

# SOUTHERNERS ON NEW GROUND

BUILDING A POLITICAL HOME ACROSS RACE, CLASS, CULTURE, GENDER, & SEXUALITY

## VIRGINIA KEY FINDINGS REPORT

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study lifts up the key findings on the lives and realities of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) Virginians. This community-based research was conducted by SONG (Southerners On New Ground), a regional LGBTQ multi-racial, and multi-class organization that studies, supports, and builds deep connections in LGBTQ communities across the South. We collected data from November 2010 to January 2012. Using surveys, interviews, workshops and assemblies, SONG gathered information from over 500 LGBTQ community members in Virginia. Community members were diverse across age, race, class, ability, gender, sexual identification, immigration status and region of the state.

**For more information, and/or a copy of a shorter version of the report please visit [www.southernersonnewground.org](http://www.southernersonnewground.org) OR contact the Virginia Field Organizers**

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*This is the first report that SONG has published specifically about the conditions and lives of LGBTQ Virginians. We received 170 surveys; conducted 14 in-depth interviews with LGBTQ Virginia groups and organizations; conducted 24 one-on-one meetings with LGBTQ community leaders across the state; and convened over a hundred LGBTQ Virginians at numerous gatherings including the Wayside Center for Popular Education Summer Commons and the 2012 Virginia People's Assembly. We are humbled by and grateful for the hundreds of LGBTQ Virginians who offered us their homes, meals, time, stories, and struggles. This report would not exist without you.*

## Key Findings

For over twelve months Virginia SONG leaders have been working to better understand the conditions of the lives of LGBTQ Virginians across age, race, class, gender, geography, culture, and ability. This work has taken time, energy, and resources with finite limits and in a constantly evolving climate where we have witnessed harsh legislation against LGBTQ people, immigrants, and reproductive justice, the worsening conditions of the economy, and the increased policing of communities of color.

As SONG bore witness to the stories of high school teenagers bullied in Nelson County, a Tidewater trans woman vehemently denied her rights by the police, hate crimes committed on college campuses throughout the state, and a bisexual man in Roanoke denied access to mental or physical health care by a police officer who called him, “a retarded faggot looking for a free ride,” we came to understand that LGBTQ Virginians are often isolated, silenced, and struggling to overcome difficult conditions.

**Resources are available but they are not evenly distributed.** There are some strong resources for LGBTQ people around Virginia though they are not evenly distributed across geography, race, or class. Most of the resources available are centered in the central part of the state in urban areas. What we know from our research is that the needs of LGBTQ Virginians who are rural, disabled, people of color, transgender and gender non-conforming folks, undocumented, or poor and working-poor are not being met by the resources that are currently available. Those who have historically been left to fend for themselves outside of “official” systems of safety nets continue to be the most vulnerable members of our community. Across the state Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) at high schools have a high leadership turnover rate, often cease to exist when the founder graduates, and are difficult to start in small towns and rural areas. Chapters of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays are also hard to find outside of central Virginia and can often only be discovered via the internet which rural and poor LGBTQ youth often have little access to. While many LGBTQ spaces have existed in different parts of the state over time, from underground bars to community groups to places to organize together, these spaces that once existed are now only whispers in the wind. This leaves a new generation of young people with questions about how those before us *must* have survived and an older generation of people wondering where it all went and why.

**Youth and elders are disconnected.** We know that many generations of LGBTQ people exist in Virginia, but we often do not see or hear each other. Elders and youth have no common spaces to gather and connect in and this means that often we do not share our hardships, our successes, our difficulties, or our celebrations. This disconnection contributes to our isolation and separates us from our legacy as we hear stories of youth struggling to survive in schools and elders struggling to survive in group homes, never discovering from each other all the ways that we survive.

**“The most difficult thing about my everyday life as an LGBTQ person is the fact that there are so many of us that aren’t open and free; and so our “visibility” seems minor...If I could change one concrete thing about my life, it would be the way in which I address homophobia: by fighting with all of my might instead of letting it slide.”**

-Virginia SONG Survey Response (2011)

**Visibility is increasing, but only for some.** This year alone, Virginia has seen the continuation of seven Pride events, including two for the first time ever. Richmond’s Mayor Dwight Jones saw to it that June became the official LGBTQ month for the city and the Transgender Day of Remembrance was officially recognized. The Capital City also saw rainbow stickers adorning the windows of small businesses, the release of the biography of one of Richmond’s most well-known philanthropists, Lewis Ginter, that revealed his sexuality, and even the Federal Reserve let its rainbow flag fly despite opposition and protests.

In Hampton Roads, we celebrated the ground-breaking LGBTQ Center being raised by hard-working community members there and the gathering of immigrant queer folks at the Wayside Center for Popular Education in the beautiful Faber, Virginia.

While it was exciting to see these changes, we were also reminded of the daily struggles of our community to survive isolation, marginalization, and attacks on our families, economic security and safety. LGBTQ Virginians are fighting to keep the ability to adopt in Virginia without discrimination that would be mandated under what’s being called “The Conscious Clause”, a trans woman of color was attacked outside of a convenience store in Fredericksburg, a public library in Gloucester was forced to remove an LGBTQ pride display, a church in small-town Elkton in the Shenandoah Valley attempted to shut-down the first-ever pride there targeting the local media, Suffolk City School Board attempted to pass a mandated ban on “cross-gender dressing” and across the state people contact us explaining their dire economic circumstances potentially leading to homelessness and hunger. These are the realities and conditions of many LGBTQ people in Virginia.

**People of color** are continuing to have to fight for our voices and leadership in many of the LGBTQ groups across the state. We are interrupted, shot down, seen as inexperienced and not taken seriously. Our leadership is never made a priority and we are often lost in a sea of white faces that do not recognize the connections between race and sexuality. While some of us start our own groups, many people fall through the cracks with nowhere else to turn.

**Rural folks** are often forced to drive anywhere from 2 to 6 hours to get the resources and support that they need whether it is around health care, affirming faith and spiritual spaces, or just to have a good time as an “out” LGBTQ person. People in small towns across Virginia have said to us, “our people are underground.” Few organizations spend the time or resources to even visit these areas and when they do they often tell folks that they should move to the city.

**Trans and gender non-conforming people continue to be fragmented and isolated** from advocacy, services, and resources. While many organizations pay lip-service to the inclusion of the “T,” trans people tell us that they are not welcomed in leadership and the issues voiced as necessary to address too often go unnoticed and unheard. Our community research overwhelmingly showed that trans and gender non-conforming people of our community face the harshest violence, have the least access to employment and affordable health care, and are scapegoated from public places including bars, restrooms, and doctor’s offices.

**“I wish I could remove the pathologicalization of trans\* people. Insurance coverage, anti-discrimination laws, remove all the hoops one has to jump through.”**

-VIRGINIA SONG SURVEY RESPONSE (2011)

**Undocumented Queer Virginians** are overlooked by other LGBTQ Virginians. There are no spaces being created for undocumented queer youth in urban or rural areas. Progressive, even radical, spaces talk about undocumented people and immigration issues but there are too often no people of color in their spaces, let alone undocumented immigrant youth. When there are undocumented folks in the room people do not see them as someone with the lived experience of being undocumented, because they don’t fit the picture of “undocumented immigrant.” Most LGBTQ spaces, groups, and organizations in Virginia are not considering the needs and conditions of undocumented LGBTQ people, rendering us invisible and pushing us further into the margins.

***“Caminante, no hay puentes, se hace puentes al andar.  
(Voyager, there are no bridges, one builds them as one walks.)”***

***Gloria E. Anzaldúa***

### **Poor and working poor LGBTQ**

Virginians are feeling the pressures of an un-recovering economy. Many folks are more afraid than ever to be out in a time when jobs are few and far between. If they are employed, losing their jobs due to discrimination because of a lack of federal and state protections could be debilitating for them and their families. If they are unemployed, being “out” might limit their chances of being hired.

**Virginia LGBTQ Organizations are isolated** around the state, even when they are in the same small towns and cities. LGBTQ organizations are also

disconnected from non-lgbtq organizations working for social justice. We have heard from people that there are “factions” in their communities, that LGBTQ groups don’t talk to each other, that our “community is disjointed,” that it is “like pulling teeth to get people to go to each other’s meetings,” that race, class, and gender divide us, and that politics divide us in ways that are harmful and detrimental to all of us.

**We do not have the leaders we need** to fight for the rightful place of our communities and the type of world we demand and deserve. A significant majority of LGBTQ organizations in Virginia do not have leadership that reflects what our communities look like. When we gaze out at the leadership in place we see people that do not look like us. When we search for people of color, rural people, poor or working poor, immigrant, disabled or gender-non-conforming LGBTQ faces we see them in the trenches, not on the front lines making decisions that affect all of us. We cannot afford to wait any longer for guilt-ridden resources or charity that tokenizes our identities.

**LGBTQ Virginians are hungry to change the harsh conditions of their lives**, but they often do not know how or where to start. Over and over we have heard, “Bring back the SONG organizing school,” “I want to help but I don’t know what to do,” “I don’t know where to find people like me.” Our folks are yearning to connect with others in the community, learn about our histories, and learn skills to make change. While we are seeing young queer people of color on Virginia’s college campuses work hard to start and sustain new groups, the Virginia Transgender Rights Coalition bring leadership where and when it is needed, and LGBTQ people statewide working on living wage campaigns, reproductive rights actions, and immigrant rights organizing, we find that our groups often struggle with sustaining leaders, finding new leaders, growing,

**“Fear that the wrong person will discover my identity at a time or place in which I am unable to maintain my physical safety. If I could change how I’ve been held back by being out/visibly queer most of my life, so that I had not been unemployed and under-employed for so much time, well, that would be nice. I’d probably be a lot less worried about my retirement.”**

-VIRGINIA SONG SURVEY RESPONSE 2011

implementing new tools, and having visible, lasting or measureable change in our communities. We know that there is no liberation in isolation and that we cannot do this work alone. We must connect and learn from one another.

## FRONTS OF STRUGGLE FOR THE SELF DETERMINATION OF ALL PEOPLE

### ECONOMICS, PUBLIC SPACE, VIOLENCE

#### The Bottom Line

The bottom line is that LGBTQ people in Virginia are not alone. The daily struggles around **economics, public space, and violence** are conditions that are occurring across the South from North Carolina to Alabama to Georgia and are not happening in a vacuum. As President Obama continues to visit Virginia frequently, we look to what this means for the Old Dominion and the battleground that we are standing on as a designated swing state for the 2012 Presidential Election. With this distinction, Virginia politics have caught the attention of the nation from the likes of *The Huffington Post*, “Rachel Maddow”, FOX News, and more. Like most of the Southern states, Virginia has become a testing ground for legislation that is waging a war on the people of the state. Just this year legislation has been introduced that, if passed, would grant personhood to fetuses and greatly limit the reproductive rights of women, allow private adoption agencies to discriminate against LGBTQ parents, require drug testing of those receiving public assistance, extend the parameters of who qualifies for the death penalty, increase policing on immigrant communities by expanding programs like 287g across the state, and restrict voting rights. With legislation like this it’s hard to believe that publications like CNN’s *Money Magazine*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and *Bloomberg* consistently rank Virginia as one of the best places to live. While the Virginia General Assembly continues to fight over this legislation and has declared that Virginia is “Open for Business,” as the best state to do business, Virginian’s are left wondering why we aren’t the best state for public education, for affordable health care, or for fair housing.

***“The victim who is able to articulate the situation of the victim has ceased to be a victim: he or she has become a threat.”***

***James Baldwin***

## *“They Isolate Us, We Coordinate Ourselves”*



SONG, Richmond Organization for Sexual Minority Youth (ROSMY),  
& Virginia State University GLAAD Students  
Richmond, VA, February 2012

Though this work has been tedious and often difficult, SONG’s understanding of the conditions of the lives of LGBTQ Virginians has grown exponentially, the relationships we have built across the state are incalculable and invaluable, and we have affirmed that the survival of our people continues to rely on the resiliency of our communities.

As we watch right-wing American politicians and corporations cross borders both geographically and politically around longitudes and latitudes and economic and social issues to promote their agendas, we must understand that our own strategies must respond to the conditions that this creates. ***Our lives are not issue-based*** and our work to better our lives should reflect that. We must move beyond

arguments of “guns, abortions, and gays” to conversations about ***safety and dignity*** as necessary components of the survival of our communities.

The survival and thriving of our communities is the heart and spirit of SONG and we believe that these findings that come from Virginians lived stories and experiences are only the beginning. By listening deeply we have heard the needs, wants, and desires of our communities. It is now up to all of us to use the resources and skills we have to create space for folks to gather so that we can learn together how to collectively lift our voices as organizers, cultural workers, healers, bakers, artists, organizers, farmers, educators, and story keepers.

***“... poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change.”***

***Audre Lorde***

# For *Safety* and for *Dignity* in Virginia

So what do we do with everything that we have learned and how do we do it? Together with our communities we will look to our legacies, our bodies, our land, our memories, and our dreams to craft, create, envision, invent, and birth new ways of being that are healthy and whole. We will work to understand the forces of power affecting the daily conditions of our lives. We will work to break the isolation of our communities. We will build strong leadership of our members. We will engage, build and learn with and from other grassroots organizations working for the liberation of our communities. Concretely this means community mapping, studying our histories of resistance, collectively developing values, political education, and initiating projects and campaigns that support *the safety and dignity of our communities*.

## **We build culture. We build relationships. We build skills.**

In order to do these things, our community mindset has to transform cynicism and hurt to action. We must move away from the powerlessness that has been imposed upon us and learn to embrace challenges as opportunities. To do this we need real and whole experiences that allow us to come together to invest into the fabric of people's lives so that we can pull out the threads of hope that we share. SONG believes that in order to do this in Virginia we have to invest in building culture, building relationships, and building skills.

We believe that we must take these leaps of faith and risks, that we have been divided and isolated by forces with nearly unimaginable power, influence, and resources for far too long, and that it is up to us to demand and fight for an end to the madness that controls our lives in unhealthy ways. We must re-learn to trust each other and community in ways that are scary, that might hurt, and that will be difficult, but it is necessary for our survival in a time in which we are being attacked at every level of our being from how we make a living, how we heal our bodies and spirits, the food we eat, the shelters we build around us, and the places we pray and the places we make love. This isn't just about equality. This is about dignity. This is about worth. This is about freedom. It is about the freedom to decide how we live our lives.

**“What I value most about SONG is the community it has and is continuing to build amongst LGBTQIA folx of color... I value the spaces SONG creates and the love I experience that isn't found in any other spaces especially in coming from a homophobic Christian family and attending a predominantly white institution.”**

**-SHAN DAVIS, WILLIAMSBURG, VA (2012)**



## NEXT STEPS

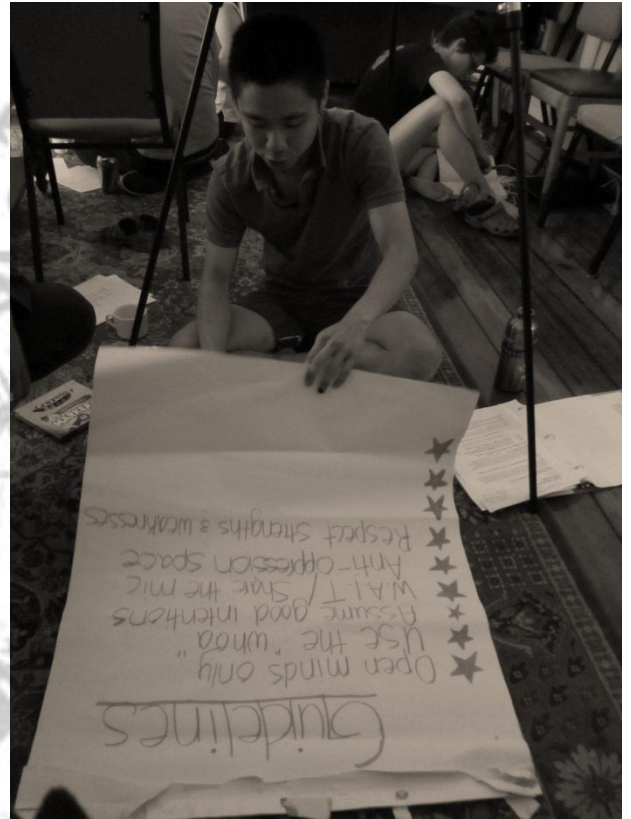
*It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other and protect each other. -Assata Shakur*

Our twenty years of leadership in the South has taught us that as LGBTQ people from all different backgrounds and places ***we know our lives best and we can meet our own needs*** when we are given the access, space, skills, and confidence necessary to overcome the hurdles that we face every day, but we have also learned that in the face of many hardships LGBTQ people are often isolated, disconnected, and lack the tools and resources necessary. This is the soul of SONG, our members, and our work. SONG is about ***transformation*** of our communities, the world, and ourselves, and we are committed to building and visioning with LGBTQ people to make Virginia a better place for all of us.

What SONG offers is commitment, support, and experience through:

- Leadership development (materials and tools)
- Presence in supporting the building of local membership bodies
- Political Analysis and practices around race and economic justice including long-term strategic thinking, mapping the assets and resources that already exist in our communities, and support with campaign and project development
- Opportunities for connection & representation around the state and the region
- Communications, infrastructure, and practices for documentation
- Leadership in statewide projects and campaigns

We do this work as well as build with other organizations that are committed to liberation to strategically build momentum and the power of our communities across a wide array of issues. We do this work slow and deep but not without a sense of urgency due to the conditions that we live in day in and day out.



SONG Member Hieu Tran  
Wayside Center for Popular Education  
Faber, VA (SUMMER 2011)

## WE MAKE IT POSSIBLE

As we move forward in Virginia and continue the work of gathering, listening, coming to community agreements and working to build the skills, confidence, and courage necessary for folks to meet their own needs, we know that our actions will often speak louder than our words and that our communities are worthy of and deserve the time, energy, and action it takes to reach the vision of transformation that we know is possible. It takes resources to build this morale, to feed our folks, and to put gas in cars to make this vision happen all over the state and all over the South.

**“I am a SONG member because of the experiences I have had with SONG in contrast to the experiences I have had my entire life. Virginia is a hostile place for queer people of color, and living here in isolation can be terrifying. SONG offers not only a place to feel safe, but also encourages and enables us to DO SOMETHING about that fear. Queer people of color are doing shit for themselves, in ways that honor our collective experience and individual histories.”**

**-JESSICA JUDE, RICHMOND (2012)**

**Please show your commitment to this vision and become a *member* today! Whether \$5 or \$50 a month-it all sustains us. Join the SONG family by visiting <http://southernersonnewground.org> and click on the “Donate Now” button or send a check to:**

***Southerners On New Ground  
250 Georgia Avenue, Suite 201  
Atlanta, GA 30312***

## TELL US! Which one are you???

*When you donate you become a member of SONG - which means access to technical assistance, member gatherings, and other members in your area! SONG's members are committed to building freedom movements, rooted in southern traditions like storytelling, music, breaking bread, resistance, non-violent social justice activism, humor, performance, critical thinking, and celebration. Your money will go directly to the fight for justice and dignity for LGBTQ people and all oppressed peoples across the South.*

**FIERCE & FABULOUS SUSTAINER**

***\$15/year***

**CARD CARRYING TROUBLE  
MAKER**

***\$10/month***

**DANGEROUS HOMOSEXUAL**

***\$20/ month***

**TENACIOUS TACTICIAN**

***\$30/month***

**FRONTLINE FREEDOM FIGHTER**

***\$50/month***