u A 2018 report found that despite Southern Democratic candidates for the House winning 46% of votes, they won only a third of their races—resulting in a loss of 18 House seats.^v And because the *Shelby* decision means the federal government no longer has the ability to review

ⁿ Kevin Morris. 2019. "Voter Purge Rates Remain High, Analysis Finds." *The Brennan Center for Justice*, August 1.

^o The Leadership Conference Education Fund. 2019. *Democracy Diverted: Polling Place Closures and the Right to Vote*.

^p Wendy Underhill. 2020. "Voter Identification Requirements | Voter ID Laws." *National Conference of State Legislatures*, February 24.

^q Keesha Gaskins and Sundee Iyer. 2012. *The Challenge of Obtaining Voter Identification*. New York: The Brennan Center for Justice.

^r Movement Advancement Project. May 2020. *Mapping LGBTQ Equality in the U.S. South*.

^s Kathryn O'Neill and Jody Herman. February 2020. *The Potential Impact of Voter Identification Laws on Transgender Voters in the 2020 General Election*. Los Angeles: The Williams Institute.

^t Laura Royden and Michael Li. 2017. *Extreme Maps*. New York: The Brennan Center for Justice.

^u Michael Li and Laura Royden. 2017. *Minority Representation: No Conflict With Fair Maps*. New York: The Brennan Center for Justice.

^v Chris Kromm. 2018. "How gerrymandering blunted the South's blue wave." *Facing South*, November 16.



election-related changes, particularly in the South, the impact of gerrymandering can be disproportionately felt by voters of color and progressive voters.

- ✘ **Felony disenfranchisement.** A number of states, concentrated in the South, have laws that ban people from voting if they have been convicted of certain crimes, even if they have already served their sentence. Of the 11 states that permanently disenfranchise at least some people with criminal convictions, five are in the South (Alabama, Florida,^w Kentucky, Mississippi, and Tennessee), and these states have extremely high rates of disenfranchisement related to criminal convictions.^x Eight of the 10 states with the highest felony disenfranchisement rates are all in the South, with rates 3-5 times higher than the national average.^y As discussed in more detail on [pages 20-21](#), the South leads the nation in incarceration of Black and Latinx people, and so these felony disenfranchisement laws disproportionately affect Black and Latinx Southerners, and especially Black men. For example, more than one in five Black residents in each of Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia are not allowed to vote because of these laws. And given the disproportionate criminalization and targeting of LGBTQ people in the South, especially under HIV criminalization laws, it is likely that many LGBTQ Southerners are also disenfranchised by these laws.

Each of these efforts creates obstacles to voting across the board, but they each also have disproportionate impacts on minority communities, including voters of color and LGBTQ voters. Given the higher concentrations of Black and LGBTQ voters in the South, the higher rates of poverty and economic challenges that many in both communities experience, and the high rates of incarceration that both communities experience, these laws and efforts dramatically limit the right to vote for both Black and LGBTQ Southerners. This makes it even more difficult for LGBTQ Southerners to achieve political change through traditional electoral politics.



More than one in five Black residents in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia are not allowed to vote because of felony disenfranchisement laws.

^w Prior to 2018, Florida had one of the harshest disenfranchisement laws in the country, *permanently* disenfranchising people with past felony convictions. In November 2018, voters in Florida approved a constitutional amendment that automatically restored the right to vote for people with felony convictions, upon completing the terms of their sentence. An estimated 1.4 million Floridians were expected to have their voting rights restored. However, in 2019, the Florida legislature passed a new law legally redefining the sentencing terms, effectively imposing further requirements and financial obstacles before a person can actually have their right to vote restored. Voting rights advocates are challenging the law in court, but the right to vote for these 1.4 million Floridians and more remains unclear. For more, see the Brennan Center's "Voting Rights Restoration Efforts in Florida" as well as the *Broadening the Fight* spotlight on [page 42](#).

^x The Brennan Center for Justice. 2019. "Criminal Disenfranchisement Laws Across the United States."

^y Christopher Uggen, Ryan Larson, and Sarah Shannon. 2016. *6 Million Lost Voters: State-Level Estimates of Felony Disenfranchisement*, 2016. Washington DC: The Sentencing Project.

LGBTQ Organizing and Advocacy in the South

LGBTQ Southerners experience many of the same issues facing LGBTQ people across the country—such as healthcare disparities, poverty, and criminalization. And as described above, LGBTQ people in the South also face added challenges in daily life and providing for their families, often a result of discrimination and lack of legal protections. Yet, LGBTQ people in the South are resilient and creative and have responded to the challenges they experience both as LGBTQ people and as members of many communities in unique ways.

In many ways, the cornerstones of Southern life influence how many people in the South, especially LGBTQ people, organize, advocate, and work to create thriving, vibrant communities. Given the one-party control, social conservatism, and resulting hostile policy landscape for LGBTQ issues, Southern LGBTQ advocacy

is often less oriented toward the policy goals or state legislative strategies often pursued in other parts of the country. Instead, Southern LGBTQ organizing and advocacy is often more oriented toward community building, direct service and mutual aid, and intersectional coalition building and advocacy beyond only a state legislative context. When LGBTQ Southerners do engage in policy advocacy, that work and those victories may also look different than in other parts of the country.

Additionally, the legacy of slavery and contemporary racial disparities lead to clear focus on LGBTQ Southerners of color, as well as making the need for strong coalitions and anti-racism work all the more apparent—and evident—in Southern LGBTQ advocacy. The broader importance of faith in the South is also reflected in Southern LGBTQ communities' direct engagement with the (false) tension between faith and sexuality or gender, and similarly the central place of community and belonging in Southern life is reflected

LGBTQ SOUTHERNERS ARE LEADING THE WAY IN ORGANIZING AND ADVOCACY



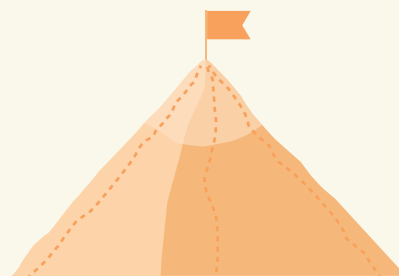
BUILDING COMMUNITY



DIRECT SUPPORT



COALITION



BROADER DEFINITIONS OF PROGRESS

in LGBTQ Southerners' focus on building and nurturing LGBTQ-affirming spaces.

Not only are these sophisticated responses to a daunting political environment, but they are also especially *Southern* responses: engaging in change and healing through community connections, person to person and neighbor to neighbor; over shared meals and shared faith; and through a deep sense of rootedness in the place and this region so many call home.



Building Community Through Joy and Regional Investment

For most LGBTQ people across the country, finding and building community with other LGBTQ people is an important part of life. Having access to community helps to find friendships and connections, supportive and affirming environments, resources or services, and so much more. While LGBTQ advocates and community members nationwide are actively and regularly engaged in community building efforts, **in the South these efforts take on a special importance and focus for LGBTQ people.**

Spaces to find or build community are especially important in more hostile or less accepting environments, as they help provide a balance and refuge from the difficulties and potential discrimination of everyday life. This is especially true for LGBTQ people of color, as they experience the negative impacts of conservatism and discrimination based on multiple aspects of their identity including race, sexual orientation and/or gender identity, gender, and immigration status. The South is, as explored throughout this report, a particularly conservative region culturally, religiously, and politically.

Additionally, in rural areas, where the population is lower, building LGBTQ community in person can be especially challenging. The South is both nearly two-thirds rural and home to more LGBTQ people than any other region, meaning that LGBTQ Southerners may be especially likely to live in rural areas and thus potentially experience limited access to LGBTQ community.

Community building also happens in unique ways in the South. Reflecting the legacies of race and conservative Christianity in the South, many of these community-building efforts are focused on or provide specific programming to LGBTQ communities of color,

A Note on COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic began during the writing of this report and has since disproportionately impacted many vulnerable groups. Data show that Black and Latinx people, including those who live in the South, are more likely to become infected and to die as a result of COVID-19. Research about LGBTQ people, particular those who are low-income, older, or who are people of color, suggests they may also be more at risk for COVID-19 infection and the economic devastation that has resulted from the pandemic. Many of the organizations profiled in this report, as well as many others working in the South, are doing what they do best: investing in community and connection increasingly online; working to meet immediate needs through rapid relief microgrants and mutual aid not only for one another but for their broader communities; building coalitions to pressure governments to protect the most vulnerable such as through expanded healthcare access and eviction moratoria; and innovating in political strategy to create policy change even amid a global crisis.

people of faith, or both. For example, at Camp Gender Benders (or Camp GB), a multi-day camp for transgender and gender diverse folks in the South (see Spotlight), there are spaces exclusively for transgender people of color. Camp GB also includes multiple workshops and activities focused on spiritual reconciliation and healing, as many LGBTQ people have been rejected or harmed by their faith tradition. Given that LGBTQ Southerners are more likely to be people of faith than are LGBTQ people in other regions and that Southern religious traditions are generally more conservative and less accepting,¹³¹ this harm is especially prevalent in Southern LGBTQ communities.

Southern LGBTQ community building also often happens outside of fixed locations or formal buildings like an LGBTQ community center. In the South, there are fewer LGBTQ community centers per LGBTQ adult than in other regions.¹³² And again, given the heavily rural landscape of the South, it may not be feasible for many LGBTQ Southerners to travel to places such as a community center in order to build or access community.



Gender Benders: "We are here, and you are not alone."

Founded in 2011, Gender Benders is a grassroots organization for transgender and gender diverse people in the southeastern United States. Based in South Carolina, with chapters and partner organizations in Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina, Gender Benders' work has three key elements: 1) connecting people to the resources they need to lead full and healthy lives; 2) engaging in activism and education work to help create safer communities for our people; and 3) holding intentional space for people to develop relationships with other transgender and gender diverse people who can serve as a support system for one another.



A defining program offered by Gender Benders is Camp GB, first offered in 2013. Camp GB is a multi-day immersive camp environment, where people gather to build community, learn from one another, and simply have fun and experience joy in an affirming space with other queer and transgender people. Camp offerings include workshops on self-love and spiritual reconciliation, a name change clinic including financial support for legal fees, an annual talent show, and even a swimming pool. In 2019, the camp added a health and wellness track that included onsite doctors, hormone replacement therapy (HRT), medical letters supporting gender



marker changes on identity documents, and general health and wellness consultations. Camp co-founder Ivy Hill added, "Because we know continued care is such an issue for our folks, we didn't just offer these services at camp, but we actually paid for six months of HRT care for every camper who started at camp and requested financial assistance."

In its first year, Camp GB had 20 attendees, and has since served over 550 people from 13 different states. An intentionally intergenerational space, campers have ranged in age from 15 to 72. Camp GB also includes spaces exclusively for attendees of color, and in 2019 roughly 65% of attendees were transgender women of color. Additionally, 90% of all campers receive financial support for attendance costs. Camp GB also has online and social media offerings so that attendees can maintain the connections and community they've built at camp, even long after leaving the campgrounds.

In a mini documentary about the camp, one multi-year attendee named Shane said, "Every year I come here it makes me stronger. It helps me be able to go out into the world and recognize that it's not the way it should be, but also have the strength and energy to fight."

To learn more or to donate, visit www.genderbenders.org.



The STAY Project: “Making our communities places we can and want to stay”



The STAY Project, founded in 2008, provides Appalachian youth and young people (ages 14-30) with the community, skills, and resources they need to stay in Appalachia. Using the tagline, “Making our communities places we can and want to stay,” the STAY Project has built a diverse regional network of young people across six states and counting: Alabama, Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. While the project is not exclusively LGBTQ-focused, many of its members are LGBTQ-identified, including many LGBTQ people of color.

The STAY Project sometimes supports policy-focused work of its youth members or partner organizations, but STAY’s mission is squarely focused on community- and skill-building in order to enable youth “to create, advocate for and participate in safe, sustainable, engaging, and inclusive communities throughout Appalachia and beyond.” Coordinator Lou Murrey described that at STAY, “We create a space where we’re able to see each other. That space is sacred for us, that young people can come and be out, or be whoever they feel comfortable being.”

Murrey continued, “The outcomes of our work are less tangible than a policy win. How do you show what a relationship means? But that’s the strength of our work: the relationships we’ve built. To be a young person who is isolated and to know you are not alone? That there are people out there who love you and care about your wellbeing? That is lifesaving.”

Through both in-person meetings at the historic Highlander Center in Tennessee and in rotating locations across their six state region, as well as through a variety of programs, the STAY Project brings Appalachian youth together and engages them “as experts in their own lives and leads them through asking one another what they want and need in order to stay and work in their home communities and then connects them with the resources and skills they need to make their visions for Central Appalachia come true.”

One central program is the STAY Summer Institute, a multi-day gathering of youth with workshops, dedicated spaces for Black youth and for LGBTQ youth, and political and cultural education. As Murrey explains, liberation is at the heart of the project: “We want to build a political analysis that is about justice and spans across all our intersecting identities, including as Appalachians.” Additionally, STAY provides small stipends to support the work of its members, especially Black and LGBTQ youth, in their own communities. Past funding has supported a wide range of projects and community building efforts, from disability justice workshops and professional development trainings to affirming pool parties and more.

To learn more or to donate, visit www.thestayproject.net.

Scholar Mary Gray describes how LGBTQ youth in rural areas, including in the South, create their own temporary and shifting spaces for community, whether “among house parties, public libraries, Christian bookstores, gas stations,” or even impromptu drag shows in Wal-Mart aisles.¹³³ Similarly, in MAP interviews, multiple LGBTQ Southern advocates highlighted that many LGBTQ Southerners regularly rely on public libraries and sometimes even local breweries as makeshift community centers or regular gathering places. While these actions may reflect, in Gray’s words, the “lack of local numbers [of LGBTQ people] and gay-owned spaces” in rural areas, they also illustrate the creativity and resilience of LGBTQ people in how they create community even in the face of obstacles like hostile environments or distant geography. For these reasons and more, in the South, LGBTQ programming and community building often happens in a wide range of spaces and places, from informal gatherings in backyards and at barbecues to non-LGBTQ community centers, public buildings, restaurants, and more.

Additionally, a key focus of these community spaces is developing skills among attendees to return to their home towns or regions and build LGBTQ community there—in effect both operating to address the immediate needs of LGBTQ Southerners for contact and community, while also working to solve the root causes of isolation and other obstacles in their home towns and the broader region. The STAY Project (see Spotlight), for example, is an organization focused on providing Appalachian youth with not only the community and connections they need to stay in Appalachia, but also the skills and resources. The Project offers a member support fund with a simple, three-question application, to help Appalachian youth launch community-building programs in their hometowns, to attend trainings or classes to build their professional skills, or simply to make ends meet. Consistent with the mission of the larger STAY Project, the goal of the member support fund is to enable Appalachian youth to get what they need and to stay in the places they call home. And by creating the environment in which LGBTQ youth feel connected to their homes, this also addresses key broader challenges for the region such as general isolation and lack of connection, limited educational opportunities and economic security, and population decline, particularly among younger people.



Providing for Community Through Direct Support

The LGBTQ community has a long history of providing for itself and caring for one another, especially when institutions and government have failed to do so, such as during the HIV/AIDS crisis. Today, many LGBTQ people across the country remain connected to this practice of community care, and this is especially true in the South given the more challenging legal and cultural climate. Again reflecting the unique history and landscape of the South, many of these direct support efforts are explicitly focused on the needs of LGBTQ communities of color and on key issues like health care and criminalization.

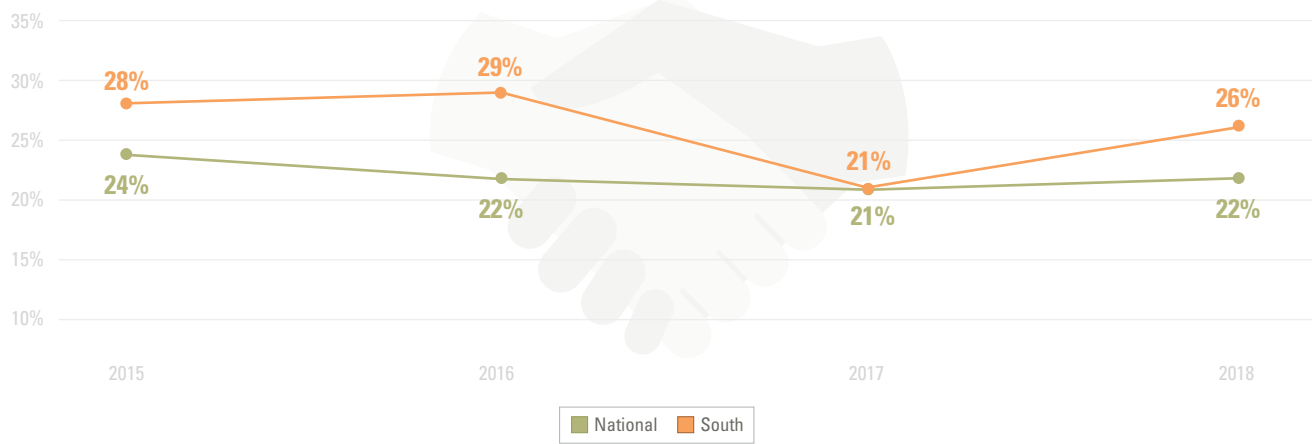
While there are many different ways to think about direct support, here the term refers broadly to people, communities, or organizations responding directly to community needs and larger political problems by providing the actual service or resource needed—such as food, clothing, money, medical care, legal assistance, and more—directly to individuals. In many cases, direct support is part of a larger effort that includes policy advocacy and other strategies, and certainly none of the strategies discussed in this report are mutually exclusive.

Data on philanthropic funding of LGBTQ issues show that LGBTQ advocates in the South are more likely to receive funding for direct service work, compared to national trends. As shown in *Figure 8* on the next page, in 2018, more than one quarter (26%) of Southern LGBTQ funding went to direct service strategies, compared to 22% of LGBTQ funding nationwide. And *Figure 8* also shows that funding for direct service in the South is generally higher over time as well, though the gap between Southern and national funding varies from one year to the next.²

As noted above, obstacles to health and healthcare access are key issues in the South, for LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ Southerners alike. Not surprisingly, then, when it comes to the issues that direct service focuses on, health-related work is a major focus for LGBTQ Southerners. While *Figure 8* shows the percent of Southern funding by strategy, *Figure 9* on the next page shows the percent of funding by issue addressed. Not only does a large share

² Importantly, Southern philanthropic funding is largely dependent on a small number of large donors. Even one or two of these donors changing their funding priorities or amounts can therefore have a large impact on the percentages shown here. However, this makes it all the more clear that, even with such year to year shifts, Southern funding for direct service remains a clear priority.

Figure 8: In the South, Direct Service Work is a Larger Share of LGBTQ Funding (By Strategy)
% of Southern vs. National Funding for LGBTQ Issues That Goes to Direct Service Work



Source: Funders for LGBTQ Issues. OneOrlando Fund not included. Funding by strategy.

Figure 9: In the South, Health Issues—Especially HIV—Are a Larger Share of LGBTQ Funding (By Issue)

Figure 9a: In the South, Health Issues Are a Larger Share of LGBTQ Funding (By Issue)
% of Southern vs. National Funding for LGBTQ Issues That Goes to Health Work

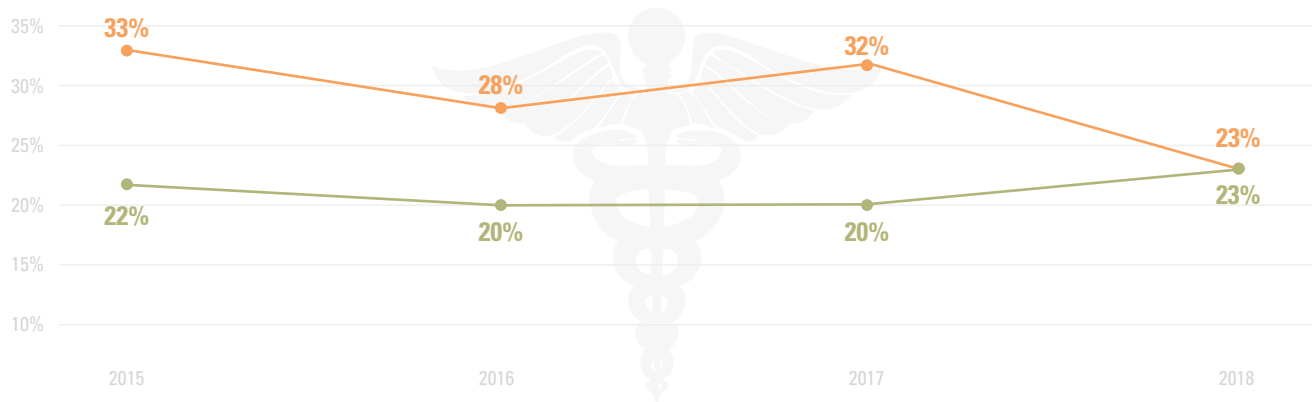
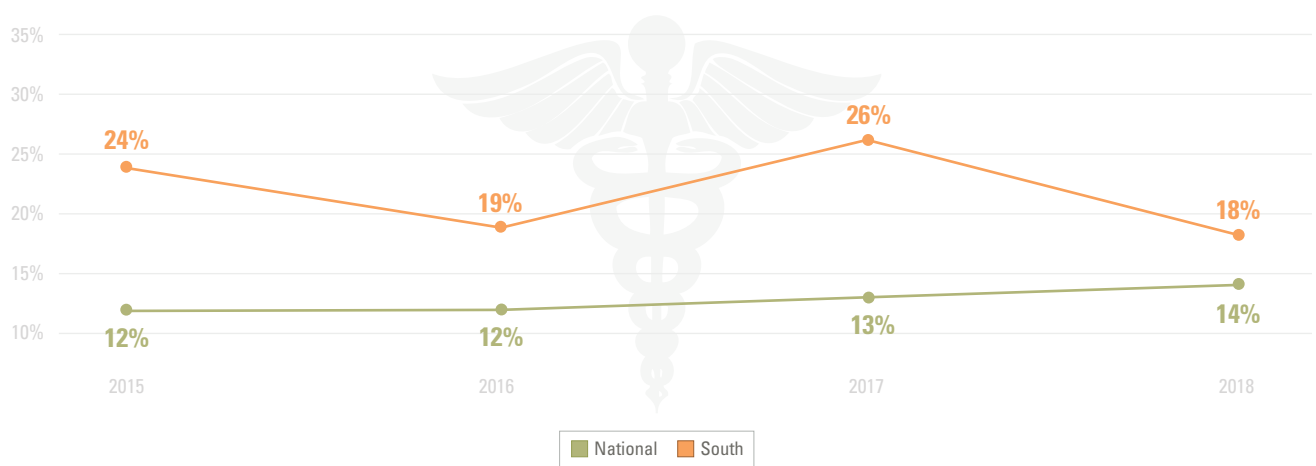


Figure 9b: In the South, HIV Work is a Larger Share of LGBTQ Funding (By Issue)
% of Southern vs. National Funding for LGBTQ Issues That Goes to HIV Work



Note: HIV funding is a subcategory of health funding.
Source: Funders for LGBTQ Issues. OneOrlando Fund not included. Funding by issue.

of Southern LGBTQ funding go to overall health and wellbeing work (*Figure 9a*), but also specifically to HIV-focused work (*Figure 9b*).^{aa} Additionally, in both cases, Southern funding for health and HIV work is a consistently larger share than nationwide LGBTQ funding.^{bb}

Mobile and pop-up clinics are one example of direct service work, including those that focus on health issues. For example, the Nationz Foundation in Richmond, Virginia, has a mobile testing unit and food pantry, traveling around the region to picnics, barbecues, and centers of LGBTQ nightlife to provide services and resources directly to community members (see *Serving and Building the Power of Black LGBTQ Southerners* spotlight). Similarly, Equality Virginia, a statewide LGBTQ advocacy group, has a program called the Transgender Information and Empowerment Summit (TIES). The TIES program includes health services, as well as legal clinics and support, education and resources, and more. In addition to an annual statewide summit, Equality Virginia takes TIES on the road, partnering with local transgender groups in cities and small towns around the state to help as many LGBTQ Virginians as possible access TIES' health and other services. Not only does this program address some of the immediate needs of LGBTQ Southerners, but it also travels throughout the state to ensure access for LGBTQ Virginians in rural areas, for those with less or no access to transportation, and for the broader community.

Community generated resource guides are a frequent tool for LGBTQ communities across the country, with some of the most visible and comprehensive emerging from the South. For example, in surveys of and community conversations with transgender and non-binary Southerners, many people reported regular difficulty in finding knowledgeable and affirming medical providers in their local communities, as well as fears of experiencing discrimination at the hands of medical providers.¹³⁴ Many people reported relying on word of mouth to find supportive providers, and that support networks were helpful in addressing feelings of isolation or not knowing where to turn for help. As a result, the Campaign for Southern Equality and partner organizations began and continue to maintain *Trans in the South*, a directory of over 400 transgender-affirming and competent medical care and other service providers throughout the South. This guide especially stands out for many reasons, including because each listed provider has been personally contacted and reviewed by the Campaign for Southern Equality, the guide is available in both English

and Spanish, and it is updated regularly. While guides or directories such as these may not provide the actual medical care or service itself, they do provide the service of knowing where LGBTQ-affirming healthcare can be found and accessed—no small feat given the South's lower rates of medical providers overall, the higher rates of health concerns and disparities for LGBTQ people, and the lack of legal protections in health care for LGBTQ Southerners.

Mutual aid work is another frequently used tactic in Southern queer communities. Mutual aid is another method of directly addressing and meeting community needs that also includes an explicitly political lens. As described by the Big Door Brigade, a mutual aid network, "Mutual aid projects are a form of political participation in which people take responsibility for caring for one another and changing political conditions, not just through symbolic acts or putting pressure on their representatives in government, but by actually building new social relations that are more survivable." Mutual aid projects are more likely to be volunteer-based and responsive to immediate concerns, rather than formally structured organizations.

Mutual aid networks exist across the country, and these are increasingly visible during the COVID-19 era. As one writer based in Appalachia described, "Groups for mutual aid...have sprung up across the country in response to the pandemic. But in Appalachia, those networks and exchanges were always here. ...In small towns, you know who is in need."¹³⁵

For Southern LGBTQ communities, where needs are often high and urgent, as discussed throughout this report, mutual aid networks are a critical part of meeting these needs. Queer Appalachia, for example—an online-only community with over 100,000 followers and growing—regularly posts community members' requests for financial support, connecting LGBTQ people directly to one another so that funds or other resources can get directly to individuals in need without being facilitated by outside organizations like food pantries, shelters, or government agencies. Similarly, Queer Appalachia has organized winter coat drives for LGBTQ people in need

^{aa} Funding for HIV-focused work (*Figure 9b*) is included in the broader category of funding for health and wellbeing (*Figure 9a*). HIV funding is presented separately given the high rates of HIV and HIV-focused work in the region.

^{bb} In 2018, rates of Southern and national funding for health and wellbeing work were the same (23%). As noted previously, even small changes among Southern donors can lead to large changes from one year to the next. Additionally, overall Southern funding as a share of national funding is significantly increasing over recent years (see *pages 39-40*), and as this continues, Southern funding patterns will increasingly drive national patterns.

SPOTLIGHT



Serving and Building the Power of Black LGBTQ Southerners

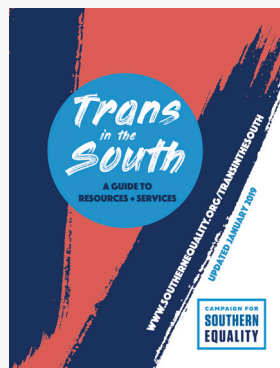
In the South, many LGBTQ people and organizations are dedicated to creating space for and serving the specific needs of Black LGBTQ and same gender loving (SGL) Southerners. Black LGBTQ/SGL communities have unique experiences, and particularly so in the South where centuries of racism and discrimination continue to shape life in many ways today. Often, these groups in the South provide not only direct support to their community members, but also leadership and models of effective, creative activism and programming to materially improve the lives of LGBTQ people of color. Two examples are the Nationz Foundation in Virginia, and the Knights & Orchids Society in Alabama.

Based in Richmond, Virginia, the Nationz Foundation “provides education and information related to HIV prevention and overall health and wellness while also working towards a more inclusive Central Virginia for LGBTQIA+ people.” Founded and led by Black transgender women, the organization's programs include community and support groups for transgender people and people living with HIV, a food pantry, free HIV and other sexual health testing services, a text line service, a computer lab, and safer sex outreach and material distribution. In addition to these many programs, Nationz has a mobile testing unit and food pantry, which travels throughout the region offering free HIV testing, sex education and health materials, and food to the broader community. Recently, Nationz was also able to acquire a house, which they named the Aim to Inspire House, so they can provide emergency housing assistance to transgender and LGBQ community members experiencing housing instability.

In their own words, The Knights & Orchids Society (TKO) “strives to build the power of the African American transgender, gender nonconforming, and LGBQ communities throughout rural areas in Alabama and across the South.” In 2017, they opened the Black Sheep Relief Center in Selma to serve as a link between the local LGBTQ community and the city of Selma for the purpose of creating positive change in the city overall, particularly among rural LGBTQ youth and young adults. During the COVID-19 health crisis, they extended their Reproductive Justice Free Store capacity to assist Black, low income, and fixed income families with items like food, diapers, and cleaning supplies. Through their Fair Access in Trans Healthcare (FAITH) program, they also provide nonclinical HIV testing, pantry, medical transition assistance, small group interventions, and prevention programs for transgender and gender nonconforming people of color, LGBQ people of color, and people of color living with HIV in the South. Just since 2019, TKO has given away over 75,000 pounds of food and essential supplies and offered nearly 1,500 hours of peer navigation services to nearly 1,000 people.

To learn more or to donate, visit www.nationzfoundationrva.org and www.tkosociety.com.

in the Appalachian region, after receiving hundreds of requests for assistance. People from all over the country mailed coats and donated money to support the drive and provide winter clothing to those in need. Queer Appalachia also sponsors a micro-grant program to support rural LGBTQ community programming and projects, and will soon launch an online support group for rural LGBTQ people in recovery from addiction. Not only do these examples illustrate Southern uses of mutual aid and direct support, but they also demonstrate how these strategies are used in direct response to the primary issues facing LGBTQ Southerners, such as economic insecurity and health, including addiction and recovery.



The Campaign for Southern Equality's *Trans in the South* guide includes a directory of over 400 transgender-affirming and competent providers across the South. To see the directory or submit a provider, visit: tinyurl.com/TransintheSouth.



Fighting the Criminalization of Poverty with Community Bail Outs



Image from SONG's Black Mama's Bail Out Action 2019 in Richmond, Virginia.

Cash bail, as discussed on [pages 20-21](#), requires people who have not been convicted of any crime to pay money in order to be released from jail. As a result, nearly half a million people around the country are in jail, simply because they cannot afford their own freedom.^{cc} And, research shows that people who cannot afford bail and are therefore kept in jail until their trial (known as “pretrial detention”) are significantly more likely than people who could pay bail to (1) be convicted of a crime, (2) receive a prison sentence, and (3) receive a longer prison sentence, even controlling for other factors like the type or severity of the crime.^{dd}

In the South, where rates of poverty and criminalization are both significantly higher across the board and especially for Southerners of color and LGBTQ Southerners, cash bail is an especially urgent problem. As a result, many communities and groups are working to address the immediate financial needs of incarcerated people and their families, by paying the bail needed to free the person from jail. Importantly, this mutual aid is part of a larger political effort to end the use of cash bail entirely and to work against the broader injustices of the prison system.

Southerners on New Ground (SONG), in its own words, is “a home for LGBTQ liberation across all lines of race, class, abilities, age, culture, gender, and sexuality in the South.” Among its many member-driven programs and campaigns is SONG’s participation in the National Bail Out Collective, a Black-led coalition of people and organizations working to get people out of jail and to end the use of pretrial detention and, ultimately, mass incarceration itself. As part of the National Bail Out Collective, SONG and LGBTQ Southerners throughout the region participate in regular bail out events, including the annual Black Mama’s Bail Out Action. This action, held annually on and around Mother’s Day, works to free Black mothers held in pretrial detention. For Mother’s Day 2019, SONG members successfully bailed out over 30 Black women in Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, and Louisiana.

To learn more or to donate, visit www.southernersonnewground.org and www.nationalbailout.org.

^{cc} Wendy Sawyer and Peter Wagner. 2020. “Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2020.” Prison Policy Initiative, March 24.

^{dd} Christopher Lowenkamp, Marie VanNostrand, and Alexander Holsinger. 2013. *The Hidden Costs of Pretrial Detention*. Houston, TX: The Laura and John Arnold Foundation.

This focus on direct support is especially important in the South, because historically there has been significantly less financial investment and funding of LGBTQ advocacy in the South. Based on annual reporting of funding for LGBTQ issues nationwide, for many years, the South was the least-funded region in the country. This meant, and often still means, that Southern LGBTQ communities have had to face a harsher political landscape but with fewer resources.

Importantly, this trend has been changing in recent years. According to annual reporting, funding for LGBTQ issues in the South nearly quadrupled from 2013 to

2018.¹³⁶ In 2013, annual funding for LGBTQ issues in the South totaled \$8.1 million, the lowest of any region. By 2018, annual funding in the South had increased to \$31.8 million, the highest of any region.

However, though funding has clearly increased overall, the South continues to have lower funding *per LGBTQ person* than some other regions,^{ee} despite having the largest LGBTQ population. Additionally, according to the research organization and network Funders for

^{ee} In 2013, the South had the lowest funding per LGBTQ adult, at \$2.97 per LGBTQ adult. In 2018, the South’s funding had increased to \$8.77 per LGBTQ adult, behind the Northeast (\$10.98) and the Pacific (\$8.98) regions, with the Mountain (\$7.19) and Midwest (\$4.25) regions now receiving the fewest funding dollars per LGBTQ adult. See Funders for LGBTQ Issues’ annual reports.

LGBTQ Issues, the majority of new funding to the South for LGBTQ issues is coming from large foundations outside the South. While this investment is clearly important, long overdue, and making a significant difference in several states in particular, it is critically important for the long-term sustainability of funding for Southern LGBTQ issues that there also be funding and investment from Southern-based sources.



Creating Change Through Intersectional Coalition Work

LGBTQ advocates in the South have led the nation in bringing to their activism the recognition that people don't live single-issue lives. That is, for example, Black LGBTQ Southerners are not solely defined by their sexual orientation or gender identity, nor can their experiences of racism be separated from their experiences as LGBTQ people. One tangible outcome of this recognition and of the very diversity of the LGBTQ communities in the South is the extent to which many LGBTQ Southern communities are actively engaged in intersectional coalition work, including on issues that may not be explicitly or commonly thought of as "LGBTQ issues."

What's more, given the conservative political powers in the South and the supermajorities held by a single party in many states, accomplishing progress on LGBTQ-specific issues may be more challenging. But, working in coalition provides vital opportunities for building understanding, power, and strength that undergirds long-term progressive work toward more inclusive, economically just, and thriving communities in the South. This type of work bridges difference, whether it be geographic between urban residents and those in rural communities, devout Christians and atheists, and LGBTQ people and their neighbors. There are deep social justice roots in the South, drawing on the strength of the Civil Rights Movement, and by coming together to advance causes such as the disenfranchisement of formerly incarcerated people, raising the minimum wage, or fighting against union busting, LGBTQ advocates not only improve the lives of LGBTQ people and others in the South who are impacted by these issues, but they also gain understanding, make connections, and help solidify a broader and deeper community of advocates. Thus, when LGBTQ organizations and communities in the South are working in coalition, it is through a deep

understanding of the diversity of communities and the shared fates that bind them together.

Several LGBTQ regional and state equality groups have intentionally and thoughtfully centered intersectional work in their missions. For example, Southerners on New Ground (SONG; see spotlights on [pages 39 and 41](#)) is a regional organization working toward "a multi-issue southern justice movement that unites us across class, age, race, ability, gender, immigration status, and sexuality; a movement in which LGBTQ people—poor and working class, immigrant, people of color, rural—take our rightful place as leaders shaping our region's legacy and future." The group's work crosses many experiences and issues, including the criminal system and incarceration, racial justice, health and healing, and more.

At the state level, Equality Florida has been an active and vocal leader in statewide fights to expand LGBTQ rights, to raise the minimum wage, to end the systemic disenfranchisement of formerly incarcerated Floridians, to prevent gun violence, and much more. Working in partnership with many communities and organizations across the state, Equality Florida was a key partner in the state's recent and historic Amendment 4, a ballot initiative that successfully restored the voting rights of over 1.4 million Floridians who had been disenfranchised due to prior felony convictions (see [pages 29-30](#)). Similarly, Equality North Carolina, the oldest statewide LGBTQ organization in the country, has been actively engaged for many years on issues beyond explicitly LGBTQ issues, such as anti-racism work and raising the minimum wage. Their community partners include no fewer than 44 different organizations across issues of race, faith, poverty, health care, reproductive justice, labor, immigration, anti-violence, and much more.¹³⁷

Importantly, successful coalition building is not one-sided. It is not simply a matter of LGBTQ organizations or communities getting non-LGBTQ organizations or individuals to advocate for LGBTQ issues. LGBTQ organizations and people must similarly show up for coalition partners, whether that be at the picket line or the state legislature. Southern LGBTQ communities are intimately familiar with this reality, as evidenced in the leadership of Equality Florida, Equality North Carolina, and many other Southern LGBTQ groups.

By working to improve the lives of all Southerners, coalition work by definition can improve the lives of LGBTQ Southerners as well.



Southerners on New Ground (SONG)

Southerners on New Ground (SONG), founded in 1993, is an organization whose mission is to “build, sustain, and connect a southern regional base of LGBTQ people in order to transform the region through strategic projects and campaigns developed in response to the current conditions in our communities.”

In the organization’s own words, “We formed to build understanding of the connections between issues and oppressions, do multi-racial organizing, and develop strong relationships between people who could and should be allies. During our life as an organization we have learned that movement building requires grassroots organizing, leadership development, deep analysis, listening/data collection, inter-generational relationships, the linking of social movements, and good long-term planning. Some of SONG’s major accomplishments include: crafting the first-ever Southern, LGBTQ-led, traveling Organizing School for small towns and rural places all over the South; training over 100 Southern and national racial and economic justice organizations to integrate work around homophobia and transphobia into their work; holding over 50 Southern sub-regional retreats for Southern Queer People of Color; continuing to be one of the only LGBTQ organizations in the US that truly listens, responds, and represents LGBTQ folk in small towns and rural places; and in 2008 holding the largest gathering specifically for Southern LGBTQ organizers in the last 10 years.”

Reflective of the major cornerstones shaping Southern life, SONG’s work today is heavily focused on LGBTQ Southerners of color and matters of racial justice, especially in the context of the criminal legal system. For example, SONG’s “Free From Fear” campaign works to end racial “profiling and state violence against people of color and LGBTQ people in southern towns and cities,” with a particular focus on ending the use of cash bail and pre-trial detention (see [page 39](#)), as well as ending local and state law enforcement’s cooperation with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in the region.

SONG also offers many programs and events centered on building joy and community, another central feature of Southern LGBTQ organizing as discussed in this report. Some of SONG’s programming in this area includes annual events like “Queer South Revival” and “Gaycation” that bring together LGBTQ Southerners for in-person connection. These events, along with other SONG programming like the annual Out South and Bayard Rustin Convening, also work to build the skills and strengths of SONG’s members, helping expand the capacity of both these individuals and the broader Southern LGBTQ community to organize in pursuit of change.

The organization’s core focus on the intersecting experiences of LGBTQ Southerners is present throughout its work: “All of our work centers the shared interest of women, LGBTQ people, people of color, and immigrants—in who we are as SONG’s leadership and membership, and the analysis and work we create. We start at the place of lifting barriers and breaking the isolation that prevents people from participating fully in economic, social, and political life through creating an organizational home for LGBTQ Southern organizing and LGBTQ Southern people. This creates a space for Southern LGBTQ people to enter a political home: a space for understanding conditions and patterns, building analysis, and organizing. From this space, we grow the work of liberation.”

For more or to donate, visit www.southernersonnewground.org.



Equality Florida and Broadening the Fight

Equality Florida has not only been a leader for LGBTQ equality in Florida for more than 20 years—defeating every piece of anti-LGBTQ legislation filed in the state since 1997—but has also been an active and vocal leader in statewide fights on matters of racial justice, reproductive rights, HIV nondiscrimination, protecting democracy, preventing gun violence, and much more.

The organization regularly speaks out about racial justice issues, ranging from police brutality and racial disparities in the criminal legal system to the epidemic of violence against transgender people, especially Black transgender women. In 2012, Equality Florida condemned the NRA's Stand Your Ground law that was used to clear the man who shot Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager, and the organization issued a Black Lives Matter statement when the movement was founded in the aftermath of Trayvon's death. In 2020, after another wave of killings of Black people by police departments and armed vigilantes around the country, Equality Florida hosted a virtual Black Lives Matter town hall with Black LGBTQ leaders. The organization also coordinated a movement-wide statement of nearly 800 LGBTQ groups condemning racial violence and white supremacy and committing to the work of ending racism "as integral to the objective of full equality for LGBTQ people."

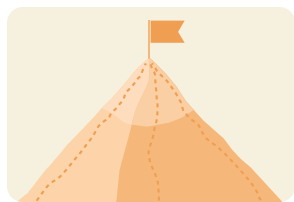
Equality Florida's fundamental theory of change requires a functioning democracy, so that changed hearts and minds can lead to real policy advances. In 2010, the organization was part of the Fair Districts campaign to end gerrymandering. The slogan "Equality Begins With Fair Districts" drove its Field operations. More recently, in 2018, Equality Florida partnered with communities and organizations across the state in the state's recent and historic Amendment 4 effort to restore voting rights of more than 1.4 million Floridians, the vast majority of whom were Black and Latinx, who had been disenfranchised due to prior felony convictions (see [pages 29-30](#)).

In 2016, after a gunman took the lives of 49 people, mostly Latinx and Black LGBTQ people, at Pulse nightclub, Equality Florida also became a central figure in the fight for gun safety and anti-violence measures in the state. As part of the organization's broader work toward racial equity and reducing violence, Equality Florida became a founding member of the Florida Coalition to Prevent Gun Violence, providing "support, resources, and strategic guidance to the new and growing movement of advocates for statewide change."

In addition, Equality Florida has also been a vocal leader on reproductive rights and the state's outdated HIV criminalization laws that are not based in science, regularly discussing the connections between the movements for LGBTQ equality, HIV stigma, healthcare access, and economic justice.

According to Executive Director Nadine Smith, "Equality Florida understands that full equality for the LGBTQ community means ensuring we are equal in every aspect of our identities. It's why we have been combating racism and been a pro-choice organization since our founding. We are committed to uprooting the forces of hatred and bigotry that continue to fuel violence and oppression because we understand what it means to stand up and push back against a culture that tells us we are less than, that our lives don't matter."

To learn more or to donate, visit www.eqfl.org.



Changing Policy Through Defense, Local Work, and Broader Definitions of Progress

Given the unique social and political climate of the South, and particularly the Republican control of most Southern state governments, LGBTQ advocates in the South often pursue change through different (i.e., non-legislative) methods, as described above. When LGBTQ Southerners do engage directly in LGBTQ-specific policy advocacy, they have frequent successes—despite what the policy landscape may suggest—but these successes often look different than in other parts of the country.

Whether by choice or by necessity, LGBTQ advocates in the South often focus on preventing further policy harm or “holding the line” against opponents of LGBTQ rights, rather than proactively expanding LGBTQ rights. Especially at the state level, such expansion may not currently be a political reality in much of the South. Often, LGBTQ advocates in the South may largely forego the state legislative route, instead pursuing change at the local level or through the judicial system. Across all these avenues for change, LGBTQ Southerners may often engage in a strategy of “losing forward,” engaging even when fighting a losing battle in order to create an opportunity for public education and shifting the larger narrative about LGBTQ life and needs in the South. And again, these efforts often reflect the unique history and culture of the South, such as the role of faith.

Fighting back—with amazing success—against state level attacks. Southern advocates working in state policy are often more focused on preventing harmful bills from becoming law or preventing the undermining of what positive laws may exist. These victories are significant, both for holding the line for LGBTQ Southerners and for laying the groundwork of future victories on the path toward legal equality and progress.

According to research by the Equality Federation and the Human Rights Campaign, in the 2019 legislative session in Southern states, only four anti-LGBTQ bills were passed into law out of at least 59 anti-LGBTQ bills introduced.¹³⁸ This means that LGBTQ Southerners defeated 55 bills—or 93% of introduced anti-LGBTQ bills—in states across the region in 2019 alone. This success rate is likely even higher, as LGBTQ advocates regularly work to prevent discriminatory bills from ever

In 2019, 93% of anti-LGBTQ bills introduced in Southern legislatures were successfully defeated.

Source: Data provided by Equality Federation, based on research in HRC & Equality Federation Institute's 2019 State Equality Index.

being introduced in the first place, though these victories are by definition more difficult to observe or count.

The importance of these victories becomes even more clear when looking back over time. In the five years from 2015 to 2019, over 750 anti-LGBTQ bills were filed in state legislatures across the country.¹³⁹ And despite the fact that the 14 Southern states make up roughly a quarter (27%) of all U.S. states, more than half (53%) of the anti-LGBTQ bills introduced from 2015 to 2019 were introduced in these states, far more than any other region.¹⁴⁰ In fact, for every pro-LGBTQ bill introduced in the South during that time, roughly 22 anti-LGBTQ bills were introduced.¹⁴¹ In the face of such consistent and widespread attacks on LGBTQ rights year after year, successfully holding the line is both a significant victory and a signal of the resiliency of Southern LGBTQ communities.

Expanding the fight to the local and judicial levels. Given the hostile state policy landscape and that much of state-level work is focused on defensive strategies, Southern LGBTQ advocates often take their more proactive work to expand LGBTQ rights to the local and judicial levels.

In the South, LGBTQ policy progress can and often does occur at the local level. While this is true around the country, Southern LGBTQ communities have led the way in providing models for how to do this work successfully, in coalition, and even in the face of hostile state legislatures.

For example, LGBTQ people and allies in Florida have successfully enacted dozens of LGBTQ-inclusive nondiscrimination ordinances that provide local-level protections for more than 60% of the state population (see *Figure 10* on the next page). In fact, Florida leads both the South and the country (among states without statewide protections) in residents protected against discrimination through local ordinances. In addition to active and persistent engagement in Florida faith communities (see *Faith Leadership in Southern LGBTQ Advocacy Spotlight*), one key way that

Florida’s efforts are unique from those in other states is that 12 of Florida’s LGBTQ-inclusive ordinances are at the county level, meaning that all residents within entire counties are protected, rather than only those within a specific city or town. In contrast, Pennsylvania has more than twice as many ordinances as Florida, but because these ordinances are largely at the city or town level rather than the county, they protect just over half as many residents as in Florida.^{ff} Of course all ordinances are important for providing protections for local residents, but Florida’s success in pursuing county-level ordinances has been extraordinary, with local community organizations leading the way.

In Kentucky, local advocates have passed at least 20 LGBTQ-inclusive nondiscrimination ordinances, or “fairness ordinances” as they are called locally. The first fairness ordinance in Kentucky was passed in Louisville in 1999, and at least 12 new ordinances have been passed since 2018 alone, in many different parts of the state. Local ordinances currently protect 31% of Kentuckians (see Figure 10).

Florida and Kentucky are also the only two Southern states with local-level bans on conversion “therapy,” though in 2019 the governor of North Carolina banned the use of taxpayer dollars for the practice, and in 2020

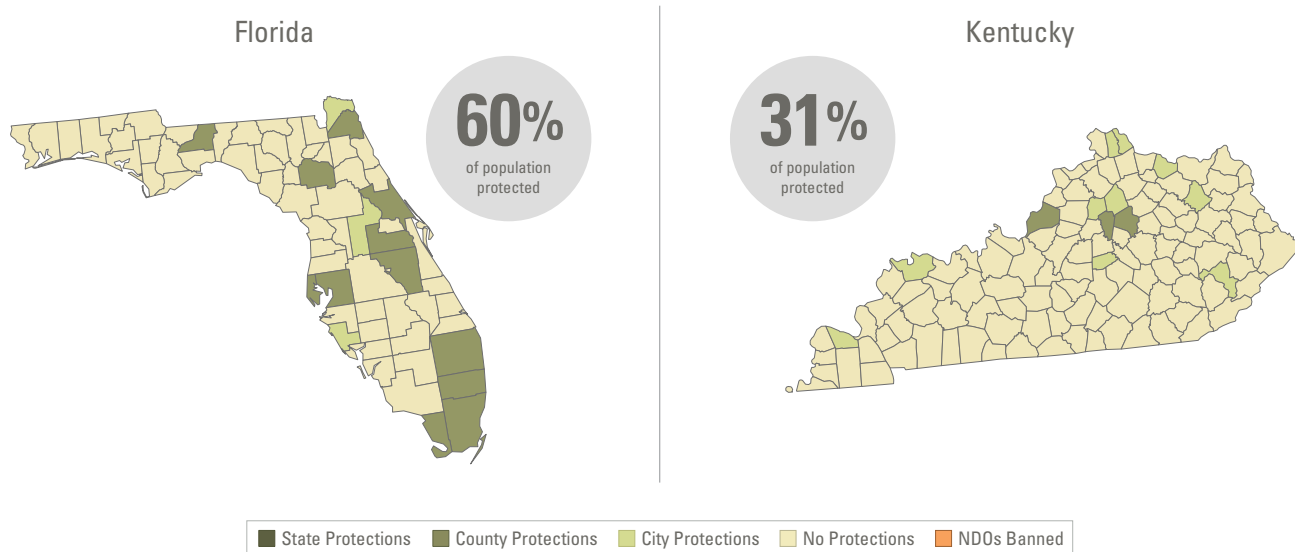
Virginia became the first Southern state to ban the practice entirely. Florida ordinances protect 21% of the state’s population, and Covington, Kentucky, recently became the first municipality in the state to ban the practice.

However, while local ordinances are an important part of the larger effort toward LGBTQ legal equality, state and federal legislators must still enact LGBTQ-inclusive protections to ensure all residents have the same rights and benefits, no matter where they call home. In many states, municipalities cannot provide protections beyond what the state authorizes, and even if every municipality in a given state were to pass an LGBTQ-inclusive nondiscrimination ordinance, this still might not protect the entire state population, as many areas may be unincorporated and therefore protected only by state or federal law.

Additionally, LGBTQ activists in Southern states may be, at least historically, more likely to pursue judicial strategies for change. Given the landscape of Southern state legislatures, LGBTQ Southerners often turn to the court system on issues that state legislatures outside the South have often taken up. In North Carolina, for

^{ff} As of this report, Florida has 32 ordinances (12 at the county level) prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in private employment, housing, and public accommodations. These protect 60% of the state population. Pennsylvania has 58 such ordinances (3 at the county level), protecting roughly 34% of the state’s population.

Figure 10: In Some Areas, LGBTQ Southerners Have Won Legal Protections Through Local Nondiscrimination Ordinances



Note: County map only shows areas with full protections (i.e., discrimination prohibited in private employment, housing, and public accommodations) for both sexual orientation and gender identity. The June 2020 U.S. Supreme Court decision affirms federal protections for sexual orientation and gender identity in employment only.

Source: MAP’s Equality Maps, as of 7/1/20.



Faith Leadership in Southern LGBTQ Advocacy

Given the predominant role of faith, and especially Christianity, in the South, a central characteristic of Southern LGBTQ organizing is engaging with faith communities. Importantly, many LGBTQ people are themselves people of faith, and in fact LGBTQ Southerners are more likely to be people of faith than are LGBTQ people outside the South.⁹⁹

Faith in Public Life, for example, is a national network of nearly 50,000 clergy and faith leaders “united in the prophetic pursuit of justice, equality, and the common good” across an intentionally broad set of issues, including economic justice, LGBTQ rights, criminal justice reform, gun violence, and more. They work throughout the South and have been especially active on LGBTQ issues in recent years in Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina.

In Georgia, Faith in Public Life members worked closely with Georgia Equality, the state’s LGBTQ advocacy group, against a religious exemption law in 2016, leading to a successful veto of the bill by the governor. In the years since, Faith in Public Life and other LGBTQ Georgians and allies have since been working to change the narrative about faith and LGBTQ people, to support local clergy and faith communities in their journeys toward acceptance and advocacy for LGBTQ people, and to pass local nondiscrimination ordinances around the state.

In Florida, faith leaders have been a central part of advancing local nondiscrimination ordinances and in the broader fight for gun safety and anti-violence measures. In Jacksonville, an LGBTQ-inclusive nondiscrimination ordinance had previously failed before the city council, including no votes from Black Democrats. Faith leaders and LGBTQ advocates engaged in long term outreach and education in local communities of faith, and particularly in Black faith communities, as well as holding numerous public events led by local faith leaders in support of nondiscrimination protections. Ultimately in 2017, an LGBTQ-inclusive ordinance was successfully passed with twice as many votes in support as opposed. Faith leaders in Florida are now refocusing their efforts on passing LGBTQ nondiscrimination protections statewide.

Having clergy and faith leaders visibly and vocally involved in Southern LGBTQ advocacy is not only important for its potentially persuasive effect on non-LGBTQ people of faith and the broader Southern culture, but also for its potentially healing effect on LGBTQ people who witness faith leaders embracing and advocating for LGBTQ people. Many LGBTQ people have been rejected or harmed by their faith tradition, and in the South this experience is especially prevalent, given both the higher rate of religious affiliation among LGBTQ Southerners and the fact that Southern religious traditions are generally more conservative and less supportive of LGBTQ people and issues.^{hh} And, because conservative Christianity is an ever-present aspect of much of Southern life and politics, that religious rejection can also be an ever-present aspect of everyday life for LGBTQ Southerners, such as when elected officials or other Southern leaders use religious language and justification for anti-LGBTQ policies or beliefs. As one interviewee described, “discrimination having that religious stamp of approval taps into that trauma” that many LGBTQ people have experienced in faith settings. As a result, centering LGBTQ-affirming faith leaders among those actively working toward LGBTQ equality makes a significant impact not only on the public conversation about faith and LGBTQ rights, but also on the spiritual wellbeing of LGBTQ Southerners.

⁹⁹ PRRI. 2019.

^{hh} PRRI. 2019.

SPOTLIGHT



Transform Houston: Deep Canvassing for Local Change

In 2015, just months after the U.S. Supreme Court granted same-sex couples the freedom to marry nationwide, voters in Houston repealed an LGBTQ-inclusive nondiscrimination ordinance known as HERO, or the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance. To many in Houston, the loss felt like a shock given the diversity of the city and Houston's three-term lesbian mayor. However, opponents of HERO engaged in persistent and often starkly transphobic messaging, bringing now familiar arguments about "bathroom bills" to the national conversation.

But the loss did not deter organizers in Houston, who reconvened and reconfigured their efforts, centering the leadership and stories of transgender people. Transform Houston was formed as a partnership of many organizations, and one of its key programs is the "transgender prejudice reduction program." The program is built on the understanding that basic, person-to-person conversations are crucial to changing hearts and minds. As a result, the program involves a deep canvass model, or door-to-door conversations across the city to familiarize people with transgender and gender non-conforming people, and to demonstrate why nondiscrimination protections are an important part of making Houston truly accessible to and inclusive of everyone. Organizers began by targeting neighborhoods with the most work to do, or where HERO was overturned by some of the largest margins. Canvassers had one-on-one conversations with voters about HERO, about transgender people more broadly, and about people's own experiences of judgment and mistreatment, in order to connect those experiences to those that transgender people regularly experience. The project continues to this day, with local organizers refusing to accept defeat and instead doubling down on doing the challenging, arduous, but ultimately inspiring work of changing hearts and minds.

To learn more or to donate, visit www.transformhouston.org.

example, the state's domestic violence law does not apply to same-sex spouses, and advocates took the issue to court after not gaining traction in the legislature. In South Carolina, the Campaign for Southern Equality and SC Equality partnered with LGBTQ students and several national LGBTQ groups to repeal an anti-LGBTQ curriculum law through the court system. Outside the South, including in often conservative Arizona, the state legislature repealed a similar anti-LGBTQ curriculum law before a lawsuit there could continue. Additionally, when Mississippi and North Carolina passed anti-LGBTQ laws in 2015 and 2016, they were swiftly challenged in court, an important remedy to keep hostile legislatures in check.

Finally, across all these avenues for change, LGBTQ Southerners may often engage in a strategy of "losing forward." In moments where a political or policy loss is all but assured, many LGBTQ people and organizations in the South (and indeed nationwide) nonetheless engage in order to create an opportunity for public education and shifting the larger narrative about LGBTQ life and needs in the South.

For example, prior to the U.S. Supreme Court decision in 2015 allowing same-sex couples to marry nationwide, numerous constitutional amendments and state laws were advanced to ban marriage and relationship recognition for same-sex couples in Southern states. While there was little hope of defeating these amendments and laws, especially at the ballot box, groups like the Campaign for Southern Equality and others took the opportunities to engage in public education about LGBTQ people and families. The WE DO Campaign, for example, involved organizing LGBTQ couples to go in person to their hometowns' local government and request a marriage license, knowing full well they would be denied. These actions brought visibility to the experiences of LGBTQ couples, humanized the issue for many Southerners, and ultimately contributed to the lawsuits that eventually struck down marriage bans in North Carolina and Mississippi. That LGBTQ-inclusive nondiscrimination laws now have majority support in every state in the United States, including in all Southern states,¹⁴² is a testament to this long-term vision and strategy of public education and familiarization.

In the rare state-level losses in more recent years, LGBTQ Southerners continue to leverage these into opportunities to shift public opinion and even weaken or repeal discriminatory laws. Following North Carolina's 2016 passage of HB2, which prevented cities from passing local ordinances and made it illegal for transgender people to use public restrooms according to their gender identity (see [page 26](#)), Equality North Carolina and regional and national partners led a national campaign to create corporate and business pressure on the state to overturn the discriminatory law. The successful efforts by LGBTQ Southerners resulted in the cancellation of numerous conventions, concerts, and collegiate and professional sports events, as well as many corporations engaging publicly for the first time in pro-LGBTQ advocacy. The backlash led the state's legislature to weaken, though not totally repeal, the law, but also created such clear economic consequences for discriminatory laws that other legislatures—including in the South—have avoided passing similar laws to avoid the consequences seen in North Carolina.

And as Southern state legislatures continue to advance hundreds of anti-LGBTQ bills, this strategy of losing forward is often an important one for creating longer-term attitude change even in the face of more immediate, though rare, potential losses.

Mirroring how both LGBTQ life and the state policy landscape look different in the South than in the rest of the country, Southern LGBTQ organizing and advocacy are also often unique from other parts of the country. The higher emphasis on community building, direct service, intersectional coalition work, and different forms of policy advocacy or definitions of policy progress are all characteristic of Southern LGBTQ organizing, reflecting the unique social and political aspects of the South itself.



Southern Strategies and Programs That LGBTQ Advocates Nationwide Can Learn From

As discussed throughout this report, the cornerstones of Southern life and the unique political landscape mean that LGBTQ life in the South—and LGBTQ advocacy in the South—often looks different from the rest of the country. As a result, Southern LGBTQ communities have innovated, tested, and pioneered many strategies, programs, and more that LGBTQ people nationwide can learn from. What follows are just a few of many Southern-led examples that organizations, community centers, and community members across the country can learn from and adopt, adjusting them to reflect the needs or unique elements of their own communities or regions. Funders can also increase support for or initiate new funding for these programs, both in the South and across the country.

STRATEGIES

- **Develop a political analysis through the lens of rural and urban experiences, in addition to experiences within states.** Many people think about political organizing primarily through the lens of state lines, which is understandable when discussing state legislatures or executive leadership. But another and often more useful way to understand the issues facing LGBTQ people is thinking about the impact of living in rural versus urban (or suburban) areas. The experiences and needs of LGBTQ people in rural areas in two different states may be more similar to one another than the experiences of LGBTQ people in a rural and urban part of the same state. Moving beyond an exclusive focus on state lines allows communities to learn lessons from similarly situated regions when diagnosing challenges and prescribing solutions.
- **Make policy change without the legislature when needed.** The South is certainly not the only part of the country with often hostile legislatures or difficult political environments for LGBTQ residents. States across the country, from Idaho to Missouri to Ohio and more, can learn a great deal from the policy and advocacy innovation of LGBTQ Southerners, including going around the legislature when needed. Legal protections can be won through local level work, behind-the-scenes administrative policy, turning to the judicial system, and more.
- **Get mobile and go where LGBTQ people already are.** LGBTQ organizers have gotten creative about how to reach community members in the sometimes sprawling rural landscape of the South. From health clinics, legal aid, and voter registration to food pantries and clothing swaps, mobile programming takes the services and resources directly to the community. The Nationz Foundation, for example, has a robust mobile STI testing operation, traveling to picnics, BBQs, and other LGBTQ-centric social events in areas outside of the immediate Richmond, Virginia metro, and on a statewide level, Equality Virginia's TIES program involves mobile pop-up clinics focused on health services and legal aid. These serve as a testament to the power of getting mobile, as well as blending LGBTQ social life with critical, inclusive services.
- **Center the voices of people of faith.** For too long, national narratives have (falsely) framed LGBTQ people and rights as in conflict with faith and religion. But the majority of LGBTQ people are themselves people of faith, and the majority of non-LGBTQ people of many faiths support LGBTQ rights and equality.ⁱⁱ In the South, LGBTQ communities have shown the importance of centering the voices of people of faith in the work toward LGBTQ equality. Being authentic, meeting people where they are, and centering faith-based values like treating everyone the way we want to be treated ourselves, has opened the door to unexpected conversations and growing support. There's also tremendous power in coordinating with smaller queer-friendly congregations, where there is a passion for getting organized and building political power, as well as promoting the healing of LGBTQ people who have been harmed in religious settings. Importantly, however, it is critical that LGBTQ communities not simply use faith leaders or clergy as props, but rather cultivate and maintain mutual relationships.
- **Stand shoulder to shoulder with others.** The LGBTQ movement aspires to be an intersectional movement, and again and again Southern LGBTQ organizers unite over a wide range of issues, relying on the leadership of people most impacted by those issues. Just as LGBTQ organizers often lean on organizers who are perhaps most centrally

ⁱⁱ PRRI. 2019 American Values Atlas.



passionate about reproductive justice, climate change, or immigration reform, LGBTQ organizers in Southern communities have a proud history of showing up for issues that are not specifically or exclusively thought of as “LGBTQ issues.” As is evident in the South, when we show up for one another and stand shoulder to shoulder, communities become stronger and even more becomes possible.

- **Play the long game.** In 2020, Virginia saw the result of over a decade of tireless work toward LGBTQ progress. Following years of LGBTQ legislation being rejected, or perhaps passed in one chamber but held up in another, LGBTQ organizers rallied together with other progressive advocacy groups to help flip the legislature. Equality Virginia worked for years building relationships with Republican elected officials and engaging business leaders. In 2017, this coalition and years of work resulted in significant gains in the state house, including electing Danica Roem, the first openly transgender person ever to be seated in a state legislature, in the process. The 2019 election flipped full control of the state to Democrats, who worked alongside Republican colleagues to pass bipartisan bills on transgender healthcare, comprehensive nondiscrimination protections, conversion therapy, and more. The series of colossal victories—and the bipartisan nature of the legislation—is a testament to the critical investment made year after year in the state and the tenacity of folks on the ground.
- **When winning isn’t possible, try “losing forward.”** In the most challenging days of the movement to win marriage equality for same-sex couples, Freedom to Marry founder Evan Wolfson wrote, “Even where we cannot win a given battle, we can still engage and fight so as to at least lose forward, putting us in a better place for the inevitable next battle.” LGBTQ Southerners have illustrated the effectiveness of this tactic time and again, from the Campaign for Southern Equality’s “We Do” campaign (see [page 46](#)) to the coordinated push against North Carolina’s HB2, which seemed almost guaranteed to pass in the legislature but created an opportunity to tackle anti-transgender “restroom” arguments head-on for the first time and learn salient lessons about how best to familiarize non-LGBTQ Americans with transgender people.

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

- **Community events for the sake of community.** While incredible advances have been made around the country in recent years, it is still vital for LGBTQ community spaces and events to be available and accessible, especially for LGBTQ people in rural areas, LGBTQ people of color, and others with specific experiences and needs. LGBTQ Southerners often prioritize and dedicate resources specifically to community-building programs, like Camp GenderBenders and the STAY Project (see [pages 33-34](#)).
- **Programming for specific LGBTQ communities, such as LGBTQ people of color or LGBTQ people of faith.** Specific communities have specific experiences and needs. But in a 2018 survey, only 53% of LGBTQ community centers had programming specifically for people with HIV, 51% had programming for LGBTQ people of color, and only 30% had programming for LGBTQ immigrants.ⁱⁱ More tailored programming can help address the unique needs and experiences of these LGBTQ community members.
- **Programming to meet material needs.** Southern LGBTQ communities are particularly adept at programs and services designed to meet immediate, material needs. Events or services from food pantries and health clinics to employment services and gender-affirming clothing swaps help address the immediate needs of LGBTQ people, while also building relationships between community members and service or advocacy organizations.
- **Be creative about what LGBTQ community spaces look like.** In many Southern states, LGBTQ-specific infrastructure can be sparse, with fewer LGBTQ community centers and other resources available per person. This is often true in rural areas around the country. But spaces that are not specifically LGBTQ centers can still serve as spaces for LGBTQ organizing and community-buildings. For example, the Dr. Jesse R. Peele Center at East Carolina University, was meant to serve the college’s students, but given the rurality of the region, the center now also

ⁱⁱ Movement Advancement Project and CenterLink. August 2018. *2018 LGBTQ Community Center Survey Report*.



serves as a resource for the LGBTQ community beyond the campus. Similarly, the Research and Education Center in Tennessee—a center for grassroots organizing and coalition building across movements for economic justice, racial justice, and more—also provides meeting space to and financial sponsorship of organizations like The STAY Project (see [page 34](#)). Using and adapting existing spaces not only saves community resources, but can also help build coalitions and broader community connections.

- **Small-scale funds or grants with simple applications.** People know best what their own communities need, but access to funding is often prohibitively difficult or gatekept. Lengthy applications, required materials, unspoken expectations of formal writing, and more all add up to barriers to getting much-needed funds, especially for those most in need or least likely to have the increasingly specialized skills and education for successful grant writing or fundraising. Therefore, creating dedicated funds—with simple, short applications, easy enough to complete on a cell phone—that distribute financial resources directly to community members is both effective and important. The grants provide direct support to LGBTQ people for exactly what they need, whether for immediate needs like food or shelter or to fund training or larger projects they know are needed in their own community, while the simple application process reduces barriers and increases accessibility. The Campaign for Southern Equality, for example, distributes 10% of its organizational budget each year through its Southern Equality Fund (SEF), which provides general grants of up to \$500 throughout the year. The SEF also has specialized grant rounds for specific areas (such as rural-focused work) or as new or urgent issues arise in the South (such as rapid relief funding during the COVID-19 pandemic). Funders can also reduce barriers by funding this sort of work, as well as by simplifying their own grant process, including in applications and follow-up reports.
- **Providing food and childcare at events.** As one interviewee said, “We can’t do anything without food in the South.” Not only does providing food at events bring a social, community-building component to the table, but it also serves a broader economic justice lens by ensuring that any attendee or community member who might be in need or facing food insecurity has at least one less meal to worry about. Similarly, providing childcare at events is another opportunity to ensure that community members can bring their full selves to community gatherings, and that they aren’t effectively excluded because they cannot afford or find childcare.
- **Investing in community-driven and user-populated resource guides.** The struggle to find competent, friendly, and inclusive service providers—especially when it comes to legal services and healthcare—is a shared experience among many transgender and non-binary people nationwide. That’s why many organizations in the South have invested time and energy into developing resource guides and directories that catalog LGBTQ-friendly services. The Campaign for Southern Equality’s *Trans in the South* guide is a listing of 400+ providers in 13 Southern states, and similar guides are available from [TransKentucky](#) and [Louisiana Trans Advocates](#), to name just a few. Guides like these help to formalize the word of mouth and “whisper network” that transgender people, and LGBTQ people more broadly, have created over the years, sharing information on competent and affirming providers with a broader audience and challenging more providers to improve when it comes to LGBTQ inclusivity.
- **Integrating leadership opportunities and skill-building into programming.** Harassment or discrimination in schools, the workplace, or the broader community means that many LGBTQ people, especially youth, may be denied opportunities that would help their economic security. Being denied a part-time job or an internship because they are LGBTQ, for example, can not only affect their short-term income, but also their competitiveness for future opportunities. LGBTQ organizations or programs can include formal leadership or skill-building opportunities, such as volunteer coordinating or a youth representative on a staff or board—or, in the case of the STAY Project ([page 34](#)), being intentionally led entirely by youth—to help community access experiences and growth they might otherwise be denied.

VI. WAYS TO FURTHER THE WORK OF LGBTQ SOUTHERNERS

As this report documents, while LGBTQ Southerners share both the joys and challenges of Southern life, they also experience distinct impacts and additional barriers to full equality under the law and acceptance in their communities. The tenacious, passionate work of organizers who have long waged uphill battles has resulted in a more nuanced—and more hopeful—story when it comes to lived and legal equality for LGBTQ people in the South.

Many of the recommendations from our previous *Where We Call Home* report series, focused on LGBTQ people living in rural communities, are also applicable to supporting Southern LGBTQ communities, especially given that 65% of Southern counties are predominantly rural. Below are additional recommendations for amplifying and furthering the ongoing and innovative work of LGBTQ Southerners, and how the South can play a vital role in national efforts.

1. Use 21st century narratives about the South and fuel a hopeful message.

Too often, especially at the national level or outside the South, people talk about the South in dismissive or pejorative terms. Narratives about the South as a "lost cause" or a place stuck in the past rely on dated stereotypes and generalities. We can recognize the real and unique challenges in the South today without overlooking the equally real ways that the South has changed and is continuing to do so. More than 3.6 million LGBTQ people live in the region, and writing the region off as "unwinnable" is not only dispiriting to and an abandonment of these millions of people, but it is also untrue: several Southern states won the freedom to marry before states in other parts of the country; court rulings by Southern judges have served as foundations for long-game legal theories; and in 2020, Virginia became the first state in the South to pass a wide-ranging list of proactive, LGBTQ-inclusive bills.

Updating the way people think and talk about the South and the possibility of progress there is critical not only for recognizing and validating the innovative work of LGBTQ Southerners—many of whom are people of color—but also for the continued success of their work. LGBTQ Southerners

and leaders across the region are already (and have been for a long time) telling a new story about the South, centering a message of hope, courage, resiliency, and community, to encourage organizers and everyday Southerners and to chart a path beyond the adversity and pain that so many LGBTQ people in the South have experienced.

2. Respond to the urgency of needs in the South.

Many of the challenges facing the South—from high rates of poverty and health disparities to discrimination in daily life—result in acute and immediate need. Food insecurity, lack of health insurance or access to medical care, denial of needed services, and violence and harassment mean that many Southerners, including LGBTQ Southerners, may struggle to have even their basic needs and safety met. This is especially true for transgender women of color, who face even higher rates of health disparities (including HIV), poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and violence.

LGBTQ communities and allies must work specifically to address the acute and immediate needs presented by these challenges that are disproportionately present in the South. This can include a range of strategies, from the direct service and mutual aid efforts spotlighted in this report to broader policy and structural changes such as expanding Medicaid access throughout Southern states. It isn't that responding to these urgent needs must come at the expense of advancing LGBTQ-specific laws and policies, but rather that immediate support and systems change work must come hand in hand.

3. Acknowledge and serve the 21st century diversity of the South.

The South is home to nearly one in three (32%) LGBTQ people, more than anywhere else in the United States.¹⁴³ And, more than two in five LGBTQ Southerners are people of color.¹⁴⁴ Additionally, the South is home to people of many different backgrounds and experiences across race and ethnicity, class, education, faith, disability, immigrant status, geography, and more. This means that, while there are common elements shaping life in the South, there is no singular Southern experience.

Seeing and fully acknowledging the diversity of the modern South is important for understanding

the contemporary and diverse experiences of life in the South and shifting narratives about who lives in the region. It is also critical for recognizing that Southerners in specific communities often have different needs than Southerners in other communities. The obstacles to accessing healthcare, for example, are likely quite distinct for LGBTQ Latinx youth in Houston compared to Black LGBTQ seniors in the Mississippi Delta or white LGBTQ adults in West Virginia. It is equally important to both acknowledge and then tailor efforts to address the unique needs and experiences of these different parts of the broader Southern community.

4. Recognize that LGBTQ people don't live single-issue lives, and so "LGBTQ issues" includes a broad range of intersecting needs and priorities.

Southern LGBTQ people are also people of color, immigrants, women, working class people, disabled people, and a wide range of other historically marginalized experiences. Making progress on any of the issues impacting these communities, in turn, improves the experiences of LGBTQ people in those communities. Therefore, LGBTQ advocates and funders should resist the urge to silo off "LGBTQ issues" as only those pertaining exclusively or explicitly to all LGBTQ people. Investing energy and effort into defeating legislation that harms and supporting policies that help marginalized communities, taking direction from other organizers who have long histories of leadership in these spaces, are vital and effective ways to make tangible changes for the better.

Additionally, because LGBTQ people living in the South are, by definition, part of Southern communities, improving the infrastructure and resources of Southern communities overall will also improve the experiences of LGBTQ people in the South. Therefore, efforts to improve economic security in the South, to address disparities in health and healthcare (especially related to HIV), to expand Medicaid, to reduce violence, and to improve infrastructure and access to basic services like housing, education, the Internet, and more will improve the lives of all Southerners, including LGBTQ Southerners.

5. Work toward victory in the South, understanding that change and wins often look different than in other parts of the country.

The formal political institutions of the South—state legislatures, governorships, and more—are predominantly controlled by the Republican party and have been for many years. This makes progressive change in state laws and policies especially difficult. It also means LGBTQ Southerners regularly and frequently must combat numerous anti-LGBTQ bills and efforts to undermine what few protections currently exist.

Because of these realities, a victory in a Southern state may not look the same as those occurring elsewhere in the country—but those victories are still happening. Sometimes these victories take the form of defeating harmful bills. For example, Georgia Equality and other allies have blocked anti-LGBTQ legislation for at least six years in a row, including one religious exemption bill that was vetoed by Republican Governor—and evangelical Christian—Nathan Deal in 2016. The defeat of that discriminatory bill was a major victory and perhaps did more to shift the national narrative about LGBTQ people than proactive statewide victories in other states. Sometimes, Southern LGBTQ victories come in the form of local steps forward, such as Florida's or Kentucky's incremental approach to municipal nondiscrimination ordinances. These wins may not be as trumpeted as other LGBTQ progress, but they're critically important bellwethers of what's possible with smart, sustained organizing. Applying only a singular definition of success or change negates the ongoing work of advocates and the long-term impacts of education and coalition building.

6. Work toward federal victory, too.

Though local and statewide organizing is vital, achieving legal protections and equality in the South demands a multi-pronged strategy. There are states in the South where it will simply take too long to win some LGBTQ advances on the state level. That's why it is imperative to push for comprehensive federal legislation, such as the Equality Act, that would create explicit protections under federal civil rights laws for sexual orientation and gender identity. Federal legislation and litigation through federal courts can be the most effective way to deliver protections to every corner of the South and to ensure that no LGBTQ Southerner has to choose between basic protections and the place they call home.

7. Trust and invest in grassroots organizers.

Like most communities, Southerners have an acute and specific understanding of their local communities. People in each city and town know best their local community's needs and dreams, as well as what specific histories, relationships, and day-to-day circumstances shape LGBTQ life in their town. State and national groups, policymakers, and funders should ask local leaders what their communities need, and then listen to and trust their analysis. This is particularly true for LGBTQ people in the South who are valued members and leaders of local communities.

For many years the South received only a small fraction of the financial resources that LGBTQ efforts in other regions of the country did. For that reason, grassroots organizers have often pioneered tremendous efforts on shoestring budgets, working to build community and capacity without much support. This resulting "scrappiness" has helped grassroots organizers do a lot with very little. These organizations may lack the same infrastructure as larger organizations in other parts of the country, or they may approach community organizing, problem solving, and advocacy in ways that are unique to their place-based missions. Significantly, however, these same characteristics that help the organizers stay nimble and effective can also stand in the way of achieving broader fundraising or consistent institutional funding success. Imagine what could be possible with greater and sustained financial support—and with trust in grassroots organizers' vision and expertise.

8. Recognize that coalition building, including in and with faith communities, is not a short-term project or one-way street.

Relationships take time to build, and they are not built on foundations of quid pro quo. Coalition building is not and cannot be a one-way street. LGBTQ communities cannot invite partnership from the immigrant or racial justice or reproductive justice movements on LGBTQ issues, but then not show up for those partners on issues of immigration, racial justice, or reproductive freedom. Rather, successful coalitions are built from a shared vision or goal, strong interpersonal relationships, and an understanding of shared fates that propel work forward, even during challenging times.

9. Foster a pride of place in the next generation.

Southern identity can be complicated: for many Southerners there is a keen and deeply felt understanding of the region's deep-rooted injustices, especially when it comes to racism and white supremacy. LGBTQ Southerners may feel pain or hurt at the region's historical and present-day challenges around gender, sexuality, and difference. But at the same time, many also feel a strong sense of home, connection, and belonging. No one should have to choose between the place they call home and basic rights and protections. That's why it's vital to encourage young people to be proud of where they're from—and to be committed to improving it and realizing a vision of equality and dignity for all. Fostering connections and community among LGBTQ youth in the South not only strengthens the social connections of today but creates a foundation for future leaders and advocates far into the future.

10. Never give up.

This report offers just a few of the countless innovations, collaborations, and hardworking organizations doing high impact, effective, and values-based work in the South. If the combination of the many strategies, programs, and lessons offered throughout this report add up to any one thing, perhaps it is simply this: never give up. Strong communities that are inclusive and equitable exist in the South thanks to the hard work of LGBTQ people and those who love them.

VII. CONCLUSION

While the South is commonly portrayed as a distinctly hostile region for LGBTQ people—and indeed, the region does have a hostile, though slowly changing, political landscape for LGBTQ issues—the South is also home to more LGBTQ people than any other part of the country. And precisely because of this conservative social, cultural, and political climate, LGBTQ Southerners have become leaders in innovative, intersectional, and powerful community building, mutual aid, coalition work, and organizing, often outside traditional methods for political change.

Overall, this report illustrates the ways that LGBTQ Southerners experience the same joys and challenges as their Southern neighbors, while also experiencing both the unique impacts of these challenges and ongoing disparities and discrimination. However, judging the South and the quality of life for LGBTQ Southerners solely through the region's state policy landscape minimizes the complexity, creativity, and resilience of LGBTQ Southerners—not to mention the lessons that LGBTQ advocates across the country can learn from their Southern kin for how to nurture community and build strong, diverse coalitions to effectively change hearts and minds, even in the most hostile halls of government.

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