

A photograph of two men standing in front of a blue and white tent. The man on the left is wearing a grey cap, glasses, and a dark jacket over a plaid shirt. The man on the right is wearing a grey flat cap and a dark jacket over a plaid shirt, with his arm around the other man's shoulder. The background shows green pine branches.

SEEN, HEARD
AND HERE
—
OLDER LGBTQ+
OREGONIANS

AGE+
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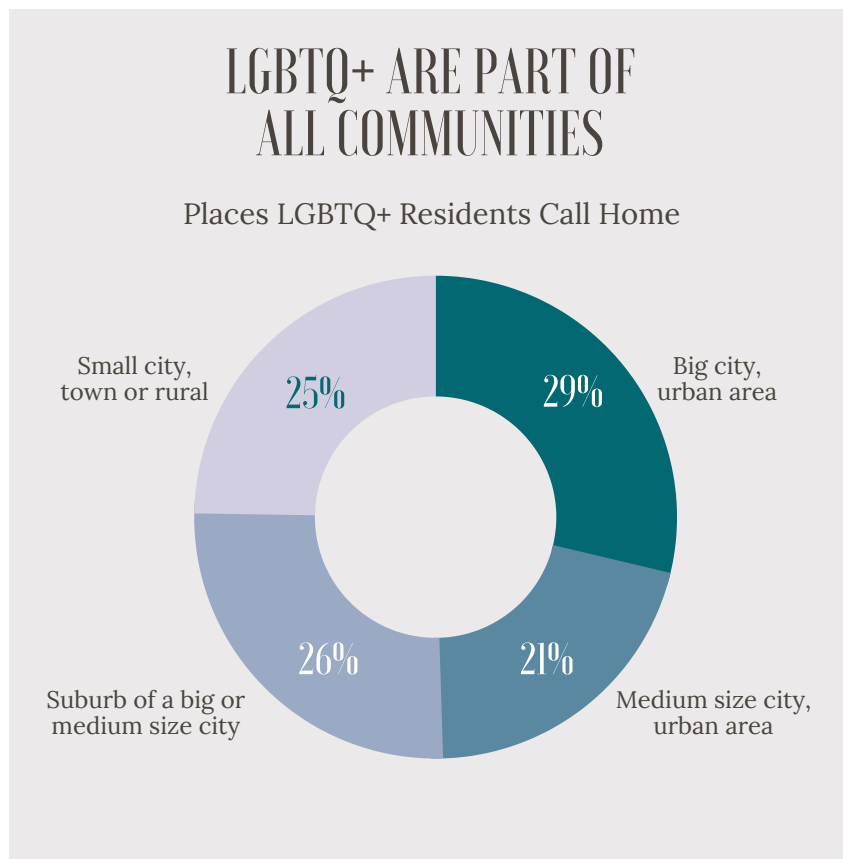
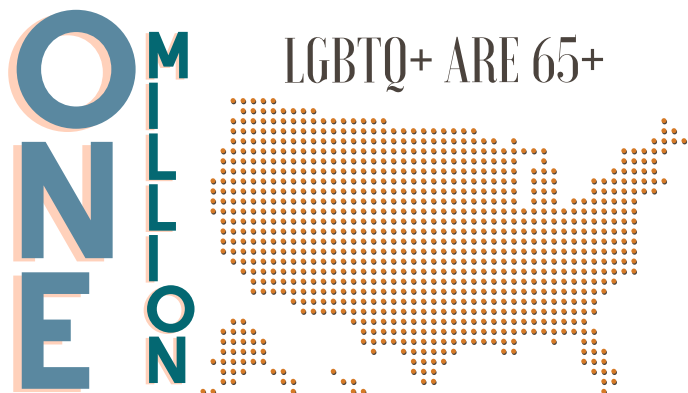
COUNTING IN OLDER LGBTQ+ OREGONIANS

The U.S. Census has never directly counted lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people, much less those who are part of the rest of the "alphabet." This invisibility in basic data has affected generations of LGBTQ+ Americans. The best available data estimate is approximately 3.4% of Oregonians aged 55+ identify as LGB*. This is higher than the national estimate of 1.3% - 2% for this age group. Such healthy numbers are not surprising given that Oregon is home to the highest LGBTQ+ adult population by proportion of any state in the U.S.—approximately 5.6% of residents. This group is growing in size. Nationally, LGBTQ+ older adults 50+ are expected to rise from today's estimated 3 million to around 7 million by 2030.

Oregon's older LGBTQ+ population is diverse with individual experiences of aging. Age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, education, economics, race, ethnicity, faith, language, political beliefs and where someone lives impact how people age. But many feel as though they are invisible, especially since they have historically been excluded from data. Don't ask; don't know.

This paper aims to increase understanding of the unique needs and experiences of LGBTQ+ older adults in Oregon, so service providers, advocates, the aging network and policymakers can consider challenges and opportunities when serving this population. That's the only way all older residents can thrive.

*Reliable Oregon data applies only to LGB since the sample size of older transgender adults is too small for data analysis.



ONE-THIRD

LGBTQ+ OLDER ADULTS
LIVE AT OR BELOW 200%
OF THE FEDERAL POVERTY LEVEL

HISTORY MATTERS AS LGBTQ+ GROW OLD



OLDER GENERATIONS LIVE WITH THEIR OWN STORIES

INVISIBLE GENERATION 85+ TODAY

- Came of age during the Great Depression
- Many fought in WWII
- Identities were absent from public disclosure
- Family support very rare
- Moral judgment severe

SILENT GENERATION 75-85 TODAY

- "The Greatest Generation"
- Experienced active prejudice & discrimination
- Same sex behavior criminalized
- Homosexuality considered a "psychiatric disorder"

PRIDE GENERATION 60-75 TODAY

- Came of age at a time of great social change
- Stonewall, the birth of Gay Pride & increasing openness
- Decriminalization starts
- 1980s AIDS pandemic began
- Marriage equality achieved

Despite Oregon's comparatively strong nondiscrimination protections, older LGBTQ+ people today are at heightened risks of economic disadvantages, social disconnectedness and health disparities. This is likely due to a lack of economic opportunities and the discrimination they have faced. The past may not predict the future. For example, the Oregon Department of Human Services' State Plan on Aging recognizes the importance of improving outreach and developing services and programs to promote the well-being of disadvantaged populations—specifically in improving outreach to older adults of color, tribal elders, older adults with disabilities and LGBTQ+ older adults. But today's LGBTQ+ people carry their history with them as they grow into old age over the next 10-20 years. It hasn't been easy and many carry scars of that history. Many are stronger after lifelong work for acceptance.

SHARED EXPERIENCES UNITE GENERATIONS

- A lifetime of discrimination, especially in housing and employment, along with long-term lack of legal and social recognition, combine to create deep economic insecurity for LGBTQ+ older adults
- A reliance on a chosen family due to family rejection and legalized discrimination creates social isolation and vulnerability of LGBTQ+ older adults
- Lack of competent, inclusive healthcare leads to specific mental and physical health disparities

CONSEQUENCES OF DISCRIMINATION ARE SHARED, TOO LGBTQ+ OLDER ADULTS ARE:

- Twice as likely to be single and live alone
- Four times less likely to have children
- More likely to be estranged from family
- Less likely to receive partner's pension or SS benefits
- More likely to be caregivers for their friends
- Far more likely than heterosexual peers to have faced discrimination, social stigma and the effects of prejudice
- More likely to face poverty and homelessness, and to have poor physical and mental health

Source: MAP & SAGE, "Understanding Issues Facing LGBT Older Adults," 2017



AND THE OREGON SURVEY SHOWS...

To make visible what has been largely invisible, in 2020, the Oregon Department of Human Services, Office of Aging and People with Disabilities commissioned a pioneering study: "LGBTQ+ Older Adult Survey." The results shed light on the diversity and cumulative risks facing this aging population.

Economic concerns and social exclusion affect LGBTQ+ older adults' ability to live in safe and supportive environments, increasing the risk for social isolation and its negative physical and mental health consequences. More than one-fifth report experiencing suicidal ideation in the past year, which is significantly higher than in the general population. Risks and issues for older adults are even higher for LGBTQ+ people of color, those living in the most rural areas and those with HIV.

DISCRIMINATION PERSISTS

Nearly 60% of survey respondents reported experiencing discrimination within the past year.

- Nearly 60% in public places
- More than 25% in employment
- Nearly 25% in residential settings or care and health services
- Highest rates are among participants of color, transgender people and gay men

ELDER ABUSE IS TOO COMMON

A quarter of participants experienced at least one type of elder abuse in the past year.

- Verbal abuse: 17%
- Excessive control: 10%
- Financial: 6%
- Abused by a stranger: 62%
- These rates are much higher than for older adults in general

SERVICES ARE HARD TO ACCESS

Half of participants (54%) say they had unmet service needs in the past year. Common reasons given for not using services include:

- Difficulty in applying: 46%
- High costs: 39%
- Not LGBTQ+ friendly: 32%
- Location or hard to access: 29%

HOUSING SECURITY IS A WORRY

Two-thirds of participants worry about where they will live.

- Two-thirds reported experiencing housing instability
- Nearly two-thirds reported they are not confident that they will be able to continue living in their current housing
- Twenty-one percent of those currently living in a residential setting such as senior housing, assisted living, adult foster homes, or nursing homes report LGBTQ+ discrimination in their housing

Based on the voices of 1,402 LGBTQ+ Oregonians aged 55+ across the state, this survey has set a standard for state agencies to listen and understand the experiences in the community, and to work together to develop meaningful strategies, programs, services and resources.

INVISIBLE NO MORE—HELLO, U.S. CENSUS!



Invisibility in data is perhaps the largest challenge facing older LGBTQ+ Oregonians. When data is missing, outdated or oversimplified, we lack an essential tool for change. It is difficult to set goals to improve disparities. In a watershed moment, for the first time ever on a population survey sponsored by the U.S. Census Bureau, the summer 2021 Household Pulse Survey (HPS) asked about sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI). These Pulse Surveys are important snapshots of the country and have documented the experiences of American households during the coronavirus pandemic. But until now, those snapshots were incomplete because not everyone was included. Now, by asking SOGI questions, researchers are able to highlight how the experiences of the LGBTQ+ population are different compared to their heterosexual counterparts. Without those questions, challenges of LGBTQ+ people were invisible—and so were their strengths.

Of course, real change requires more than just counting LGBTQ+ people at the federal level. Yet it is a beginning. Without adequate information about a marginalized group, it is hard to understand the issues they face or design inclusive policies that match their needs. An example: addressing the unique circumstances of LGBTQ+ adults when it comes to long-term care.

Oregon, too, is beginning to address this invisibility. In 2020, The Oregon Department of Health Services, Office of Aging and People with Disabilities commissioned a pioneering study, "LGBTQ+ Older Adult Survey" which reveals distinct strengths and concerns affecting LGBTQ+ people.

SO WHAT DOES THE SURVEY REVEAL?

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE HOUSEHOLD PULSE SURVEY (2021 BY U.S. CENSUS)

- A larger share (38%) of LGBT respondents than non-LGBT respondents (16%) experienced depression more than half the days of the week
- Overall, about 13% of LGBT adults lived in a household that experienced food insecurity in the past seven days, compared to 7% of non-LGBT adults
- More LGBT adults have lost employment income during the pandemic compared to other adults

YES, THE LETTERS MATTER—AND YES, THEY ARE EVOLVING

It's not easy. The terms and definitions people use to describe themselves are incredibly diverse and often mean different things to different people. According to the Human Rights Campaign, "Many Americans refrain from talking about sexual orientation and gender identity or expression because it feels taboo, or because they're afraid of saying the wrong thing."

For a glossary of these evolving terms, see the Human Rights Campaign website at www.hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms. This glossary helps give people the words and meanings to help make conversations easier and more comfortable.

The key principle is to listen for and respect a person's self-identified terminology.



LGBTQ+ OLDER ADULTS DEMONSTRATE RESILIENCE

Adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant illnesses are often common experiences of aging. But hard times need not define later life thanks to resiliency, the ability to adapt well to setbacks. Many older LGBTQ+ people have been there, done that. A lifetime navigating the experiences and consequences of societal prejudice and bias (and often trauma) can instill practical resilience that promotes confidence in one's strengths and abilities to overcome adversity. Insight from the Oregon Survey shows LGBTQ+ resiliency is built on shared strengths and looking out for one another:

- More than 70% of respondents have 3+ people they can count on for social and emotional support
- The majority are actively engaged in LGBTQ+ communities through helping others, receiving help and being involved in advocacy activities
- More than 40% attend faith, spiritual or religious services
- 72% say they "bounce back quickly after hard times"
- Those aged 75+, and lesbians, show the highest resilience

**REPRESENTATION MATTERS. WE INVITE YOU TO JOIN US IN THIS DISCUSSION.
HOW CAN OREGON BECOME MORE INCLUSIVE OF OLDER LGBTQ+ RESIDENTS?**

SHARE YOUR STORY OR COMMENTS AT WWW.AGEPLUS.ORG/STORIES.

About AGE+

AGE+ empowers communities of all ages to value and care for older adults, especially those who are isolated, low-income and underserved. AGE+ engages communities through stimulating partnerships, training caregivers and developing innovative programs that address the real and growing challenges and opportunities facing aging in America.

AGE+ consulted the wisdom and lived experiences of members of the LGBTQ+ community to collaboratively write this paper. Special thanks to Liz James, former CEO of the Lesbian Health Initiative of Houston, who currently serves as a member of the Oregon LGBTQ+ Aging Coalition, Chair of the Rogue Valley Council of Governments, and is an active volunteer with AARP Oregon.

For sources go to: www.ageplus.org/sources

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