



# INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH LEADERS

RESEARCH BRIEF | December 2020

## Improved Access to Mental Health Care and Affirming Providers Necessary to Support South Texas LGBTQ+ People

### WHY WE DID THIS STUDY

In 2017, researchers, advocates, and community members formed the Strengthening Colors of Pride team and set out to understand the lived experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other gender and sexual minority (LGBTQ+) people in the San Antonio Metro Area. This research project seeks to understand the current capacity of San Antonio to address the health and social needs of the LGBTQ+ community, the underlying factors that contribute to health issues impacting the LGBTQ+ community, and the different ways the LGBTQ+ community copes with both racial/ethnic-related discrimination and sexuality-related discrimination. The experiences of LGBTQ+ people are not regularly included in studies of health and resiliency in Texas, and this project conducted the largest study to date of LGBTQ+ Texans.

### HOW WE DID THIS STUDY

Between June and November of 2019, the Strengthening Colors of Pride research team collected 1819 online surveys from individuals identifying as LGBTQ+ in the San Antonio metro area, ages 16 to 81 years old. The San Antonio metro area includes Bexar County and the seven counties that surround San Antonio—Kendall, Bandera, Medina, Atascosa, Wilson, Guadalupe, Comal. The survey included questions about housing, employment, discrimination, family trauma, systems of support and resilience, mental and physical health, healthcare experiences, and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). ACEs are potentially traumatic events that children experience which can have negative, lasting effects on health and well-being. ACEs are measured through a set of ten questions about physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, divorce, parental mental health issues, parental substance use, incarceration of family members, and domestic violence. An ACEs score is a number from 0 to 10 that represents how many of these questions respondents answered positively. An ACEs score of 4 or more items is associated with negative health outcomes like mental or physical health issues and tendencies towards substance abuse.

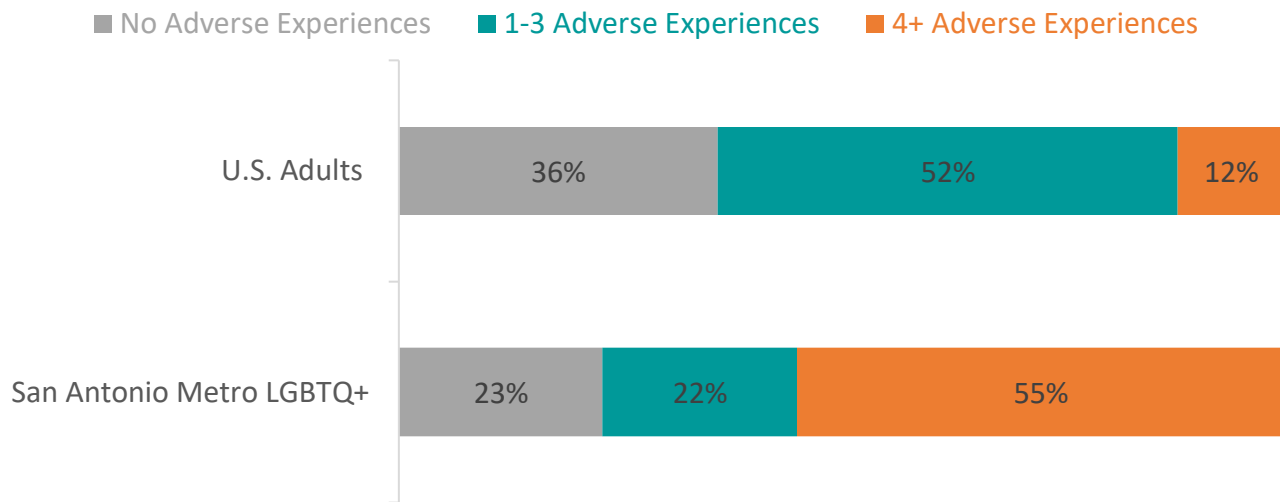
This report also includes voices from interviews with 82 LGBTQ+ residents of San Antonio (age 16-51 years old) that the Strengthening Colors of Pride research team conducted in the summer of 2018. These interviews focused on individual, interpersonal, and community support for resilience during hard times. Due to the involvement of our racially diverse community advisory board and research team, the majority of LGBTQ+ participants in both the online survey and face-to-face interviews identified as Black, Latinx, American Indian, or another racial minority identity.

Support for this project was provided by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Interdisciplinary Research Leaders program. Interdisciplinary Research Leaders is a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation led by the University of Minnesota.

### KEY FINDINGS

- High rates of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) impact the health of LGBTQ+ people. 55% of the LGBTQ+ respondents have an ACEs score of 4 or more. This is at least three times the national average for these scores.
- LGBTQ+ experience serious gaps in health care provision. Almost one third (30.8%) of respondents had been refused services by a provider due to their sexual orientation or gender identity on at least one occasion.
- LGBTQ+ community members have high rates of resilience and support within the community.

Figure 1. San Antonio LGBTQ+ People Experience High Levels of Adverse Childhood Experiences



### WHAT WE FOUND

Survey findings illustrate patterns of discrimination, harassment, and mistreatment that LGBTQ+ people continue to experience in all aspects of their lives, personally and professionally, publicly and privately. The findings identify large and alarming disparities between LGBTQ+ individuals and the larger San Antonio Metro Area population, disparities that are further heightened for transgender individuals, people of color, and youth. Most importantly, however, the findings also highlight the remarkable resiliency and strength of LGBTQ+ individuals and their capacity to navigate complex adversity and trauma.

#### *Family Trauma Impacts Adult Health*

High rates of family trauma and ACEs impact the health of LGBTQ+ people in San Antonio.

LGBTQ+ residents of the San Antonio metro area have significantly higher ACEs scores than the general population, which may impact adult physical and mental health. 55% of the LGBTQ+ respondents have an ACEs score of 4 or more, and 30% have a score of 6 or more. This is at least three times the national average for these scores, based on the Kaiser study of ACEs.

Readers should not conclude that ACEs create gender or sexual identity differences. Instead, LGBTQ+ children may be targeted for child abuse

and neglect based on family reactions to sexuality or gender non-conformity. Transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming respondents reported some of the highest ACEs scores (5.7 vs 3.6 for cisgender people), suggesting that some of these adverse childhood experience like neglect may be a family response to gender non-conformity.

The measure of ACEs, however, does not include common childhood experiences that are specific to the experiences of LGBTQ+ children. Queer Adverse Childhood Experiences (Q-ACEs) is a measure being developed by this research team. Based on interviews with 82 high ACEs or low-income LGBTQ+ members of the San Antonio community, we developed questions about

**“I consider myself a resilient person because in a nutshell, I keep going.”**

— *Tiara, 25, Black Bisexual Cisgender Woman*

common childhood traumatic experiences. In San Antonio, LGBTQ+ respondents reported high rates of family homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia, along with shame and worry about being a burden or troubling their parents with their gender and sexuality. One third of LGBTQ+ respondents also reported feeling worried about their safety or housing because their gender or sexuality would be discovered by family members.

*Inadequate Healthcare Compounds Health Issues*  
LGBTQ+ people experience serious gaps in health care provision. LGBTQ+ people are more likely to avoid seeing a healthcare professional when needed, less likely to have health insurance, and have problems finding LGBTQ+ competent healthcare in the San Antonio metro area. Approximately half of LGBTQ+ individuals do not know where to find a provider that is knowledgeable about LGBTQ+ concerns. Almost one third (31%) of respondents had been refused services by a provider due their sexual orientation or gender identity on at least one occasion.

*Supportive Networks are Key to Well Being*  
LGBTQ+ respondents reported high rates of resilience and supportive social networks outside of their family of origin. Around 80% of respondents agree that they have a special friend who cares about their feelings and they can share their joys and sorrows, being around when they are in need, and be a real source of comfort to them. Overall, 72% of respondents expressed that they felt supported by the LGBTQ+ community in South Texas.

Most respondents (67%) have always felt or often feel accepted as an LGBTQ+ person in their spiritual/religious community, and 66% always or often feel welcomed as an LGBTQ+ person when attending faith community functions and services.

## WHAT THESE FINDINGS MEAN

This section charts a course of action, proving next steps for community members, policy makers, health care providers, and family members in improving the health and well-being of LGBTQ+ community members in the San Antonio metro community.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

This brief was authored by Dr. Amy L. Stone of Trinity University and Mr. Robert Salcido, Jr., of Pride Center San Antonio. They are 2017 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Interdisciplinary Research Leaders fellows. For questions please contact: Amy Stone [astone@trinity.edu](mailto:astone@trinity.edu) or Robert Salcido [robert@pridecentersa.org](mailto:robert@pridecentersa.org)

The health care crisis for LGBTQ+ residents of San Antonio is perpetuated by a combination of lack of access to health care, lack of LGBTQ+ affirming healthcare providers, and the impact of ACEs and Q-ACEs on the health of LGBTQ+ adults and youth. The consequences of this health care crisis are dramatic, and interventions to improve the health of the LGBTQ+ community are literally lifesaving.

- ✓ Increase free and low-income LGBTQ+ friendly mental health services in San Antonio. Mental health services are a major unmet need for transgender and non-binary individuals. 32% of transgender women, 30% of transgender men, and 20% of non-binary people report that they need and cannot access mental health services. Youth also report a higher need for mental health services than adults (23% versus 14%).
- ✓ Develop mandatory LGBTQ+ competency and sensitivity training for health care providers that are trained in the colleges and universities of San Antonio, including nurses, doctors, and medical receptionists.
- ✓ Launch a transgender health training program for area providers to equip more healthcare providers with the knowledge and competency to serve transgender-specific health care needs but also to serve transgender patients for other health care needs.
- ✓ Train social workers and employees of youth-serving institutions about the detrimental impact of ACEs and Q-ACEs on the health and well-being of LGBTQ+ youth. This training could include learning to mediate parental punishment of gender-nonconformity and general neglect of LGBTQ+ youth. School district trainings could include information about the impact of ACEs and Q-ACEs on LGBTQ+ youth.
- ✓ Develop health public service announcements and programming for family members about the impact of family support on the health of LGBTQ+ youth.

These policy changes will help improve mental and physical health for LGBTQ+ people in South Texas.