

Eastern Kentucky University

Encompass

Honors Theses

Student Scholarship

Spring 5-1-2023

LGBTQ+ in a Rural Kentucky Town

Caroline A. Kinsman

Eastern Kentucky University, caroline_kinsman@mymail.eku.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://encompass.eku.edu/honors_theses

Recommended Citation

Kinsman, Caroline A., "LGBTQ+ in a Rural Kentucky Town" (2023). *Honors Theses*. 968.
https://encompass.eku.edu/honors_theses/968

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at Encompass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Encompass. For more information, please contact Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu.

Eastern Kentucky University

LGBTQ+ in a Rural Kentucky Town

Honors Thesis
Submitted
In Partial Fulfillment
Of The
Requirements of HON 420
Spring 2023

By
Caroline Kinsman

Faculty Mentor
Dr. Alison Buck

Department of Language & Cultural Studies, Anthropology, and Sociology

LGBTQ+ in a Rural Kentucky Town

Caroline Kinsman

Dr. Alison Buck, Department of Language & Cultural Studies, Anthropology, and
Sociology

Abstract: This interview series aims to understand the perspectives of LGBTQ+ community members in relation to local government in a small rural town in Kentucky. The purpose is to ascertain the correlation between the LGBTQ+ community level of feeling accepted and the efforts and attitudes of non-LGBTQ+ officials. In total, six LGBTQ+ individuals were interviewed and two elected government officials. Themes found within the interview series include reputation, safety, mental health, urgent change, blindness, and lack of responsibility.

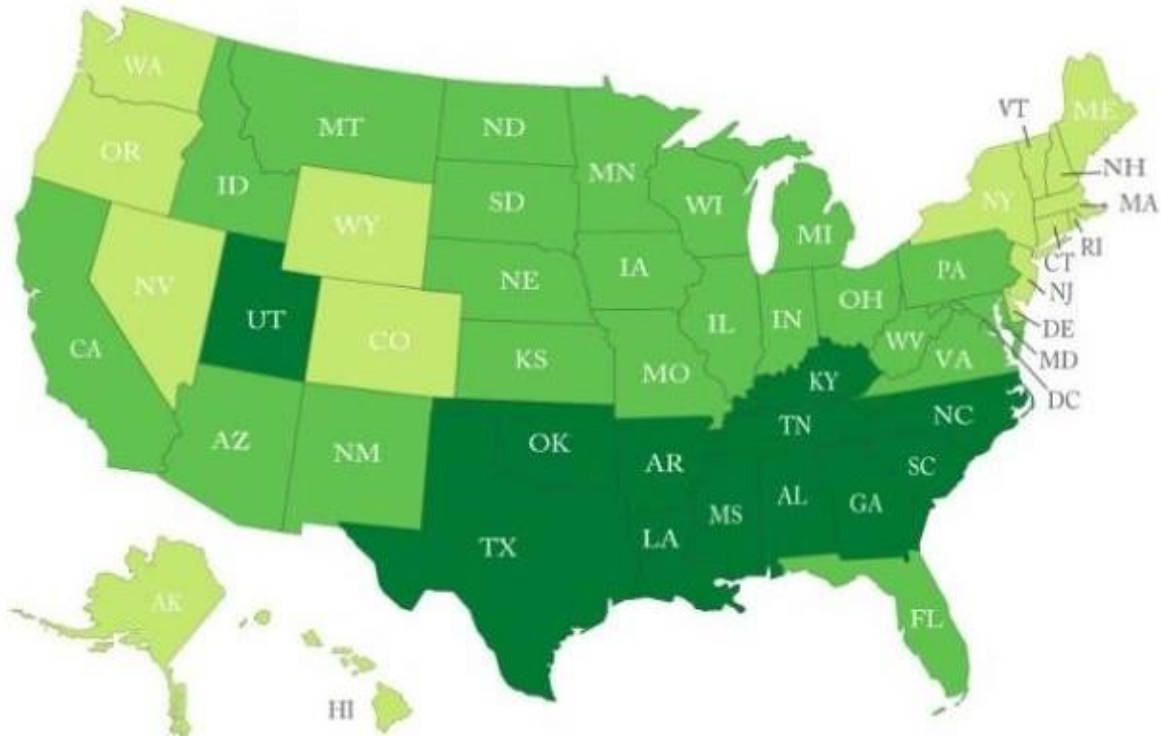
Keywords and phrases: thesis, interview, rural, LGBTQ+, identity, safety, Kentucky, change

Table of Contents

Abstract Description.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
List of Figures.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	vi
Thesis Overview.....	1
Factors that Impact Importance.....	1
Literature Review.....	2
Methods.....	13
Results.....	16
Discussion and Future Research.....	26
Conclusions.....	29
References.....	30

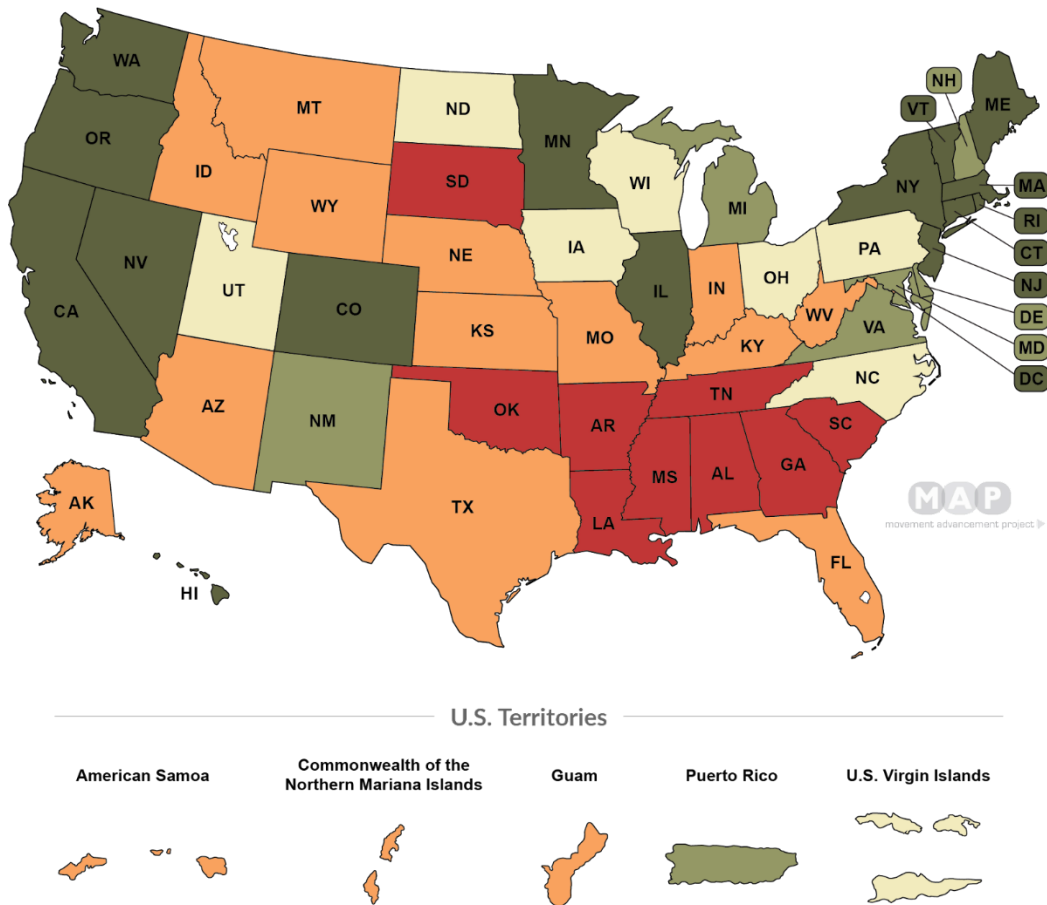
List of Figures

Figure 1



This map was developed by a Gallup Religiosity Index, with the dark green representing states that have “above average” levels of citizens practicing religion.

Figure 2



The Movement Advancement Project keeps an updated “tally map” of states that have passed policy that supports the equality of LGBTQ+ individuals. The major categories of laws covered by the policy tally include Relationship & Parental Recognition, Nondiscrimination, Religious Exemptions, LGBTQ Youth, Health Care, Criminal Justice, and Identity Documents.

Kentucky sits at the status: low overall policy tally.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my faculty mentor, Dr. Buck. I could not have completed this project without your wisdom and support. Thank you for believing in me and sharing a passion for this research.

To my family and Cooper, thank you for encouraging me to do this work. Your support meant the world to me.

Sydney, thank you for being a source of motivation and support through this research. You are a true friend and amazing source of positivity.

To my participants, thank you for sharing your stories and experiences. This could not have been possible without your bravery.

Thesis Overview

I completed an interview series with LGBTQ+ individuals and government officials to gain attitudes and information about the treatment of the LGBTQ+ population in a rural town in Kentucky. This was a project sparked by personal interest as I grew up in a small southern town. Over the years, I watched people close to me struggle with their identity and feeling safe in a more politically and socially conservative community. I wanted to use my personal experiences, combined with the information I gained through my literature review, to create an interview series to gain a stronger understanding. Through interviewing eight individuals, I was able to find themes of reputation, safety, mental health, urgent change, blindness, and lack of responsibility, as well as a plethora of sub-concepts. My primary research going into my study was: Is the town doing “enough” to support the LGBTQ+ population, and what would "enough" be?

Significance of LGBTQ+ Experiences in Rural Areas

It is important that this research is done, so that change in this region of the United States can begin urgently. Kentucky, and the southern United States needs to be studied due to the conditions that LGBTQ+ individuals have to live under. This area is particularly dangerous or can be generally unsupportive of the LGBTQ+ community for a multitude of reasons. These generally unsupportive attitudes can lead to higher numbers of individuals negatively impacted by mental health, and victimized. This is also a topic that has not yet been extensively researched. In my literature review I will further discuss these factors that impact

the importance of this research in this geographic area of Kentucky, and the general southern United States.

Literature Review-Geographic and Religious Impact

While it is important that this study is conducted in Kentucky, it is specifically important that the area studied is rural. There have been a few studies done on the impact that a rural area can have on members of the LGBTQ+ community, and the first one I would like to discuss was done by Hulko & Hovanes in 2018. The article presents a study on the analysis of views of LGBTQ+ youth in western Canadian rural areas, and their sexual and gender identities. The sample was composed of 13 youth, and it was found that LGBTQ+ youth who grew up in a small town felt as though they lacked a “sense of community” (Hulko & Hovanes, 2018). Hulko and Hovanes (2018) explain that their research has shown that geography makes a difference in terms of possibilities for support and affirmation of one’s identity for youth living in small cities and rural towns. The youth in this study described how religion, family influence and lack of community engagement impacted their sense of belonging. Some youth also described living in or visiting a large urban area, and the positive effect that it had on feeling safe and comfortable.

However, these difficulties are not confined to just LGBTQ+ youth. In “LGBT Aging in the Rural Context”, Butler examines current research, concepts, and theories related to the unique experience of aging as a sexual and gender minority. Issues such as caregiving, sexual health, social supports, and mental health among this population as well as the experiences of bisexual and transgender elders and those who are veterans and residents of rural

communities are discussed as difficulties that they may face. In addition, “Many older LGBTQ individuals recall being exposed to a range of rejection, confusion, fear, hatred, and isolation from religious communities and organizations that led them to seek out therapy services” (Bower et al., 2023,1). Religion is a topic that can be a difficult subject for members of the LGBTQ+ community, as many have had negative experiences.

Beagan & Hattie did a study to explore the religious experiences of 35 members of the LGBTQ+ community in 2015. “Although not all participants experienced conflicts, the psychological and emotional harm done to some participants through organized religion were extensive and knew no age boundaries. Disconnection from bodies and delayed sexual activity were common” (Beagan & Hattie, 2015). Many of the participants had left their religious organization, and those who felt comfortable enough to stay had to create a distinction between “religious teachings and institutions, and between religion and spirituality” (Beagan & Hattie, 2015).

There is a southern region of the United States that is commonly referred to as the “Bible Belt” due to the high number of religious organization, and religion practicing citizens. This is a map that was developed by the Gallup Religiosity Index, and is color coded by states with high levels of religion (Figure 1). It is easy to make the distinction of where the “Bible Belt” is, and that Kentucky is within the dark green states that have “above average” levels of citizens practicing religion.

Barton (2010) explored the backgrounds and experiences of what she refers to as “Bible Belt gays”. Within the “Bible Belt” religion is not confined to a building, but instead “crosses, messages, paraphernalia, music, news, and attitudes permeate everyday settings. Consequently, Christian fundamentalist dogma about homosexuality—that homosexuals are

bad, diseased, perverse, sinful, other, and inferior—is cumulatively bolstered within a variety of other social institutions and environments in the Bible Belt” (Barton, 2010). Anderson states that Southern Christianity is simply more supernaturalist and more conservative in orientation, and more committed to traditional understandings of family values” (Anderson, 2011). Of the 46 individuals interviewed in this study, the majority describe experiencing feelings of isolation, self-loathing, and abuse (Barton, 2010). Due to the negative social aspect of living in a geographically religious dominant area, the individuals experienced religion-based homophobia. This homophobia “caused a range of harmful consequences in their lives including the fear of going to hell, depression, low self-esteem, and feelings of worthlessness” (Barton, 2010). While the connection between religion and negative effects on the LGBTQ+ community has been established, it is simple to understand why the geographic and religious factors in this research can be merged, and why they are principle pieces of this research.

Literature Review-Level of Education

According to the 2020 progress report from the Council on Postsecondary Education, in 2018, 46.9% of Kentuckians ages 25-64 had a postsecondary credential or degree. This is below the national average of 48.4%. According to the U.S. Census Bureau from 2017 to 2021, only 25.7% of Kentuckians aged at least 25 years earned a bachelor’s degree or higher. These statistics show that over three fourths of Kentucky adults have experienced some level of LGBTQ+ positive curriculum in their lifetimes, as this is not something that is consistently taught in the primary or secondary levels of schools. There have been pushes to include LGBTQ+ content to social studies, but they have not been successful.

Social studies as a subject “plays an important role in preparing students for a diverse, pluralistic democratic citizenry” (Maguth & Taylor, 2013). However, without a full and updated history, some citizens will lack diverse perspectives. One project aimed at lowering this gap in LGBTQ+ education is called “The Difference Maker Project” (Maguth & Taylor, 2013) and was designed to allow students to research and advocate for a LGBTQ+ constitutional issue. The authors concluded at the end of their study that “by adding LGBTQ topics into the curriculum teachers can begin to eradicate the erasure and misinformation surrounding a group of people and their history within the social studies. This not only gives a more truthful account of history but also provides a more hospitable educational environment for LGBTQ students” (Maguth & Taylor, 2023). However, creating a hospitable learning environment for LGBTQ+ students is not a topic on the Kentucky legislative agenda. In fact, Kentucky has recently passed legislation to ensure that schools are not a safe or supportive space for LGBTQ+ youth.

Senate Bill 150 was passed during the 2023 legislative session and required that no sex education can be taught at the fifth-grade level or below (Horsley, 2023). This also bans any studies exploring or educating on the topics of gender identity or sexual orientation (Horsley, 2023). Also, “originally introduced by Sen. Max Wise, Republican gubernatorial candidate Kelly Craft’s running mate, as legislation that would prevent the Kentucky Department of Education from issuing guidance on using trans students’ pronouns and requiring schools to disclose mental health services students receive, Senate Bill 150 evolved to include provisions from House Bill 470 banning gender-affirming medical care for trans minors” (Horsley, 2023). This type of legislation can permanently damage the psyche of LGBTQ+ individual, and make that region feel less habitable for that community.

Literature Review-LGBTQ+ Equality Policies

The Movement Advancement Project keeps an updated “tally map” of states that have passed policy that supports the equality of LGBTQ+ individuals (See Figure 2). The major categories of laws covered by the policy tally include: Relationship & Parental Recognition, Nondiscrimination, Religious Exemptions, LGBTQ Youth, Health Care, Criminal Justice, and Identity Documents. Kentucky sits at the status: low overall policy tally.

States that enact protective hate crime laws can statistically see that the rate of suicide attempts drops significantly amongst students who are in the gender or sexuality minority, but heterosexual students as well according to research that was published by the American Psychological Association (Kivisto, 2022). Kivisto (2022) stated that “Sexual minority youth are at increased risk for suicide. Structural interventions, such as hate crime laws, that promote the rights and protections of sexual minorities provide opportunities to address these disparities, although research examining the effects of such legislation is limited”.

The researchers in this study gathered data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, a national school-based survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in hopes to find the correlation between hate crime legislation and youth suicide rates (Kivisto, 2022). This study has been conducted every two years since 1991, and covers students from ninth to twelfth grade. The study centered around questions about health-related behaviors that lead to the leading causes of death or disability for that age group (Kivisto, 2022). These topics included things like sexual behavior and suicide attempts.

The researchers initially analyzed all suicidal language questions, from all responses since 1991 which was 697,000 high school students. Within these responses, “approximately 8.6% of students reported one or more suicide attempts in the year prior to completing the

survey” (Kivisto, 2022). In 2015, surveyors began asking questions about sexual identity. When analyzing the time period between 2015 and 2018 specially, the researchers were looking at 83,000 responses. It was found that “during that period, suicide attempt rates were significantly higher in students who identified as gay or lesbian (25.7%), bisexual (27.1%) or questioning (18.5%) than among their heterosexual counterparts (6.3%)” (Kivisto, 2022). Researchers then looked at these numbers in comparison to the statistics of the students in states where hate crime laws protecting gender and sexuality have been passed during the time of the study. “They found, overall, suicide attempt rates decreased by 1.2 percentage points for all students in those states after the legislation was enacted. This translated into an overall decrease of 16% in the yearly number of suicide attempts in those states” (Kivisto, 2022). This is a statistically relevant finding, especially when Kentucky is ranked as having a low number of policies that protect the LGBTQ+ communities’ equality.

In another ranking, Kentucky was on the lower fifth of the list in the article “The Best and Worst States for LGBTQ People” (Harrington et al., 2020). The reports’ purpose was to “analyze each state laws and policies affecting LGBTQ people and assess how well states are doing to protect LGBTQ individuals from discrimination” (Harrington et al., 2020). Kentucky is ranked as the 46th worst state for LGBTQ+ individuals to reside in, out of 50 states. This ranking is primarily due to Kentucky being one of 26 states to pass legislation that criminalizes behaviors that carry a low or negligible risk of HIV transmission (Harrington et al., 2020). Kentucky is also one of the states to pass the State Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which gives business owners the right to refuse service to same-sex couples on religious grounds (Harrington et al., 2020). This right was publicly played out in national headlines in Morehead, Kentucky in 2015. City clerk Kim Davis refused to issue

marriage licenses for same-sex couples, while flouting the Supreme Court ruling that legalized same-sex marriage (Harrington et al., 2020). The article acknowledges the presence of urban Kentucky areas like Louisville or Lexington that may be more accepting of the LGBTQ+ community, but the ranking is due to the presence of negative state-wide policies.

Literature Review-Discrepancies in Mental Health

Mental health is one concept that can be found throughout this research. As found in Kivisto's analysis, suicide attempt rates of LGBTQ+ youth are higher in states that do not openly support or consistently pass LGBTQ+ protective legislation. However, suicide alone is not the only concern, and the concept of mental health is one that changes the urgency of the importance of this research.

To raise awareness of the health risks to the LGBTQ+ population the Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work online program at the University of Southern California began a "Forward Thinking Campaign" (USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work, 2017). The study conducted research to gain an understanding of what increased risks LGBTQ+ youth are under, which includes increased risk of depression, suicidal thoughts, and homelessness amongst other topics (USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work, 2017). According to this study, done through the Center of Disease Control and Prevention, LGB youth are three times more likely to consider suicide and four times more likely to attempt suicide than straight youth (USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work, 2017). LGB youth are two times more likely to experience feeling sad or hopeless every day for more than two weeks at a time than straight youth, and four and a half times more likely

to attempt suicide that results in a injury, poisoning, or overdose that has to be treated by a doctor than straight youth.

The statistics for transgender youth are even more disheartening. Transgender youth who are rejected by their families are eight times more likely to attempt suicide than straight youths (USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work, 2017). Also, 15% of transgender youth leave education, either K-12 or post-secondary, due to the level of extreme harassment they faced (USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work, 2017). There is a direct correlation to bullying, and the increase of LGBTQ+ students decline in mental health as well. LGB students are twice as likely to experience bullying as their fellow heterosexual peers (USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work, 2017). There is also a religious aspect to the disparity of LGBTQ+ levels of mental health in conversion therapy.

According to Blackwell (2008) “Heterosexuals self-identifying with a fundamentalist religious denomination typically manifest higher levels of sexual prejudice than do non-religious and members of liberal denominations”. This firm belief caused homosexuality to be seen as a pathological illness that resulted from dysfunctional parent-child relationships (Blackwell, 2008). It was not until 1973 that the American Psychological Association removed homosexuality from the list of sexual disorders (Blackwell, 2008). Prior to that time, many feared “coming out” in the early twentieth century for fear of being institutionalized. There was, however, a treatment for what society called the disorder of homosexuality. That would be conversion therapy. There are a multitude of ways that conversion therapy can be inacted, but some include “long-term psychoanalytic therapy in attempt to solve unconscious childhood conflicts believed to be the etiology of one’s homosexuality, group social demand treatments, heterosexual responsiveness instruction,

aversion conditioning, social learning training, covert sensitization, fantasy modification, capacity for heterosexual intercourse, training for abstinence and celibacy, drug treatment, and fundamental spiritual treatments” (Blackwell, 2008). The treatments were statistically close to entirely ineffective and overall traumatizing for the victims. Young people who experienced sexual orientation or gender identity conversion efforts were more than two times more likely to report having attempted suicide and having multiple suicide attempts (Green et al., 2020). The American Psychological Association maintained that there is no published scientific evidence supporting the efficacy of conversion therapies as a treatment to change sexual orientation (Blackwell, 2008).

Literature Review-LGBTQ+ Victimization

Victimization can be violent or passive but leaves a lasting effect on the victim. The Bureau of Justice Statistics compiled a report of violent victimizations from 2017 to 2020, where the subject was someone who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (Truman & Morgan, 2022). The full report analyzed what type of crime was committed, and whether or not the victim chose to report the victimization to the police. However, for the purposes of this research, the following four statistics are the most relevant:

- The rate of violent victimization of lesbian or gay persons (43.5 victimizations per 1,000 persons aged 16 or older) was more than two times the rate for straight persons (19.0 per 1,000) (Truman & Morgan, 2022).

- The rate of violent victimization against transgender persons (51.5 victimizations per 1,000 persons aged 16 or older) was 2.5 times the rate among cisgender persons (20.5 per 1,000) (Truman & Morgan, 2022).
- About 58% of violent victimizations of lesbian or gay persons were reported to police (Truman & Morgan, 2022).
- Domestic violence was eight times as high among bisexual persons (32.3 victimizations per 1,000 persons aged 16 or older) and more than twice as high among lesbian or gay persons (10.3 per 1,000) as it was among straight persons (4.2 per 1,000) (Truman & Morgan, 2022).

This research clearly states that LGBTQ+ individuals are at a higher risk of violent victimization. Anderson et al. (2019) specifically narrowed down this victimization to the concept of rape victims within the LGBTQ+ community, and the disparity of acknowledgement and mental health outcomes. The participants of the study were 245 young adults who identified under the bisexual umbrella, and 65% self-identified as nonbinary (Anderson et al., 2019). They all completed a series of online questionnaires pertaining to their “sexual victimization history, mental health outcomes (depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder [PTSD]), and constructs relevant to minority stress theory (level of outness, internalized bisexual negativity, connection to LGBTQ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning] community)” (Anderson et al., 2019). The study overall found that there is an extraordinarily increased prevalence of rape and rape acknowledgment among nonbinary bisexual people (Anderson et al., 2019). Rape acknowledgment is also accompanied by increased anxiety, depression, and even post-traumatic stress disorder (Anderson et al., 2019). Overall, LGBTQ+ individuals are at a higher risk of being the

victims of a sexual violent crime than heterosexual or cisgender individuals. Members of the LGBTQ+ community are also more likely to leave the rape or violent sexual crime unacknowledged, leading to severe mental health symptoms.

Unfortunately, victimization can even occur at school in relation to LGBTQ+ youth in rural areas. In the article “Understanding safety, victimization and school climate among rural lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning”, De Pedro et al. analyzes decades of research done on the LGBTQ+ experience in schools. One of his conclusions is that many of the research studies conducted focus on urban areas, while there are very few that focus on rural regions (De Pedro et al., 2018). Using a sample of LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ students in a rural California school district, this study explored the correlation between an affirming school environment and the safety and victimization of LGBTQ+ students (De Pedro et al., 2018). The results of the study strongly indicated that a combination of peer and teacher intervention, with LGBTQ+ support resulted in higher levels of safety for the LGBTQ+ youth. On the other side of that, the presence of a Gender and Sexuality Alliance at the school made LGBTQ+ students experience a lower level of safety (De Pedro et al., 2018). This research was ultimately used as an avenue to promote school-based interventions for LGBTQ+ youth in rural schools. Students should be able to go to school without fear for their safety or being victimized.

Methods

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board, it was time to gather willing participants. With the recruitment process, there were many factors that needed to be considered. For example, keeping the identities of participants confidential, as well as the name of the town. I chose to leave the town unnamed, due to the small LGBTQ+ community that resides or has lived there. If the town was used, the participants would have a much higher chance of being recognized. After conducting my literature review, I was aware that if the identities of the participants were discovered, that could lead to further victimization. With that in mind, I decided to use snowball sampling to determine my LGBTQ+ interview subjects. Using a virtual and verbal recruitment script, I called and emailed two people who I knew from the area who I believed would be potentially willing. They both agreed to be interviewed.

Most of the interviews had to be conducted via Zoom, due to the fact that every LGBTQ+ participant had moved away from the rural area. After each participant agreed to be interviewed and a date had been set, I emailed them an IRB-formatted informed consent sheet. The informed consent document outlined the purpose of the research, as well as how their confidentiality would be maintained, and their role in the research. This document had their name on it, so it has been stored separately from the interview transcripts that bear their aliases. The participants were also emailed a mental health resources sheet, that I created for the purposes of this project. The topics covered in the interview can be triggering or unpleasant, so I wanted to make sure I was acknowledging that and trying to combat any negative effects that the research may have.

The recruitment for the government officials was very different, as there were publicly listed. I went to the town's website and looked at the profiles of the elected officials. I emailed a few of the elected officials, and after a few weeks, two of them had responded that they would be willing to be interviewed. The government officials also received the informed consent document as well as the mental health resources document. These interviews were carried out on Zoom as well.

Prior to beginning the interview, I asked the person if they had any questions for me regarding the email or the research that I was conducting. I also informed the interviewees that if they wanted to stop the interview at any time, for any reason, they were welcome to do so. I also informed them that they did not have to answer every question asked, and they could refuse to answer any question they did not feel comfortable answering. Finally, I asked the participants for their permission to record a audio of the interview, that I could later transcribe. The audio recordings were deleted immediately after the transcriptions were created. I developed two separate interview guides, for the LGBTQ+ interviews and the elected government official interviews. This made the interviews feel as though they had a structure. The questions below guided the interviews, although questions were subtracted or added on an interview-to-interview basis, based on the kind of information the person was providing. The town name was used during the actual interviews, but for confidentiality, it is named as "Ruralton" below.

Potential Questions for members of the LGBTQ community over the age of 18:

- What is your age?
- How long have you lived in "Ruralton"?

- How long have you identified as a member of the LGBTQ community and what is that identity?
- How was your experience coming out to your family?
- Was it a difficult decision to choose to make that part of your identity known and why or why not?
- How was your experience choosing to come out as someone from or currently living in “Ruralton”?
- Do you consider “Ruralton” to be a safe space for you, why or why not?
- Do you feel supported by the city of “Ruralton”?
- How do you feel the city could be supporting the LGBTQ community better?

Potential Questions for Government Officials:

- What is your age?
- How long have you lived in “Ruralton”?
- What government or public offices have you held in Ruralton or Rural County?
- What does it mean for you to be the (position) in “Ruralton”?
- What have been your priorities since you took over your position?
- Do you feel as though “Ruralton” does “enough” to support all of the different communities within the city?
- Do you believe that “Ruralton” is a safe space for members of the LGBTQ community?
- Do you think that the city could be doing more to support its citizens of the LGBTQ community, and what would that be?

- What impact could hanging a pride flag outside of the courthouse have on the members of the “Ruralton” LGBTQ+ community?

Once the interviews were conducted, I did a data analysis to find the dominant themes of the research. I printed out all of the interview transcriptions and read through all of them. After a first read, I realized that the LGBTQ+ interviews differed significantly from my government official interviews. For this reason, I decided to develop two different categories of themes for my interviews: one pertaining to my LGBTQ+ interviews and one for the government official interviews. After I decided to create these two categories, I was able to read through the transcripts and look for similar themes. The most frequently found concepts in the research are what I chose as my overarching themes. It should be noted that to maintain confidentiality, the transcripts, alias documents, and informed consent documents are being stored separately and securely.

Results

LGBTQ+ Theme One, Safety

The first theme that I discovered within the LGBTQ+ interviews was safety. Safety was paired with the sub concepts of guilt, anxiety, family, coming out, leaving/returning, trapped, assault, police, fear, and survival. Safety was discussed in a physical sense, as well as a mental sense. Participants felt afraid and guilty that they were leaving their family in that area, and many waited to come out until they were physically out of the area to avoid persecution for themselves or their loved ones. Many felt as though they would not necessarily feel physically in danger while in the town, but felt more as though their mental health would be under attack. I also witnessed accounts of interviewees feeling as though

they could not report crimes that they were the victim of, because they did not think proper action would be taken. The two quotes below illustrate this theme.

Allison: “Which in part is probably due to the fact that most of leave because it is not safe. There are unfortunately people who are trapped there, like the young people who can’t just leave yet. Right before I started college I had a sexual assault, and I did not feel comfortable even telling the police. I was so afraid that they would believe him over me. I had not felt validation as a human being in my identity at that time. I was just trying to survive and get out.”

Brandon: “Not really. I think I’m privileged to know people close to me so that if I got a flat tire, I would know who to call. Unfortunately, it would be a very scary situation to have to rely on the kindness of the stranger who drove up in their pickup truck. Definitely it would not be safe in school. I had situations with teachers trying to out me.”

The following quotes illustrate concerns with safety in both the mental and physical sense. It is also important to acknowledge how the physical safety concerns can affect the mental health of these individuals. When asked if the town felt safe for them, every LGBTQ+ participant answered that they did not think it was either in the physical or mental sense. For Allison, being in that area meant not being able to rely on law enforcement to protect her physical safety. She experienced a sexual assault, which then fed into her experiencing depression and suicidal thoughts. For Brandon, the fear of lack of safety came from the general ideals of the town. While he had not been personally victimized by anyone close to him, he knew that he was not necessarily safe with the general population. The more pressing

matter for Brandon was that teachers would try to express his identity to his parents, which cultivated a lot of fear for him. This affected his mental health drastically.

LGBTQ+ Theme Two, Mental Health

The second theme that stood out to me amongst the interviews was mental health. As illustrated in my literature review, there is a disparity between mental health struggles for LGBTQ+ individuals, and non-LGBTQ+ individuals. While no interview questions were directly pointed at discussing mental health, every single individual brought it up in some aspect. They either discussed struggling with their own mental health while living in a more rural, conservative area, or being aware that most of their counterparts were struggling. Most of my individuals interviewed experienced mental health struggles through anxiety or depression, and expressed the direct correlation to being in an area where they did not feel accepted. Or the feelings came from having to struggle with their identity because they felt like it had to be hidden to remain safe. They were not able to identity as themselves, which can create long term issues with self-worth. Within this theme I found sub concepts dangerous, on edge, alone, worthless, youth, accepted, depression, anxiety, suicide, hidden.

Allison: “It would help them feel like they belonged in this world. It would help with suicidal thoughts that they may be having. I know I did. I struggled badly then, as everyone does in those environments. It destroys your self-worth. It destroys your mental health, and I still struggle with depression every day. I still struggle in environments that are busy if I am in a conservative area. You don’t forget that anxiety. Sometimes I still feel like people are staring when they aren't, because that is what I got used to. It would make a world of a difference to

not have to feel alone in the very concept of who I was, because I definitely did. It could be life or death for some people.”

Lily: “If I stay to the same places I’ve always been to in the town like church or even school functions then I know that I’m going to be OK because those are people who knew me before I transitioned. The fact that they knew me before, due to Southern hospitality, they will not be rude to my face, because of who I was to them before. But I get extremely anxious going places where I do not know who is going to be there. A restaurant is one thing when I’m with my family or my friends. One example is when a cousin of mine invited me to a bar crawl, and I declined because I was extremely anxious about going to a small-town Kentucky bar. I didn’t want there to even be a possibility that I got into a bad situation, and I feel strongly that that possibility was there.”

These quotes illustrate how mental health is an extremely important factor of living in a rural area as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. For Allison, her main concern with growing up in this area was having to live with eating disorders and anxiety, and severe depression. This quote is related to how she believes changing certain practices or implementing more LGBTQ+ imagery would help LGBTQ+ individuals who are unable to leave the area. She expresses that in conservative areas, it could be the difference between these LGBTQ+ individuals wanting to live or die. Lily speaks more to struggling with anxiety, especially in particular areas of the town that are unfamiliar to her. This also ties into her feeling safe, because she fears that if she went to a strange area to her that a hateful situation would arise.

LGBTQ+ Theme Three, Urgent Change

The third theme found in the interview series was urgent change. This project was based around the idea that these rural areas needed change in relation to the attitudes and treatment of the rural LGBTQ+ population, but it was reiterated repeatedly that change was needed immediately. When asked the questions related to change or impact that change could have, interviewees defended the ways that they believed the community could change, and that the change would assist in ways that go beyond the research statistics. It was found consistently that participants believed change needed to occur in schools, so that LGBTQ+ youth could have a more positive outlook from a young age about their identity. The idea of retention was also a consistent contribution, but no one wants to stay in an area where they do not feel supported or safe. No one can offer themselves to be a martyr. As far as government practices, hiring efforts, representation, education, and government supported or funded programs were brought up as ways to improve LGBTQ+ quality of life. Everyone expressed the need for small towns to speak out against anti-LGBTQ+ equality policies. Sub concepts found within this theme include education, support, programs, acknowledgement, legislation, power, hiring practices, exposure, returning, retention, sacrifice, and life and death. The following quotes illustrate this theme.

Madison: “I think as far as queer children go, I think there needs to be sturdy and obvious support within the school systems. I think it should be a non-negotiable. Schools are not a religious setting and when it comes to supporting queer people in a small town, it is a matter of life and death. I think having supportive school programs, and designated safe places and people, who have been announced, like having an allyship group. Even just speaking about it would be a start, and I think that needs to begin immediately. That support was entirely

absent from my school experience. I know multiple people in surrounding grades who come out after leaving town. As far as within the town, there needs to be representation. Whether that comes down to small business owners having pride flags in their windows, or city hall having some signs that have more productive and supportive language. When we speak about marginalized groups, there will always be a conversation about power. There will always be a dominant group. Something even that small would be representative that there is someone in a position of power who was supportive, and who wanted all of the people of “Ruralton” to know that they are seen and should feel valid in this place. Something like that would come down to using power in a positive manner.”

Lily: “I mean, I think one easy way would be having the city verbally pushing back on any statewide bills against transgender individuals. It’s hard because I’m not a big community activist. I think that little things to make spaces feel safer would go a long way. I don’t know that they do this, but I would be incredibly shocked to find out that they did. In June, during Pride Month, just having a progressive flag in a City Hall window. Of course, more than that is needed, but even in schools’ staff should be aware of the queer kids and make sure that they feel safe and comfortable. They should be making sure they aren’t getting their shit kicked in every single day. Little things can be done to make the city feel safer. I don’t know that that would be possible given the attitude of the area, but that would make such a large difference.”

The LGBTQ+ interviews showed a consistent repetition of ways that the community could be more positive towards LGBTQ+ citizens. Most of the ideas surrounded the concept of building a place where these individuals could have a safe space to have a community. Different ideas were expressed but not limited to student education, community education,

support systems, and LGBTQ+ positive imagery in town beautification efforts. It should also be noted that the individuals interviewed discussed the impact that these efforts would have on feelings of safety, returning to the town, living there, and mental health.

Government Officials Theme One, Lack of Responsibility

The first theme I discovered through my analysis of the government official interviews was a lack of responsibility. The officials were asked questions about their role in protecting and maintaining equality within the city, it turned to city logistics that they currently maintain. While both individuals discussed things they do for the city, neither one discussed their LGBTQ+ focused efforts, or the need for the development of them. They instead focus on the community as a whole, and speak about the physical needs of a community, and the ways that they choose to spend the budget. The role of the city is also discussed in relation to the homeless population, and it is noted that nonprofit organizations take responsibility for caring for that at-risk population because the city is limited in resources. Sub concepts of resources, precedent, and narrow perspective can also be found within this theme.

Joseph: “When you ask the question about if we are meeting the needs within the community in our city, it depends on the community. Do we work to make sure we have police and fire protection? Yes. Do we make sure our roads are in good place? Yes. Do we get the trash picked up? Yes. We pick up leaves and have open parks. We pay our staff. We do those things. I think that the city has to make the city open for the entire community. Then we look at the broader community, and we have improved playgrounds and are improving bathrooms. We’re working on cameras for security. We try to improve the quality of life with things like

that. In any community there are homeless people. What role does the city take in that?

Luckily nonprofits take responsibility in that, but the city is not in the position to operate and maintain a homeless shelter. The city is limited on resources and how you can spend those dollars. It's sometimes better to let other organizations pick up and take care of that need."

Richard: "Yes there have been. There are many conversations within the city about what we need to do. We are like other cities where we are having a homeless problem and we will not sweep it under the rug or forget that it exists. We have some people who are trying to come up with solutions that will assist the people involved and assist the city as well."

Both individuals raised concerns for the homeless community when asked about at-risk communities. While this is an important cause, neither man discussed how in their elected position there is also a responsibility to promote social equality. As leaders in the town, both also hold a responsibility as opinion leaders that neither seems to claim. Both focused on physical things in the community that either they are currently taking responsibility for, or plan on taking a hand in.

Government Officials Theme Two, Blindness

This theme of blindness is specifically related to the concept of LGBTQ+ safety in this rural area, and the ignorance of the impact a rural area can have. Both individuals were asked if they believed that this was a safe place for members of the LGBTQ+ community, and both answered that they believed it was. Both discussed how they were not aware of any physical altercations that had occurred and said that they believed that it was safe. Another major component to this theme was revealed when one official was asked about the impact that

hanging a pride flag in the town hall would have on the LGBTQ+ community members. The response showed a blindness to the negative effects of the town, and the negative attitudes that many members of the community hold towards the LGBTQ+ population. Within this theme, there were sub concepts of police, drugs, crime, safety, misunderstanding, miseducation, and exclusion. The following quotes were pulled to illustrate this theme.

Richard: “Yes, I do. We have our share of problems. We, like everyone else, wish we don’t have the drug problem we do. I think we have a good way of dealing with it. From that standpoint I haven’t seen anything from the LGBTQ standpoint that would make me feel uncomfortable. That is as a citizen or as a member of that community, I don’t see anything threatening. I’ve had conversations with our law enforcement, not that they’re breaking the law, but sometimes they’re the subject of some confrontation and we haven’t had that.”

Joseph: “Overall, it’s going to be mixed. I think that’s with anything. If we hung the Confederate Flag outside of the courthouse, you’d have people who say “Don’t need that”, and others who say “Okay I like that”. People might not be comfortable with it, but you can say it has historical value. We live in a community where you have rivalry in sports yet the rivalry at the end of the day is no rivalry. At the end of the day, we travel on the same roads, you go to the same church. It doesn’t impact you. You don’t not talk to people because of what teams they are a part of. That’s a quality that the town has. It’s not in your face. We don’t put up the Pride Flag, or the Confederate Flag, just like you don’t need a sports flag. It’s not needed. We just aren’t judging you by that. That’s the good thing about it. The city includes. You exclude. If you want to do the things that excludes yourself go ahead, but it won’t be the city that excludes you. You’ll make a statement, cause some action, do

something that excludes yourself. Whether that's your race, your sex, your identity, or the poor service you give at the restaurant. You will exclude yourself. I don't have to."

The primary reason that this theme is blindness, is that both officials are blind to the negative effects that a rural area can have on the LGBTQ+ community outside of physical wellbeing. The first quote illustrates the belief that safety for the LGBTQ+ community only relates to crime or physical confrontation, which he was unaware of any taking place in the area based on experiences with the local police. The second quote demonstrates a blindness to the fact that LGBTQ+ individuals struggle with exclusion and places the blame on those individuals for having a different identity and "excluding" themselves. Both are blind to the mental health struggles that these individuals face, and blind to any responsibility that the town could have on this issue.

Government Officials Theme Three, Reputation

This theme primarily comes from one of the interviewed individuals who expressed concern for the town's reputation. The official was receptive to changing town practices, if they were brought up to him by another community member. He discussed previous town happenings with reputation, and how he wanted to avoid any other spectacles for the area. Specifically, he expressed concern for social media, and how it would be harder to control potential backlash for something like hanging a pride flag in the center of town. Within this theme I found sub concepts of fear, social media, community management, and image. The following quote helps illustrate this theme further.

Richard: “Well quite honestly, my opinion is that the only people who would have a problem with it is someone who wants to use social media to make something of it. I could see someone taking a picture and saying, “Well did you know that the town had this?” Of course, from my perspective, there’s nothing wrong with hanging that flag up there. It’s just that sometimes social media enables people to say things that they would never say to your face or standing in front of you. That opens up the door for people to hang a flag in a restaurant window with a gay pride symbol and say look we have this. Then you’ll have 200 people say “What’s this? What’s this world coming to?” That’s just the danger of playing it out on social media.”

As an elected official, hanging a pride flag in the local courthouse window may damage his reputation due to the strong homophobic attitudes of the area. However, as an elected official, there is also a duty to make decisions that will benefit the community, even if they are not popular ones. There is an undercurrent of fear with this topic, specifically about how the public would react to LGBTQ+ practices and imagery. However, the previously outlined research shows the impact of not changing these practices, and a reputation is not worth losing LGBTQ+ citizens to suicide.

Discussion and Further Research

Through the literature review and LGBTQ+ interview materials, it is apparent that urgent change is needed. Every year, fear for reputation management and ignorance prevents local governments from making rural communities more supportive and equal areas, lives will be lost. The responsibility to make the community safe should be able to overrule any

concern that any official could have, because it is their responsibility even if they are not aware of that. It is my opinion that if educated about this topic, and the effects that LGBTQ+ positive changes could have on the community, the government officials may be more likely to implement change. I have compiled a list of budget and resource friendly options that local governments could take to make their town safer for their LGBTQ+ population. Now, I also want to call attention to the fact that these steps would need to be implemented in a staged plan, and I understand that these things may not all be possible in the same community in quick succession. Officials would also need to be prepared for the potential negative outcry from the community, and how to handle that. Rural areas could be

- Including pride imagery in town beautification efforts.
- Hosting pride themed city events.
- Offering educational media on the city website or social media.
- Encouraging and educating local businesses about LGBTQ+ inclusive habits.
- Implementing pride support programs in local schools.
- Training city officials and workers on LGBTQ+ materials.
- Implementing more inclusive hiring efforts for the city.
- Speaking out against LGBTQ+ state legislation.

These efforts are all very cost effective but could have an astronomic difference on the members of the LGBTQ+ community who are still living in the town. Retention is a problem for towns becoming more inclusive, because when the LGBTQ+ individuals do not feel safe or supported, they leave the area as quickly as they can, and try to return as sparingly as possible. This unfortunately means that many citizens are not exposed to members of the LGBTQ+ community consistently. If the town felt safer, then more LGBTQ+ individuals

would feel called to stay in the area, and even raise their families in the area. This provides the opportunity for an actual community to form for LGBTQ+ individuals, if more of them feel called to stay in the area. If the demographics change in these small towns, then eventually the demographics of the state will change as well. This is where the long-term impact can begin.

There has been a correlation established between LGBTQ+ mental health impact, and the state where they reside passing anti hate crime laws. If LGBTQ+ individuals feel safe in states like Kentucky, in their perspective towns, then they will remain there. This could eventually revolutionize the makeup of the Kentucky legislative system, to where more LGBTQ+ positive legislation can be passed. This would eventually have a massive generational impact and change the lives of the entire LGBTQ+ community.

As far as further research done on this topic, I would like to look into the practices of urban cities within more politically and socially conservative states. I would like to look into how they began to implement LGBTQ+ imagery within their city, and how they dealt with any backlash. This way I could create a more instructional guide of incorporating LGBTQ+ positive practices with present to back up my claims. I would also like to look at the budget for the different LGBTQ+ practices, and how did they transform their budget to include these extra expenses. I would also like to look into similar data in rural areas of more socially progressive states and see if they have any data to look at pertaining to making the community a more welcoming or supportive environment. Finally, I would like to do a separate project just pertaining to retention. I would like to analyze the history of a more progressive state, like California, and look at how they were able to establish themselves as a state that is generally accepting. I would like to look at how this change came to be, whether

it was through a state campaign, or began in smaller towns that eventually became a feature of the entire state. This would also most likely contain another interview series about why LGBTQ+ individuals come to or stay in this state.

Conclusions

Local governments in rural towns need to take responsibility for the impact they could have on the LGBTQ+ community, and that begins with acknowledging the negative impact the environment currently has. With the aforementioned efforts, and generational time, these communities could retain more of their LGBTQ+ community. Furthermore, the community would become safe and inclusive, making the area more ideal for citizens to migrate there with diverse perspectives. This could then change the way that states passed legislation, and which could become transformational.

References

- Adelman, M., Segal, E. A., & Kilty, K. M. (2006). Introduction: Transforming LGBTQ Inequalities in the Twenty-First Century. *Journal of Poverty*, 10(2), 1–4. https://doi-org.libproxy.eku.edu/10.1300/J134v10n02_01
- Anderson, J. (2011). Conservative Christianity, the Global South and the Battle over Sexual Orientation. *Third World Quarterly*, 32(9), 1589–1605. <https://doi-org.libproxy.eku.edu/10.1080/01436597.2011.618648>
- Anderson, R. E., Tarasoff, L. A., VanKim, N., & Flanders, C. (2021). Differences in Rape Acknowledgment and Mental Health Outcomes Across Transgender, Nonbinary, and Cisgender Bisexual Youth. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 36(13/14), NP7717-NP7739. <https://doi-org.libproxy.eku.edu/10.1177/0886260519829763>
- Barton, B. (2010, April 1). “Abomination”—*Life as a Bible Belt Gay*. *Journal of Homosexuality*. Retrieved April 11, 2023, from <https://www-tandfonline-com.libproxy.eku.edu/doi/full/10.1080/15538605.2015.1029204?scroll=top&needAccess=true&role=tab>
- Beagan & Hattie (2015) Religion, Spirituality, and LGBTQ Identity Integration, *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling*, 9:2, 92-117, DOI: [10.1080/15538605.2015.1029204](https://doi-org.libproxy.eku.edu/10.1080/15538605.2015.1029204)
- Blackwell, C. W. (2008). Nursing Implications in the Application of Conversion Therapies on Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Clients. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 29(6), 651–665. <https://doi-org.libproxy.eku.edu/10.1080/01612840802048915>

- Bower, K. L., McGeorge, C. R., & Bermudez, J. M. (2023). "It Doesn't Say Except, It Just Says Love Each Other": Mapping Spiritual Reconciliation among LGBTQ Older Adults. *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, 35(1), 55–84. <https://doi-org.libproxy.eku.edu/10.1080/08952833.2022.2136829>
- Butler, S. S. (2017). LGBT Aging in the Rural Context. *Annual Review of Gerontology & Geriatrics*, 37(1), 127–142. <https://doi-org.libproxy.eku.edu/10.1891/0198-8794.37.127>
- Council on Postsecondary Education. (2020, April). *Progress Report 2020: Kentucky's Progress toward Postsecondary Strategic Agenda Goals*. Council on Postsecondary Education. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from <http://cpe.ky.gov/data/reports/2020progressreport.pdf>
- De Pedro, K. T., Lynch, R. J., & Esqueda, M. C. (2018). Understanding safety, victimization and school climate among rural lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 15(4), 265–279. <https://doi-org.libproxy.eku.edu/10.1080/19361653.2018.1472050>
- Florida, R. (2012, March 29). *The Real Boundaries of the Bible Belt*. Bloomberg.com. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2012-03-29/the-real-boundaries-of-the-bible-belt>
- Green, A. E., Price-Feeney, M., Dorison, S. H., & Pick, C. J. (2020). Self-Reported Conversion Efforts and Suicidality Among US LGBTQ Youths and Young Adults, 2018. *American Journal of Public Health*, 110(8), 1221–1227. <https://doi-org.libproxy.eku.edu/10.2105/AJPH.2020.305701>
- Harrington, J., Byrnes, H., & Suneson, G. (2020, June 15). *Supreme Court decision aside, some states are better – and some are worse – for LGBTQ community*. USA Today. Retrieved

April 12, 2023, from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2020/06/19/the-best-and-worst-states-for-lgbtq-people/111968524/>

Horsley, M. (2023, April 7). *Sex, gender, parents' rights: A roundup of Kentucky education legislation*. Hoptown Chronicle. Retrieved April 11, 2023, from <https://hoptownchronicle.org/sex-gender-parents-rights-a-roundup-of-kentucky-education-legislation/>

Houghton, A. (2018, March). *Maintaining Dignity: A Survey of LGBT Adults Age 45 and Older*. AARP. <https://www.aarp.org/research/topics/life/info-2018/maintaining-dignity-lgbt.html>

Hulko, W., & Hovanes, J. (2018). Intersectionality in the Lives of LGBTQ Youth: Identifying as LGBTQ and Finding Community in Small Cities and Rural Towns. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 65(4), 427–455. <https://doi-org.libproxy.eku.edu/10.1080/00918369.2017.1320169>

Kivisto, A. (2022, June 23). *Fewer youth attempt suicide in states with hate crime laws*. American Psychological Association. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2022/06/youth-suicide-hate-crime-laws>

Maguth, B. M., & Taylor, N. (2014). Bringing LGBTQ Topics into the Social Studies Classroom. *Social Studies*, 105(1), 23–28. <https://doi-org.libproxy.eku.edu/10.1080/00377996.2013.788471>

Movement Advancement Project. "Equality Maps Snapshot: LGBTQ Equality By State." <https://www.mapresearch.org/equality-maps/>. Accessed 03/27/2023.

Truman, J., & Morgan, R. (2022, June 21). *Violent Victimization by Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, 2017–2020*. Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from <https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/violent-victimization-sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity-2017-2020>

United States Census Bureau. (n.d.). *Kentucky*. Census Bureau. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/KY>

USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social. (2017, June 17). INFOGRAPHICS: “Forward Thinking Campaign” shares the risks for LGBTQ youth still today. *Campus Pride*. <https://www.campuspride.org/forwardthinking/>

Woodell, B., & Schwadel, P. (2020). Changes in Religiosity Among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Emerging Adults. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 59(2), 379–396. <https://doi-org.libproxy.eku.edu/10.1111/jssr.12653>