

Nearly 4 million LGBTQ people live in rural America, and 'everything is not bias and awful'

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Pop culture often paints LGBTQ people living in rural areas as outsiders eager to bolt for more dazzling and diverse hubs such as New York or San Francisco.

A report out Wednesday upends that assumption: 2.9 to 3.8 million in the LGBTQ community call rural America home, data shows – and, for many, that’s exactly where they want to be.

The [report by the Movement Advancement Project](#) puts a spotlight for the first time on the sizable segment of the 19 million LGBTQ people living in the United States – or 4.5% of all adults and 10% of youths – who don’t congregate on the coasts or in major cities.

“Rarely do we see images of LGBTQ people in rural areas, and when we do they are portrayed as the only one there and stick out like a sore thumb or a target of violence,” said Logan Casey, author of the report by MAP, a think tank that researches LGBTQ issues. “It’s a stereotype that’s not the case.”

The report’s authors hope to rebuke another assumption: That discrimination runs rampant in rural areas. “Everything is not bias and awful,” Mushovic said.

However, when an LGBTQ individual does feel the sting of rejection in a rural setting, the repercussions can be amplified in ways not seen in big cities, the report notes.

For example, if people are excluded from their faith community for being gay, they could face difficulty finding work in a tight-knit town if a church member is a potential employer.

And [religious exemptions laws](#) – which let someone cite a religious belief as a reason not to enforce a law – can loom large in smaller settings with fewer services. That is why the passage of non-discrimination protections for work, housing and public accommodations is so crucial, Mushovic said.

The ripple effects in a rural, more interconnected community can have positive results, too. “When one person stands up and takes a stance for an LGBTQ person ... and really embraces them, that sets the tone for how they should be treated,” Casey said.

LGBTQ people want to live in the country for the same reasons others do, MAP Executive Director Ineke Mushovic said, whether it’s a connection to the land, family roots or the sheer allure of pastoral life.

Bert Pezzarossi, 46, has deep ties in Miles City, Montana, where he spent his early childhood. He returned to the town as a young adult in 1998. He has spent 17 years coaching 5th and 6th-grade football; he’s a member of a local acting troupe; last year he ran for a Montana House of Representatives seat.

The Native American – who says “the 47th most interesting thing about me is that I’m gay” – has felt nothing but support from local child care agencies as he and his husband have fostered 14 children through the years. “It’s all about the kids,” he said

His one serious brush with bias came when he got a job about 70 miles away at a Catholic boarding school outside the Northern Cheyenne Indian reservation. A casual chat with a maintenance manager there about family led to call from the school’s CEO who ended up rescinding the job offer.

“He asked me if I was a practicing homosexual ... do you live your life upholding Catholic values,” Pezzarossi recalled. “It definitely felt like the inquisition.”

But his life experiences in Miles City overall have been “very positive,” Pezzarossi said. “Montanans are conservative but fiercely independent: You mind yours, I’ll mind mine.”

Vermont leads the country with the greatest concentration of rural residents – 93% of counties are majority rural – and has the highest proportion of LGBTQ adults living in any rural state at 5.2%, according to the Williams Institute.

The state is regarded as one of the most LGBTQ-friendly in the United States – it was the first state to allow civil unions for same-sex couples in 2000.

Brenda Churchill, 61, “always wanted to live in the woods.” The Syracuse, New York, native moved to tiny Bakersfield, Vermont, 33 years ago and “never looked back.”

Churchill, a woman who identifies as transgender, said she has always felt safe in Bakersfield, and she has been an active force whether lobbying for LGBTQ issues at the Vermont Statehouse, speaking at the state’s Women’s March or helping persuade Christine Hallquist (the nation’s first transgender major party nominee for governor) to run for office.

But Churchill recognizes that even in her progressive state, there are barriers. “I got through life as middle class. But some folks are isolated by distance and transportation. They can’t get on the Internet,” she said. “Without a good economic base, it can leave you stranded.”

Churchill has concerns for herself as a retiree living in a sparsely populated town of about 1,300 people, but those issues aren’t necessarily unique to LGBTQ individuals, she said. For now at least, “I’m exactly where I want to be.”

Rural areas already have fewer health care and housing options, and when agencies cite religious exemptions or people are rejected, alternatives can be nil. “If you have heart problems and that’s the only cardiologist within two hours of you ... you can’t just go to another doctor,” MAP’s Mushovic said.

In fact, only 11% of LGBTQ adults 45 and older have access to an LGBTQ health center in rural areas, compared with 57% in urban settings, according to an AARP survey cited in the MAP report.

Stefani Vargas, 27, a queer activist and educator who has called Marquette, Michigan, home since 2010, says health care has been her biggest obstacle to acceptance.

When Vargas came to Marquette to attend Northern Michigan University, she feared isolation and hostility but instead was embraced by a kind campus community. “I was terrified I would be the only one,” she said.

Vargas soon became enthralled with her new home. “It’s one of the most beautiful places in the world, stunningly gorgeous,” she said. “Even in the winter when it’s brutal, it’s just beautiful.”

But challenges did emerge for the bisexual, first-generation Peruvian American. Vargas was diagnosed with Crohn’s disease and found very few specialists who would even believe her symptoms.

“Whenever a partner I’m dating enters the room, I’m essentially outed and the care begins to shift. Doctors are colder, less attentive,” she said. “They are more willing to blame my problems on something like having anxiety.”

Still, Vargas says rural areas get “a bad rap” for being hotbeds of bias. “What I have found is that it’s more about a lack of knowledge than outright bigotry.”

Over half – or 55% – of LGBTQ people live in the Midwest or the South, regions populated by rural

communities, with the South taking the biggest draw, the MAP report shows.

Wynston Sanders, 30, knows the bumps along the road to equality in the South first-hand.

Sanders, who identifies as a transgender man and transgender queer, grew up in a “don’t ask, don’t tell” house in Union, South Carolina, and attended a church that was less than welcoming – even though he only made “subtle statements” like wearing a rainbow belt to services.

“I felt like I was leading a double life,” he said.

Sanders, who graduated from Converse College in Spartanburg, moved two years ago to Greenville, a place where he finally found a richer sense of belonging and connections he could trust.

Now a fellow for the Campaign for Southern Equality, Sanders has seen others struggle with access to health care, misuse of correct pronouns, lack of a dedicated LGBTQ community center and “subtle” discrimination.

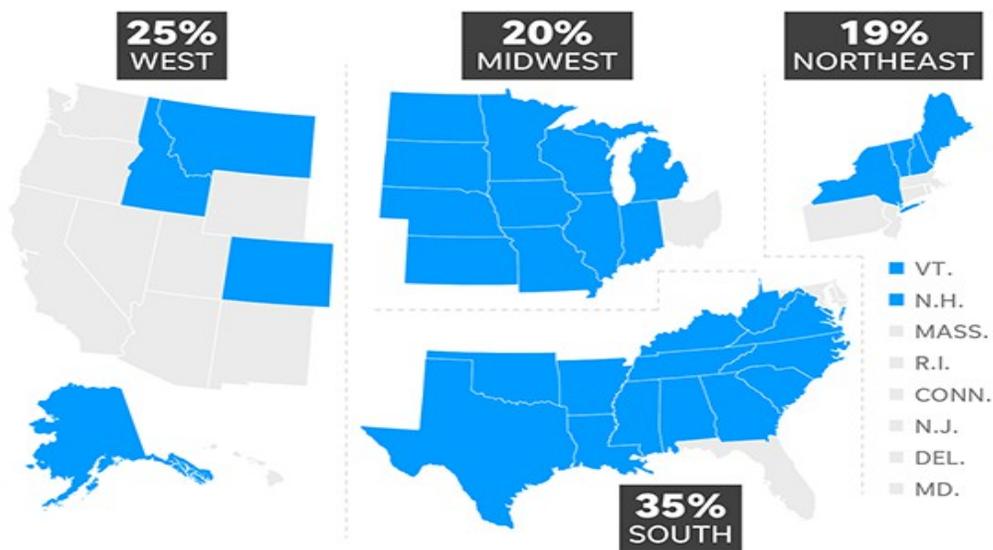
But he dwells on the inroads made in his own life – and beyond. “At one time I thought moving to San Francisco would change my life,” he said. “Maybe life would be better in a bigger mecca. But I like the small-town feel.”

Sanders is optimistic that the South is transforming.

“It’s happening all over in Tennessee, Alabama, North Carolina, South Carolina,” he said. “We are making the South a new place where LGBTQ people can thrive. When people look at you as a person – besides your LGBTQ status – that’s what it’s about.”

Where US adult LGBTQ population lives

● Indicates majority-rural state¹



1 — States where, in a majority of counties, a majority of people live in rural areas

SOURCE Movement Advancement Project with data from the U.S. Census Bureau and The Williams Institute; NOTE Does not add to 100 due to rounding

George Petras/USA TODAY