NONRELIGIOUS LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER, AND QUEER PEOPLE IN AMERICA

A Brief from the U.S. Secular Survey

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

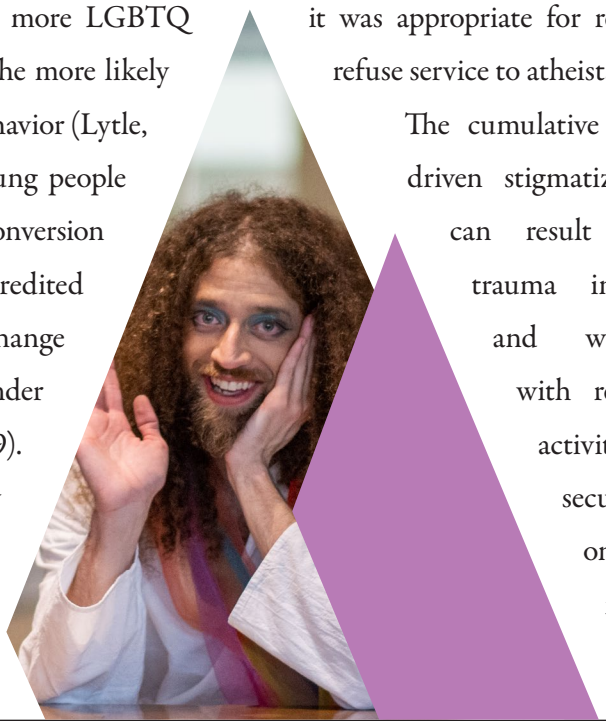
The U.S. Secular Survey was a groundbreaking 2019 survey of nearly 34,000 nonreligious people living in the United States. Of these participants, 7,759 participants (22.9% of the sample) identified as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer), meaning that they have a sexual orientation other than straight or heterosexual (20.4%) and/or a gender identity that is not cisgender (3.6%) (see sidebar for more information on how these matters were assessed by the U.S. Secular Survey). Among the general population, 4.5% of U.S. adults are LGBTQ, with about 0.6% identifying as trans (Conron & Goldberg, 2020). Our previous *Reality Check: Being Nonreligious in America* report provided an overview of the data gathered through the U.S. Secular Survey, focusing on the lives and experiences of nonreligious people, including atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers, skeptics, and others. This brief will more closely focus on nonreligious LGBTQ people, a group that is infrequently studied but that faces significant stigmatization in our predominantly religious society. In addition to presenting data about this population, we will provide recommendations for secular groups and LGBTQ groups to more fully engage with and support nonreligious LGBTQ people.

While there is still a dearth of research about the needs and experiences of LGBTQ people, significant strides have been made over the last decade to improve data collection for this population. For example, questions about sexual orientation and gender identity have been added to several federal population surveys intended to collect information about health, substance abuse, and education, and there are efforts to improve and expand this data collection (*see, e.g.,* National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2022). Conversely, data about nonreligious people remains limited, as few federal surveys collect data about religious demographics. Therefore, available data has been limited to organizational population research on religion (Pew, 2019; Jones, et al., 2016). However, the data shows that compared to the general population, LGBTQ people are significantly more likely to be nonreligious. A 2013 survey of LGBTQ adults found that nearly half (48%) were religiously unaffiliated (Pew Research Center, 2013), and a 2020 Williams Institute study found that 53.3% of LGBTQ adults are nonreligious (Conron, et al., 2020). In comparison, among the general population, about three in ten Americans are religious unaffiliated and approximately 9% are atheist or agnostic (Smith, 2021). Differences in the way these surveys identify nonreligious people likely mask the significant increase over time of the population of nonreligious LGBTQ people. For example, the 2020 study found that approximately 60% of LGBTQ adults ages 18-34 are nonreligious even though the study defines nonreligious in a way that strongly favors identification with religion (Conron, et al., 2020).

It is not surprising that a dwindling number of LGBTQ people identify with religion because many LGBTQ people perceive religious opprobrium at the root of the societal stigma and discrimination they face. Examples of religiously driven efforts to stifle LGBTQ equality are innumerable: efforts to oppose legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States were largely driven by the Catholic and Mormon churches; legal attacks on LGBTQ nondiscrimination laws have focused on opposing claims of religious freedom; and many of the largest Christian denominations support legislation that would further stigmatize or isolate LGBTQ people, especially trans youth. Additionally, many LGBTQ people feel the impact of religiously based stigma more personally. Nearly one-third (29%) of LGBTQ people have been made to feel unwelcome at a place of worship (Pew Research Center, 2013), and nonaffirming religious settings can increase internalized homophobia and minority stress (Barnes & Meyer, 2012). A 2018 survey of young adults found that the more LGBTQ people attend religious services, the more likely they were to engage in suicidal behavior (Lytle, et al., 2018). Many LGBTQ young people are subject to religiously based conversion therapy, dangerous and discredited practices that falsely purport to change one's sexual orientation or gender identity (Mallory, et al., 2019). Further, society increasingly appears to sanction this stigma and discrimination–so long as it is rooted in religion. A 2019 study found that nearly one-third of people surveyed believe that religious business owners should be allowed to refuse service to LGBTQ people, and this percentage had nearly doubled between 2014 and 2019 (Greenburg, et al., 2019). (At the same time, nearly one-quarter said it was appropriate for religious business owners to refuse service to atheists.)

> "I have noticed that people who know or figure out that I am transgender tend to automatically assume that I'm atheist and will sometime say negative things to me both based on my trans status and their assumption (even though it's correct) that I'm an atheist."
>
> –TGNC, Georgia

> "Expectations of religious conformity were highest at my first place of employment as a federal government employee. I found the least amount of discrimination or stigmatization while working for large corporations."
>
> –Male, Alabama



The cumulative impact of this religiously driven stigmatization of LGBTQ people can result in significant religious trauma in LGBTQ communities and widespread disengagement with religious organizations and activities. Some find refuge in secular communities, which, on the whole, are among the religious demographics most

"My discrimination tends to be intertwined with other minority statuses (queer, mentally ill, lower class) that makes it harder for my nonreligious identity to be accepted as legitimate and sincere."

—TGNC, Florida

accepting of LGBTQ people. For example, atheists are the religious demographic with the highest percentage of LGBTQ members (Burge & Djupe, 2018), 85% of atheists support same-sex marriage (Burge, 2022), and nearly 60% disagree with the idea there are only two genders (Burge, 2021).

Although there are clearly differences between the experiences of LGBTQ people and the issues faced by nonreligious people, there are also commonalities. Like LGBTQ people, many nonreligious people experience significant religious trauma (Winell, 2011), and they may seek community among secular groups in order to find support and understanding. Similarly, nonreligious people encounter opposition from many of the same societal forces that oppose the rights of LGBTQ people, such as Christian nationalists. Both LGBTQ people and nonreligious people encounter discrimination in areas such as employment and education that is being justified on religious grounds.

Being nonreligious, like being LGBTQ, makes one an invisible minority in the United States. A person's identity as being nonreligious or LGBTQ is often concealable, and individuals must decide the extent to which they will disclose their identities to family members, friends, work colleagues, and others. Many choose to conceal their identities in various aspects of their lives, which can result in isolation and lack of support, or to disclose their identities, potentially risking the loss of friends, family, employment, and education, as well as other negative outcomes. When first coming to terms with their stigmatized identities, many LGBTQ people and nonreligious people alike will need to reconcile their identity with their sense of self and the stigmatizing beliefs they have been indoctrinated with. And young LGBTQ people and nonreligious people may both risk family rejection when their families learn about their identities.

These and other similarities may lead a disproportionately large number of LGBTQ people to engage with secular communities and better allow cisgender/heterosexual, nonreligious people to empathize with the experiences of their LGBTQ peers. However, there is certainly more that secular organizations can do to better engage with and support their LGBTQ members and prospective members. Similarly, LGBTQ organizations can make efforts to better support their nonreligious membership. We hope that this brief provides a deeper understanding of the needs of nonreligious LGBTQ people and of the barriers that prevent full engagement with supportive communities.

How does the U.S. Secular Survey ask about Sexuality and Gender Identity?

This brief provides an analysis of data related to nonreligious people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) who participated in the U.S. Secular Survey. LGBTQ participants were identified based on three questions: sex assigned at birth (*'What sex were you assigned at birth, on your original birth certificate?' Male or Female*); current gender identity (*'How do you describe your current gender identity? Please check all those terms that apply to you.' Male, Female, Transgender, Gender nonconforming, nonbinary or genderfluid, and Prefer not to Answer*); and current sexual orientation (*'How do you describe your sexual orientation or sexuality? Please check all those terms that apply to you.' Straight or Heterosexual, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Queer, Pansexual, Asexual, and Prefer not to Answer*).

"Transgender and Gender Nonconforming (TGNC) participants" include those who selected 'Transgender' or 'Gender Nonconforming, nonbinary or genderfluid' as their gender identity, as well as those participants who report a current gender identity different from their sex assigned at birth (for example, male sex assigned at birth and female gender identity). Conversely, participants who reported that their current gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth were identified as cisgender.

"LGBTQ participants" include all TGNC participants, regardless of their sexual orientation, as well as all participants who selected a sexual orientation other than 'straight or heterosexual.'

"Non-LGBTQ participants" sometimes referred to as "cisgender/heterosexual participants", throughout the report, include those who both (1) exclusively identified their sexual orientation as 'straight or heterosexual' and did not select any other sexual orientation; and (2) reported only a current gender identity that matches their sex assigned at birth (for example, male gender identity and male sex assigned at birth, on original birth certificate).

For a comprehensive description of the survey methodology and analysis, please see *Reality Check: Being Nonreligious in America*, available at **www.secularsurvey.org**.

ABOUT THE SAMPLE

By the Numbers

7,759

Nonreligious LGBTQ adults participated in the US Secular Survey
22.9% of the total 33,897 participants

20.7%

One in five reported having children, compared to nearly one-third (30.2%) of non-LGBTQ participants, however, LGBQ cisgender females were approximately as likely to have children as cisgender/heterosexual female participants

28.9%

Nearly 3 in 10 were attending school

69.8%

Nearly **seven in ten** were employed

52.8%

One half employed fulltime

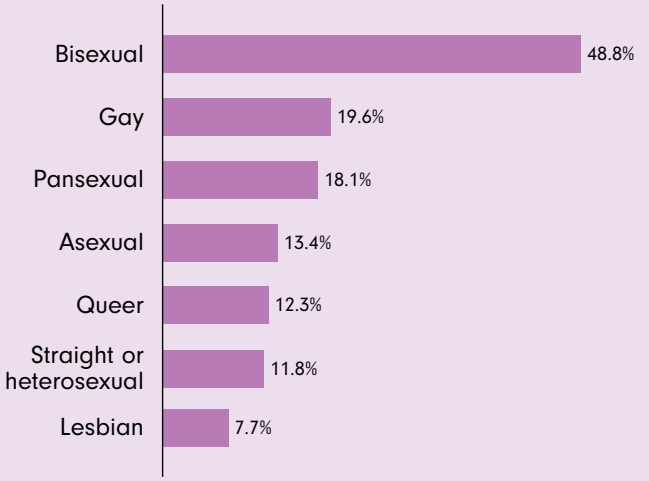
16.9%

Employed part-time

Sex & Gender

Sexual Orientation

FIGURE 1



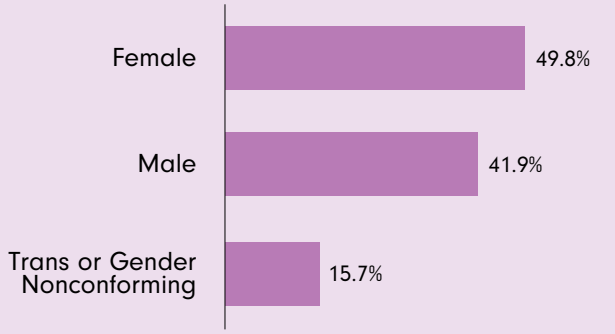
Over one in seven (15.7%) LGBTQ respondents identified as trans and/or gender nonconforming (TGNC).

Almost half (48.8%) of the LGBTQ respondents identified as bisexual; **nearly one-fifth** identified as gay (19.6%) or pansexual (18.1%).

Nonreligious women were **more than twice as likely** to identify as bisexual than were other participants (16.7% vs. 7.6%).

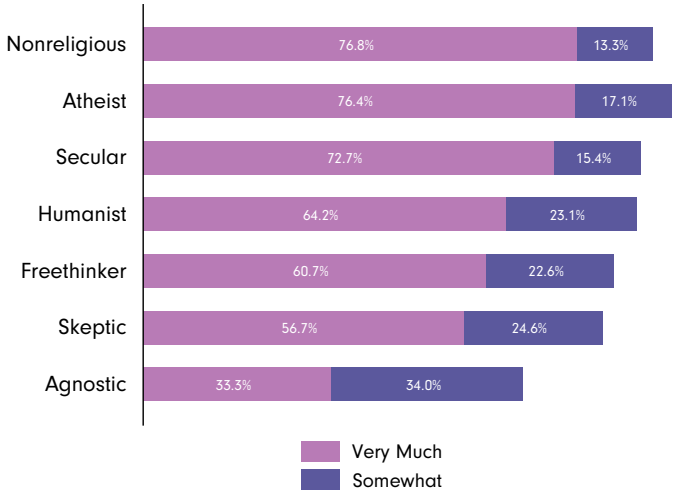
Gender Identity

FIGURE 2

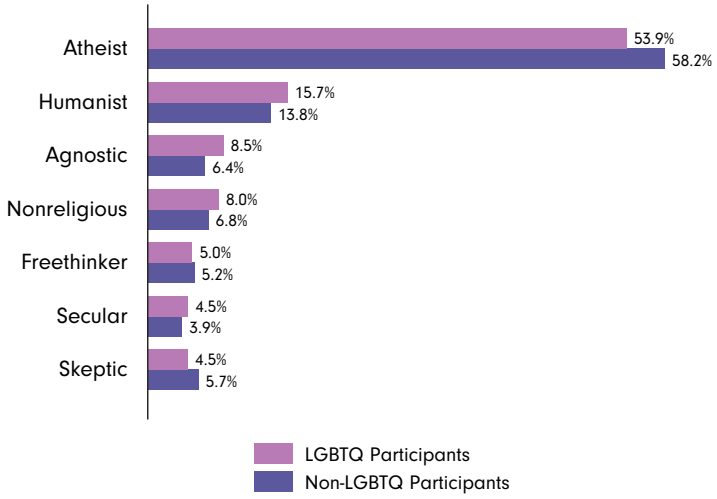


Nonreligious Identity

Identification with Nonreligious Identities FIGURE 3



Primary Nonreligious Identity FIGURE 4



More than half of both LGBTQ (53.9%) and non-LGBTQ (58.2%) participants primarily identified as atheist. However, LGBTQ participants were **13.8% less likely** to do so.

LGBTQ participants were **24.2% more likely** to identify primarily as humanist and **19.8% more likely** to identify primarily as agnostic than non-LGBTQ participants.

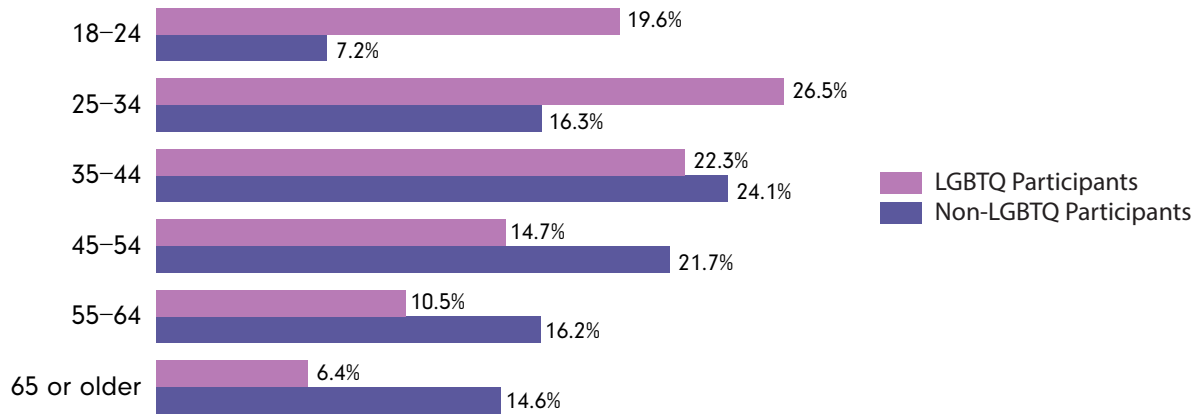
Race & Ethnicity

The race/ethnicity demographics of LGBTQ participants was similar to other participants, except that they were **almost twice as likely** to identify as Native American, American Indian, or Alaskan Native and were **almost 1.5 times as likely** to identify as African American or Black.

Race/Ethnicity	Number of Participants	Percent
African American, Black	291	3.8%
Hispanic, Latino, Latina, Spanish	539	7.1%
Caribbean	68	0.9%
Asian, Asian American or Pacific Islander	195	2.6%
Native American, American Indian, Alaskan Native	236	3.1%
Middle Eastern, Arab American	67	0.9%
White	6970	91.9%
Biracial or Multiracial	630	8.3%

Age

Age of LGBTQ and Non-LGBTQ Participants FIGURE 5



LGBTQ participants were over **3 times as likely** as non-LGBTQ participants to be between the ages of 18 and 24 and were nearly **twice as likely** to be between the ages of 25 and 34.

TGNC participants were more than **3.5 times as likely** as cisgender participants to be between the ages of 18 and 24 (27.9% vs. 9.4%, respectively).

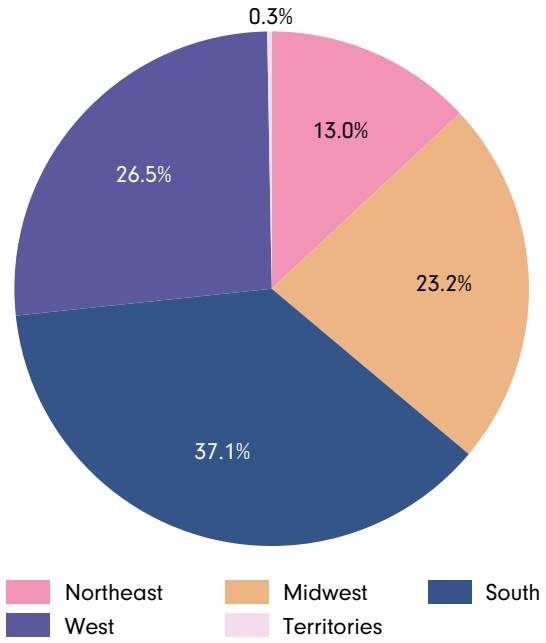
Accounting for age differences between LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ participants

In our sample, LGBTQ participants were significantly younger than non-LGBTQ participants. Because of this age imbalance and the fact that age (particularly younger age) is associated with many of the outcomes in this report, analyses comparing significant differences between LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ participants adjust for age, unless otherwise indicated. We further examined age differences and how they impact religious attitudes and experiences among nonreligious youth ages 18-24 in the *Tipping Point Generation* report, available at **www.secularsurvey.org**.

Community & Religiosity

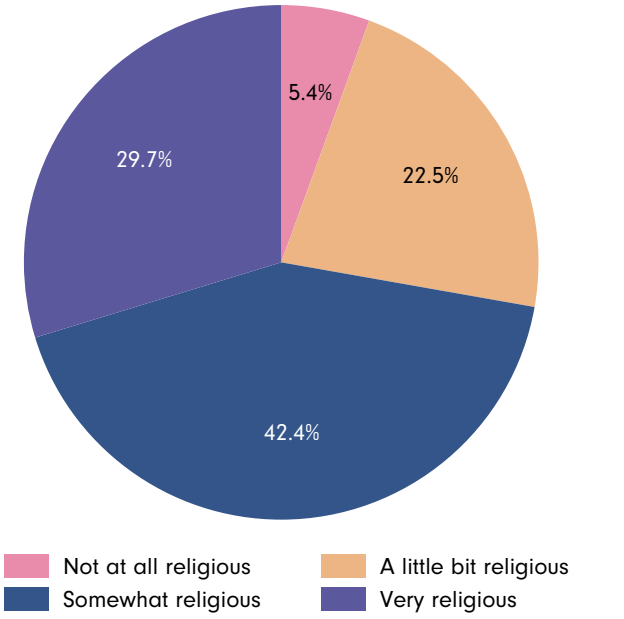
Census Region

FIGURE 6



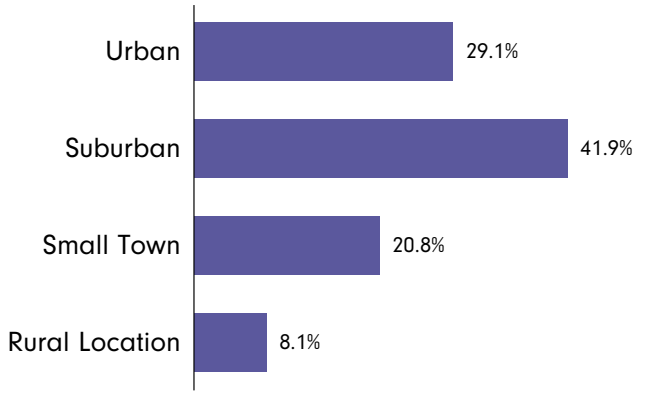
Community Religiosity

FIGURE 7



Community Type

FIGURE 8



Three in ten (29.7%) LGBTQ participants live in 'very religious' communities, a similar rate to non-LGBTQ participants.

More than half (53.8%) of LGBTQ participants living in rural areas reported that their communities were very religious.

Over **four in ten (41.9%)** LGBTQ participants live in suburban areas and almost three in ten (29.1%) live in urban areas.

> "I've had experiences as an atheist in a variety of cities of ranging political, social, and political beliefs. When I was living in a liberal city, I didn't think much about my atheism. After moving to more conservative cities/states, I was forced to confront this part of myself and truly take up arms against religious discrimination. Even though the experiences that forced me into activism were dreadful, I wouldn't have changed it for the world: it woke me up. Hopefully those atheists in more progressive areas feel that same call and help us by joining the fight with equal vigor."
>
> —TGNC, Texas

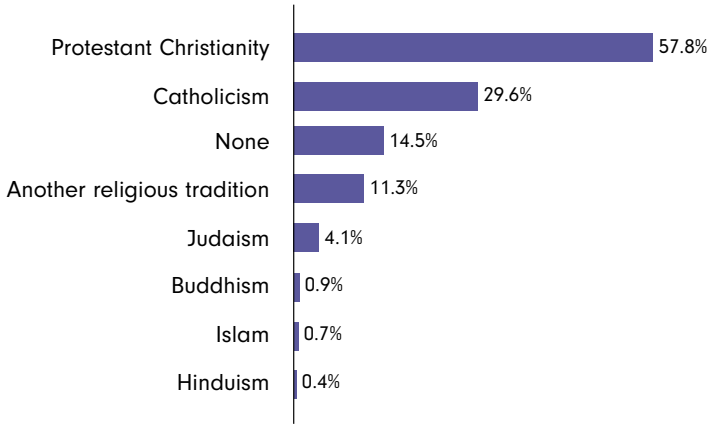
Religious Upbringing & Family Rejection

The vast majority of LGBTQ participants surveyed were raised in the Christian religion, either in Protestant (57.8%) or Catholic (29.6%) households. **One in seven** (14.5%) LGBTQ respondents were raised in nonreligious households. This was comparable to the religious upbringing of non-LGBTQ participants.

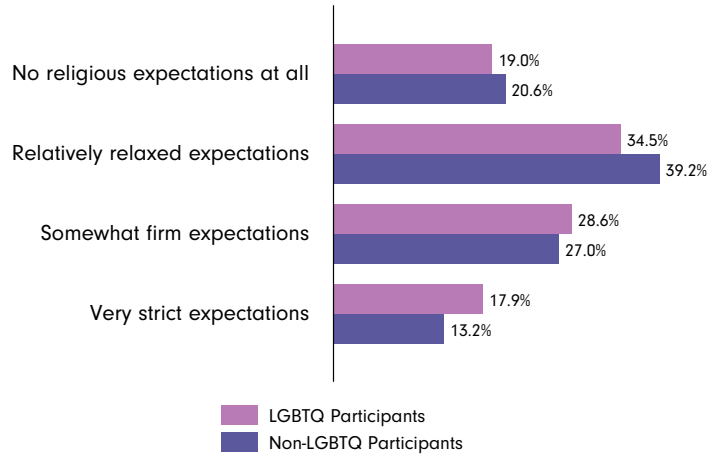
Almost one-fifth (17.9%) of LGBTQ participants grew up with parents with very strict religious expectations, a significantly higher percentage than non-LGBTQ participants (13.2%). LGBTQ participants were **almost 1.5 times as likely** as non-LGBTQ participants to report that they were raised with strict religious expectations. Although we cannot verify the cause for this difference, it is possible that LGBTQ participants perceive their upbringing as more strictly religious than other participants due to tension between their LGBTQ identity and religious disapproval of such identities.

Because of this tension, it is especially important to examine how nonreligious LGBTQ people encounter family rejection and analyze how it differs from other nonreligious populations. In order to assess family rejection, we first asked whether participants' parents are or were aware of their nonreligious beliefs when they were 25 years of age or younger. While LGBTQ participants were significantly more likely than non-LGBTQ participants to report their parents were aware of their nonreligious beliefs, when adjusted for age, LGBTQ participants were as likely than non-LGBTQ participants to report that their parents were aware of their nonreligious beliefs. Those LGBTQ participants whose parents are or were aware of their nonreligious beliefs before age 25 were significantly more likely than comparable non-LGBTQ participants to report their parents were somewhat or very unsupportive of these beliefs (see Figure 11). For example, **more than two-fifths (43.0%)** of LGBTQ participants whose parents were

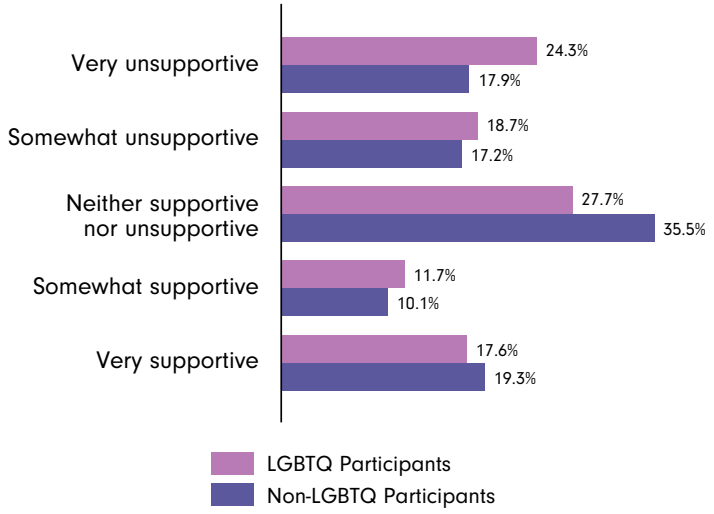
Religious Upbringing FIGURE 9



Strictness of Parental Religious Expectations FIGURE 10



Level of Family Support FIGURE 11



aware of their beliefs reported their parents were very (24.3%) or somewhat (18.7%) unsupportive, which is **30.6% higher** than comparable non-LGBTQ participants (35.0%).

Another method to measure family rejection is to compare negative experiences with families due to participants' nonreligious beliefs. For all participants, increased levels of household and community religiosity correlated to increased negative experiences within families. LGBTQ participants were disproportionately more likely to have negative experiences with close family than non-LGBTQ peers. Overall, more than **six in ten (61.7%)** LGBTQ participants had negative experiences with their families due to their nonreligious beliefs, compared with slightly more than half of non-LGBTQ participants (52.4%). Among participants living in very religious communities, **more than seven in ten (71.0%)** LGBTQ participants had negative experiences with family because of their beliefs, compared to about six in ten (63.3%) non-LGBTQ participants (see Figure 12).

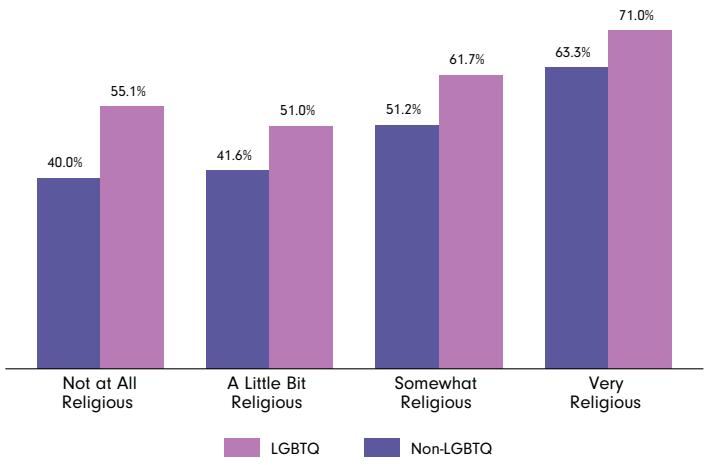
> "Most people where I live are Christian, so it can be very lonely. Even most gay men where I live are Christian, so I have big issues with isolation. I can't find any local secular groups."
>
> —Male, North Carolina

> "I don't believe that I have faced any discrimination from a agency or business. However, I have faced a great deal of rejection and isolation from my family because of my lack of religious beliefs."
>
> —TGNC, Utah

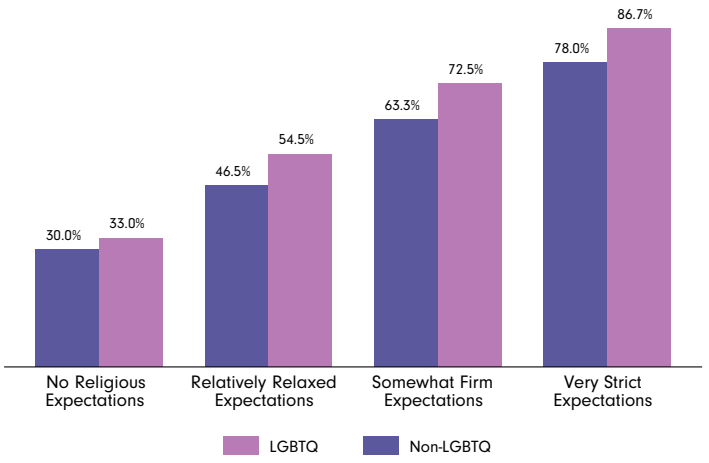
Participants raised by families with 'very strict' religious expectations reported an even greater rate of family rejection. **Almost nine in ten (86.7%)** LGBTQ participants from very strict religious families had negative experiences with their family because of their nonreligious beliefs (see Figure 13). LGBTQ participants with very strict religious expectations were **over five times as likely** as LGBTQ participants raised with no religious expectations, relatively relaxed expectations, and somewhat firm expectations to experience this type of family rejection. Moreover, LGBTQ participants with very strict religious upbringings were **37.6% more likely than** non-LGBTQ participants raised with similar expectations to have negative experiences with their families because of their nonreligious beliefs.

Our data shows that family rejection had a significant negative impact on the psychological well-being of LGBTQ and other participants. In general, it is well-established that LGBTQ populations are more likely to report depression, loneliness, and other adverse mental health outcomes, relative to comparable cisgender/heterosexual populations (Gorczynski & Fasoli, 2021; Moagi, et al., 2021; Borgogna, et al., 2019). This was also true for LGBTQ participants of the U.S. Secular Survey.

Negative Experiences with Families by Community Religiosity FIGURE 12



Negative Experiences with Families by Parental Religious Expectations FIGURE 13



Overall, LGBTQ participants scored, on average, **16.7% higher** on the loneliness scale than cisgender/heterosexual adults, meaning they were significantly more lonely (5.76 LGBTQ vs. 4.94 non-LGBTQ). Particular groups of LGBTQ participants reported even higher levels of loneliness, on average, than cisgender/heterosexual participants (see Figure 14). Disparities were most pronounced among trans and gender nonconforming (TGNC) and queer participants. On average, queer participants scored **24.3% higher** than cisgender/heterosexual participants, and TGNC participants scored **28.9% higher** on the loneliness scale than cisgender/heterosexual participants.

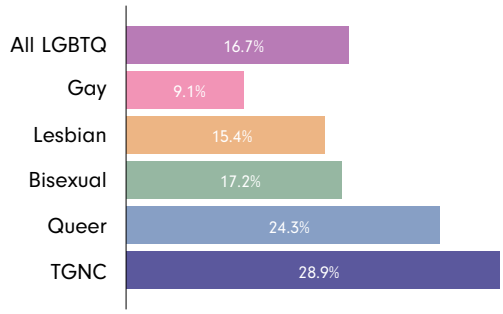
Overall, **nearly six in ten** (**56.9%**) LGBTQ participants reported having little interest or pleasure in doing things on at least several days in the past two weeks, if not more frequently, **and six in ten (60.0%)** reported 'feeling down, depressed, or hopeless' on at least several days in the past two weeks, if not more frequently. Summing these two items together, **more than one-quarter (27.9%)** of LGBTQ participants are likely to be depressed, a rate that is **twice** that of cisgender/heterosexual participants (13.8%).

Family rejection and very religious environments were associated with increased loneliness and likely depression among LGBTQ participants (Figure 15). Of those whose parents were aware of their nonreligious identities, LGBTQ participants with unsupportive parents were **almost 1.5 times as likely** to be depressed as those with supportive or neutral parents (33.7% vs. 26.3%). Similarly, LGBTQ participants who had negative experiences with their

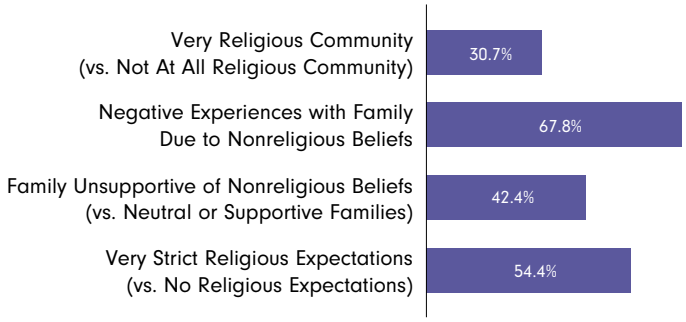
families due to their beliefs were **67.8% more likely** to screen positive for depression than those who did not (32.3% vs. 22.1%). LGBTQ participants raised with very strict religious expectations were **54.4% more likely** to be depressed than LGBTQ participants raised by families with no religious expectations (33.1% vs. 24.3%). Finally, LGBTQ participants living in very religious communities were **30.7% more likely** to screen positive for likely depression than those living in not at all religious communities (32.1% vs. 26.6%).

Finally, LGBTQ participants with unsupportive families were **9.2% more lonely** than LGBTQ participants with supportive or neutral families, and those who had negative experiences with their families because of their beliefs were **12.9% more lonely** than LGBTQ participants who did not.

Percent Increase in Average Loneliness, Compared to Cisgender/Heterosexual Participants FIGURE 14



Increase Likelihood of Screening Positive for Depression for Various Factors FIGURE 15



Assessing Loneliness and Likely Depression in the U.S. Secular Survey

In the U.S. Secular Survey, to assess the extent to which survey participants feel lonely or experience social isolation, they were asked how often they feel a lack of companionship, feel left out, and feel isolated from others. Participants were provided with three response choices which were coded 1 (hardly ever), 2 (some of the time), and 3 (often). Loneliness was determined by summing each of the three responses, producing a scale that ranged from 3-9, with higher scores indicating greater feelings of loneliness.

The U.S. Secular Survey also asked a set of questions to assess the likelihood of depression (PHQ2). To screen the likelihood that survey participants were depressed, they were asked two questions based on the "PHQ-2" assessment (Spitzer, et al., 1999), which assesses the frequency of experiencing certain symptoms over the two weeks prior to the survey. When added together, the PHQ2 score ranges from 0 to 6, and cutoff score for someone to be referred for further screening for depression is 3. We refer to those who have PHQ2 scores of 3 or higher as 'likely to be depressed.'

For more information about how loneliness and likely depression were assessed, please see the *Reality Check: Being Nonreligious in America* report.

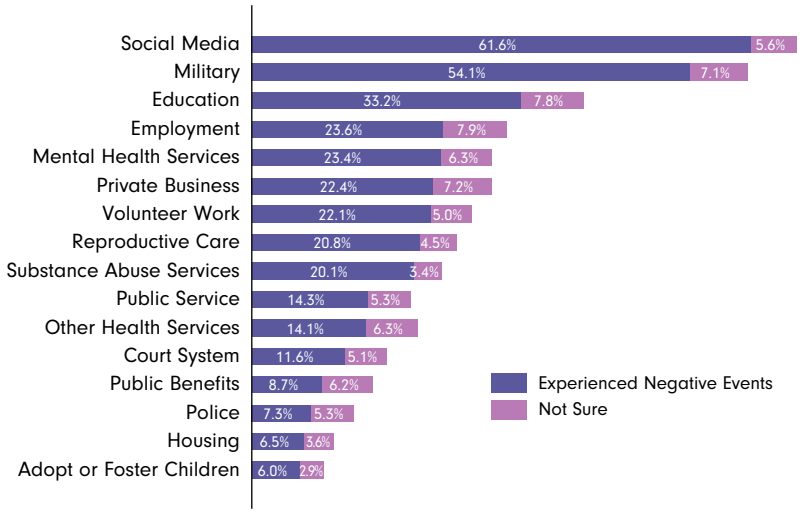
Discrimination, Stigma, and Violence

Although many participants reported experiencing discrimination in various areas of their lives because of their nonreligious beliefs, LGBTQ participants encountered significantly higher levels of discrimination and negative events than their non-LGBTQ peers in every area surveyed.

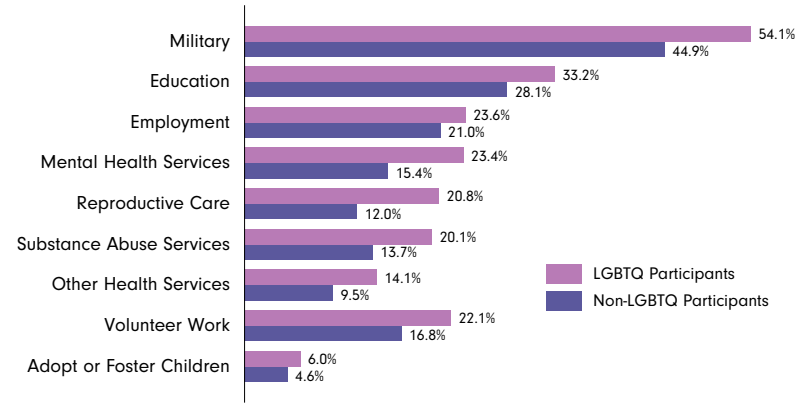
One-third (33.2%) of LGBTQ participants encountered negative experiences or discrimination in education settings due to their nonreligious beliefs, compared with 28.1% of cisgender/heterosexual participants. Among those participants *currently* in school, TGNC participants were approximately **30.2% more likely** than cisgender participants (LGB and heterosexual included) to experience discrimination (35.5% vs. 28.2%).

LGBTQ participants were **one-fifth (20.3%) more likely** than non-LGBTQ participants to have encountered negative experiences or discrimination at work. Partially due to their younger ages, LGBTQ participants were significantly more likely to be in school, and less likely to be working, than non-LGBTQ participants. However, even after controlling for LGBTQ participants' younger average age, these participants were **26.3% less likely** than non-LGBTQ participants to be currently employed either full time or part time.

Negative Experiences and Discrimination FIGURE 16



Negative Experiences and Discrimination in Select Sectors FIGURE 17



A significant number of nonreligious LGBTQ participants reported experiencing discrimination in the military because of their nonreligious beliefs. Among the LGBTQ participants who were servicemembers or veterans (8.3%), **more than half (54.1%)** encountered discrimination or negative experiences in the military because of their nonreligious beliefs, **nearly two-thirds (65.5%) more**

than their cisgender/heterosexual peers who had ever served in the military (13.7% were servicemembers or veterans, 44.9% of whom experienced discrimination). For TGNC servicemembers or veterans, disparities were even more stark. Among the 9.3% of TGNC respondents who had ever served, **almost seven in ten (69.2%)** had negative experiences in the military due to their nonreligious beliefs, **approximately three times** that of cisgender servicemembers or veterans.

LGBTQ participants were significantly more likely than non-LGBTQ participants to have encountered negative experiences or discrimination as a result of their nonreligious beliefs while accessing various categories of health care and services. More specifically, LGBTQ participants were **55.5% more likely** than non-LGBTQ participants to have encountered negative experiences or discrimination while accessing mental health services (23.4% vs. 15.4%, respectively), **68.7% more likely** while accessing substance abuse services (20.1% vs. 13.7%), and **64.8% more likely** while seeking other health services (14.1% vs. 9.5%).

> "When I was homeless, the only non-religious shelter in the area would not allow anyone to stay there if they hadn't first attempted staying at a Christian shelter. While there I was mistreated and verbally, emotionally, and psychologically abused for not believing in god and for being transgender. I already had several mental health conditions, and the people in charge of the Mission fully believed that all mental illness is demon possession, so I was terrified of what would happen to me if they found out, or if I had a panic attack or flashback in front of them."
>
> —TGNC, Rhode Island

> "My coworkers pray for me and insist that I will find enlightenment one day and tell me not to share my views, while they espouse theirs freely. I work in health care and the fact that so many health care groups are owned by Catholic organizations truly limits my employment options, since I, as an atheist, queer, liberal, feminist, am unwilling to put myself in a hostile environment in order to pay the bills."
>
> —Female, Michigan

Disparities in encountering negative experiences or discrimination while seeking reproductive care varied significantly by gender. Overall, LGBTQ participants were **71.9% more likely** than cisgender/heterosexual participants to encounter discrimination in this area (20.8% vs. 12.0%). However, cisgender LGBQ females were **1.5 times as likely** as cisgender/heterosexual females to encounter negative experiences while accessing reproductive care (24.4% vs. 16.0%), and they were **more than twice as likely** as cisgender male GBQ participants (11.1%).

While only **6.0%** of LGBTQ participants encountered negative experiences or discrimination because of their nonreligious beliefs while seeking to adopt or foster children, this increased to **16.5%** of LGBTQ participants with children, **more than twice** that of parenting cisgender/heterosexual participants (7.8%). As with reproductive care, differences emerged by gender. Parenting LGBQ cisgender female participants were **more than 1.5 times as**

likely as heterosexual/cisgender females to have encountered negative experiences (18.9% vs. 11.0%), and parenting TGNC participants were **more than 2.5 times as likely** as cisgender participants (LGBQ and heterosexual).

Trans and gender nonconforming youth were significantly more likely to encounter certain forms of discrimination than were cisgender youth participants. For example, **nearly two in five (38.9%)** TGNC participants ages 18-24 reported negative experiences in education because of their nonreligious beliefs, and **nearly one-third (31.5%)** reported negative experiences when accessing mental health services. It is critical to understand the impact of discrimination against this population as various states consider legislation that would exclude TGNC youth from athletics and other school activities or deny them essential health care.

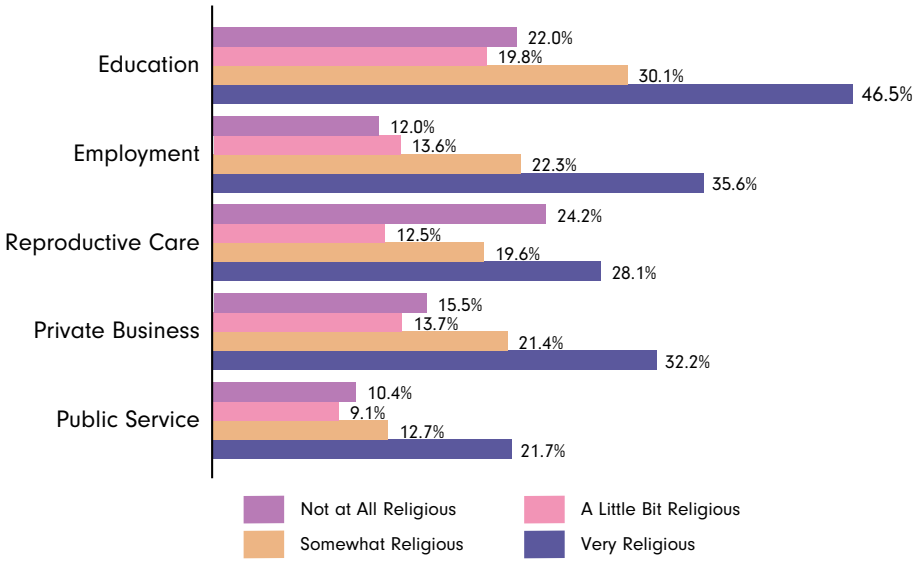
> "Because it can be hidden, non-religious discrimination can often be very internal. If I think about my parents finding out I'm an atheist, it's the possible start of a panic attack. This isn't overt discrimination, but the overall attitude of society is negative, causing harm."
>
> —TGNC, California

> "I think it is a big deal that public schools and city pools feel free to include religious music, prayer and bible quotes with impunity. This makes my children feel like outsiders because they are not religious and also excludes non-Christian children in the same way."
>
> —Female, Ohio

As with other participants of the U.S. Secular Survey, LGBTQ participants were significantly very likely to encounter discrimination because of their beliefs in more religious communities. The only exceptions were negative experiences in the military and while interacting with adoption/foster agencies. For example, **nearly half (46.5%)** of LGBTQ participants living in very religious communities encountered negative experiences or discrimination in education settings, **more than twice that** of LGBTQ participants living in less religious communities (26.6%). (Less religious communities includes not at all, a little bit, and somewhat religious communities.)

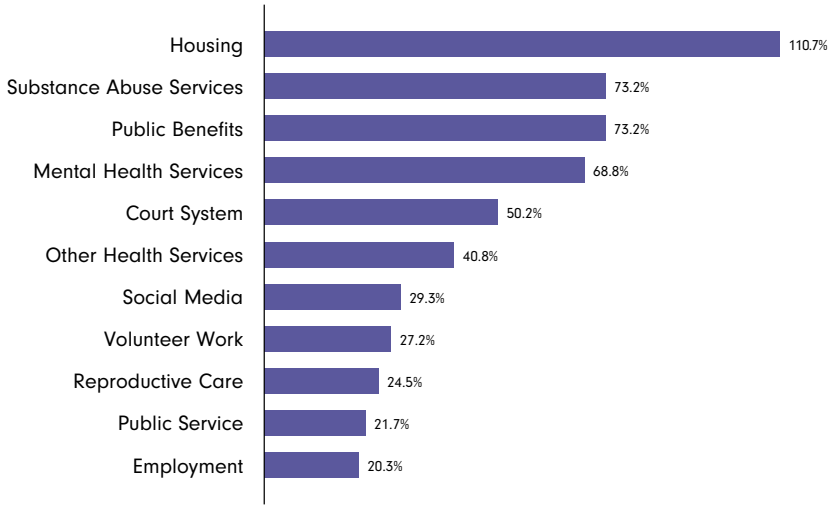
Increased Discrimination in Select Areas by Community Religiosity

FIGURE 18



Similarly, LGBTQ participants living in very religious communities were **more than twice as likely** to experience discrimination because of their nonreligious beliefs in employment, public service, public benefits, other health services, and by private businesses than those in less religious areas. When it comes to police, housing, and court systems, nonreligious LGBTQ people in very religious areas were **more than 2.5 times as likely** to experience discrimination as in less religious areas.

Increased Odds of Depression Among Those Who Had Negative Experiences, by Sector FIGURE 19



LGBTQ participants who experienced discrimination in various areas because of their nonreligious identity were significantly more likely to screen positive for depression (Figure 19). For example, those who encountered discrimination or negative experiences while seeking or living in housing were **more than twice as likely** to screen positive for depression. However, there was no significant increase in screening likely for depression among LGBTQ participants who encountered discrimination because of their nonreligious beliefs in the military, in encounters with the police, while using private businesses, in education settings, or when seeking to adopt or foster children.

In addition to incidents of discrimination in various areas of life, nonreligious LGBTQ people encounter widespread stigmatization as a result of their beliefs. To measure the level of stigma that they encounter, participants of the U.S. Secular Survey were asked to reflect how often they recalled experiencing certain microaggressions in the past year. On a scale of 1 – 5, with 5 representing higher/more frequent levels of stigma, LGBTQ

"I work for a religion-owned health care organization in which the religion is heavily pushed on everyone from all sides. Prayers at every staff meeting, Bible quotes all over the facilities, etc. It's in your face everywhere you turn and very frustrating."

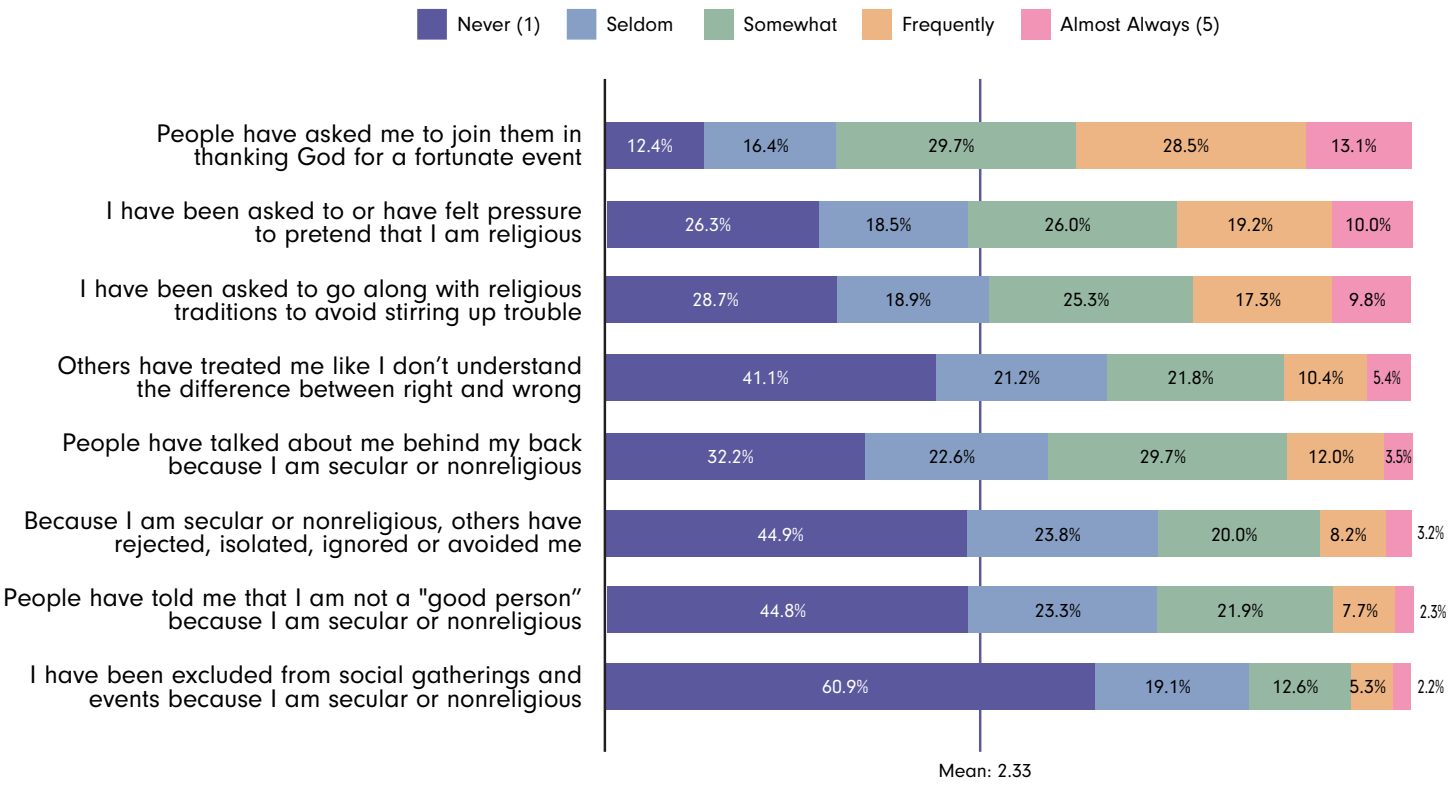
—Female, California

"I'm a public school teacher and my career has been so difficult due to religious privilege and poor leadership that I will not be teaching again. I must now choose carefully when and to whom I disclose [my beliefs]. I used to be open about it until it cost me my job."

—Female, Texas

Frequency of Stigmatizing Experiences

FIGURE 20

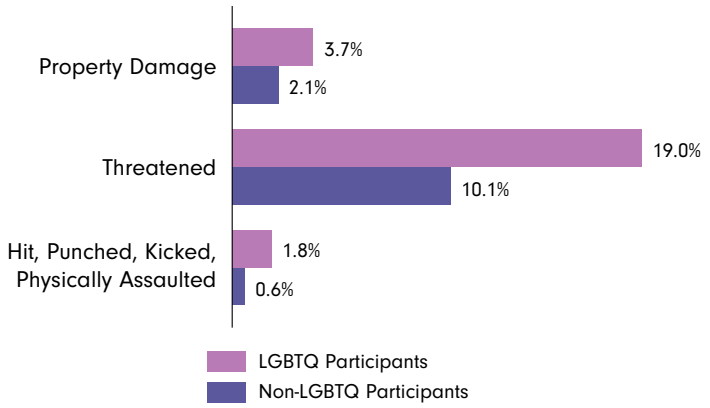


participants had an aggregate average of 2.33 for this stigmatization scale (Figure 20). Overall, this level of stigmatization was **10.3% higher** for nonreligious LGBTQ participants compared to their cisgender/heterosexual peers. LGBTQ participants residing in very religious communities experienced, on average, **41.3% higher** stigma than those residing in not at all religious communities (2.73 vs. 1.93).

Nearly **one in five (19.0%)** LGBTQ participants reported having been threatened because of their nonreligious identity. LGBTQ participants were **76.9% more likely** than cisgender/heterosexual participants to have experienced threats and **more than twice as likely** to be assaulted due to their nonreligious identity.

Vandalism, Threats, and Assault

FIGURE 21



> "I'd have my bachelors degree except for discrimination by a religious professor who refused to let me pass his class unless I became Christian."
>
> —TGNC, Missouri

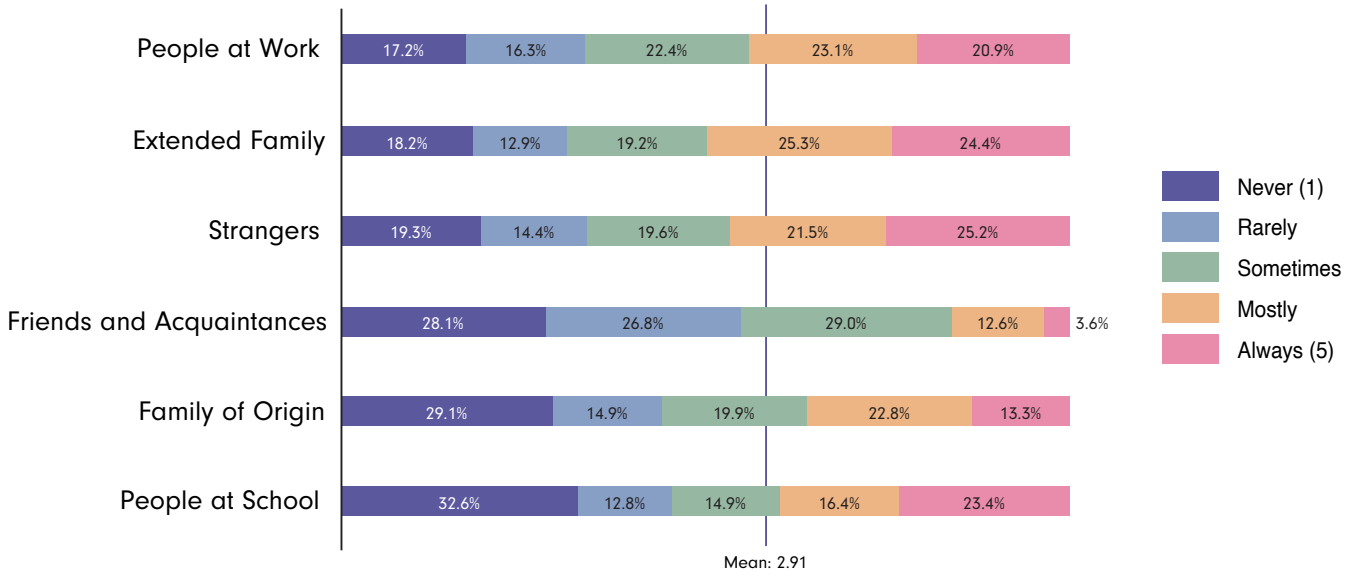
Concealment & Negative Outcomes

Likely resulting from or in anticipation of the high levels of discrimination and stigma nonreligious LGBTQ participants encountered, many regularly concealed their nonreligious beliefs. Discrimination, stigma, and concealment each resulted in heightened levels of loneliness and depression. On a scale of a scale of 1 – 5, with 5 representing more frequent concealment in various areas of their lives, LGBTQ participants averaged a score of 2.91 (Figure 22). Overall, LGBTQ participants were slightly more likely to conceal their nonreligious beliefs than non-LGBTQ participants.

Concealment differed across settings. For example, LGBTQ participants were approximately **16.1% more likely** than non-LGBTQ participants to mostly or always conceal their nonreligious identities from their families of origin (36.1% vs. 30.0%), and they were **13.4% more likely** to mostly or always conceal their nonreligious identity **from their extended families** (49.7% vs. 40.7%). In contrast, LGBTQ participants were **21.1% less likely** than non-LGBTQ participants to mostly always or always conceal their nonreligious identities from **friends or acquaintances** (16.2% vs. 19.8%).

> "I've never shared my religious non-belief with my family. My friends know I'm an atheist, but I'm afraid to share that part of me with co-workers, because the vast majority of them are very religious, and I fear discrimination."
>
> —TGNC, Georgia

Concealment of Nonreligious Identity FIGURE 22

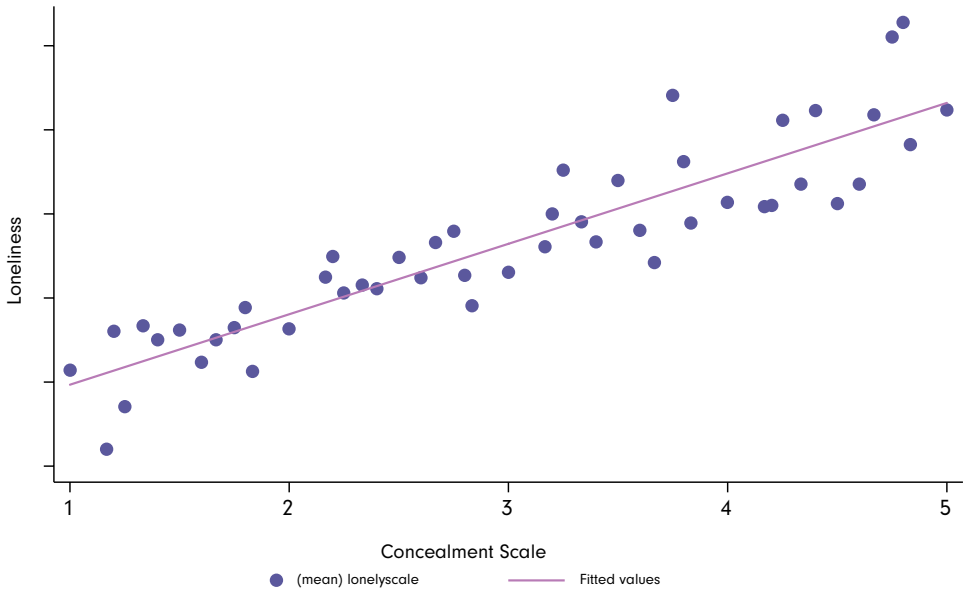


Among LGBTQ participants, those whose parents were very unsupportive of their nonreligious identity concealed their identity **29.4% more frequently** than those whose parents were very supportive of their nonreligious beliefs (3.17 vs. 2.45). LGBTQ participants who lived in very religious communities concealed their nonreligious identity **25.8% more frequently** than LGBTQ participants living in not at all religious communities (3.12 vs. 2.48).

Research has revealed that concealment can cause people to feel a lack of authenticity, to be less able to establish close ties with others, to experience more social isolation, to have lower feelings of belonging, and to have lower psychological well-being (see for example, Quinn, 2009, 2013, & 2017). Our data from the U.S. Secular Survey showed that concealment is associated with several types of negative outcomes among survey participants, including increased loneliness and risk for depression. This trend was consistent among LGBTQ participants as well. LGBTQ participants with higher concealment scores reported significantly more loneliness (Figure 23). In particular, LGBTQ participants who 'always' conceal their secular identity had **30.6% higher** loneliness than those who 'rarely' did so (6.62 vs. 5.07, scale range 3-9). In addition, LGBTQ participants who mostly or always concealed their nonreligious beliefs in at least half of the areas surveyed were **nearly 1.5 times as likely** to screen positive for depression as those who concealed their beliefs in fewer areas (31.5% vs. 25.9%).

> "Since I have not disclosed my non-religious beliefs with anyone besides trusted family and friends, I rarely face direct religious-based discrimination. However, the entire reason my lack of religion is kept mostly secret is due to living in a very religious rural community and knowing that people absolutely would treat me differently if they knew."
>
> —TGNC, Illinois

Concealment and Mean Loneliness FIGURE 23



INVOLVEMENT WITH LOCAL & NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

In order to better understand how nonreligious LGBTQ participants interact with nonreligious communities, we asked them about their membership in national and local secular organizations as well as their participation in secular activities with those organizations. **More than one-third (38.8%)** of LGBTQ participants were involved in local or national secular organizations, including **30.5%** who were a member of at least one national organization and **21.4%** of a local organization. This was similar to the rate of involvement among non-LGBTQ participants. LGBTQ participants living in very religious areas were **26.9%** more likely to be a member of a national group and **58.3%** more likely to be a member of a local group than those living in less religious areas.

Like other nonreligious participants, engagement with these organizations was an important protective factor for LGBTQ participants. LGBTQ participants who were members of a national secular organization were **28.3% less likely** than nonmembers to be at risk for depression, and those who were involved with local secular organizations were **20.2% less likely** to be at risk for depression. Similar patterns of protective effects were seen for non-LGBTQ participants.

Participation in local secular events such as social events, volunteer opportunities, advocacy, and debates or lectures, was equivalent to that of their cisgender/heterosexual peers. See the *Reality Check* report for additional details about these activities. One notable difference between LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ participants, however, is that among participants with children, LGBTQ parents were **78.8% more likely** to have accessed resources for people with children who are secular (12.0% vs. 7.5%, respectively). Similar percentages of LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ participants wanted, but had not yet had access to, these resources.

"I wrote a blog post calling myself an atheist for the first time in 2017. I was instantly bombarded by messages from college friends "confessing" their own atheism and saying how alone they'd felt. It was impactful and inspiring, because we'd all known each other but all had felt lonely because discussing atheism was taboo. My goal now, as an atheist and a content creator, is to break that taboo for others and build the atheist community."

—TGNC, Texas

"I hate the fact that there are no good organizations near my rural area in which to actually get together with other Atheists/Humanists. In St. Louis, I was a member of their Ethical Society...nothing comparable exists where I currently reside. It's harder to make a difference solo...there is definite strength in numbers."

—Female, Illinois

"I mostly keep schtum about my atheism for fear of repercussions from the mostly religious population outside of my town. There is a local Facebook group of Freethinkers, Atheists, Humanists, etc. that I quite enjoy. We let off steam when getting bombarded with religion multiple times in a day (as most folks in the US are) by posting informative articles, funny memes, or just plain stupid or horrifying stories about people who do things in the name of religion."

—Female, Kansas

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT & POLICY PRIORITIES

Nearly half (48.9%) of LGBTQ participants report they 'Always' vote, compared with 53.9% of non-LGBTQ participants. However, this does not account for the younger age, on average, of LGBTQ participants and lower voting participation of younger adults. Adjusting for age, LGBTQ participants are **5.3% more likely** than non-LGBTQ participants to 'Always' vote and **17.3% more likely** to be registered to vote.

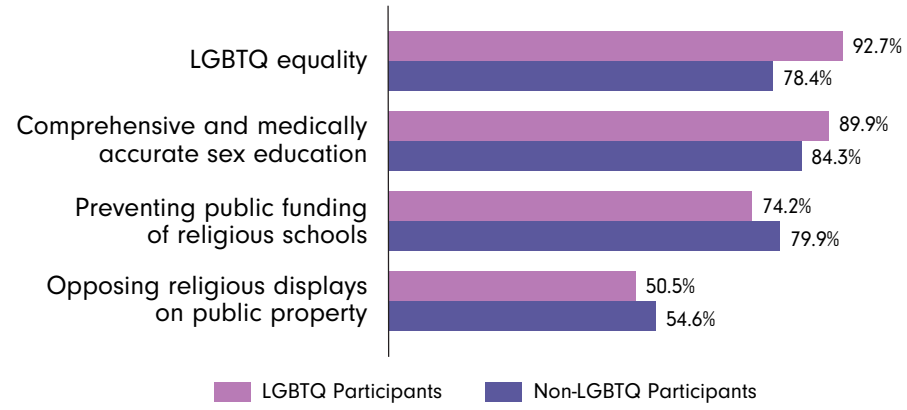
While LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ participants of the U.S. Secular Survey held similar views of the importance of many secular policy issues, such as maintaining secular public schools, stopping inappropriate political activity by churches, and opposing persecution of nonreligious people internationally, there were a few notable differences. **More than nine in ten (92.7%)** LGBTQ participants said that protecting LGBTQ rights was very important, compared with just over three-quarters (78.4%) of non-LGBTQ participants. Conversely, LGBTQ participants were less likely than non-LGBTQ participants to view as very important preventing public funding of religious schools (74.2% vs. 79.9%) and opposing religious displays on public property (50.5% vs. 54.6%).

> "I live in a very religious state. Religion here is a status symbol, regardless of the truth of the persons actual practices. Our family feels like outcast in the community because we aren't in a church. We are ignored, frowned at, and looked down on. Every day one religion or another is pushing in on science and ruining good public information, events, and schools. They have no right to impose on anyone else's life."
>
> —Female, Kentucky

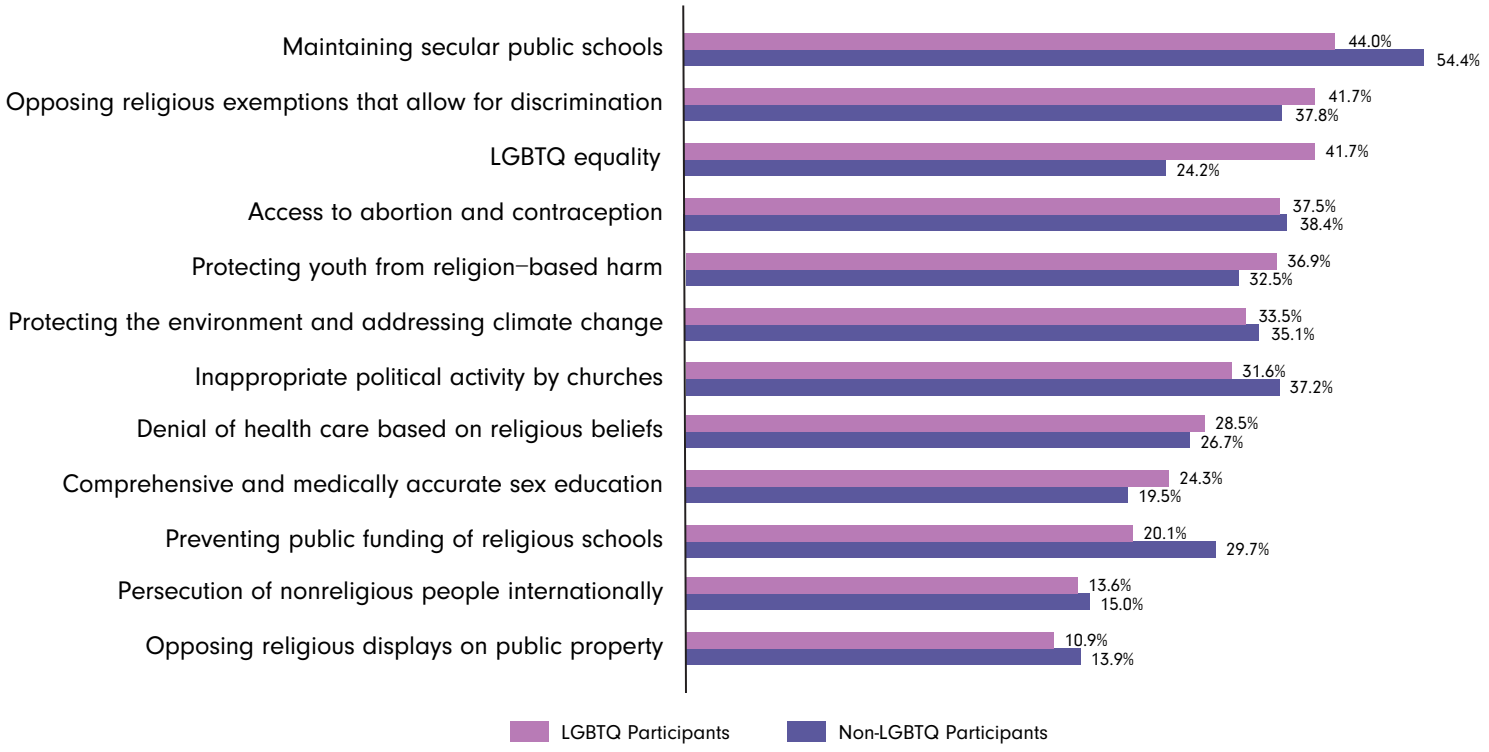
> "My experience with my secular identity has also been easier because of my amazing siblings and father, along with my secular organization at college. Without these, my path would have been much harder to walk."
>
> —TGNC, Wisconsin

When asked about their top three priorities for advocacy by secular organizations, there were substantial differences in prioritization among LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ participants (Figure 25). The top-rated advocacy priority for both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ participants was maintaining secular public schools, selected by 44.0% of LGBTQ participants and 54.4% of non-LGBTQ participants. However,

Select Very Important Policy Priorities FIGURE 24



Policy Priorities for Secular Organizations FIGURE 25



in second place, among LGBTQ participants, there was a tie between prioritizing LGBTQ equality (41.7%) and opposing religious exemptions that allow for discrimination (41.7%). In comparison, among non-LGBTQ participants, support for these issues as top priorities for secular organizations was 24.2% and 37.8%, respectively, and second and third top rated advocacy priorities were preserving access to abortion and contraception, and preventing inappropriate political activity by churches. LGBTQ participants were also more likely to view comprehensive and medically accurate sex education as a top priority for secular organizations (24.3% vs. 19.5%).

"[Atheists] are presumed to have out-sized power and influence, rather than the reality: despite the country's secular Constitutional underpinnings, we are constantly flirting with Christian theocracy. I feel it keenly."

—TGNC, California

"Our children are being indoctrinated at taxpayer expense and pressured socially to conform to publicly expressing a religious identity that is not necessarily theirs. This is confusing and harmful to kids like mine. We are a family of non-believers. I want better for my kids, and all kids."

—Female, New Jersey

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING & ORGANIZING

The U.S. Secular Survey provides valuable insights that can help both national and local secular organizations, as well as national and local LGBTQ organizations, better meet the needs of nonreligious LGBTQ people. But data alone has little value. If secular and LGBTQ organizations want to better serve this population, they must be willing to take meaningful steps to reach out to nonreligious LGBTQ people, to reexamine their activities and their missions, and to accept that changing membership and increasing diversity requires organizational change.

Moreover, this data provides opportunities for secular and LGBTQ organizations to build relationships with each other to better serve their populations and achieve their organizational missions. The fact is that there is a very significant overlap in the membership of LGBTQ organizations (where approximately half of the LGBTQ population identifies as nonreligious) and secular organizations (where the U.S. Secular Survey showed that nearly one-quarter of nonreligious participants identified as LGBTQ). In addition to the communities they represent, LGBTQ and secular organizations face many of the same opponents (such as well-funded conservative Christian legal organizations) and share many issues of concern (such as religious exemptions being used to undermine basic civil rights). Given these factors, to not build strong bridges between the secular movement and the LGBTQ movement would ultimately be self-defeating. Instead, we urge secular organizations and LGBTQ organizations to join together and coordinate to advance religious equality and civil rights for all people, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or their religious viewpoint.

1. **Both LGBTQ and secular organizations should create an environment that is welcoming for nonreligious LGBTQ people.** Although they comprise nearly half of the LGBTQ population, nonreligious LGBTQ people often feel like an afterthought for many LGBTQ organizations. This affects coalition building and advocacy efforts (see #3 below) as well as community building and activities. In many communities, LGBTQ events are frequently held in religious spaces, conveying an assumption that everyone in LGBTQ communities is religious or agrees with various religious beliefs. For example, Trans Day of Remembrance events are often held

at churches, religious groups frequently host Pride events, and in some areas, LGBTQ community events are regularly opened with prayer. However, many nonreligious LGBTQ people, as well as religious LGBTQ people, have religious trauma as a result of their experiences. Therefore, these events can be exclusionary or triggering for a significant portion of the LGBTQ population.

> "As a teenager suffering from mental illnesses and from self-harm, my family performed an exorcism on me. They are aware I'm not religious, and I did not consent to it. I still go to therapy for it, and hearing people pray can trigger intense breakdowns."
>
> —TGNC, Alaska

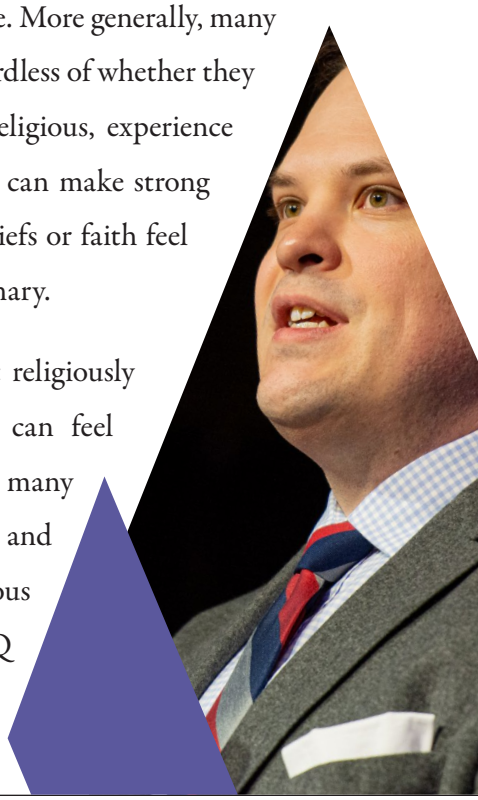
There are numerous ways that LGBTQ organizations and communities can create a more inclusive environment for nonreligious LGBTQ people, for example, by:

a. Specifically mentioning atheists and nonreligious people, along with other groups, when welcoming attendees to a space or conducting events. The assumption that everyone is religious can be especially frustrating for nonreligious people, and by acknowledging people of all different beliefs, organizers can help ensure that nonreligious LGBTQ people feel seen and accepted. Similarly, if you are inviting representatives of religious groups to an event, consider inviting secular organizations as well.

b. Allowing people to opt out of religious ceremony. Organizers should avoid making religious ceremony mandatory or expected for attendees by holding such activities prior to the start of events or by holding religious ceremony alongside other secular options. Please also note that nonreligious people may have a different understanding of what constitutes religious ceremony or activities than religious people.

c. Avoiding characterizing religion or faith as essential or universally beneficial. Nonreligious people have many different opinions about the role of religion and faith in our society. However, framing belief as mandatory to be a good person or critical to success is stigmatizing to nonreligious people. More generally, many LGBTQ people, regardless of whether they are religious or nonreligious, experience religious trauma that can make strong praise of religious beliefs or faith feel triggering or exclusionary.

d. Holding events at religiously neutral locations. It can feel exclusionary for many nonreligious people and people with religious trauma when LGBTQ



community events are frequently held at places of religious significance, where they may not feel welcome. Instead, consider community centers, LGBTQ centers, libraries, schools, and other areas that are not closely associated with religious belief. Of course, it is completely appropriate to sometimes host LGBTQ community events for people of faith at churches or other religious locations, but if that is the only form of regular community gathering, then people who do not feel comfortable in those sites are regularly excluded.

In addition, secular groups should take steps to ensure that they are welcoming for LGBTQ people. Local secular groups can raise awareness of their presence in the community by participating in Pride activities or hosting events aimed at nonreligious LGBTQ people, perhaps in partnership with local LGBTQ groups. Many nonreligious LGBTQ people have significant religious trauma, and so they may especially benefit from resources and support intended to help individuals deal with the difficulties of newly coming to terms with religious trauma or nonreligious beliefs. This may include emotional support, mentorship, information about supportive therapists, and helping young people who have been rejected by their families. Secular organizations should also ensure that published resources, advertisements, and other outreach materials include images and other representation of nonreligious LGBTQ people to help counter stereotypes and normalize this population.

Gendered and anti-LGBTQ dynamics can certainly affect local secular organizations, and organizations that fail to recognize these dynamics and account for them will be unable to fully engage nonreligious LGBTQ people. Nonreligious LGBTQ people can be driven out of local secular organizations by homophobic stereotypes and assumptions, sexist or lewd humor, and dismissive or hostile members. Organizational leadership can and must interrupt these patterns. For example, if it's known that certain members are actively antagonistic to LGBTQ people, steps must be taken to address the issue proactively. It's not enough to put the burden on prospective new members by subtly warning them to avoid certain people. Instead, community expectations must be established, which requires commitment from leadership, a clear standard of what behavior is not acceptable, and real consequences when these standards are violated. American Atheists has resources available to secular organizations to help

establish standards of behavior. Ultimately, unless prospective LGBTQ members feel that the group is a safe and welcoming environment, they will not return.

> "Even local LGBTQ+ organizations here are strongly religious and push you into their religious restoration groups. I had one member of a local organization ask me if I could overcome my religious bitterness and serve the local Christian LGBTQ+ community."
>
> —Female, Michigan

2. Understand that LGBTQ equality is a secular issue, and that LGBTQ people are disproportionately affected by harmful laws and policies motivated by religion.

By examining what different subpopulations of nonreligious people view as policy priorities for secular organizations, it becomes evident that what is considered a "secular issue" depends on who is asked. LGBTQ people have long been impacted by America's unique blend of puritanism and religious exceptionalism, and they are arguably the population that is most affected by America's rising Christian nationalism (Greenesmith, 2022). Is LGBTQ equality a secular issue? Given the fact the nearly all anti-LGBTQ animus and opposition to LGBTQ equality is driven by religious beliefs and organizations, yes, it unquestionably is. Nonreligious people of all stripes should respect the effort that LGBTQ communities have made to define themselves and defend their rights in this religiously hostile culture: standing up to religious oppression is a shared value. And while there has been progress, hard-fought gains such as inclusive nondiscrimination laws, same-sex marriage, and anti-bullying efforts in schools are imperiled by challenges in the courts, in statehouses, and in the culture.

Therefore, it is more important than ever for secular organizations to stand with LGBTQ people against the waves of negative, religiously inspired legislation we're seeing in states around the country. For example, secular organizations can play an important role in opposing harmful legislation targeting trans youth, especially when LGBTQ people are being silenced by threats and false accusations. Our research shows that nonreligious LGBTQ people were more likely than other participants to encounter family rejection and discrimination, particularly in education and health care, because of their nonreligious beliefs. Therefore, it may make sense to organize around policy change that positively impacts these issues, such as bills to end conversion therapy (a form of family rejection that endangers LGBTQ youth) and efforts to prevent religion-

based denial of health care. Just like everyone else, nonreligious LGBTQ people tend to prioritize policy issues that directly impact them, their families, and their communities. Secular organizations must be aware of and responsive to these preferences when setting their advocacy agendas.

3. Secular organizations and LGBTQ organizations should build stronger connections in order to better serve nonreligious LGBTQ people, build power, and advance their organizational missions.

For many understandable reasons, there has been a strong effort to gain legitimacy for LGBTQ advocacy by involving supportive religious leaders and religious elements. When so much of the anti-LGBTQ animus that this population faces is driven by religion, it only makes sense to hold up opposing figures in that sphere in order to counter or disrupt the idea that this hatred is universal—that all religions and religious leaders are anti-LGBTQ. Moreover, this helps to normalize LGBTQ people to the American public—to convey the idea that LGBTQ people are just like everyone else, including in terms of religious belief.

Within LGBTQ activism, these understandable goals have evolved into standard advocacy practices where LGBTQ advocacy is ideally always accompanied or supported by progressive religious leaders. Much of the organizing capacity of state LGBTQ organizations is spent building relationships with supportive faith leaders, major LGBTQ national conferences devote significant time and resources to faith organizing, and foundations that support the LGBTQ movement frequently prioritize faith organizing work for funding. This continues even as more moderate and LGBTQ-accepting forms of Christianity dwindle in the United States, leaving behind the more aggressively anti-LGBTQ denominations and a growing diversity of nonreligious and religiously unaffiliated Americans (Goldman, 2021).

Despite this focused outreach to religious groups to support the goals of the LGBTQ movement, there has been surprisingly little coordination between LGBTQ organizations and secular organizations representing nonreligious people. For example, secular leaders are rarely invited to testify or speak out on legislation and most LGBTQ groups do not involve secular

> "I work as a hospital chaplain endorsed by the Humanist Society. Because of this, all of my chaplain colleagues know of my humanism. They have been largely supportive. Where I find more discrimination is from the medical staff and administration. Over time, by forcing myself into situations where I might have otherwise been excluded, people have come to respect my philosophy of life. This has resulted in a larger acceptance by people in the hospital."
>
> —TGNC, Ohio

groups in their faith organizing.

On the whole, however, groups representing nonreligious people are well-suited to partnership with national and state LGBTQ organizations. Compared to many smaller progressive religious denominations, they are extremely well-organized with local affiliates in many states, sophisticated policy and legal resources, broad communication platforms, a tradition of activism, national and regional conferences, and host of secular leaders that can speak on nonreligious and LGBTQ issues. Secular and LGBTQ groups align nearly completely when it comes to policy goals and opposing efforts by religious conservatives to privilege religious beliefs over civil rights. Finally, nonreligious people tend to be among the most politically engaged Americans (Burge, 2020).

Given these factors, why is partnership with secular organizations and communities so overlooked by LGBTQ organizations? Of course, secular organizations could do a better job reaching out to LGBTQ organizations. However, we would suggest that this is primarily a matter of respectability politics—the belief that marginalized communities must adhere to dominant cultural norms to receive respect (Higginbotham, 1993)—and that it is ultimately harmful to the goals of both the secular movement and the LGBTQ movement. In other words, LGBTQ groups are less likely to partner with atheists and nonreligious people because, despite all that they share, atheists and nonreligious people are stigmatized in our society and do not, at least at this time, bring the same cultural legitimacy as alliance with progressive religious groups. However, this approach needlessly excludes potentially strong partners in the fight for LGBTQ equality at a time when the religiously unaffiliated and nonreligious populations are rapidly growing. Moreover, this is a false dichotomy—there is no reason that LGBTQ groups cannot work alongside both progressive religious and secular groups. We encourage LGBTQ organizations and organizers to question their assumptions about the secular movement and to build bridges with local and national secular groups so that we might better pursue our goals to end religious stigma and achieve true equality together.

> "My mother was completely upset when I told her and couldn't fathom how I could have any morals without religion. She always seems to throw religious beliefs into every conversation we have now."
>
> —TGNC, Illinois

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OUR ORGANIZATIONS

American Atheists is a national civil rights organization that works to achieve religious equality for all Americans by protecting what Thomas Jefferson called the "wall of separation" between government and religion created by the First Amendment. We strive to create an environment where atheism and atheists are accepted as members of our nation's communities and where casual bigotry against our community is seen as abhorrent and unacceptable. We promote understanding of atheists through education, outreach, and community-building and work to end the stigma associated with being an atheist in America. To find out more about American Atheists and our work, please visit **atheists.org**.

Strength in Numbers Consulting Group (SiNCG) is a progressive research, evaluation, and strategy firm. Incorporated in 2010, SiNCG offers nonprofit, government, and philanthropic clients high quality data and analysis using substantive input from the most affected communities. SiNCG focuses on marginalized and stigmatized groups in the United States and in international contexts. Please visit **strengthinnumbersconsulting.com**.

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