



Discussions from LGBTQ Mississippians

Focus group results 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 via a series of semi-structured focus groups in seven geographic districts across Mississippi. The initial pool of participants was recruited through targeted social networking advertisement, membership lists of participating LGBTQ groups in Mississippi, and in-person recruitment at LGBTQ-targeted events occurring during the study period, and through snowball recruitment. Following a modified participatory action research approach, focus group participants help structure subsequent data collection approaches in their local areas. The final dataset includes responses from approximately 50 LGBTQ Mississippians. Data were analyzed using an inductive team coding approach, with emergent themes determined through consensus of the research team. Three of these themes are discussed in this brief. Data presented here are the direct, unedited words of participants, though some segments have been redacted to protect participant confidentiality.

Theme 1: Terrible Things are Happening

Focus group participants were prompted to describe their experiences and the experiences of their LGBTQ friends and neighbors living in Mississippi. These descriptive questions were designed to be very broad and yielded rich descriptions of LGBTQ life around the state. These responses were sorted into subthemes and used in structuring the survey component of the needs assessment study. Emergent subthemes included: families, health and mental health, identities, safety and legal issues, and issues within the community. While there was some variation in the experiences participants described across all subthemes, the overwhelming majority of these experiences detailed adverse or challenging conditions that participants tied to their gender or sexual identities. The quotes below are responses to these descriptive items and are typical of the overall response set within this theme.

What happens in families

“My mom actually took me to ... a group for people who wanted to not be gay anymore. That was pretty rough. We even went all the way to Indiana for a conference. It was horrible. And that conference has since disbanded because the president came out as gay.”

“I feel like if he tries to come out, it does turn out that way, then my family’s just gonna attack him like ... Attack him, then they’re probably gonna come back for me, like, ‘Oh, you did this, you poisoned him.’”

“I used to sleep in the bathroom, on the floor. I was asleep in the bathroom ... And she found the letter on the sink [outing me], she cried, went to my daddy, and started blessin’ me for like days. ‘This is not you,’ she called my grandmother, all the people at the church. And they had a whole blessing session. No what did she call it... to bless the demon outa me?”

*“My dad had said early on, right after my mom died, to never invite him to a f*ggot wedding.”*

What happens in healthcare and mental health

"I don't have a GP. It took me eight years to find a LGBT-friendly general practitioner".

"Well, there is a clinic ... they do mostly HIV testing and treatment, and they do hormone replacement therapy, but the experiences I've had basically aren't that great. They'll give it to you, but that's about all you get. ...[one of the doctors] was like, 'yeah you transitioned cute but some of these boys that wanna be girls just really need to stop because it's never gonna work.'"

"Especially when you get to the teenage years and start to realize, 'Hey this is what I am, so does that mean I'm this horrible awful person?' because that's what I've been told my entire life... I think had I grown up in those environments where it's just like, 'Okay, cool, it's not a big deal,' ... There wouldn't have been the shame, there wouldn't have been the depression, and the mental health issues that came up as a result of that very strict religious upbringing and understanding of sexuality."

What happens with safety and the legal system

"When we had pride and things like that I never left by myself, or those contentious Board of Alderman meetings, because I didn't want something to happen to me, or if something did happen to me at least there's someone else there to tell the tale."

*"I think we have it bad, but guys have it a whole lot worse. Specifically because before they pray away the gay they'll beat that sh*t out you."*

"I think, because it's Mississippi you still have to be guarded. I realize when I leave my house, I'm basically a target. "

"In the workplace I've experienced a lot of non-verbal discrimination. People don't greet me, people don't look me in the eye. People don't approach me. People don't respond to me. I've experienced a lot of that because I don't fit in the profile of what I'm supposed to be. "

"At least have some knowledge about it, instead of just misconceptions...I only had one therapist that I tried out, but we got so close, and if she had just known more about LGBT, we could have solved it, I could have known more about myself and probably have been able to do a whole lot more than I've been able to do."

"My therapist was like, 'Well, yeah, she probably was molested 'cause most kids that were molested by other people of the same sex end up being gay.'" And I was like, "What?" And she said, "Yeah. You know, they're a gay person or if you were molested by somebody is the same sex as you, you end up being gay. You'll just do the same thing to other kids."


"Because I'm not scared of my doctor knowing I'm gay, but I want a doctor that's not going to...run special tests on me just to do that, or have a certain mindset of what my life looks like because I'm a gay man. And I do think it's important that, if I find a doctor, that I can be completely honest with everything."

"Sometimes you really have to tone it down. I can't come out and tell them that, but eight to five, you can't be that gay. You can't be your full, authentic, drag self. Eight to five. 5:01, 7:59 you can do that. But here you can't do that. Because you'd still be fired."

"I think Mississippi does need some lawyers, legal aides, those type people who are willing to help out LGBT, everything from name change for trans people, and birth certificates and stuff, all the way to ... I've had friends who were, before marriage equality, were legally married in California, and then one of 'em gets put in the hospital here, and suddenly the hospital doesn't wanna allow 'em to see their partner, because they don't recognize that as a valid marriage. While technically we shouldn't have that problem now that we have national marriage equality, that sort of thing still happens."

Theme 2: People Are Scared

Beyond the descriptive findings in which participants detailed their experiences in Mississippi, focus group participants also discussed their perceptions of the overall climate for LGBTQ people living in Mississippi. Fear emerged as the dominant theme, with participants across multiple groups and geographies describing a context of fear that results from the adverse experiences - or expectation of adverse experiences - among LGBTQ Mississippians. The quotes below are examples of these discussions and are typical of the overall response set within this theme.



"I think Mississippi, as gay as we are, we still can't quite run from Mississippi. "

"Day-to-day stuff there's... you just have to be paranoid in a way, because especially living in Mississippi, it's traditional, everybody is usually traditional. Normal peers don't have to worry about coming out to family or be worried that a bunch of ignorant frat [members] might beat them up or something, and stuff like that, or somebody follows you in the bathroom and is like why are you in here, harassing stuff."

"I think a lot of the thing, in Mississippi especially, is not necessarily just how people are treated, but the fear of how you may be treated."

"It can be scary sometimes to identify, to express yourself. Also expressing themselves openly can be scary too because there is just a lot of open hate usually like words thrown around sometimes as in jokingly but it's hard to take that stuff lightly."

"I think my mind functioned on survival a lot, when it shouldn't have. So I learned like in third or fourth grade what I should and shouldn't do. You know I learned what girls did, what boys did, I learned how to reserve myself and cut myself off and all that kind of stuff."

"The only thing I worry about is, as we get older, and if one of us gets sick, I want to make sure we have things in place to where ... Of course, now, that it's legal- marriage is legal, it's a little bit easier. But still, I don't want any kind of hassle as far as who's considered family and not family, and who has a say-so, and ... I really worry about that sometimes."

"It's just it's always a little bit of fear living here. And that can be ... horrible stuff happens everywhere, it's just when people are more comfortable espousing those views it creates a lot of internal anxiety more than anything."

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Theme 3: People Live Their Lives in the Context of this Fear

Participants readily described adverse experiences and the context of fear that these experiences create. They also described the methods by which they go on living their day-to-day lives as Mississippians even in the context of this fear. Strategies for coping ranged widely and included a mix of personally healthy and unhealthy strategies. They described both severe challenges and ample resilience. The quotes below are examples of these discussions and are typical of the overall response set within this theme.

"[Neighborhood] is where most of our LGBT friends live, and we don't want to be far away from them. So, that would be my biggest advice, would be to find your core. Find your group, the people that will celebrate you, and have each other's backs."

"Those of us that were born and raised here, we're still Southern, at heart... We might can go to San Francisco and be more accepted for being gay, but what about the rest of who we are?"

"I was taught that I was going to burn in hell because god hated me. I had a lot of angst about that, because I was a good little Baptist girl. I had suicidal thoughts and all that, my parents tried to make me do conversion therapy, a Baptist thing. It was bad. There was a period of time when I thought god hated me, so I didn't like god."

*"I'm grateful for having teachers or instructors who were out and proud. 'Just do your thing. Live your life. It's gonna be sh*tty sometimes, but live your life.' Had it not been for this, I don't know that I would be able to be who I am."*

"Younger LGBT community members leave the area because they go to places like Atlanta and Florida and places like that where they're accepted more. They want to go where they can be themselves 100% and not be judged or not feel uncomfortable when they go somewhere"

"I thought I was going to go to my grave, them not knowing I was gay. I would never talk about it. I dated a girl for four years in high school. I was just trying to hide it and stuff "

"School for me was never negative...I'd probably say that we live in a world that's progressing so much especially where we come from and it makes me happy to think that. Maybe not so much in this area but back in [MS hometown] where we went. It was very progressive in the student region. Maybe not older people that were living there but in our generation of people, it was never really a problem."

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