

# Facts about Rural Aging for LGBTQ+ Older Adults

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## Rural Aging and LGBTQ+ Older Adults

It is a stereotype that LGBTQ+ people only live in urban areas and prefer urban areas over rural areas. In reality, LGBTQ+ people enjoy rural areas for many of the same reasons that non-LGBTQ+ people do. For instance, rural living can provide a life connected to nature, a close connection to family, and opportunities to lead rural lifestyle.<sup>1</sup> It is important for aging service providers to be aware of the specific needs and strengths of LGBTQ+ older adults living in rural areas to help them age in the place that they love.

One in five Americans live in a rural area according to the US Census, and that population is diverse in race, ethnicity, and in gender and sexual orientation.<sup>1</sup> National surveys of rural areas show that between 3% and 5% of the rural population identifies as LGBT, consistent with estimates that 4.5% of the U.S. adult population identifies as LGBT.<sup>1</sup> Despite the considerable number of LGBTQ+ people living in rural areas, there has been little attention given to the unique qualities, needs, and challenges of rural aging for LGBTQ+ people, and increasingly diverse rural populations.

## Challenges of Rural Aging

There is little information on rural aging of LGBTQ+ older adults but being aware of the facts of rural aging are important for understanding how geographical location, age, and LGBTQ+ status might intersect. Rural aging is different than urban aging due to geographical location which impacts several factors important to aging.<sup>2</sup>

**Health & Wellness:** Research shows that rural older adults tend to be in worse physical and mental health than their urban counterparts.

**Service Access & Utilization:** Rural older adults are less likely to have access to needed health care services, mental health care services, and social services when compared to their urban counterparts due to their geographical location. Rural older adults are also less likely to utilize services that are available to them, particularly mental health services.

**Social Support:** Rurality can also impact social support, making rural older adults more socially isolated than urban older adults.

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**Transportation:** Rural areas often lack public transportation, leaving most rural older adults reliant on their private vehicles. This can be a challenge in later life, when chronic conditions might interfere with an older adult's ability to drive.

**Housing:** Rural older adults are much more likely to own their own homes and they have fewer options than non-rural older adults for aging-in-place, which is what many older adults desire. This can lead to higher housing costs for rural older adults who want to age where they live.

### **How do rural LGBTQ+ older adults differ from urban LGBTQ+ older adults?**

**Family Support:** Rural LGBTQ+ older adults are more likely to have raised children than those in urban areas. This is an important difference because this might indicate that rural LGBTQ+ older adults have more family caregivers available to them than urban LGBTQ+ older adults.<sup>3</sup> Further, this might indicate that rural LGBTQ+ older adults have a different life course than LGBTQ+ older adults that live in urban areas, often having families and spouses or partners as their primary social support rather than families of choice or LGBTQ+ organizations.<sup>4</sup>

**Life Course:** When we learn about the general personal history of LGBTQ+ older adults, the focus is on urban LGBTQ+ life. Rural communities are often isolated from rights movements for longer, and rural areas are sometimes less tolerant of LGBTQ+ identities long after urban areas adjust. This means that Rural LGBTQ+ older adults might have been less impacted by the LGBTQ+ rights movement which occurred in urban areas.<sup>3</sup>

**Outness:** Rural LGBTQ+ older adults are less likely to be out in all areas of their lives, particularly with managers at their job. Researchers found in discussions with some LGBTQ+ older adults in rural areas that their LGBTQ+ identity is not as important to them as other aspects of their identity.<sup>1</sup> This might indicate that outness among rural LGBTQ+ older adults is less important than it is for urban LGBTQ+ older adults.<sup>3</sup>

### **Health Equity Issues for LGBTQ+ Older Adults Living Rurally**

**Social Networks and Support:** Social support is important to health outcomes.<sup>5</sup> There are several issues with social support in rural areas for LGBTQ+ older adults that might have an adverse impact on health.

- Rural LGBTQ+ older adults and LGBTQ+ older adults in small communities are less likely than urban and suburban to live in areas that are supportive of their gender identity and/or sexuality.<sup>4</sup>
- Rural LGBTQ+ older adults lack access to community groups and religious institutions that are supportive of their identities and few rural LGBTQ+ older adults have access to LGBTQ+ specific organizations.<sup>4</sup>
- Rural areas tend to be more isolated, making social support a challenge for rural LGBTQ+ older adults.<sup>2</sup>

## Policies and Practices

Policies on the local, state, and federal level are important for all people getting the health and social services they need to live healthy lives.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, practices of health and social service organizations are important as well in ensuring equity in services for LGBTQ+ older adults.

- More rural LGBTQ+ older adults live in states that do not have legal protections for sexual orientation or gender identity, and lack of legal protections has been found to lead to discrimination in employment and healthcare along with worse health outcomes.<sup>1</sup>
- LGBTQ+ older adults living in rural areas are unlikely to have access to healthcare and social services that are openly inclusive of LGBTQ+ older adults.<sup>4</sup>

## How to Improve Rural Life for LGBTQ+ Older Adults

- Encourage organizations in rural areas that provide health and social services to get training from SAGECare. Regardless of community type, older adults indicate that they want their health care and social service providers to have cultural competence on LGBTQ+ care issues.
- Encourage organizations in rural areas to participate in the Long-Term Care Equality Index. It is important that rural long-term care organizations ensure that they have policies and practices that are inclusive of LGBTQ+ people, especially considering the lack of state-wide protections for LGBTQ+ people in many rural areas.
- Advocate for LGBTQ+ people in your community. If you live in a rural area, you can become a volunteer ambassador and give presentations on LGBTQ+ issues with presentations developed by the National Resource Center on LGBT Aging. You can also encourage local organizations to get cultural competency training from SAGECare or participate in the Long-Term Care Equality Index.
- Support Policies that Ensure Protection: You can help rural LGBTQ+ older adults by supporting protections for them on the federal level and on the state level if they do not already exist where you live. To provide support for federal non-discrimination legislation, you can support the [Equality Act](#).

## Resources for more information on LGBTQ+ aging & advocacy:

[National Resource Center on LGBT Aging](#)

[SAGECare](#)

[Long-Term Care Equality Index](#)

[FORGE](#)

[Diverse Elders Coalition](#)

## Sources

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Morgan Van Vleck is an MSW intern for the NRC, who is passionate about advocating for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ older adults in aging services.