



SONG North Carolina Key Findings Report

Executive Summary

This study brings to light key findings on the lives and realities of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) North Carolinians. This community based-research was conducted by SONG (Southerners On New Ground): a regional LGBTQ multi-racial, and multi-classed organization that studies, builds and supports LGBTQ groups and communities across the South. We collected data from November 2010 to May 2011: using online surveys, interviews and convenings, SONG gathered information 214 LGBTQ leaders in North Carolina. These leaders were diverse across race, class, gender, sexual identification, and region of the state. For more information, and/or a copy of the full report please go to: www.southernersonnewground.org or email Caitlin Breedlove (Caitlin@southernersonnewground.org)

SONG is currently the only organization in North Carolina conducting community-based research within our LGBTQ community across race, class, culture, gender, sexuality and region. This is the first report that SONG has published specifically about the conditions and lives of LGBTQ North Carolinians. We received 155 surveys; conducted 14 in-depth interviews with leaders around North Carolina within LGBTQ groups; conducted 20 one-on-one meetings with major state leaders in community and church groups who work with LGBTQ people and groups; and convened 25 LGBTQ leaders in the triangle in person to discuss conditions of the state.

Key Findings

LGBTQ North Carolinians continue to face discrimination and violence in daily life in North Carolina. Roughly 80% of research participants described experiencing discrimination and/or violence in their daily lives in some way or another: in work, in public, or in community life. In particular, those LGBTQ people who are transgender, or do not fit conventional gender appearances or roles, faced profound discrimination and fear of violence. Additionally, LGBTQ people of Color and people with Disabilities face

increased violence in North Carolina. Overall, our organizational experience is that in relation to overall quality of life-- homophobia and transphobia are compounded and worsened for people of color; rural people; immigrants; poor and low-income people; people with disabilities; and trans and gender non-conforming people.

Finding Work and Being Safe are the most Important Issues in the Lives of LGBTQ North Carolinians. While research participants also named other issues, by and large, finding safe and steady means of income was rivaled in importance only to being safe from daily violence. Like many North Carolinians, concerns around the jobs and economy are central; research participants face the added fear and questions about the ability to live and work free of discrimination, violence and hate.

LGBTQ North Carolinians are concerned about violence and hate against all LGBTQ young people and want to support their well-being. Adults and youth alike named the importance of supporting the safety of LGBTQ young people in work and schools, and the need to fight for the fair treatment in schools and communities for ALL youth.

While there are some strong resources for LGBTQ people around North Carolina, they are not supported or evenly distributed. In surveying groups and organizations of LGBTQ people around the state, we found that while there were devoted leaders in many different areas, there was no overall infrastructure of resources for LGBTQ people in North Carolina. Additionally, most of the resources were centered in urban areas, and even then were often based on where individual leaders lived, and therefore, worked. For example, in the triangle-area there are a variety of Gay Straight Alliances (GSA's), but in many rural areas if you are an LGBTQ youth, you might have to drive 2-3 hours to find the closest GSA. The same was true for all organizing, advocacy, and service groups around the state—whether they addressed political power, safety, or education. Most groups noted that they would like to do more and have wider reach, but that they suffer from a lack of resources and leaders. At best, we see a sparse patchwork of resources and organized groups of LGBTQ people across North Carolina. Nonetheless, there is a resiliency to the groups that do exist: from the few rural GSA's who are fighting conservative school districts to the elders who carry on PFLAG chapters (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere) through anonymous help lines in their homes.

If Isolation is a Key Problem, Connection and Convenings are an Answer. Many research participants named isolation as a key problem for LGBTQ North Carolinians, particularly in poor and/or rural communities. Many youth and elders do not have the support that they need to feel connected to community, get basic needs met, and gain an acceptance of who they are. Simultaneously, the presence and visibility of some LGBTQ communities in North Carolina—through groups, media outlets, and community gathering spaces—are crucial. The need for more gathering spaces for the community (social and political) was articulated. Participants named creativity, ingenuity, action, passion, and the ability to move quickly to action when needed, as strengths of the overall North Carolina LGBTQ community.

Black LGBTQ Churches are Blossoming Homes for New Leaders There has been an assumption in many mainstream, white-led LGBTQ organizations that most African-American LGBTQ people are “not organized” into political and social groups. Our research found this to not be the case, in reality; the places where African-American LGBTQ are organized are simply different. Churches, Fraternities, Sororities, and social groups are established and growing homes for Black LGBTQ people who want to connect to and build our communities. In particular, the number of Black LGBTQ churches, and sizes of congregations, is growing in North Carolina. Many of these churches preach strong beliefs about social justice, and community unity. There is a long history of Southern churches as homes for community gathering and community organizing, our research points to the potential of these churches as homes for carrying on that tradition.

Many LGBTQ people want to be leaders in North Carolina to fight for social justice, but do not know how or where to start. A common refrain in our research was that there are too few places for LGBTQ people to go to connect with others in the community, learn about our histories, and learn skills to make change. Many long-time leaders feel worn out and isolated, and express the need for a new generation of leaders to work with them to combat the issues that our community is facing.

Next Steps

What will SONG do with these findings?

It is clear from our findings that LGBTQ people in North Carolina are affected just as deeply (and often more) by the painful realities of this recession. Additionally, our communities are dealing with critical issues around safety and voice. It is also apparent that there are pockets of resiliency and leadership that are working hard to support and build the safety, unity and well-being of our LGBTQ communities: from the youngest children to our oldest elders. We are clearly so deeply affected by what other marginalized North Carolinians are.

We need more leaders. Leaders must be tracked and trained to build specific skills to specific ends, work on coordinated projects and campaigns together, and be connected into a circle of LGBTQ leaders who are in this work long-term to fight for the future of North Carolina on behalf of our communities.

We face an incredibly critical time in our country and world: from racial justice to environmental justice to LGBTQ justice we are facing critical moments and when we look around at rallies, meetings, and other organizing events—there are just too few of us. We know that the issues of oppressed people are connected but we don’t always know how to talk about it or act on it. We know that building local economies, food, and safety for our people is important but we are not quite sure how to do it. In response to our conditions and this data, SONG proposes a ‘North Carolina Community Summit’.

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WHAT: A North Carolina Community Summit that brings together a multi-racial, multi-generational, multi-faith, multi-classed, multi-cultured group of LGBTQ people to support them to become leaders to fight for the future of justice in North Carolina. The Summit will meet 1-2 times a year and will be a space for learning, strategizing, connecting leaders, celebrating our community, pollinating new strategies, and moving jointly into strategic projects and campaigns.

WHEN: January 20-22, 2012. Please contact Bishop Donagrat McCluney for more information. (Donagrat@southernersonnewground.org)