

Report to the Community

Rainbow Illinois: A Survey of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender People in Central Illinois

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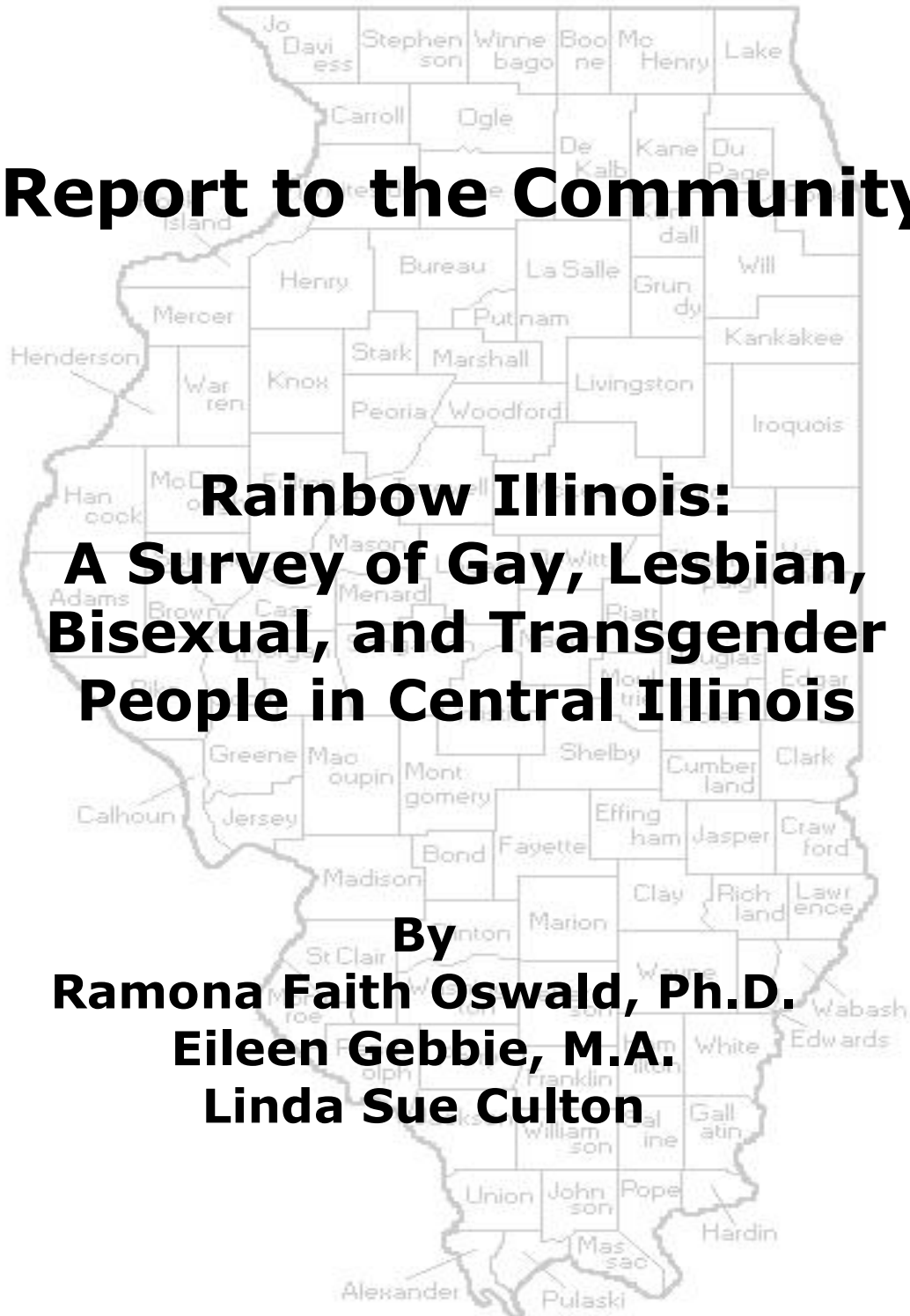


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INTRODUCTION

Very little research has looked at lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in rural or near rural areas. The purpose of this survey was to document and describe the experiences, beliefs, resources, and relationships of LGBT people in central Illinois. This information may be used to inform both policy and community development efforts. Also, it may be of use to anyone who just wants to better understand LGBT experiences in the world.

Permission to conduct this survey was given by the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board before any data were collected. It was funded by a grant from the University of Illinois Research Board. The first author is an Assistant Professor of Family Studies in the Department of Human and Community Development at the University of Illinois. She can be reached at <roswald@uiuc.edu> or 217-333-2547.

METHODOLOGY

The survey questions were developed using information from previous research efforts. A draft of the survey was critiqued by a group of LGBT volunteers, and their suggestions were used to create a final version.

Data collection took place in the spring and early summer of 2000. Two thousand surveys were mailed using organization mailing lists and volunteers who distributed surveys through their social networks. All membership information was kept confidential -- we do not know who was or was not on those lists. Sixty-six surveys were returned with incorrect or missing addresses. Five hundred twenty seven were returned complete, giving a response rate of 27% (527/1934). As an incentive, people who filled out the survey indicated to which LGBT organization they would like one dollar donated. Incentive money is being distributed accordingly¹.

The participants in this survey do not constitute a representative sample of LGBT people. Having a representative sample means that, within a known population, each person had an equal chance of being selected. This allows you to say that your results can be generalized to the larger population from which you selected the sample. Because no one knows who constitutes the whole population of LGBT people in central Illinois (or anywhere else for that matter) it is impossible to give every LGBT person an equal chance of being selected. Instead, we found people by working with organizations and social networks. That means that this study is biased towards people who belong to

¹ Surveys continue to trickle in. Though late arrivals are not included in this report, they will be entered and included in future analyses. Also, their incentive requests will be paid.

LGBT organizations or have other LGBT people in their lives, and who are willing to fill out and return a survey.

This report contains only descriptive statistics. In other words, we report only the percentages of people who do or don't report something. More complicated analyses will be run at a later time. Also, not every question asked in the survey is included in this report (for example we don't report on personal events/rituals).

ACTION RECOMMENDATIONS

We asked all respondents, "What would improve your life as a LGBT person in central Illinois?" Our suggestions in this section are based on the four most common responses to this question. The descriptive statistics that we report in the next section do support each of these recommendations. Though it may seem odd to put this section at the beginning of the report, we would like people interested in action to have easy access to these recommendations.

SUPPORT LEGISLATION THAT GRANTS EQUALITY FOR LGBT PEOPLE AND THEIR FAMILIES

LGBT people are tax-paying citizens of Illinois, and yet it is legal to discriminate in this state on the basis of sexual orientation. "Equal rights" was the most common answer to the question, "what would improve your life as a LGBT person in central Illinois?" Over and over again, respondents wrote that, because their relationships are not recognized by the law, they are unable to access the same benefits and privileges that heterosexual people take for granted. Respondents described being discriminated against in employment, lending, housing, insurance, taxes, pension benefits, medical care, social security eligibility, and custody decisions.

"I have no health insurance and if there were state recognition of marriage or even civil union statutes that would allow me to be on my partner's policy, I would be much relieved."

"I am terrified that I will have a medical emergency and my partner will not be allowed to make decisions on my behalf. She alone understands my beliefs and respects them."

"I wish people, all people, would realize that we are all basically the same as heterosexual. We want the same things – house, cars, loving

relationships, equal rights and opportunities. Not special rights – just equal rights! Legal rights, medical rights, human rights!!”

Experience with anti-GLBT prejudice and discrimination are further explored in an upcoming section.

EDUCATE THE PUBLIC ABOUT THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF ANTI-GAY PREJUDICE

Respondents believe that educating heterosexual people about LGBT people will reduce prejudice and foster understanding across differences. Making the topics of sexuality and cultural differences less taboo would also help LGBT people find information and support. Many described the general atmosphere of central Illinois as anti-LGBT, and attributed this climate to a lack of accurate information and a lack of public support for the discussion of these issues.

“We should be teaching tolerance in schools and churches. My grandson has come home with some really awful stuff from school.”

“Straights need to be more open and understanding. They don’t realize what we go through.”

“The more society learns about us, the less fearful and threatening we will be to each other.”

“I would have loved to have more knowledge of homosexuality in high school and middle school. I knew I was feeling different but didn’t know what to call it or what it was. I wish my parents could have had someone to talk to ...”

INCREASE THE VISIBILITY AND INTERCONNECTION OF LGBT PEOPLE AND RESOURCES

Respondents want to be more visible and connected with other LGBT people. Many express a desire for alternatives to bars and nightclubs. Suggestions include more LGBT-themed films shown at local theatres, the creation of a café or restaurant that openly welcomes LGBT people, a LGBT bookstore, a resource directory listing all business and services that welcome LGBT customers and clients. Given that some of these resources do exist (for example Prairie Flame newspaper includes a resource directory in every

issue), increasing the visibility of, and access to, existing resources may be the best first step. Also, it is important to remember that if one community has a given resource, that doesn't mean that other LGBT people in central Illinois have easy access to it. Finally, given that the vast majority of respondents do have computer access (see demographics section), any strategies to further build the LGBT community should incorporate the web and Internet. We realize that many organizations are already on-line, but with the exception of Prairie Net our electronic presence is decentralized. Is there a way to create one central website with links to everything else?

"A nice coffee shop or café that was identifiably queer would be a cool place to meet people and host events that aren't structured around alcohol."

"I would like to see more resources for LGBT individuals, especially teens. I grew up in a very small town and my experiences there scared me for many years. If organizations were more visible to teens, perhaps they would have someone to turn to in their time of need."

"I would love to see a resource publication of gay-owned or gay-friendly businesses: Attorneys, restaurants, hotels, doctors, etc."

"I would like to see more speakers, programs, that would address the needs of gay/lesbian people. Entertainment opportunities, coffee houses. It would be nice to go to a restaurant (not a bar) where you could hold your partner's hand—during dinner-- without fear of death or worse!"

"We need services for LGBT people who are abused. When I sought services here I experienced extreme homophobia from some service providers and other victims."

"A larger umbrella organization or even a larger event to more fully integrate the LGBT community. With a greater network other problems might be more manageable, for example the lack of "out" people might be overcome with more unity."

CONFRONT DIFFERENCES

People of color described their difficulties dealing with racism among white LGBT people and homophobia within their ethnic communities. Trans people talked about being shunned by GLB people. Older people described a "youth culture" within our community that they find alienating. People with disabilities want to be recognized. In addition, many respondents made disparaging comments about LGBT people whose socio-economic class

presumably differs from their own. If the LGBT community is to be more inclusive, then these issues need to be confronted in a productive way.

"More LGBT outreach and dialogue between the LGBT communities including black, white, Asian, etc."

"Greater awareness of and sensitivity to transgender issues. I no longer feel like part of the queer community because of the ignorance, and just plain hatefulness, of the LGB community."

"People in the LGBT community accepting my lesbianism AND my cerebral palsy."

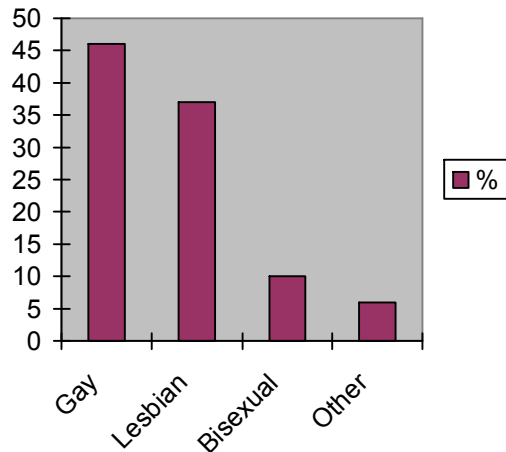
DEMOGRAPHICS

Some respondents criticized us for asking about categories such as sexual orientation and race. We understand their concern with labeling, and yet we feel that these categories do shape people's lives. Therefore it is important to know how we do and don't fit into them.

To summarize the demographics of LGBT people in central Illinois we offer the following: While most respondents identify themselves as either lesbian or gay, people who define their sexuality as bisexual or other are also included. Though most respondents have always been either female or male, trans- and inter-sex people are also included. Respondents range from age 17 to 77, with an average age of 41 years. Many people of color are included in this survey, yet the majority of respondents are white. About one quarter are parents, and most of their children are adults, but some do have young kids. Incomes range from under \$10,000 to over \$100,000, but the average is somewhere in the 30 thousands per year. Respondents report a range of education levels though many have an advanced degree. LGBT people are concentrated in education and "helping professions." Most use the Internet, but those that don't may not want to go on line. Respondents live in virtually every central Illinois county, the majority in small cities or large towns.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

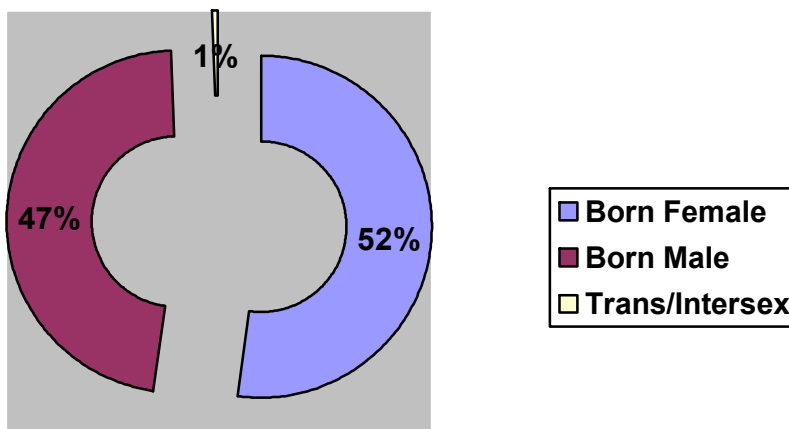
Forty-six percent of respondents identify as gay, 37% as lesbian, 10% as bisexual, 6% as other (heterosexual, asexual, queer and other).



SEX

Fifty-two percent of respondents were born biological females and 47% were born biological males. The remaining one percent (3 people) were born trans- or inter-sexual.

The term transsexual refers to people who were born one sex but have undergone chemical treatment, surgery or a combination of the two in order to transition from their birth sex to another (e.g. female-to-male and male-to-female).

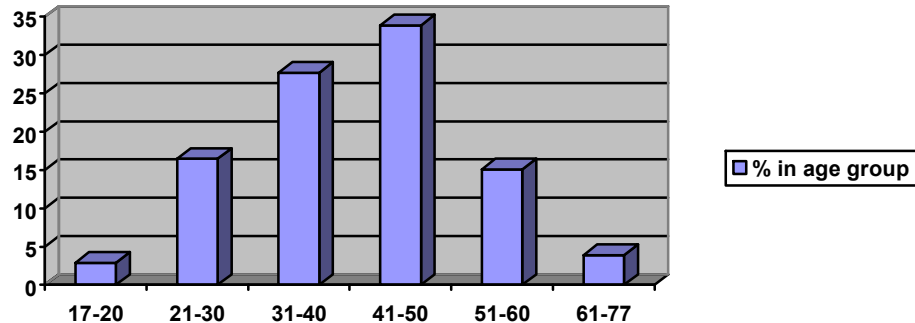


Inter-sex is the preferred term for people previously known as "hermaphrodites" (one in every 2,000 live births is inter-sex). Inter-sex people have a combination of both male and female genetic and/or physical characteristics.

Trans and inter-sex people report being shunned or otherwise isolated from LGB people, who may share the general societal presumption that people are always either male or female (see “confront our differences” in the action recommendation section).

AGE

Participants range in age from 17 to 77 years. The average age is 41.



Though older people commented on ageism within the LGBT community, they also marveled at how far we have come with regards to acceptance and visibility. Many people expressed concerns about LGBT youths’ need for information and support.

"I wish the LGBT community (but especially the gay community) would shift its focus from youth and physical appearance to something more rounded...Looking at the media and the personals (Planet Out and Excite) I feel ancient at 37!"

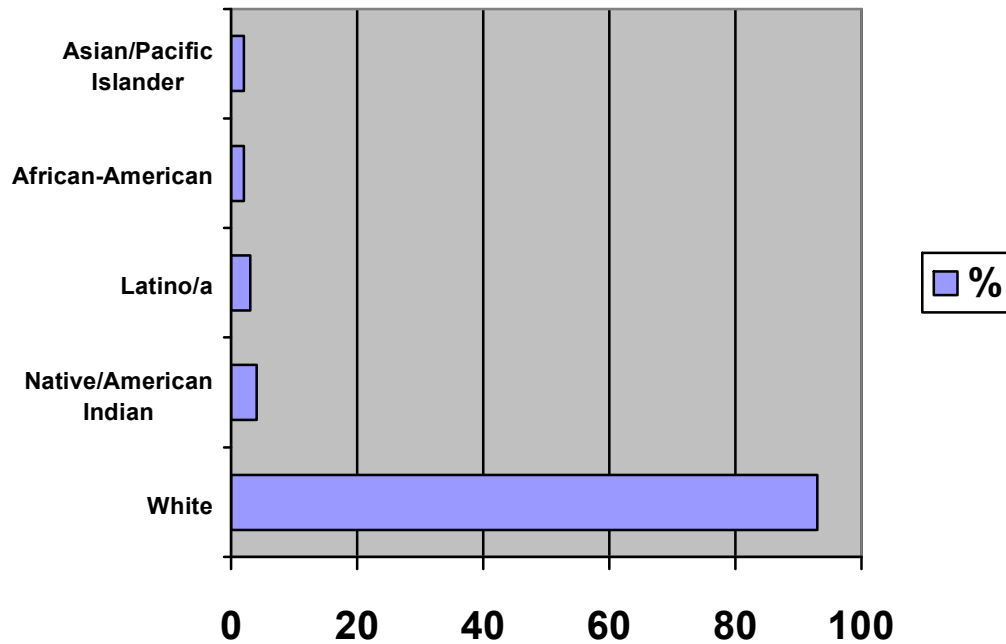
"Growing up in a small town in the 30-40's was not oppressive-as long as you kept your nose clean. I marvel at the freedoms and gains made by our tribe in the past 60 years. The young ones should know of the advances we have made-thanks to each generation."

"Resources down here for teenagers are really poor and they are at risk because of it."

RACE

Respondents are overwhelmingly white. Ninety-three percent report their race as White, two percent as Native American, three percent Hispanic-Latino/a, two percent African/African American, and two percent Asian/Pacific Islander. Percentages do not add up to exactly 100% as some people reported more than one race. Assuming that LGBT people exist in every racial/ethnic group in similar numbers, future research should do a much

better job at locating LGBT people of color, who may not join the organizations through which many respondents for this survey were located.



Many people of color made reference to racism in their open ended comments. The few white people who mentioned race did so with an awareness of white privilege.

"This ain' t the place to be Black and gay! There's a lack of racial diversity within and outside of the LGBT community."

"A lot of racial discrimination exists from white male gays."

"There are not many of my ethnicity who are LGBT or that support LGBT."

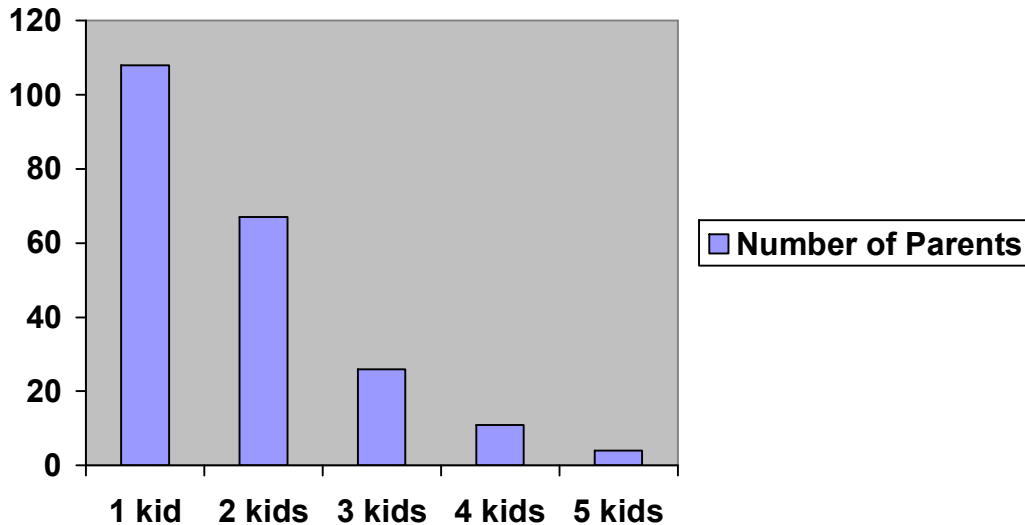
"As a LGBT person and a person of color, I feel there needs to be a greater, stronger bridge to link people of color together with queer people."

"My class and skin privilege have made it easier than others might find it."

Efforts to confront racism and cultural differences among LGBT people could go a long way towards building a stronger community, and a stronger bridge linking LGBT concerns to other those of other groups that also experience prejudice and inequality.

PARENTAL STATUS

One hundred seventeen respondents (22%) are parents to 236 children. They have from one to five kids, with an average of two kids per parent. In the following table, all parents are included in the bar for "one kid," all parents with two or more children are included in the bar for "two kids," all parents with three or more children are included in the bar for "three kids," and so on.



Seventy-two percent of the parents are mothers, 27% fathers (one transgendered biological father is also a mother); put another way, 31% of women in the survey and 13% of men are parents. Half of the children are female, half male. Seventy-eight percent of the children are biologically connected to their LGBT parent. The remaining 22% of children are connected to their LGBT parent through adoption, foster, step-parenting, co-parenting, or other arrangement. The age of children ranges from one to 50 years, with an average age of 20 and the most common age of 30. Sixty percent of the parents are in at least weekly contact with their children.

Comments about being parents were varied, with mothers and fathers expressing both the joys of having children and the struggles for support and acceptance that they face. Several mentioned battling for custody of their children.

"(We need more) support for LGBT folks with children...and awareness in the community, etc. There are plenty of us and it's very difficult to become visible because of potential threats to children/custody..."

"We are a gay couple ... since we have children we have had the BEST of both worlds."

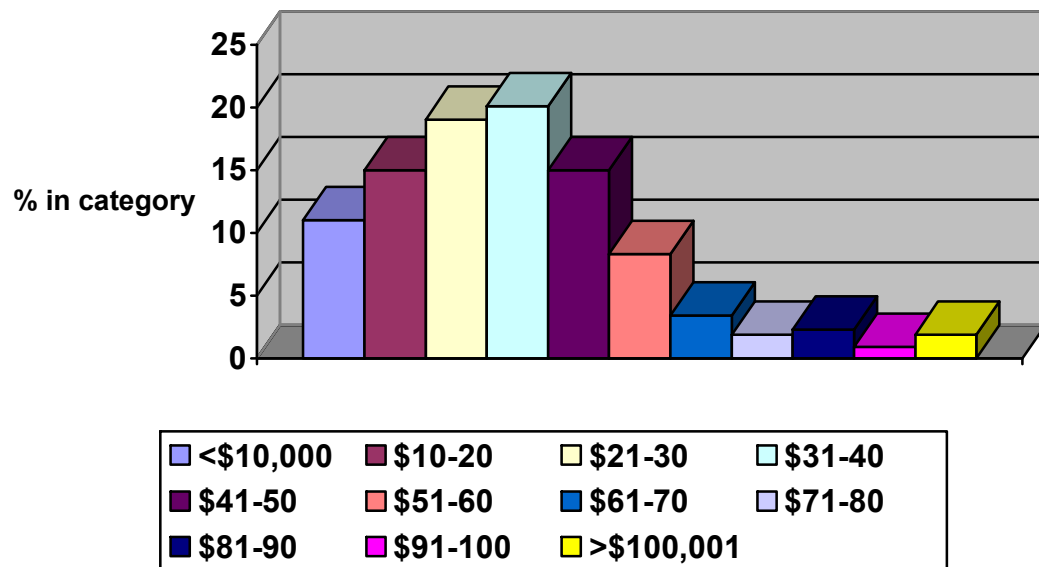
"...We need a school district that is more concerned about making schools safe for all children including its LGBT students and students of LGBT parents."

"I am afraid that my relationship with my son and grandchild would be destroyed if they knew I'm a lesbian."

We did not ask in-depth questions about parent/child issues. This area deserves much more careful investigation.

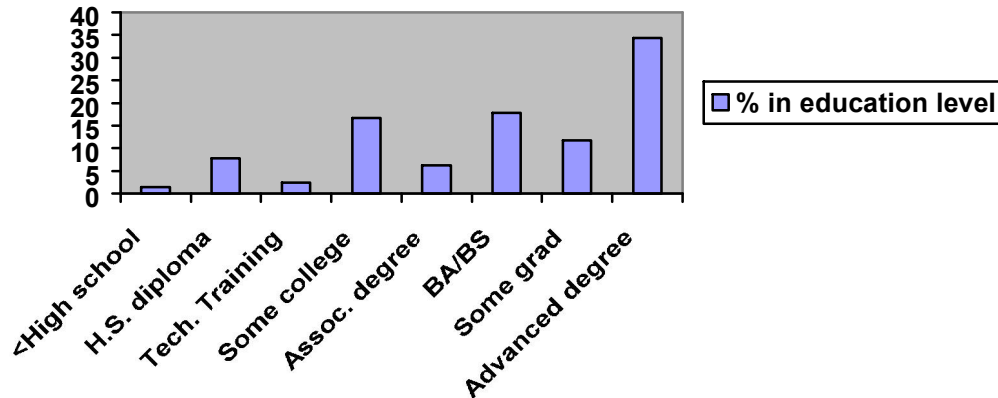
INCOME

We asked respondents how much money they made last year. The most commonly reported income category (i.e., the mode) is \$31,000 to \$40,000. This is also the median category, meaning that approximately half of participants had incomes in this category, or less, while half of participants had incomes in this category or more.



EDUCATION

Respondents are highly educated. More than one-third have advanced degrees (34%). This finding is not a surprise given that the survey is associated with a University, and many LGBT organizations through which respondents were located have a school connection.

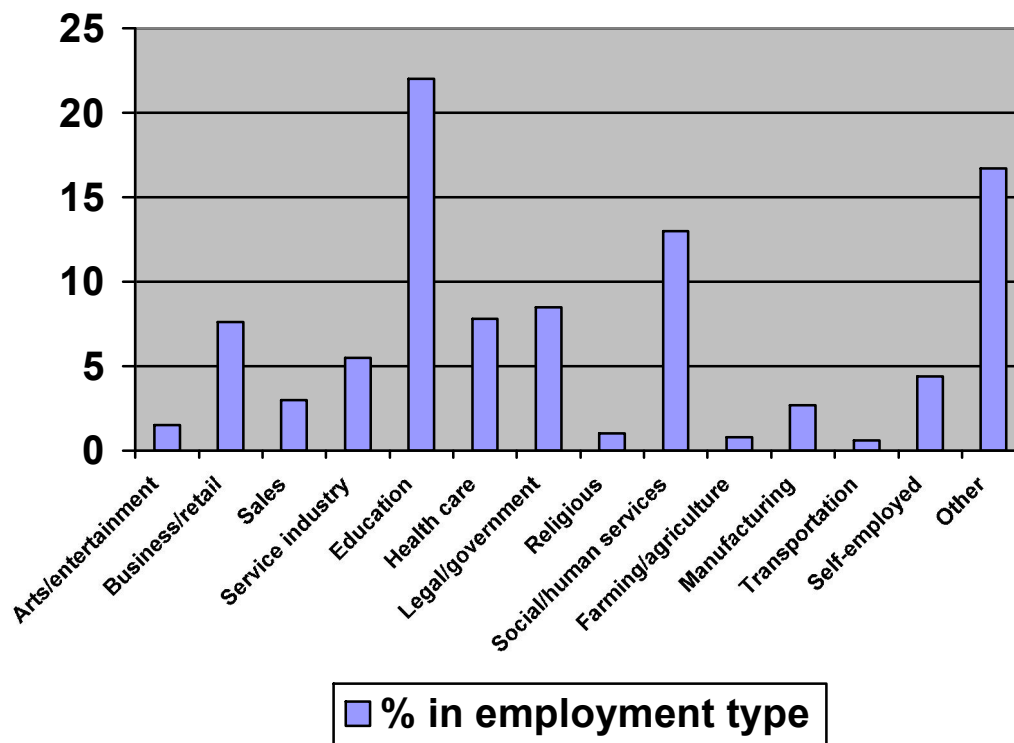


EMPLOYMENT

Seventy-two percent of respondents are employed full-time and 11% part-time. Fifteen percent are students, four percent retired, three percent unemployed, and two percent involved in seasonal work. Eight percent do some other kind of labor. The percents do not add up to exactly 100 because people could have more than one kind of employment.

Respondents live from 0 to 250 miles away from their primary place of employment. The average distance traveled to work is ten miles, but the median distance is three miles. That means that half of the respondents travel three miles or less to work, while the other half travel from 4 to 200 miles.

As you can see in the following table, about one-fifth of respondents work in education (22%) and fourteen percent work in social or human services, with nine percent in law/government, eight percent in health care and one-half percent in a religious institution. Respondents are clearly concentrated in education and the "helping professions."



Forty eight percent of respondents feel tolerated as a LGBT person in their primary place of employment, while 40% feel supported, and 12% feel a sense of hostility. It is important to question what “tolerated” means given the reports of coworker hostility towards LGBT people (see discrimination section).

COMPUTER ACCESS

Four hundred and forty-one (84%) of respondents have Internet access. More than half of those with access go online at least once per week (66%). Of those who have Internet access, 87% use it to keep in touch with friends, 82% to access LGBT resources or support, and 36% to meet other LGBT people. The electronic community allows access to information and support that might not otherwise be available outside of major metropolitan areas. This resource allows LGBT people anonymity when needed and addresses problems of physical distance faced by people in rural areas (25% of respondents travel an average of 64 miles per week just to be around other LGBT people or access LGBT resources). The Internet is clearly a significant resource for community development (refer back to section on action recommendations).

PLACE OF RESIDENCE

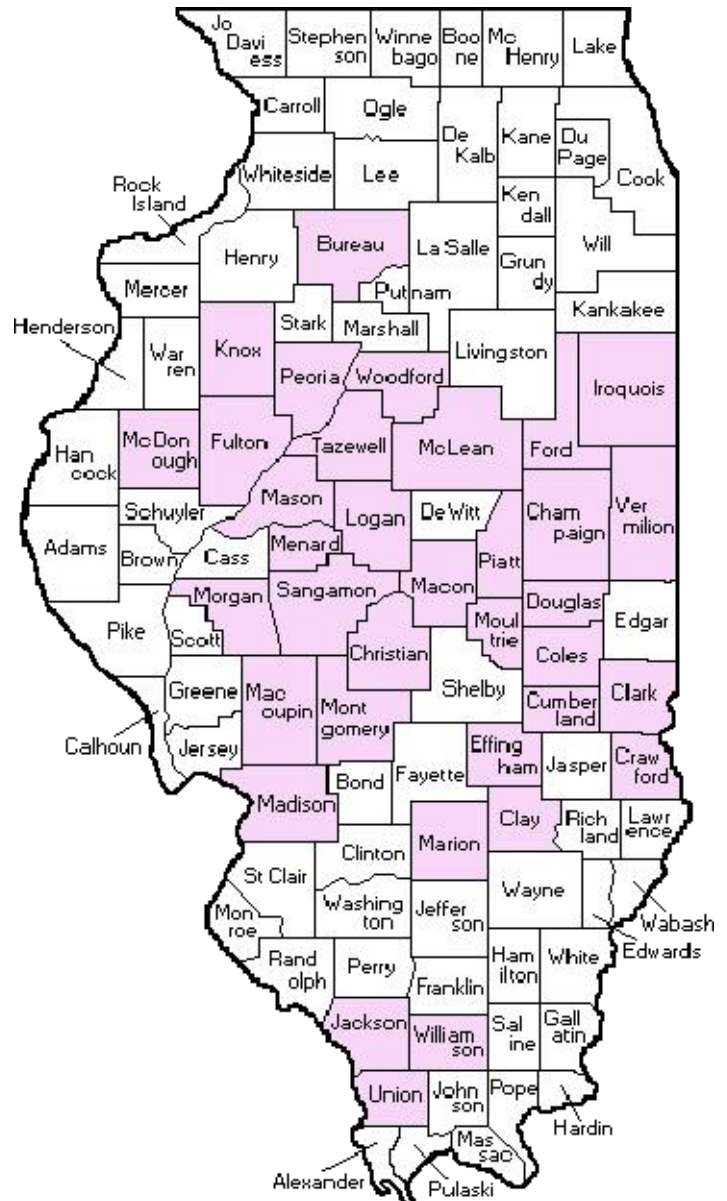
"I wish the media would be more aware of non-urban gay life."

Survey data documents that LGBT people live in almost every county in central Illinois (shaded area on map). However, there is no reason to believe that LGBT people don't live in every county. The 72 respondents who declined to give their zip code may fear being identified.

Seventy-five percent of respondents live in large towns/cities, 15% in small towns, eight percent in rural or country areas, and two percent in a suburban area.

"After 20 years living in Chicago & Houston, I needed less stress of a city like Champaign."

"The best thing about living here is the wide open farmland. I own a farm and love the country. I would hate to be in a more populated area. I have many gay friends here whose company I truly enjoy."



Only 11% of respondents said that they felt supported as a LGBT person in their residential community. Seventy-two percent felt tolerated as a LGBT person in their community of residence, and 17% felt hostility. Thus, residential communities on average are less supportive than the workplace.

Feeling supported appears to be related to a person creating their own network of friends and family. When asked, "What is the best thing about your life as a LGBT person in central Illinois?" the most common response was "having a terrific partner and/or wonderful friends."

"I have a very supportive community, both straight and gay, at the U of I and at my church."

The most common response to the question "What is the worst thing about your life as a LGBT person Central Illinois?" was "the conservative public/religious right" (the following section will discuss neighbors and strangers as perpetrators of anti-gay acts).

"We're so vulnerable when we're alone. The cops here won't even file reports of the problems I've had with the neighbors. It's my love of the land, the "family pride" in the farm, the family – my parents and my duty to teach them – that keeps me here in the middle of nowhere."

"Attitudes toward LGBT people are not as progressive here as in larger cities."

What these best things/ worst things questions suggest is that central Illinois is not a particularly friendly environment in which to live unless you have the personal/private resources with which to carve out a good life. Thus, social support for LGBT people comes from their own tenacity and innovation rather than any effort by the community at large. Given that LGBT people are just as much stakeholders in their communities as any other people, what steps could be taken in the public arena to increase support for LGBT citizens in their residential communities?

ANTI-LGBT PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION

In an effort to understand the full experience of LGBT people in downstate Illinois, respondents were asked if they had experienced mistreatment because they are LGBT. In addition to reporting their experiences, participants told us how often each type of mistreatment had occurred and who had perpetrated it.

In the following table, types of mistreatment are listed in rank order (most commonly reported to least commonly reported). Ninety-two percent have overheard others make anti-LGBT remarks, and just over half (51%) have

been shunned or teased by people with anti-LGBT prejudices. Just under one half (44%) have been outed by others without their consent. Almost one third (31%) have been treated worse than others in the same situation. These experiences most commonly occur a few times each year (the most common category of occurrence for each type of mistreatment is in bold on the chart). Generally speaking, almost one-quarter of respondents have experienced more serious harm to their person or property. We say “generally speaking” because there is surely some overlap between categories. For example one might be outed and then driven out of their home. These experiences are most likely to occur only once, though we should also keep in mind the people for whom these are more frequently occurring situations.

What happened to you?	How often did it happen?					Row Totals	
	One time Only	At Least Once a Year	A Few Times a Year	Weekly	Daily	Total Number of people	% of respondents
Overheard people say anti LGBT things	20	82	283	87	13	485	92%
Teased, called names, people said nasty things	63	75	92	29	12	271	51%
Shunned, ignored, avoided	56	67	108	21	19	271	51%
Outed by others without consent	102	55	69	5	1	232	44%
Treated worse than other people in the same situation	43	41	51	20	8	163	31%
Threatened with physical violence	66	21	25	4	4	120	23%
Physically harmed	59	25	17	2	12	115	22%
Property vandalized	62	24	16	2	0	104	20%
Refused services, or asked to leave an event	45	21	11	4	2	83	16%
Followed	34	17	13	3	1	68	13%
Driven out of your home	25	2	3	1	1	32	6%

"As someone over 55, professional, and out in all aspects of my life, I do not generally experience bigotry because of the social circle and business circle in which I participate. However, in spite of my accomplishments and roles in society, I have been, and still fear being, attacked, abused and insulted, simply and exclusively on the basis of my sexual orientation."

"There is no support when problems and threats come."

"It's tiring to hide myself when meeting new people, interacting with business people, some professors, interviewing for jobs. My boyfriend and I can only be open with each other at home, not out in public."

We also asked who perpetrated the acts that respondents had experienced. The following table shows that strangers are the most common perpetrators (see column totals at the bottom), and they are more responsible for the more serious acts. It is not a surprise that many respondents feel merely tolerated in their residential communities; the results in this table lend further credence to their perception of non-support.

"Those who know me and my parents are tolerant or supportive, but bigoted strangers still threaten, insult, or even assault."

Co-workers are the second most commonly reported perpetrators. We included all reports of teachers and students under "work" as it is a work environment for teachers, and a work-equivalent environment for students. Co-workers are the most commonly named perpetrators of making anti-LGBT remarks, shunning, and treating LGBT people worse than others (and these acts are the ones most frequently experienced by respondents). Thus co-workers contribute significantly to an environment that is negative for LGBT people. This finding is even more disturbing given the concentration of respondents in education and human services. If coworkers are making life difficult for their LGBT peers, what are they doing to their clients and students? This issue should be studied more carefully as it may have important policy implications (refer to previous section on action recommendations).

"I was forced out of a job due to being gay. Sought legal advice from two attorneys who both declined my case stating there is not state or federal law to protect me."

"I would like to see employment non-discrimination laws enacted for sexual orientation and gender identity. I work for a company that has a policy to protect LGBT people but I don't feel like they are strongly committed to it. I still feel that I would be putting my job at risk if I came out."

What happened to you?	Who did this to you?							
	Stranger	Work ²	Friend	Family ³	Acquaintance ⁴	Service ⁵	Neighbor	Partner ⁶
Said anti LGBT things.	123	183	60	73	37	8	37	9
Teasing, name-calling.	79	32	23	24	22	5	13	7
Shunned, ignored, avoided.	28	57	42	42	21	15	17	3
Outed without consent.	5	50	70	34	14	6	3	7
Treated worse than others.	19	53	8	11	9	17	1	1
Threatened with violence.	49	8	2	2	8	2	3	6
Physically harmed.	33	2	4	4	7	0	0	19
Property vandalized.	36	3	4	2	5	0	17	2
Refused services or asked to leave.	9	3	3	0	0	37	0	1
Followed.	26	1	3	0	2	4	0	4
Driven out of your home.	1	0	3	15	0	4	5	5
Total	418	392	222	207	125	103	94	57

² Work includes both employment and school. The vast majority of reports were for coworkers and students (classmates or those one teaches). Less than five percent names bosses and teachers/advisers.

³ Family includes any family of origin or extended relatives (including on partner's side).

⁴ This category includes those more specifically identified than stranger (e.g., peer, acquaintance, other men, etc.).

⁵ Any report of attempting to access services from an organization or business.

⁶ Partners can be current or ex.

The "service" category includes waiters/waitresses, bartenders, lawyers, government agents, police officers, clergy, elected officials, and organization members. The idea is that this category covers any situation where a LGBT person is trying to access information or resources. That "service" people are the most common perpetrators of refusing to help or asking LGBT people to leave suggests that respondents face opposition trying to do the most mundane errands and activities.

Family members are the most likely people to drive respondents out of their homes. Granted, few respondents have experienced this, and those that have usually experienced it only once. However, it remains disturbing to us that such a serious life disruption would be most commonly caused by loved ones.

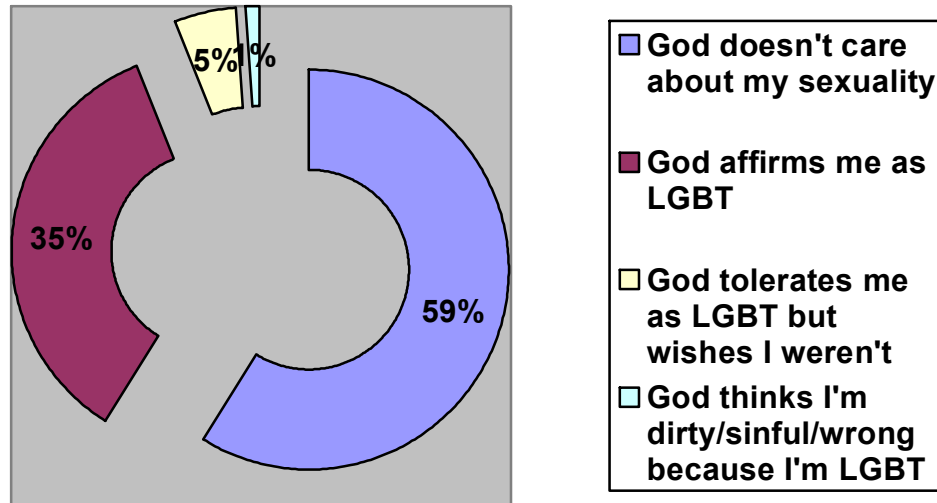
The fact that friends, neighbors, acquaintances, and partners are not responsible for the majority of any one kind of anti-LGBT act should not erase the fact that they do engage in these behaviors.

POSITIVE ASPECTS OF LGBT LIFE

RELIGION/SPIRITUALITY

Eighty nine percent of respondents believe in spiritual being(s) or power(s). We refer to this as "god." Religious/spiritual beliefs are either very important or extremely important for 55% of respondents' daily lives. Twenty four percent feel their beliefs are important, 18% sort of important and only three percent not at all important for daily life.

When asked what best describes their beliefs regarding god and sexuality, 59% chose "The power I believe in doesn't care either way about my being LGBT." Thirty five percent chose "The power I believe in affirms me as a LGBT person." Only five percent felt that god "tolerates me as LGBT, but wishes I were not" and only one percent felt that god "thinks I am dirty, wrong or sinful" (five people).



The majority of respondents who believe in god identify solely as Protestant or Catholic (51% and 23% respectively). However, Pagans, Buddhists, Jews, Hindus, and others are also included. Respondents could choose identification with more than one religion.

Respondents who worship with others were asked to assess their relationship with their religious community and faith structure. Sixty two percent feel supported as a LGBT person, 32% feel tolerated and six percent feel hostility from their community of worship. Therefore religious community is on average more welcoming than both employment and residential community (see above sections). Welcoming congregations are an important source of support, especially given the conservative Christian climate in this area.

"We've been looking for a church that you can be out and not worry."

"I am an 'out' lesbian pastor of a Universal Church of Christ congregation. I am out to the church. I don't have to hide! It's wonderful!"

RELATIONSHIPS

"I have a very loving and supportive family and the best partner in the world!"

Families of Origin

Ninety-five percent of respondents are in contact with their families of origin, and most keep in touch with weekly phone calls. Ninety percent of respondents are in touch with their extended relatives. For 61% of respondents this contact is monthly or yearly, and it is most often (43%) in person. This suggests that contact with extended family is primarily for special events such as holidays.

Fifty eight percent of respondents are out as LGBT to their parents and siblings. Slightly more than are out (60%) say that their parents and siblings are supportive of them as LGBT, with 35% feeling tolerated, and five percent experiencing hostility. Family of origin is on average slightly less supportive than welcoming congregations, but more supportive than work or residential community. Given the emphasis on crisis and conflict between LGBT people and their families in both popular and academic literature, this finding is quite hopeful and suggests that we need more careful research about how these relationships unfold over time.

Over half (56%) say that they are the only LGBT person in their family of origin. However, 44% say that there is *at least one other person* in their family of origin that is also LGBT!

Respondents named the biggest event in their family of origin in the last year. Eighty six percent of those having rituals were invited to attend, and did attend (the top two events were funerals and weddings). Ten percent were invited but chose not to attend. Just over three percent were not invited and less than one percent were not invited but went anyway. Forty-six percent of respondents reported high levels of feeling included during these rituals. Being invited, attending, and feeling part of the ritual all lend further support to the idea that LGBT people value, and are valued by, their families of origin.

Partners

We asked respondents whether or not they were in relationships with same-sex, opposite-sex, or trans/inter-sex partners⁷. As you can see in the below table, more than half are in relationships with same-sex partners. Same-sex relationships are longer lasting and more committed on average than are relationships with opposite-sex or trans partners. Over half (55%) have

⁷ Twenty respondents say they are in relationships with more than one partner.

taken steps to legalize their relationship (for example buying property together).

Type of partner	% who have partner	Average length of relationship	% that live together	Average commitment level (out of 7)	Legalization
Same-sex	62%	8.43 years	73%	6.45	55% have taken steps to legalize their relationship.
Opposite sex	4%	5.6 years	70%	5.95	43% are legally married.
Trans- or intersex	1% (four people)	1.3 years	50% (two people)	4.33	None have any legal tie.

Nineteen percent of respondents in same-sex relationships have had a commitment ceremony, and most of these ceremonies took place in the last decade. Given that more people with same-sex partners have taken steps to legalize their relationship than have had commitment ceremonies suggests that we are more concerned right now with actual legal and material protections than ritual acts.

Partners were consistently mentioned as the “best thing” in life.

“The best thing about my life as a gay person is my relationship with my partner of 21 years.”

“I have a good partner who’s honest, loyal, trustworthy, sincere, intelligent, loveable and cute!”

“The best thing of course would be my wonderful partner, and her loving and accepting family, as well as my own.”

Partners also appear to be accepted by many of our families of origin. Referring back to the family rituals discussed above, 60% of respondents’ partners were invited to attend and did so. Eighty-two percent of those who brought their partners said that their partner was “included like anyone else’s.”

LGBT Community

In addition to partners, friends and the LGBT community were most commonly cited as “the best things in life in central Illinois.”

"The strong supportive LGBT community that lurks beneath the surface of mundane rural life."

"We are a small community; it is easy to get a sense of community unlike in larger metropolitan areas."

"The general supportive atmosphere of the community. The availability of support groups and social groups for people just coming out, like me."

"Getting to know and getting support from other gay men."

"I get to spend most of my time with women."

There were also comments about negative aspects of the community such as racism, transphobia, ableism (see action recommendations section). And, in response to the question, "What is the worst thing about life in central Illinois?" a number of people wrote about how the LGBT community was too small, divided, inaccessible, or invisible.

"There are very few lesbians to interact with as friends."

"Not a large LGBT community; hard to find people with similar interests."

"The relative social isolation. There isn't a prominent visible gay presence in this town."

"There aren't enough LGBT resources or organizations in my area; very little sense of community. People are just scattered."

It appears that some respondents have a sense of community belonging, and others do not but would like to. What can we do so that more people feel that they have access to resources and support, and are able to find others with whom they feel a personal connection?

THE IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCH

When asked if they had further comments, most respondents expressed their appreciation for this survey, and several were shocked that money was actually available to study LGBT life. Over 300 respondents returned a postcard asking to be included in future research. All these findings suggest that LGBT in central Illinois do not feel acknowledged by the larger public,

and would like to be. Further, LGBT people are motivated to provide information as long as they trust that they won't be harmed in the process. Research may be viewed as one way to garner respect and validity for the LGBT community, which in time may break down barriers and lead to positive social change.

"Glad the survey was given. Maybe we'll get to know more about how many gay men and women are really out here in Illinois. Not to mention transgender and transvestite."

"I'm glad you are doing this and I hope some positive social change will result."

"It's hard to be heard when you're different, gay or not. Thanks for the opportunity to participate."

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Amasong
BGLA at Western Illinois University
Brother To Brother in Springfield
Central Illinois Friends of People with AIDS
Church of the Good Shepard in Carbondale
Common Ground at Bradley University
Connections Community Center in Bloomington
Faith Eternal Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) in Springfield
Gay and Lesbian Association of Decatur (GLAD)

Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Educators Network (GLSEN) in Champaign-Urbana
Greater Community AIDS Project (GCAP)
Heart of Illinois Lesbians in Friendship Together (HILIFT) in Peoria
Rainbow Pride at Lincoln Land Community College
McLean County AIDS Task Force
Men's Network of Peoria
New Hope Christian Fellowship in Springfield
Open Door Youth Center in Bloomington
OUTPost Community Center in Champaign-Urbana
 OutZone Youth Group at OUTPost
Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) in Bloomington
Prairie Flame newspaper
Rainbow Youth Outreach of Peoria
SafeZone at the University of Illinois
Saint John the Divine Church in Champaign-Urbana
Springfield AIDS Research Association (SARA)
Springfield Area Lesbian Outreach (SALO)
Transgender Outreach Project in Champaign-Urbana
Vermillion County AIDS Task Force
WEFT Radio Station in Champaign-Urbana