

Safety Concerns among LGBTQ Mississippians

Findings from a statewide needs assessment study

Methods and Data

Findings reported in this brief are taken from a statewide needs assessment study conducted in 2018 among self-identified sexual and gender minority Mississippians. Data were collected using a web-based survey that was designed by the research team using both extant survey items and using preliminary findings from a statewide collection of LGBTQ focus groups. The survey was distributed to a convenience sample of LGBTQ Mississippians - at present, no population level data are available for LGBTQ Mississippians and a probability sample is therefore not possible. The initial pool of participants was recruited through targeted social networking advertisement,

membership lists of participating LGBTQ groups in Mississippi, and through in-person recruitment at LGBTQ-targeted events occurring during the study period. Sponsored advertisements were posted to targeted audiences in Mississippi via Facebook in an effort to reach as wide a cross-section of Mississippi's LGBTQ population as possible. The final dataset includes responses from 500 LGBTQ Mississippians across 51 Mississippi counties. To the knowledge of the research team, this constitutes the largest dataset of LGBTQ Mississippians collected as of the date of publication.

Experiences with Law Enforcement

Respondents were asked to characterize their experiences with local law enforcement. The largest subgroup of respondents, 47% (N=229), reported having 'mostly positive' experiences with local law enforcement, 36% (N=175) reporting having had no experiences with local law enforcement, and a distinct minority (17%, N=84) reported 'mostly negative' experiences with local law enforcement. An additional 12 respondents elected to skip questions related to law enforcement. Among the small group of respondents with 'mostly negative' experiences, 51% (N=34) report that their sexual orientations or gender identities were a factor in these negative experiences.

Respondents of color and white respondents reported similar frequencies of 'mostly positive' experiences, but varied notably on frequencies of having 'mostly negative' experiences and of having 'no experience' with local law enforcement. Among respondents of color, 26% reported 'mostly negative' experiences with law enforcement, compared to only 15% of white respondents.

Transgender and cisgender respondents' experiences with law enforcement varied greatly. While similar frequencies of transgender and cisgender respondents reported having no experience with law enforcement, the proportion of transgender respondents with negative experiences was substantially greater than the proportion of cisgender respondents.

Figure 1: Experiences with Local Law Enforcement, by Transgender/Cisgender Identity



Violence, Harassment, and Survival Hardships

Respondents were asked to report whether they had ever experienced specific acts of violence, harassment, or survival hardships. Response frequencies for these items are reported in Table 13 below. Critically, a majority of respondents reported using alcohol or other substances to cope with stress, and reported experiencing verbal harassment in public places. The third most frequently reported experience, sexual abuse or assault, was reported by a near majority – 47% of respondents.

Experience	Respondents Reporting 'Yes'	
	%	N
Used alcohol or other substances to cope	62%	308
Verbally harassed in public spaces	54%	269
Sexually abused or assaulted	47%	227
Experienced food insecurity	43%	217
Experienced familial or domestic violence	40%	194
Experienced housing instability	20%	98
Relied on survival sex to meet basic needs	17%	86
Experienced homelessness	16%	81
Been Arrested	16%	78
Been incarcerated	9%	43
Attacked violently in public spaces	9%	42

The frequency of reporting alcohol or substance use as a coping mechanism did not vary meaningfully by racial category, gender category, transgender or cisgender identity, or the rurality of the county in which the respondent lived. This high proportion of alcohol and substance use rate among respondents coupled with the lack of meaningful subgroup variation makes alcohol and substance use among the most critical issues identified in the overall study.

Most items within this section varied across age groups, with older age groups consistently reporting Multiple items varied meaningfully across gender categories, transgender or cisgender identity, or racial category. The most notable disparities among these subgroups are discussed below and on the following page.

- In multiple experiences related to survival hardship, notable variation was reported across racial categories. Among respondents of color: 23% (N=19) reported experiencing homelessness compared to only 15% (N=59) of white respondents; 33% reported experiencing housing instability (N=27) compared to only 17% (N=68) of white respondents. The majority of respondents of color (59%, N=48) reported experiencing food insecurity, as compared to only 41% (N=164) of white respondents.
- While experiences of verbal harassment were prevalent across the sample, they were markedly pronounced among transgender respondents. Among transgender respondents, 72% (N=34) report experiencing verbal harassment as compared to 53% (N=235) of cisgender respondents.

- Transgender respondents reported higher rates of negative domestic experiences compared to cisgender respondents in multiple measures. Among transgender respondents: 60% (N=28) report experiencing familial or domestic violence as compared to 38% (N=166) of cisgender respondents; 31% (N=15) report experiencing housing instability as compared to 19% (N=83) of cisgender respondents; and 28% (N=13) report experiencing homelessness as compared to 15% (N=68) of cisgender respondents.
- Sexual abuse and assault experiences varied substantially by gender category. The majority of women in the sample (53%, N=141) and the majority of nonbinary respondents (58%, N=24) reported having experienced sexual abuse or assault, compared to only 36% (N=67) of men.

Fear of Violence and Harassment

Respondents were asked to report whether they had ever felt the need to hide their LGBTQ identities due to fear of violence or harassment. Response frequencies for these items are reported in Table 14 below. Rates of fear of violence and harassment were exceptionally high; with the exception of one measure (property theft/vandalism) a majority of respondents reported having concealed their LGBTQ identities due to fear on each item.

Table 2: Fear of Violence and Harassment

	Respondents reporting a need to keep their LGBTQ identities private due to fear of...	
	%	N
Being Treated Rudely	86%	422
Discrimination in a Public Setting	80%	387
Verbal Harassment	78%	387
Being Socially Excluded	78%	380
Being Denied Service by a Private Business	64%	311
Physical Violence	56%	269
Having Property Stolen or Vandalized	47%	225

Levels of fear were so high that variation by race, gender, and rurality was generally not large enough to affect the overall finding.

While some subgroup variation existed across measures of fear, these variations were generally not large enough to be meaningful, given how substantial rates of fear were among the overall sample. Put differently, levels of fear were so high on most measures that variation by race, gender, rurality, or other characteristics was generally not large enough to affect the overall finding.

Open Ended Responses and Comments

Respondents were given the opportunity to provide open-ended feedback to the research team following completion of the survey. This theme of widespread fear was prevalent throughout these open-ended responses, and emerged organically. Relevant responses are included below, reproduced verbatim and reflecting the experiences of these LGBTQ Mississippians:

“Be safe, they are watching.”

“For me, there is a lot of fear when it comes to thinking about participating in public LGBTQ events/living openly/going to doctors/interacting with various other businesses (buying a mattress at a local store with my partner, for example). This feeling has only increased since the passing of HB1523.”

“Getting scarier in Mississippi for open gays.”

“Here, it’s better to keep it hidden than let it be known”

“We need saving.”

“I am not ‘out’ but 2 of my children are (they are more courageous than I am)”

“I’ve had to stay quiet about who I am to protect my family, my husband’s job, and my children. One day I hope to live somewhere where I would feel included and safe enough to tell other people who I really am”

“Living here keeps you in a constant state of paranoia about who might know what”

“Please help us. We are dying.”

“The state is frightening and violent.”

“We are scared.”

This research was made possible through the support of the Out in the South Fund, a project of Funders for LGBTQ Issues. The research was sponsored by the LGBTQ Fund of Mississippi at the Community Foundation for Mississippi. Institutional support was provided by the Mississippi State University Department of Sociology and the Department of Counseling, Educational Psychology, and Foundations.

