POSITIVE IMAGES

SONOMA COUNTY

QUEER NEEDS

2024 ASSESSMENT

Queering Land Back:

Indigiqueer and QTBIPOC Resistance

TRANS PEOPLE BELONG

POSITIVE IMAGES

As We Grow...

2024 SONOMA COUNTY
QUEER NEEDS ASSESSMENT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DISCLAIMER ON PARTICIPANT ANONYMITY

To ensure the safety and privacy of our community members, we have chosen not to attribute any quotes to participant names in this report. This decision was made in light of the increasingly hostile and retaliatory actions from the federal administration, which pose risks to the identities and well-being of LGBTQIA2S+ community members and professionals.

POSITIVE IMAGES

www.posimages.org | (707) 568-5830
200 Montgomery Drive Suite C, Santa Rosa, CA 95404

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Before we embarked on this project, in late 2023, we knew our queer community was being overlooked in meaningful ways, contributing to disparate mental health outcomes. We witnessed the rise of anti-trans rhetoric and policies as an increasing threat to our well-being and safety. Still, we did not foresee how rapidly the blatant persecution of our community would escalate by early 2025.

What began as an undercurrent of legislative and cultural hostility quickly morphed into a full-scale assault on our rights, safety, and dignity. Harmful policies, media-fueled disinformation, and emboldened anti-LGBT movements converged to exacerbate the mental health crisis within our community, pushing many to the brink. As we conducted our assessment, we saw firsthand the rising fear, anxiety, and isolation among queer and trans individuals. **The impact is not theoretical—it's immediate, urgent, and deeply personal.**

This report not only documents these pressing challenges, but also highlights the resilience, strength, and ingenuity of our community in the face of adversity. Conversations with LGBTQIA2S+ individuals, service providers, and advocacy groups revealed critical gaps in support systems and outlined recommendations to create a more responsive and affirming infrastructure. **These findings reaffirm the importance of solidarity in movement, investment in queer-led initiatives, and policy changes that prioritize our collective well-being.**

The stakes could not be higher, but neither could our resolve. Now more than ever, we must act decisively—to protect, uplift, and empower LGBTQIA2S+ individuals. This report stands as both a call to action and a roadmap for meaningful change— **because our community deserves more than survival; we deserve to thrive.**

In Community,

The Positive Images Team

INTRODUCTION

For over three decades, Positive Images has provided support and advocacy for the LGBTQIA+ community in Sonoma County. Our commitment has always been to serve the diverse needs of individuals who identify as queer and trans, providing a safe space for self-expression, connection, and growth. As a community-based organization, we have witnessed firsthand the unique challenges that our community members face—challenges that are often overlooked or underrepresented in broader local data and reports.

The purpose of this needs assessment is to address this gap by centering the voices and experiences of LGBTQIA2S+ individuals in Sonoma County. Despite the commendable efforts of existing reports and census data, these documents frequently fall short in capturing the nuanced realities of LGBTQIA2S+ lives, particularly in areas such as education, income, housing, health, and other systemic issues. Our goal is to ensure that the needs of LGBTQIA2S+ individuals are visible and recognized by local decision-makers. This report aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of these needs, uplifting the strengths, joys, and barriers experienced by our community.

IMPORTANCE OF INTERSECTIONALITY AND EQUITY

Intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, highlights how **overlapping identities—such as race, gender, class, and sexuality—compound experiences of inequality.** A Black woman's experience, for example, is shaped by the intersection of both race and gender, not just as separate factors.

This framework is essential in decision-making, as it reveals how marginalized groups, such as LGBTQIA2S+ people of color, face unique barriers in areas like housing and employment. Without this lens, policies risk reinforcing systemic inequities rather than addressing them.

Equity ensures that individuals receive the resources and opportunities they need, acknowledging that different communities face distinct challenges. Unlike equality, which assumes uniform support, equity recognizes systemic disadvantages and tailors interventions accordingly.

For the LGBTQIA2S+ community, **which intersects all other communities**, equity might involve:

- Safe and affordable housing that combats discrimination and fosters affirming environments.
- Equitable healthcare that includes access to gender-affirming care and culturally competent providers.
- Economic policies that address wage gaps, workplace bias, and barriers to financial stability.
- Community support networks that enhance belonging and safety for individuals with diverse identities.

By embedding equity into policies and programs, decision-makers can dismantle systemic barriers and build a more just and inclusive society for all LGBTQIA2S+ individuals.

A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

To capture an accurate and meaningful portrayal of the LGBTQIA2S+ community's needs in Sonoma County, Positive Images adopted a participatory action research (PAR) approach. This methodology is rooted in the belief that those most affected by an issue should be at the forefront of the research process. **By centering the diverse voices of LGBTQIA2S+ community members, PI aimed to collect authentic, undiluted narratives that reflect the lived experiences of our participants.** The research project was conducted in four distinct phases:

PHASE ONE SURVEY COLLECTION

PI distributed short survey cards to gather both quantitative data on access to basic needs and qualitative insights into the top three priorities identified by respondents. A total of 348 surveys were collected, ensuring representation across diverse identities and regional areas, including rural communities in south and west Sonoma County, Sonoma Valley, and Cloverdale. By partnering with local organizations, we prioritized reaching multicultural communities, ensuring that historically underrepresented voices were included.

PHASE TWO FOCUS GROUPS

After collecting our first 100 surveys, we conducted a preliminary analysis to identify the most frequently mentioned needs, which informed the development of our focus group questions. We facilitated seven focus groups, including four affinity groups tailored to specific LGBTQIA2S+ intersections: teenaged youth; Black community members; Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (ANHPI) individuals, and bilingual Spanish/English Latine Sonoma County Residents. These discussions, involving a total of 44 participants, provided deeper insight into the complexity of the themes that emerged from the survey data.

PHASE THREE KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

To complement survey and focus group findings, we conducted 19 stakeholder interviews with LGBTQIA2S+ professionals in the social service sector and community advocates with lived experience. These interviews provided expert perspectives on the systemic barriers facing LGBTQIA2S+ individuals in Sonoma County, including challenges related to housing, employment, healthcare, and safety.

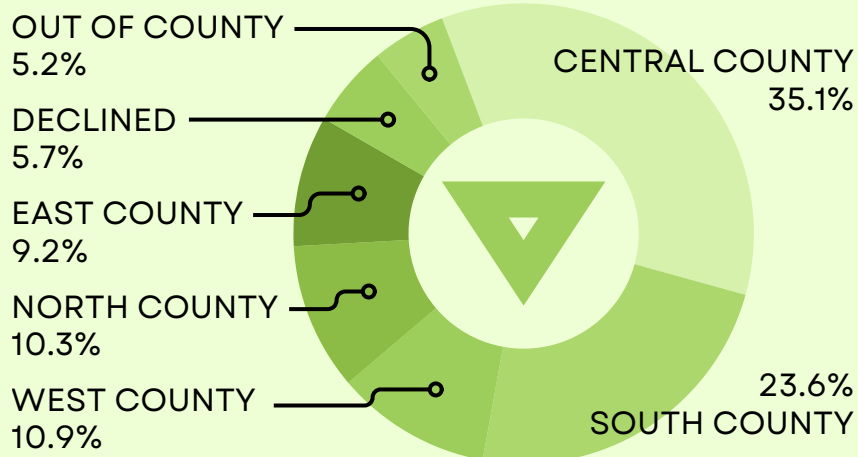## PHASE FOUR COMMUNITY FEEDBACK SESSION

To ensure the accuracy and relevance of our findings, we hosted a community feedback session where preliminary results were shared with participants. This session served as a "temp check," allowing us to refine interpretations and confirm that our analysis authentically represented the lived experiences of LGBTQIA2S+ community members. Feedback from this session was incorporated into the final analysis to strengthen the validity of our findings.
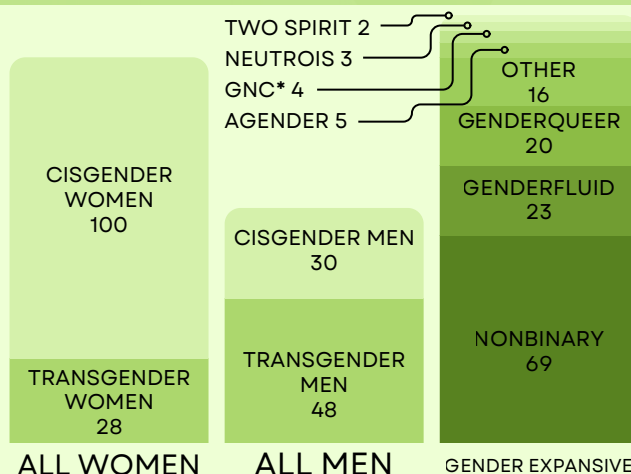
PHASE FIVE DATA ANALYSIS

A thematic analysis approach was used to examine qualitative data from survey responses, focus groups, and key informant interviews. Common themes were identified through an iterative coding process to highlight key issues and priorities. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify trends and disparities, particularly across different demographic groups. Findings from both methods were integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the most pressing needs and challenges faced by LGBTQIA2S+ individuals in Sonoma County.

FINDINGS: BY THE NUMBERS

THE WHERE

OUT OF COUNTY
5.2%

DECLINED
5.7%

EAST COUNTY
9.2%

NORTH COUNTY
10.3%

WEST COUNTY
10.9%

CENTRAL COUNTY
35.1%

23.6%
SOUTH COUNTY

THE WHO

UNSPECIFIED
2.59%

ANHPI
5.75%

BLACK
11.78%

MULTIPLE RACIAL
IDENTITIES 11.78%

INDIGENOUS
10.9%

WHITE
56.61%

19.83%
LATINE

TWO SPIRIT 2
NEUTROIS 3
GNC* 4
AGENDER 5

OTHER
16

GENDERQUEER
20

GENDERFLUID
23

NONBINARY
69

CISGENDER
WOMEN
100

TRANSGENDER
WOMEN
28

ALL WOMEN

CISGENDER MEN
30

TRANSGENDER
MEN
48

ALL MEN

GENDER EXPANSIVE

THE FINDINGS

WE ASKED 348 INDIVIDUALS TO SHARE
THEIR TOP 3 NEEDS:

Category	Value
COMMUNITY	249
HOUSING	130
ECONOMIC RESOURCES	103
SAFETY	78
MENTAL HEALTH	67
REPRESENTATION	57
HEALTHCARE	56
AFFIRMING HEALTHCARE	48
EMPLOYMENT	46
ACCESSIBILITY	43
FOOD	42
ADVOCACY	37
EDUCATION	37
JOY	35
LEGAL PROTECTIONS	33
YOUTH/FAMILY SUPPORT	28
DEBA/BIPOC SUPPORT	28
TRANSPORTATION	26

WE ASKED 348 INDIVIDUALS TO RANK THEIR ACCESS TO...

GOOD ▼ **FAIR** ▼ **POOR** ▼

MENTAL HEALTHCARE
- 21.8%
- 47.5%
- 30.7%
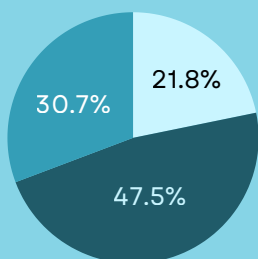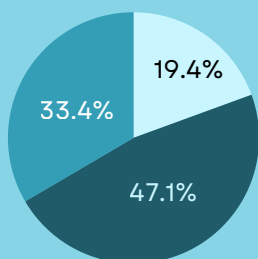
GENDER AFFIRMING CARE
- 19.4%
- 47.1%
- 33.4%

SAFE HOUSING
- 16%
- 35.2%
- 48.8%

A LIVING WAGE
- 35.1%
- 36.6%
- 28.3%

GROCERIES
- 14.2%
- 39.1%
- 46.7%

EDUCATION
- 13%
- 28.9%
- 58.1%

COMMUNITY
- 20.1%
- 48.3%
- 31.5%
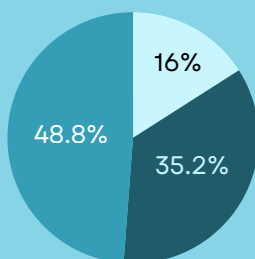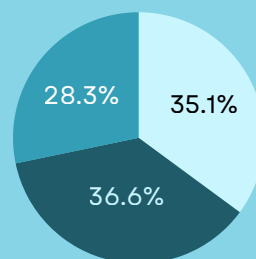
TRANSPORTATION
- 21.3%
- 33.9%
- 44.7%
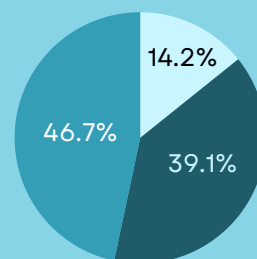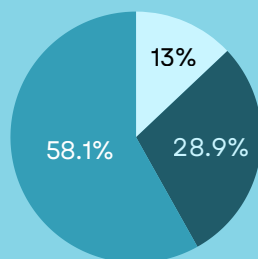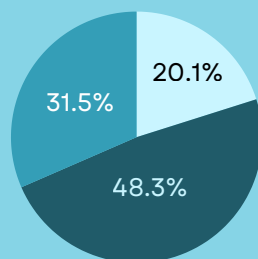
DISAGGREGATING BY RACE AND GENDER

When we disaggregate the data by race and gender, the disparities reveal how systemic inequities disproportionately disadvantage certain groups, particularly people of color and gender diverse individuals. The o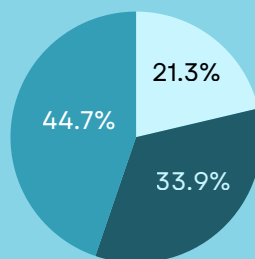verlapping impacts of racism, sexism, and transphobia manifest in limited access to essential resources, such as community, housing, living wages, mental healthcare, and education.

Racial Disparities:
People of color report significantly poorer access to resources compared to white individuals. For example, 28.2% of respondents of color rank their access to community as poor, double the 13.9% of white respondents. Similarly, 20% of respondents of color report poor access to safe housing, compared to 13.4% of white respondents, and 37% of respondents of color report poor access to a living wage, compared to 30.7% of white respondents. These inequities extend to mental healthcare (28.2% vs. 16.3%) and education (18.5% vs. 8.4%).
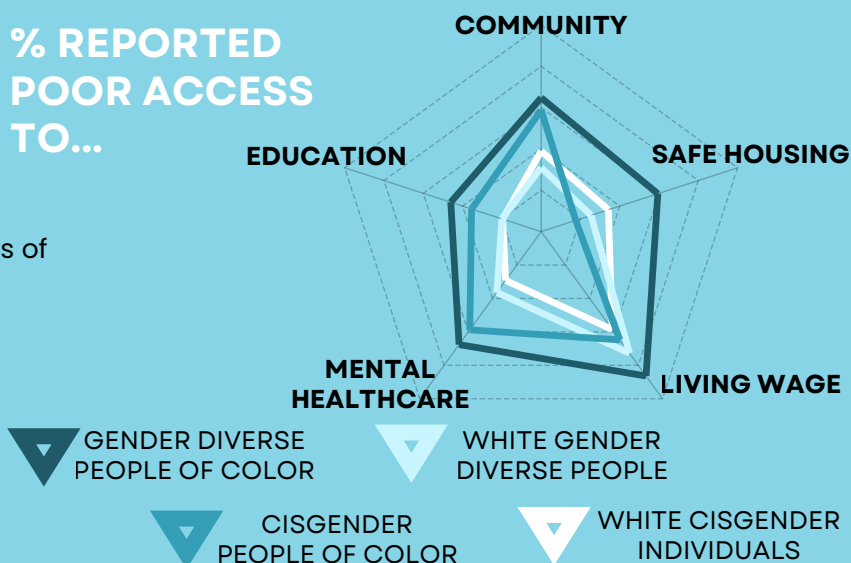
Gender Disparities:
Gender diverse respondents face more significant barriers than cisgender respondents. For instance, 38.8% of gender diverse respondents report poor access to a living wage, compared to 30.3% of cisgender respondents. Similarly, 24.5% of gender diverse respondents report poor access to mental healthcare, compared to 21.1% of cisgender respondents, and 19.2% face poor access to safe housing, compared to 13.2%.

Intersectional Inequities:
Race and gender intersect to further exacerbate disparities. Gender diverse people of color report the highest rates of poor access across nearly every category. For example, 38.8% of gender diverse respondents of color rank their access to a living wage as poor, exceeding both cisgender respondents of color (37%) and white gender diverse respondents (30.7%). Similarly, 28.2% of gender diverse respondents of color report poor access to mental healthcare, far exceeding rates for white gender diverse respondents (18.2%) and cisgender respondents of color (17.7%).

These findings underscore the compounded barriers faced by LGBTQIA2S+ individuals at the intersections of race and gender. The accompanying radar chart visually highlights these critical gaps, emphasizing the need for targeted, intersectional solutions to ensure equity and justice.

% REPORTED POOR ACCESS TO...

COMMUNITY · SAFE HOUSING · LIVING WAGE · MENTAL HEALTHCARE · EDUCATION

▼ GENDER DIVERSE PEOPLE OF COLOR

▼ WHITE GENDER DIVERSE PEOPLE

▼ CISGENDER PEOPLE OF COLOR

▼ WHITE CISGENDER INDIVIDUALS

1) COMMUNITY

249 OUT OF 348 RESPONDENTS 71.6%

In our Needs Assessment survey, when asked "As an LGBTQIA2S+ person, what are your top three needs to live and belong in Sonoma County?" an overwhelming number of participants responded with 'Community.' In fact, community was identified **as the top need,** consistently highlighted across several demographic categories such as gender, sexual orientation, race, and location. It repeatedly emerged in survey responses and listening sessions as a fundamental need that, when met, improves access to other vital resources and opportunities.

The survey responses underscore the crucial role community plays in the lives of the LGBTQIA2S+ community in the county. Throughout focus group discussions and key informant interviews, participants expanded on this need, emphasizing that community extends beyond access to social networks—it involves building spaces where community members can feel authentically seen, heard, and supported. This theme of 'support,' which was deeply intertwined and included in the broader narrative of 'community' as a category, is significant to our emotional well-being, feelings of safety, and ties to resources. 'Community' was mentioned 249 out of the 348 needs assessment survey responses, often overlapping with other complex needs that fit into multiple categories. For example, one respondent expressed the need for **"community events accessible to people still being cautious about COVID"** and another shared **"a community space (fb discord etc) to discuss local healthcare access as a chronically ill person."** These types of responses were recorded among 'community' and at least one other category, such as healthcare. Additionally 'support' appeared 79 out of the total responses and is embedded within the community narrative, as seen in responses such as, **"more support in the community"** and **"more people who are supportive."**

> "I'm a part of certain communities, but also I feel alone a lot of the times. And maybe that's just a Black experience, I don't know.... Because I feel like, and it's not to be like, 'Oh, in these spaces, I don't feel Black enough. In these spaces, I don't feel queer enough,' but...I feel like in Sonoma County, besides my family, or the people that I grew up with, I don't really have that [community] as far as, like, Black AND queer.

According to a 2024 National Youth Survey by the Trevor Project, **'LGBTQ+ youth living in very accepting communities were half as likely to attempt suicide than those who lived in very unaccepting communities'** [1], demonstrating the life-saving importance of community in providing environments of belonging, affirmation, and support. **"You can't thrive without community,"** shared one key informant, capturing the sentiment echoed by many participants. Community members called for space to express themselves without threat of judgment or harm as members of the LGBTQIA2S+ community. Another participant shared, **"Community is everything. [It's] at the center of everything I do, particularly in Sonoma... the music, hip-hop, arts, and writing communities... where people saw me, heard me, treated me with kindness, respect, gratitude, and love."** In expression, in identity, in culture—for many, these third spaces are far more than places we gather, but a refuge among people with shared lived experiences, which can be key to overcoming isolation and building resilience against a world that so often marginalizes us.

Moreover, community is strength in collective action. In stakeholder interviews, there was a clear understanding that community is needed for mutual aid, emotional support, solidarity in action—citing the historical ability of the queer and trans community to mobilize for systemic change. For LGBTQIA2S+ individuals, especially those at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities, finding and being able to rely on a community that has similar lived experiences and shared struggles is a powerful force for challenging societal issues. **"It is time for us to come together, have meetings, and say, 'Listen, I'm going to do an immigration event on July 13. Would you like to bring resources there? Would you like to provide some type of workshop?' At what point do we create community events where all of us from different areas connect to provide a safe environment...where we are all welcome and appreciated, not [just] 'tolerated,'"** shared one participant, highlighting how showing up in solidarity empowers people to challenge the systems that oppress us.

According to the Horizon's 2018 Bay Area LGBTQ Community Needs Assessment, of which 9% of survey respondents lived in Sonoma County, **"connection to the LGBTQ community is important to respondents, but some feel disconnected and isolated,"** this was especially prevalent for respondents making under $60,000, Black respondents, Middle Eastern respondents, and respondents under the age of 24. This isolation was recognized as a significant barrier to mental health and emotional well-being, with many of Horizon's participants expressing loss of LGBTQIA2S+ community and isolation as one of their greatest concerns. [2]

And we saw this reflected in our own data. Particularly when focus group participants called for greater visibility within Sonoma County, with a particular emphasis on intersectional visibility—recognizing that queer people of color, neurodivergent community members, and other marginalized groups often feel invisible and tokenized within the larger LGBTQIA2S+ community and movements. One participant shared, **"the queer community did not recognize me as another queer in need…somehow it's harder to find me a housing when I'm a Black queer than it is when white queers are trying to do the community work to help each other, because at the end of the day, they're not trying to put a black person in their house, right?"** Another participant of our Black focus group stated, '**but they like us for photo ops, right?**' reflecting the broader reality of inequity within queer and trans spaces, where systemic barriers persist. Even in communities built on principles of inclusion, mutual aid, and support, there is a greater need for intentional efforts to create truly intersectional and equitable support systems—ones that are actively anti-racist and challenge the pedagogy of performative allyship and white supremacy, ensuring that QTBIPOC community members are not just included symbolically, but are genuinely and actively supported and uplifted in community spaces, decision-making, resource allocation, and outreach.

The insights from our needs assessment reaffirmed that community is not just a desire, but a necessity for queer and trans individuals and families in Sonoma County. It serves as both a means of survival and a pathway to deeper connection, belonging, and empowerment. Consistently, community was named as the most significant theme throughout our research, mitigating barriers and challenges when faced with collective power and knowledge, and fostering a sense of safety and resilience. **"Community is really a very important aspect of feeling safe. And definitely, when I didn't have any community it felt less safe, but still, just the existing in public spaces that are not specifically queer spaces…"** shared one ANHPI focus group stakeholder, **"Every community…is fractioned into all sorts of sub communities, and..it necessitates that we all, like the people that find each other, kind of hold on. The number of queer Asian trans people in Sonoma County [that I've met are] in this room."** For many participants, community means finding and holding on to one another, it is a foundation for deeper connection, and it is an avenue for creating lasting change.

2) HOUSING   130 OUT OF 348 RESPONDENTS   37.4%

Access to safe, stable, and affordable housing remains a critical issue for the LGBTQIA2S+ community in Sonoma County. In our needs assessment, **37.36% of respondents ranked housing among their top concerns,** underscoring the urgent demand for equitable solutions. Disaggregated survey data reveal even starker racial disparities—for example, **housing emerged as the #1 need among Indigenous and Black LGBTQIA2S+ community members, and as one of the top two needs in all other racial categories,** highlighting the compounded barriers our community faces due to systemic inequities.

> " I feel like it's hard to make friends, because also they end up moving because of housing costs and it's hard to build sustainable community…I think it impacts the ability to build a long term, strong community here.

LGBTQIA2S+ individuals face disproportionate housing instability exacerbated by discrimination, economic hardship, and lack of access to affirming support services. Nationally, **28% of LGBTQ youth have experienced homelessness or housing instability** [1], a figure that rises to **44% among Native/Indigenous LGBTQ youth** [3]. Economic hardship is a major contributor, with **40% of LGBTQ+ adults in California struggling to cover basic household expenses** [4]. Homeownership rates further illustrate this disparity—while **64% of the general U.S. population owns a home, only 49% of LGBTQ+ adults do, and that number drops to just 25% for transgender adults** [5]. In Sonoma County, **Black and Latino homeownership rates are significantly lower than white households, at 33% and 39% respectively** [6].

These challenges are particularly pronounced for Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) community members, who experience heightened vulnerability to displacement and financial insecurity. As one focus group

participant shared, **"Even if a landlord is supportive, the neighbors might not be. That makes it really difficult to feel safe in your own home."** Another participant emphasized the need for LGBTQIA2S+ affirming housing, stating, **"I had to find a queer-specific place to live because I was afraid of not knowing who I'd be living with."**

Further compounding these issues, **Sonoma County residents struggle with a severe housing shortage, with an estimated 38,000-unit deficit and an additional 20,000 homes needed by 2030 to meet demand** [7]. The lack of affordable housing disproportionately impacts marginalized populations, particularly LGBTQIA2S+ individuals who already face systemic barriers to economic stability. Additionally, **65% of Black renters and 56% of Latino renters in Sonoma County are cost-burdened, spending more than 30% of their income on rent** [6].

> I've had a few friends that had been kicked out of their house because they were part of the LGBTQ community...my parents were never like, 'we're kicking you out,' it's kind of like 'there's a door'... just being in a toxic environment or not in an accepting environment is really hard to kind of thrive and be yourself.

Addressing this crisis requires targeted interventions: increased access to LGBTQIA2S+-affirming housing services, tenant protections, pathways to stable, long-term housing solutions. Ensuring housing security for LGBTQIA2S+ individuals goes beyond shelter—it is essential to safety, dignity, and community well-being. By prioritizing inclusive housing policies and expanding supportive services, we can build a more just and equitable Sonoma County where everyone has the opportunity to *thrive.*

3) ECONOMIC RESOURCES

103 OUT OF 348 RESPONDENTS — 29.6%

Access to economic resources—including fair wages, financial stability, and employment opportunities—is a pressing need for LGBTQIA2S+ individuals in Sonoma County. In our needs assessment, **103 out of 348 respondents (nearly 30%) identified economic resources as one of their top four needs,** highlighting the widespread financial insecurity within the community.

LGBTQIA2S+ individuals consistently face higher rates of economic insecurity compared to their cisgender, heterosexual counterparts, making financial stability one of their most pressing needs. According to the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), LGBTQ+ adults are significantly more likely to live in poverty, **with 22% of LGBTQ+ people living below the federal poverty line,** compared to 16% of non-LGBTQ+ individuals [8]. For transgender individuals, the numbers are even more stark—**nearly 29% of trans people live in poverty** [8]. Economic precarity is not just a secondary concern for LGBTQ2S+ individuals—it is central to their ability to thrive in society.

Employment discrimination remains a major contributor to economic instability within the LGBTQIA2S+ community. The Center for American Progress (CAP) reports that **46% of LGBTQ workers have experienced discrimination or unfair treatment in the workplace** [9]. This includes being denied promotions, facing wage disparities, or even being fired due to their identity. Transgender individuals are disproportionately affected, with **one in three trans workers experiencing mistreatment at work** [9]. Now with federal protections being rolled back, workplace bias will likely continue to grow and further prevent LGBTQIA2S+ individuals, especially trans individuals, from gaining and maintaining well-paying jobs.

During a focus group regarding this topic, one participant shared, **"With the homophobia and the transphobia at work, and even just like being racist, we've had employees just leave because of that, and they haven't done anything to fix it."** They went on to share that sometimes, discriminatory working environments are worse for their mental health than the reality of being unemployed.

> I've also seen a lot more youth like lean on camming or sex work...to make extra money to make their rent differently. I heard a young trans girl [say] ...'because that's one of the only skills I have, and also that's how I will be able to make the most money.' And I was like, 'I don't disagree with you.' ...if she had to work her way up in our company [it's] very unlikely she would be very successful.

Poverty among LGBTQIA2S+ people is also deeply intertwined with access to essential services such as healthcare, housing, and social support. According to Funders for LGBTQ Issues, **32% of LGBTQ individuals have an annual income below $24,000, limiting their ability to secure stable housing and healthcare** [10]. The Georgetown Journal on Poverty Law and Policy highlights that LGBTQIA2S+ individuals often face barriers to public benefits, with discriminatory policies making it more difficult to access unemployment assistance, food

programs, and housing subsidies [11]. For many, financial insecurity is not just about income—it is about a systemic lack of access to the very resources that could help lift them out of poverty.

Systemic discrimination also disproportionately affects LGBTQIA2S+ people of color, younger individuals, and those with disabilities. The Institute for Research on Poverty notes that **LGBTQ+ people of color are at even higher risk of economic insecurity, often experiencing poverty rates of 40% or more, due to the compounded effects of racial discrimination and economic exclusion** [12]. LGBTQ+ youth, especially those who experience family rejection, often face homelessness at alarmingly high rates. According to research, **up to 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ+**, making economic stability an even more urgent need for this population[12].

The economic instability faced by LGBTQIA2S+ individuals underscores why financial resources—such as employment protections, wage equity, and access to social services—are among their most critical needs. For many, the fight for LGBTQIA2S+ rights is not just about social acceptance but about the ability to achieve financial independence and security. As the Center for Law and Social Policy puts it, **"LGBTQ+ discrimination is not just a civil rights issue—it's a poverty issue."** [13] Addressing these systemic economic challenges requires policy changes, increased funding for support programs, and a deeper commitment to workplace and housing protections for LGBTQIA2S+ individuals.

4) SAFETY

78 OUT OF 348 RESPONDENTS — 22.4%

For far too many LGBTQIA2S+ community members in Sonoma County, safety is not assured–it's an ongoing fight for survival. In our survey, **22.41% respondents named safety as a foundational need, and in listening sessions and interviews with stakeholders throughout this project, the critical nature of that need became even clearer**. Through our work at Positive Images, we directly support individuals and families facing discrimination, harassment, marginalization, and violence–harm that it doesn't always show up in ways our system can predict or adequately address. Safety can intersect with racism, ableism, and other marginalizations in Sonoma County, and the assumption of singular causation ignores the reality of compounded, intersectional harm. This is why supportive and intentional spaces, where the LGBTQIA2S+ community can feel secure in expressing their identities, without fear, are essential. For many, safety lies at the core of being able to experience comfort, joy, and belonging; and Sonoma County may not be as inclusive and safe as it's often perceived.

Threats to safety often extend past physical violence–they also encompass emotional, social, and psychological forms of harm. Participants cited microaggressions, exclusion and isolation, and hostile environments as barriers to well-being and belonging. These issues cultivate a culture within Sonoma County where LGBTQIA2S+ community members feel the need to remain vigilant to survive, with some community members feeling the need to carry weapons for protection, while others attempt to "pass" as straight or cisgender to avoid bias, maintain their employment, or preserve ties to family and community. For a great number of the LGBTQIA2S+ community, visibility is a source of strength and pride, but can come with potential risk. While increased representation fosters a more accepting and welcoming Sonoma County, the evolving social climate, ongoing inequities, and shifting attitudes towards our community can also heighten vulnerability to bias, scrutiny and judgement, or even physical assault, forcing them to constantly assess their surroundings for danger. A focus group participant explained, **"Once I decided to transition and pursue authenticity and just be as much myself as possible...I initially I felt very unsafe everywhere...I still feel unsafe some places, and I'm more careful about where I go and some places I make sure that I have my knife convenient, and mace, a baseball bat in my car, taser, etc. depending where I'm at."** The complex relationship between visibility and safety punctuates the urgent need for systemic change. Until all people, in the trueness of their identities, can live openly and without fear, true

> **Remember how they were saying that many of the people who are in power think that the Civil Rights Movement was over many years ago, but we living here in Sonoma [know] … it is a mirage that we live in [safety]… and there are many people in power that forget or decide to forget more than anything else.**

belonging will remain out of reach for many in Sonoma County. One participant, who lives in a small town, reflected the complicated layers of safety and visibility and intersectional experience, sharing "**Most people who I connect with in the town don't know I'm trans, and because I can pass, most people just think I'm a guy, and so I'm pretty careful...there's some people I don't feel safe [with]...although I also pass as a Black man ... so I know that there's some stuff that's under the surface, and so I'm careful, and I don't expect much in that way.**" While some queer and trans individuals reporting feeling relatively safe in Sonoma County, many expressed that this safety is conditional, dependent on factors of race, gender expression, and the ongoing presence of discrimination and lack of systemic accountability, making it clear that safety remains an urgent, unmet need that LGBTQIA2S+ folks navigate regularly.

In 2023, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) declared a National State of Emergency for LGBTQIA2S+ people in the U.S as a response to the onslaught of record numbers of anti-LGBTQIA2S+ bills introduced, the vast majority of which specifically targeted trans rights, and which continues its upward trend each year. The rise of legislative attacks parallels an increase of hate crimes and concerns for safety within our community. **"Over 2,800 hate crimes were recorded against LGBTQ+ people in 2023, accounting for almost one in four (22.8%) of all hate crimes recorded that year,"** according to HRC's analysis of FBI Crime Data. This trend continued into 2024, with HRC reporting that, for the second consecutive year, **"more than 1 in 5 of any type of hate crime is now motivated by anti-LGBTQ+ bias."** [14]

These concerns deeply resonate with LGBTQIA2S+ community members in Sonoma County. Several participants expressed how racial and systemic oppression complicates feeling safe, one sharing, **"the heavy policing that's happening in Sonoma County—being a BIPOC person...honestly, I think it's the cops and it's that environment—and then there's just heavily white spaces, that prevents us from feeling safe, which I don't know if we can change and be all 'white people, peace out,' but at least having QTBIPOC events, that's where you can be Chale. I'm with my homies. I can speak my language...It's called Cultura."** Another participant underscored the need for designated safe spaces for QTBIPOC community members, **"Just tear down everything in the system and start fresh with something different. So many things are baked in, racism and fascism...some of the smaller things that immediately come to mind [to address safety] are a lot of things that Positive Images already does, like providing spaces that are specific for certain groups of people, like the QTBIPOC hangout...I can come to the QTBIPOC hangout and know [there's] going to be other queer people of color who have...an alignment with me at least...they provide a certain sense of security."**

Unaccepting behaviors and the threat of various forms of harm takes a significant toll on the mental health of the LGBTQIA2S+ community in Sonoma County. Many participants of our needs assessment shared how feelings of insecurity, systemic discrimination, lack of representation, and lack of access to mental healthcare contributed to feeling unsafe. **19.25% of our survey respondents shared a need for increased, affirming, or low/no-cost mental health access, with 21.26% reporting currently having poor access to mental health resources.** Furthermore, community members described the nuances and impacts of accepting environments on well-being; whether in school, work, or with family, the impact of acceptance amplifies feelings of safety and security.

"Stop hate in school" one survey response read. In our experience, LGBTQIA2S+ youth in Sonoma County continue to experience discrimination and harassment in schools, often with little-to-no action taken by administrators. A 2024 article from The Press Democrat regarding incidents of bullying and discrimination in Sonoma County schools highlighted this persistent issue, **"According to parents and advocacy groups, a pattern of discrimination, bullying, sexual harassment and a lack of action to protect queer students is creating an unwelcome environment for them."** In this article, Oak Grove Union Co-President Cari Cardle stated, **"Our Youth Truth survey for staff said 25% were considering moving to a**

new district; 25% is a lot. That's inexcusable" and emphasized, **"We need to keep these kids alive and safe. We don't want kids to be suicidal because of what happens at school."** [15] One focus group participant made a point of how systemic inaction in schools exacerbates feelings of insecurity, **"I was assaulted due to my gender identity, which is what they had said...I did not feel safe expressing myself authentically...[The school] like[s] to preach that they're very open and inclusive and progressive and will stand up for their students. But when I brought it up to admin, they kind of just half-assed their way through trying to talk to the school SRO and never really resolved the issue."** Another respondent pointed out how the perception of safety in Sonoma County, especially in our schools, does not always align with the reality many queer and trans youth face, **"What I've noticed lately is a generalized idea of, 'it's safe here, or it's safer here' from administrators [and] teachers....[and] less severity around consequences [on behalf of] youth who are being emotionally attacked by their peers."** To create truly safer environments, structural changes are necessary, such as gender-neutral and all-gender welcome spaces in workplaces, schools, and public-use areas. As this participant continued, harassment is prevalent in gendered spaces, **"Locker rooms are a huge problem for high school students, especially gender expansive [youth]...It's one of the largest issues that I hear from kids at the high schools and where most of the bullying...starts. Just a neutral place for youth like that would really help."**

Workplaces also represent a space where members of the LGBTQIA2S+ community face discrimination. According to Them magazine, a 2023 study of 1,902 LGBTQ+ adults in the workforce, **"17% said they had experienced discrimination or harassment on the job in the past year."** The report further reveals trans and nonbinary employees are disproportionately affected and **"were more than twice as likely as cisgender queer employees to face discrimination and harassment: 22% of trans and nonbinary people experienced discrimination in the past year, and 26% experienced harassment."** [16] This further illustrates systemic bias, lack of protections, and unsafe environments compounding stress and anxiety for LGBTQIA2S+ folks. One participant shared, "I'm what they say as, 'straight passing.' So my coworkers don't know, and I don't always like to tell them, just 'cause I do work for the church, and it states, when they hired me...if the church doesn't believe in what I do, then I can get fired." Another participant added, **"You're not allowed to be genuine during work. You're not allowed to be you during work. You're not actually going to be cared for, because to us, this is a job. It's duty. But often you're not really cared for as a person...People suffer because 'I don't care about you, because I don't have to. You're replaceable.'"** Many respondents shared experiences such as this, spotlighting deep-rooted challenges our community faces, the pressures to conform, and the fear of retaliation—all stifling their ability to live authentically.

Addressing these concerns requires more than symbolic support, it demands tangible action, from increased affirming mental health resources to systemic policy changes that protect LGBTQIA2S+ lives. **Safety is non-negotiable.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

The urgency of these policy and programmatic recommendations is heightened by the shifting political landscape under the new federal administration and the alarming rise in anti-trans policies nationwide. The rollback of federal protections, increased state-level legislative attacks on LGBTQIA2S+ rights, and the persistent socio-economic disparities faced by queer and trans individuals, particularly those who are BIPOC, have created an environment of heightened vulnerability. The growing wave of anti-trans policies, ranging from bans on gender-affirming healthcare to restrictions on participation in public life, underscores the immediate need for systemic interventions at local, state, and federal levels. This document outlines essential policy and programmatic actions necessary to safeguard the well-being, economic security, and civil rights of LGBTQIA2S+ individuals, ensuring that their fundamental rights and dignity remain protected despite the escalating threats.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A. General Policy Recommendations
1. **Strengthen Anti-Discrimination Protections in Housing and Employment**
   - Many LGBTQIA2S+ individuals experience discrimination in renting, homeownership, and employment. Protections must be expanded and enforced.
2. **Implement Livable Wage Standards**
   - LGBTQIA2S+ individuals, particularly QTBIPOC, frequently struggle to find stable employment that pays a living wage.
3. **Ensure Equitable Access to Public Benefits**
   - Existing benefit programs are difficult to access for LGBTQIA2S+ individuals due to systemic barriers.
4. **Expand Gender-Affirming and LGBTQIA2S+ Inclusive Healthcare**
   - Ensure providers are trained in LGBTQIA2S+ health issues, gender-affirming care is covered by insurance, and access to services is equitable.

B. Policy Recommendations for the New Federal Administration
1. **Reinstate and Expand Federal Protections for LGBTQIA2S+ Workers**
   - Ensure workplace protections are enforced at the federal level, particularly for trans individuals.
1. **Defend Access to Gender-Affirming Healthcare at the Federal Level**
   - Protection against insurance discrimination for trans and gender-nonconforming individuals.
1. **Ensure Federal Housing Assistance Prioritizes LGBTQIA2S+ Individuals**
   - Increase resources for LGBTQIA2S+ affirming housing programs and prevent discrimination in HUD-funded programs.

> " There aren't enough job opportunities in general, but it's so much harder if you're queer.

PROGRAMMATIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONS SERVING QUEER PEOPLE

A. Housing & Economic Security
1. **Create More LGBTQIA2S+ Affirming Housing Spaces**
   - Develop and fund LGBTQIA2S+ housing initiatives, such as queer co-ops or community land trusts.
2. **Expand Direct Financial Assistance and Workforce Development Programs**
   - Provide emergency grants for LGBTQIA2S+ individuals experiencing financial hardship.
   - Offer training and mentorship programs for career advancement.

B. Safety & Community Support
1. **Expand Community-Based Safety Networks**
   - Partner with local businesses to create LGBTQIA2S+ Safe Zones.
   - Increase funding for peer-led security programs at LGBTQIA2S+ events.
2. **Develop Elder-LGBTQIA2S+ Inclusion Initiatives**
   - Programs should create intergenerational spaces to bridge gaps between older and younger LGBTQIA2S+ individuals.

> " I ask, how is this a safe space for trans people? If I get harassed, will anyone care?

This set of **policy** and **programmatic** recommendations is grounded in community voices and backed by data from the needs assessment report. Addressing these systemic barriers will require **collaboration between policymakers, community organizations, and grassroots advocates** to ensure that LGBTQIA2S+ individuals in Sonoma County and beyond can **thrive with dignity, safety, and stability.**

CONCLUSION

This report is a testament to the **resilience, creativity, and determination** of the LGBTQIA2S+ community in Sonoma County. It captures not only the systemic barriers we face but also the strength and ingenuity within our community to push back against adversity. The findings in this needs assessment underscore the **urgency of addressing the disparities in housing, economic resources, safety, and community connection that disproportionately impact queer and trans individuals, particularly those with intersecting marginalized identities.**

We have done the listening—amplifying the voices and lived experiences of LGBTQIA2S+ individuals across Sonoma County. **Now, it is time for action.** The systemic inequities we face demand bold, deliberate, and sustained efforts. From creating affirming housing spaces to expanding economic opportunities, enhancing safety networks, and fostering a true sense of belonging through community connection, these actions require immediate attention and collective commitment.

At the core of these recommendations is a dedication to equity and intersectionality, recognizing that progress for one part of the LGBTQIA2S+ community cannot come at the expense of others. **The stakes are high, but the solutions are within our reach.** This report is not just a call to action—it is a roadmap for systemic change, informed by those most affected and most knowledgeable about the needs of our community.

We invite policymakers, community leaders, organizations, and allies to move from listening to doing. The time to step up is now, to create a Sonoma County where every LGBTQIA2S+ individual can live with dignity, safety, and joy. Together, we can ensure that our community not only survives but thrives in the face of these challenges. Let's make this vision a reality.

REFERENCES

[1] "2024 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Young People." 2024 National Survey on LGBTQ+ Youth Mental Health, The Trevor Project, 2024, https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2024/.

[2] "LGBTQ Community Needs Assessment." Horizons Foundation, 5 Dec. 2019, https://www.horizonsfoundation.org/lgbtq-community-needs-assessment/.

[3] The Trevor Project. Homelessness and Housing Instability Among LGBTQ Youth. Feb. 2022, https://www.thetrevorproject.org/research-briefs/homelessness-and-housing-instability-among-lgbtq-youth-feb-2022/.

[4] California Budget & Policy Center. Supporting Economic Security for LGBTQ+ Californians. 2023, https://calbudgetcenter.org/resources/supporting-economic-security-for-lgbtq-californians/.

[5] United Way of Greater Los Angeles. Housing Inequality Within the LGBTQ+ Community. 2022, https://unitedwayla.org/news/housing-inequality-within-the-lgbtq-community/.

[6] Generation Housing. State of Housing in Sonoma County. 2022, https://healthypetaluma.org.

[7] Generation Housing. How Much Housing Do We Need? 2021, https://tinyurl.com/4meyxz8j.

[8] "Understanding Poverty in the LGBTQ+ Community." HRC, www.hrc.org/resources/understanding-poverty-in-the-lgbtq-community. Accessed 14 Feb. 2025.

[9] Glass, Aurelia. "Fact Sheet: LGBT Workers in the Labor Market." Center for American Progress, 1 June 2022, www.americanprogress.org/article/fact-sheet-lgbt-workers-in-the-labor-market/.

[10] "Economic Opportunity." Funders for LGBTQ Issues, 19 May 2018, lgbtfunders.org/resources/issues/economic-opportunity/.

[11] "Anti-LGBTQ+ Discrimination and Barriers to Accessing Public Benefits." Georgetown Journal on Poverty Law & Policy, Georgetown Law, www.law.georgetown.edu/poverty-journal/blog/anti-lgbtq-discrimination-and-barriers-to-accessing-public-benefits/. Accessed 14 Feb. 2025.

[12] "The Complexity of LGBT Poverty in the United States." Institute for Research on Poverty, 28 June 2021, www.irp.wisc.edu/resource/the-complexity-of-lgbt-poverty-in-the-united-states/.

[13] "LGBTQ+ Discrimination: It's a Poverty Issue." Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), 29 June 2023, www.clasp.org/blog/lgbtq-discrimination-its-poverty-issue/.

[14] "The Epidemic of Violence against the Transgender & Gender-Expansive Community in the U.S." HRC, Nov. 2024, reports.hrc.org/an-epidemic-of-violence-2024.

[15] Minkler, Alana. "Anti-LGBTQ+ Bullying at a Local School Pushed a Boy to the Brink. His Mother Says the School Did Nothing." Santa Rosa Press Democrat, 10 July 2024, www.pressdemocrat.com/article/news/lgbtq-discrimination-santa-rosa-school/.

[16] Rummler, Orion. "Despite Federal Protections, LGBTQ+ People Are Being Mistreated at Work." Them, 24 Sept. 2024, www.them.us/story/lgbtq-people-mistreated-workplace-federal-protections-williams-institute-survey.

A P P E N D I C E S

Glossary of Terms

Acronyms

1. **LGBTQIA2S+**: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Two-Spirit, plus other sexual orientations and gender identities that differ from heterosexual and cisgender.
   a. We use LGBTQIA2S+ versus other versions of the acronym to recognize the real individuals in our community that make up the group of people that we serve.
2. **QTBIPOC**: Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.
3. **ANHPI**: Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander.
4. **GNC**: Gender Non-Conforming.
5. **PAR**: Participatory Action Research, a methodology that involves the participation of affected communities in research design and implementation.
6. **HUD**: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.
7. **SRO**: School Resource Officer, typically a law enforcement officer assigned to work in schools.

Concepts

1. **Intersectionality**: A framework introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw to examine how overlapping social identities (e.g., race, gender, sexuality) compound experiences of discrimination and oppression.
2. **Equity vs. Equality**: Equity involves tailoring resources and opportunities to address systemic disadvantages, whereas equality provides the same resources for everyone, regardless of differing needs.
3. **Community**: Defined as both social networks and affirming spaces where LGBTQIA2S+ individuals feel authentically seen, heard, and supported.
   a. We recognize that Community means different things to different people, at Positive Images, Community means a space of belonging, where everyone can find the connection that they need without feeling like they need to leave a piece of their identity behind.
4. **Safe Zones**: Physical or conceptual spaces where LGBTQIA2S+ individuals can feel secure from discrimination or harm.
5. **Gender-Affirming Care**: Medical and psychological support for individuals to transition or express their gender identity, such as hormone therapy and counseling.

Groups and Identity Terms

1. **Queer**: An umbrella term for sexual orientations and gender identities outside the heteronormative or binary spectrum.
2. **Transgender (Trans)**: Individuals whose gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth.
3. **Gender Diverse**: Refers to people whose gender expressions or identities do not conform to societal expectations.
   a. In this report, we use Gender Diverse to describe people who are not cisgender.
4. **Two-Spirit:** A term used by some Indigenous North American communities to describe a person who embodies both masculine and feminine spirits.
   a. Two-Spiritedness is a closed practice and is not a synonym for non-binary, as this identity extends beyond gender identity or expression and includes a connection to one's ancestral and cultural understanding of femininity and masculinity.
5. **Agender**: A person who does not identify as any gender. Some agender people refer to themselves as, "genderless" or "gender-free."
6. **Latine**: A gender-neutral term for individuals of Latin American origin, preferred over Latino/Latina in some contexts.
7. **BIPOC**: Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, emphasizing the unique experiences of systemic racism faced by these groups.
8. **QTBIPOC**: a subset of BIPOC. Individuals who identify as QTBIPOC, identify as both a person of color and a member of the LGBTQIA2S+ community.
9. **Neurodivergen**t: Individuals whose neurological development and functioning differ from what is considered typical or neurotypical.

Systemic Issues and Challenges

1. **Housing Instability**: Challenges faced in securing safe, affordable, and affirming housing due to discrimination and economic barriers.
2. **Economic Insecurity**: Financial instability and poverty, compounded by employment discrimination.
3. **Safety and Visibility**: The ongoing struggle to live authentically without fear of physical, emotional, or psychological harm.
4. **Hate Crimes**: a crime, typically one involving violence or intimidation, that is motivated by prejudice on the basis of ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability status, or similar ground.

Research and Advocacy Methods

1. **Needs Assessment**: A process to identify and prioritize the unmet needs of a specific community through surveys, interviews, and focus groups.
2. **Affinity Groups**: Focus groups designed for specific intersections of identity (e.g., Black LGBTQIA2S+ individuals) to provide targeted insights and foster safe discussions.
3. **Community Feedback Session**: A participatory event to validate and refine research findings through the input of community members.

"We have to be visible. We should not be ashamed of who we are."
-Sylvia Rivera

Queering Land Back:
Indigiqueer and QTBIPOC
Resistance

TRANS
PEOPLE
BELONG

POSITIVE IMAGES

As We Grow...

This report was prepared by Positive Images.
Project Vision and Design: Kiki Barbosa
Data Analysis and Narrative: Vanessa Hamill-Meeriyakerd, Crimson Diggs, and Chase Overholt
Contributors: Ronimar Luna-Bazán, Marian Mejia, Drew Rose, Laura LeCave, and Joy Anderson