

# MEET THE NEIGHBORS

A full-length portrait of Rhode Island's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, two-spirited, queer and questioning individuals

**EQUITY**

**ACTION**

Rhode Island's Fund for Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Initiatives



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THE RHODE ISLAND FOUNDATION

## **MEET THE NEIGHBORS**

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#### MEET THE NEIGHBORS

This report's release makes Rhode Island the first state in the nation to attempt to more fully describe its statewide LGBTQ communities.

The findings pave the way for Rhode Island to continue its leadership role on this critical civil rights issue.

# Preface

## The launch of Equity Action and its importance to Rhode Island and beyond.

THE LAUNCH OF EQUITY ACTION coincides with a series of local, national and global events that have drawn increased attention to the rights and concerns of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) communities. These events include:

- the election of a gay mayor to Providence,
- the emerging work in Rhode Island related to community coalitions and a possible community center,
- the recent decision on gay marriage by the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts,<sup>1</sup>
- the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision on sodomy,<sup>2</sup>
- the appointment of a gay bishop to the Episcopal Church,
- the decision in Canada to allow gay marriages,<sup>3</sup> and
- the ever-increasing LGBTQ visibility in the media and on television.

The confluence of these events both inspire hope and provoke fear in the debate about gay rights, resulting in considerable backlash against the incremental legal and social protections that have been established. Issues which have long been shrouded in silence and confined to the margins of public discourse are suddenly at the heart of debates within religious communities and at play in national elections. These issues – such as legalizing gay marriage or appointing gay clergy – are often sensationalized and framed divisively.

Too often, members of LGBTQ communities have been forced into a defensive posture in such debates. In both public and private arenas, individuals who have “come out” and advocated for gay rights have had to worry about physical safety and violence, harassment, job security and jeopardizing personal relationships.

Advocating for gay rights has often been defined as an individual process that occurs in isolation rather than as part of a broader effort to gain equal rights for an entire community. One factor contributing to this isolation is the fact that not a lot is known about LGBTQ communities as a whole. To date, there has been surprisingly limited empirical research about LGBTQ communities nationwide. This lack of research has contributed to a climate in which, too often, misconceptions and prejudice rather than understanding and compassion, shape the ways that members of LGBTQ communities are treated in both public and private settings.

The research that *has* been conducted on LGBTQ populations has often focused on health disparities or specific medical concerns. While such research is vital in advancing scientific knowledge and treatment practices, it is too narrowly defined to provide a holistic portrait of an individual's life, much less the nature of an entire community.

Because of a lack of other types of research and a lack of mechanisms for disseminating accurate information about LGBTQ communities, health-related studies have played an overly-determinant role in shaping public conceptions about the lives of gays and lesbians. In subtle but significant ways, the studies have reinforced an antiquated yet prevalent association between homosexuality, pathology and/or abnormality.

This report, *Meet the Neighbors*, is one of the cornerstones of Equity Action. To our knowledge, the release makes Rhode Island the first state in the nation to attempt to more fully describe its LGBTQ communities.

The report's findings pave the way for Rhode Island to continue its leadership role on this critical civil rights issue and test new models for social change work that:

- respect the complexity of the issues at stake,
- honor the dynamic, diverse nature of LGBTQ communities,
- embody the values of compassion, respect, love, and fairness,
- draw upon the traditions of dissent, solidarity, and creativity that distinguish LGBTQ communities,
- function effectively to create lasting change, and
- are inclusive rather than exclusive.

Organizations such as the National Lesbian and Gay Community Funding Partnership (NLGCFP) and The Rhode Island Foundation believe a critical step in effecting such change involves developing philanthropic resources that will equip LGBTQ communities to:

- support individuals and organizations as they work for equal protection and equal access to services,



- create the organizations, infrastructures and political and social networks necessary to tap into the community’s considerable strengths and address its self-defined priorities.

In our scan of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning communities, we have found decidedly mixed information about the quality of life in Rhode Island. Although strides have been made in the effort to end the discrimination faced by these communities, significant barriers to the promise of equity still remain.

This study contains numerous, dismaying stories about the great fear of and irrational hatred toward LGBTQ individuals. An elderly lesbian recounts being told by the staff of her nursing home to hide her sexual orientation. A teenager reports being kicked out of her home and into the street when her family learned she was gay. Youth report they are afraid to go to school because of the level of harassment and threats of violence they face in Rhode Island’s public education system.

Although a high percentage of respondents spoke of the centrality of religion in their lives, same sex couples are prohibited from sanctifying their partnerships within their religious traditions. LGBTQ individuals live with the daily knowledge that they are not protected from such discrimination. The weight of these experiences is borne by the entire LGBTQ community and informs the way they conduct their lives.

In the tradition of civil rights work, there is a belief that no one is free until everyone is free. We embrace this sense of connectivity and believe no one in our state can be certain of his or her individual rights until we guarantee equal protection for all Rhode Islanders.

One of the questions – and challenges – our state faces is whether we will acknowledge the barriers to equal protection and share in the work of removing them.

It is common for people to distance themselves from LGBTQ communities without recognizing its members are part of every sphere of our public and private lives: our families, neighborhoods, churches, schools and workplaces. Imagine, then, if all Rhode Islanders faced the daily threat of being thrown out of their homes, barred from legally affirming their marriages, or being attacked simply because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Imagine if all Rhode Islanders lived with the possibility of losing their parental rights or their means of economic support simply because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Imagine how these pressures would change each of their lives. Imagine how it would impact the state’s productivity and the basic health and happiness of our communities. Would people still think of Rhode Island as a good, safe, affirming community? Would they want to live here?

Even in the face of these fears, though, we found LGBTQ individuals are making significant contributions to the economic and civic life of the state. This scan represents an effort to reach consensus on the strengths of Rhode Island's LGBTQ communities, as well as the challenges they face.

Several key issues were identified by community members and community leaders that can form the basis of agreement and a plan for action in our diverse communities. The strengths and concerns of LGBTQ communities as illustrated by this report provide a means for countering the continued attacks on the basic rights of every Rhode Islander.

Often reports provide a conclusion to critical policy matters and too often we simply accept the facts presented to us as the way things are. It might be easy to read this report and only see the positive gains LGBTQ communities have made and the strength and vitality of the communities themselves.

Yet the power of this document, from our perspective, is it maps the significant work yet to be done. This report is not a conclusion; it is not something we can put aside in the hopes incremental progress will continue. This report demonstrates the need for action, the need for deeper compassion and understanding, and the responsibility each of us bears toward honoring and affirming the dignity of all who live in Rhode Island.

We are committed to working with elected officials, government agencies, service providers, professional associations and community groups to ensure there is a timely and meaningful response to the challenges raised in this report. As part of this effort we recommend a joint Legislative Commission be established to study and respond to the findings.

Equity Action signals a new and permanent level of commitment to the LGBTQ communities of Rhode Island. We hope you will be as inspired and as deeply affected by the stories and experiences of our neighbors as we have been. We invite you to join our efforts to continue Rhode Island's tradition of leading the cause of human rights.

Sincerely,

Pablo Rodriguez  
*Chair, Board of Directors*  
*The Rhode Island Foundation*

Ronald V. Gallo  
*President & CEO*  
*The Rhode Island Foundation*

Nancy Hetherington  
and Peter Hocking  
*Co-Chairs, Equity Action*

# Background

## The Rhode Island LGBTQ Community Scan and the creation of Equity Action.

IN MAY 2002 THE RHODE ISLAND FOUNDATION accepted a challenge from the National Lesbian and Gay Community Funding Partnership (NLGCFP) to create Equity Action, a field of interest fund that will be a permanent philanthropic resource for Rhode Island's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) communities. In launching Equity Action, the Foundation signaled a high level of commitment to the National Partnership's goal of making equal protection under the law and access to services a reality for LGBTQ individuals by:

- generating new philanthropic resources and financial support for these issues and communities,
- increasing awareness about LGBTQ concerns within philanthropy, and
- encouraging a positive relationship between community foundations and the organizational and philanthropic leadership of local LGBTQ communities.

In preparing to launch Equity Action, The Rhode Island Foundation contracted with John Snow, Inc. (JSI) to conduct the *Rhode Island LGBTQ Community Scan*, a comprehensive survey designed to better understand the composition, capacity and needs of Rhode Island's LGBTQ communities. The Foundation believes the scan provides vital information that will facilitate the community's efforts to build the infrastructure of LGBTQ-serving organizations, to identify strategies for reaching isolated or "invisible" groups and to create bridges among different LGBTQ communities as well as between LGBTQ communities and "mainstream" institutions. Specifically, this report focuses on the Rhode Island LGBTQ community's demographics, the resources it has to contribute to the state and its current political and cultural priorities.

# Summary

## A brief overview of the Rhode Island LGBTQ Community Scan results.

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THE RESULTS OF THIS COMMUNITY SCAN are based on a survey of 371 individual community members, four focus groups with targeted populations, a survey of 16 separate organizations, and key informant interviews with 18 different community leaders.

Unique and distinctive issues were raised in this report. However, the broad scope of the Community Scan did not allow for concentrated study of any particular subpopulation or issue, nor can it claim to proportionally represent the state's population in absolute terms. Rather, this project serves as the foundation for future study. Future research should focus on individual subpopulations to further delineate the strengths, needs and priorities of each, as well as particular community issues such as access to health care.

This scan has identified the following issues as top priorities for Rhode Island's LGBTQ communities:

- ensuring safe schools and youth services,
- advocating for civil rights and protections,
- expanding access to welcoming health care,
- recognizing the needs of elders,
- supporting families,
- building community cohesiveness,
- addressing diversity within the communities,
- increasing awareness and visibility of the communities,
- creating a community/resource center, and
- sustaining HIV services.

Additionally, the data from the scan reveals the following:

- The LGBTQ community is not homogeneous. Sexual orientation and gender identity are just two elements of an individual's experience. Individuals identifying as LGBTQ are of every race, ethnicity, economic background and religious denomination. Those who come from communities of color or other minority groups experience multiple oppressions.
- LGBTQ communities look much like the rest of the state. Individuals within these communities are long-term residents; active participants in the labor force; geographically distributed; diverse in age, gender and ethnic and racial background; serve in the military; and often self-identify as parents and partners.
- LGBTQ communities experience discrimination and prejudice in public and private settings. Participants indicated experiencing or witnessing homophobia in all aspects of their lives – in public establishments and on the street.
- Ensuring safe schools for youth is a high priority for LGBTQ communities. When asked to rank their top service-related priorities, ensuring safe schools for LGBTQ youth consistently ranked as number one, regardless of respondents' race, age, gender or sexual orientation.
- LGBTQ-focused organizations are typically newer, rely heavily on unpaid staff and have budgets under \$50,000. These organizations struggle to operate and have more difficulty responding to the increased demands and needs of a growing and diverse community.

# Overall Findings

## Understanding the composition, capacity and needs of Rhode Island's LGBTQ communities.

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THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION REPRESENTS data gathered from surveys of individuals and organizations, as well as focus groups and key informant interviews. (For a complete description of how these individual pieces were executed, refer to the *Scan Methodology* at [www.rifoundation.org/equity\\_action](http://www.rifoundation.org/equity_action).)

### Demographics

“The LGBTQ community” is a term that has become commonly used and, as such, often obscures the lives of the individuals who comprise it. Legislation is made, policies are written and programs developed often without reflecting on the experience of what it means to live as a lesbian, gay man, bisexual, or transgender individual. This section more closely examines this experience. (For more information on the aggregated responses to each survey question, refer to Appendices A through F at [www.rifoundation.org/equity\\_action](http://www.rifoundation.org/equity_action).)

Most of the 371 survey respondents are long-time residents of Rhode Island. More than half (54%) have lived in the state for over 15 years; a third have been here for their entire lives. Those who were not born and/or raised in Rhode Island came for education or employment and never left.

Participants cited family, friends, partners, employment, geographic features and progressive politics as other reasons for continuing to live in this state. The presence of a gay mayor in Providence also was noted as a positive sign. One elder focus group participant responded in song: “Rhode Island born, Rhode Island bred, and when I die, I’ll be Rhode Island dead.”

The population analyzed in this community scan varied in age, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity and gender as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Respondent Identification<sup>†</sup>** (total number of survey respondents = 371)

AGE		RACE/ETHNICITY*	
<18	2%	African American/Black	5%
18 – 24	13%	Native American	4%
25 – 29	10%	Latino/Hispanic	2%
30 – 39	30%	White/Caucasian	87%
40 – 49	23%	Asian/Pacific Islander	1%
50 – 59	17%	Other	3%
60+	7%		

SEXUAL ORIENTATION		GENDER	
Gay	45%	Male	50%
Lesbian	34%	Female	45%
Bisexual	7%	Transgender	4%
Queer	8%	Other	1%
Chose no label	3%		

<sup>†</sup>Due to computer rounding, percents may not equal 100. \*Note: Able to choose more than one option.

**Table 2. U.S. Census and LGBTQ Sample: Race**

ETHNICITY	ALL AGES		18 & OVER	
	U.S. CENSUS	LGBTQ SAMPLE	U.S. CENSUS	LGBTQ SAMPLE
White/Caucasian	85.0%	87.4%	87.3%	85.2%
African American/Black	4.5%	5.4%	3.9%	5.2%
American Indian and Alaska Native	0.5%	2.2%	0.4%	2.2%
Asian/Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander*	2.4%	1.3%	2.2%	1.3%
Latino/Hispanic	8.7%	4.3%	8.7%	4.0%
Other	5.0%	3.2%	4.1%	3.2%

\*Note: Able to choose more than one option.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Redistricting Data (Public Law 94-171) Summary File, Rhode Island Foundation Survey Data

## Community Scan Compared to U.S. Census

To help contextualize information gathered in this community scan, demographic information from this sample was compared to statistics from the U.S. Census.

Those surveyed had both similarities to and differences from the overall population of Rhode Island. Regarding race, the LGBTQ sample contained 2.4% more white individuals than the overall Rhode Island population, based upon the 2000 Census. The sample was also higher in the number of black or African American participants (by 0.9%), and American Indian and Alaskan Native individuals (0.5% state-wide, versus 2.2% in this sample). Statewide, however, there are approximately twice as many Asian and Latino/a individuals than were represented in this survey (2.4% vs. 1.3%, and 8.7% vs. 4.3%, respectively).

The geographical distribution of this sample represents the majority of all towns and cities throughout Rhode Island. Of the 39 towns and cities throughout the state, 34 were represented in this scan (refer to the *Survey of Individuals with Compiled Raw Data* at [www.rifoundation.org/equity\\_action](http://www.rifoundation.org/equity_action) for a full list of towns and cities represented).

Regarding gender, the Community Scan and the 2000 Census are again similar. On the Rhode Island survey, four percent of survey respondents identified as transgender, while one percent chose to not label their gender identity, options which are unavailable on the national census.

**Table 3. U.S. Census and LGBTQ Sample: Gender**

GENDER	U.S. CENSUS	LGBTQ SAMPLE
Male	48%	50%
Female	52%	45%
Transgender	N/A	4%
Other	N/A	1%

## Education

The LGBTQ respondents were more likely than the overall state population to have a bachelor's degree or higher. According to the 2000 Census, 25.6% of all Rhode Islanders over the age of 25 have obtained a bachelor's degree or higher.<sup>4</sup> This is compared to 81.1% of the LGBTQ sample for all participants over the age of 25. Assessments of other LGBTQ communities also have found over-representation of higher education.<sup>5,6,7</sup>



“I am a typical Rhode Islander. My primary connections are to my family. I spend Saturday and Sundays with my family. Being a part of the LGBTQ community is just a slice of my life.”

As this community scan did not distinguish between two- and four-year colleges, it is unclear if this percentage also includes associate’s degrees, which are not included in the census data. Still, it is clear the Rhode Island LGBTQ sample was more likely to have completed post-secondary education. As with similar studies, it is not known whether this is due to the limited population sampled, sample bias or if LGBTQ individuals are on the whole more likely to pursue higher education. This will remain unclear until population-based studies are conducted within LGBTQ communities.

### Relationships and Families

Rhode Island LGBTQ individuals have created lasting relationships and families. Fifty-three percent of all respondents reported being in monogamous relationships, with the average length of relationship being 7.25 years (range: one month to more than 39 years). Eighteen percent had previously been in a male-female marriage, and four percent were currently heterosexually married. Forty-five percent reported currently living with an LGBTQ partner (40% with partner, 5% with partner and children). According to the U.S. Census, 65% of the general Rhode Island population report living in a family household, with 48% living as married partners, and 31% living with children under 18.<sup>8</sup>

On the whole, expanding recognition and rights of LGBTQ partnerships and families was ranked as one of the top community issues. LGBTQ relationships are treated differently than heterosexual partnerships, lacking privileges and benefits afforded to heterosexual couples by law. When asked about benefits accompanying legally-sanctioned marriage, 81% of all respondents indicated they would want domestic partnership coverage, 77% are in favor of civil unions, and 67% want legal marriage as an option. Eleven percent of respondents reported they have had a commitment ceremony or wedding with their partner.

The presence of children in LGBTQ-led families has been surveyed in several other LGBTQ needs assessments, and each has found one fifth to one quarter of respondents indicating they are parents, often biological.<sup>9,10,11,12</sup> In the present study, 22% indicated they were parents. Of these, 71% reported being a biological parent, 6% had adopted, 26% shared parenting with a current or previous partner, 14% were stepparents and 11% were grandparents. (Note: Participants could choose more than one category, thus percentages do not total 100%.) Nearly one out of every four respondents indicated they intended to have children in the future. While most (44%) were not yet sure what method they would choose, adoption (26%) and alternative insemination (17%) were the top two choices among available options.

## Religion and Spirituality

“[My faith] keeps me morally grounded and spiritually fulfilled.”

Surveys asking LGBTQ individuals about their beliefs report high numbers who follow a particular religious or spiritual belief system.<sup>13,14</sup> Half of all respondents in this survey raised with any spiritual or religious traditions continue to affiliate themselves with one (87% and 44%, respectively).

Elder participants were the most likely to have been raised with religious or spiritual practices (96% of all participants older than 60), while youth were the least likely (43% of all participants younger than 18). According to one national survey, the LGBTQ population is less likely to follow a specific religion.<sup>15</sup> In this 2001 national survey on religious identification, 81% of the overall American population identified with a religious group (with 54% claiming membership to a specific house of worship), compared to 90% ten years earlier. The largest growth was seen in those who choose to not identify with any religion at all.

Respondents were given the opportunity to expand upon the role of spiritual or religious traditions in their lives. When individuals detailed why they chose not to follow any particular practice, responses often reflected frustration at the treatment of LGBTQ individuals within religious institutions. “Mostly, they make me angry for their intolerance,” explained one individual. Another echoed this sentiment, stating he felt “too much rejection as a child from the congregation and leaders.”

Some saw their faith as the guiding force in their lives, stating, “It keeps me morally grounded and spiritually fulfilled,” and “My spiritual beliefs shape my world view.” Some emphasized their connection to cultural backgrounds (“Being Portuguese, my religion ties in a great deal with my culture; therefore it can’t be avoided”), while others attributed newfound faith to having children (“I looked for a church when my daughter was growing up”).

## Military Service

Gays serving in the military is another nationally-debated topic. LGBTQ Rhode Islanders indicated a level of participation in armed services that is consistent with both state and national statistics for the general population. Slightly more than 11% of the LGBTQ sample had served in the armed forces (a number reflected in a similar LGBTQ scan conducted in California<sup>16</sup>), a number similar to state (12.9%) and national (12.7%) figures. In this study, nine veteran respondents stated they had been discharged or dismissed due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. Additionally, ten respondents were denied entrance into the military because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

**Table 4. Participation in the Military**

MILITARY SERVICE	U.S. POPULATION 18 YEARS & OVER	VETERANS (number)	VETERANS (percent)
United States	208,130,352	26,403,703	12.7%
Rhode Island	797,047	102,494	12.9%
LGBTQ Sample	371	41	11.4%

## Employment and Income

Within this survey, 64.7% of all respondents indicated they currently work full-time and 12.5% work part-time for a total of 77.2% in the civilian labor force. This compares to 64.1% of Rhode Islanders who report being in the civilian labor force.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to being more fully employed, Rhode Island's LGBTQ population as represented in this study also has higher household incomes than the general population.

**Table 5. Household Income of Rhode Islanders vs. LGBTQ Sample**

HOUSEHOLD INCOME	U.S. CENSUS (number)	U.S. CENSUS (percent)	LGBTQ SAMPLE (number)	LGBTQ SAMPLE (percent)
\$0 to \$25,000	122,928	17.7%	48	12.9%
\$25,000 to \$100,000	238,469	70.9%	244	65.8%
\$100,000 or more	47,015	11.4%	79	21.4%

This Rhode Island finding, though, runs counter to national statistics. For example, Badgett (1998), concludes, on average, gay men earn less than heterosexual men (even if they have attained a higher level of formal education), while lesbians have similar earnings to heterosexual women.<sup>18</sup> This inconsistency, among others may merit future exploration.

### Volunteerism and Philanthropy

“I believe we should all live not just for ourselves, but with the good of all in mind. Nothing I do fails to affect others in some way.”

Survey respondents frequently reported they contribute to their community via supporting local organizations, either financially or by volunteering time. Overall, 54% of all respondents indicated that within the past 12 months they supported at least one organization by volunteering their time. Similar results (although slightly higher) were found in surveys conducted in California and Washington state.<sup>19,20,21</sup> This compares to 44% of the general Rhode Island population, and 58% nationwide.<sup>22</sup>

Looking at the ages of these volunteers from the general population, 25% of those aged 55 or older volunteer in Rhode Island, while 47% do so nationally.<sup>23</sup> However, of the 85 individuals over the age of 50 included in this report, 82% indicated they had volunteered within the past year, a number far higher than both the state and national figures.

Regarding charitable contributions, Rhode Island consistently ranks among the lowest in terms of percentage making financial donations.<sup>24,25</sup> Based upon itemized tax returns, 33% of all Rhode Islanders gave to charity in 2000.<sup>26</sup> However, 52% of all Rhode Island's LGBTQ community respondents indicated they contributed to at least one organization financially; 48% contributed to at least two, and 35% contributed to at least three different organizations.

When asked to list the names of organizations receiving funds, the list was broad and consisted of both LGBTQ-focused and non-LGBTQ-focused organizations. (For a full list of charitable organizations, refer to Appendix D at [www.rifoundation.org/equity\\_action](http://www.rifoundation.org/equity_action).)

When asked why they choose to sponsor selected groups, responses were as diverse as the actual organizations themselves. Some gave in memory of friends and family, others out of religious beliefs and others to support specific social causes. In general, it seems the underlying reasons for community support, either through financial means or personal time, parallels those of Rhode Islanders as a whole: compassion, personal interest and a wish to make a difference.

# Past research has shown health and social service providers discriminate against LGBTQ clients, resulting in delayed, infrequent, or avoided use of these services.

## Challenges

One of the most frequently raised topics in the focus groups was a lack of understanding from non-LGBTQ individuals. Young persons face this in schools, while elders question how welcoming senior services will be. Concerns ranged from fears about possible physical or emotional harm to expectations of inferior treatment when trying to access mainstream services and programs.

Access to services is a vital and central focus of much of the work being done by groups and organizations addressing LGBTQ health. Past research has shown health and social service providers discriminate against LGBTQ clients, and this results in delayed, infrequent, or avoided use of these services.<sup>27,28,29,30,31</sup> Such responses lead to late diagnoses, misdiagnoses and missed opportunities for healing and prevention.

When asked about their access to and use of health care services, 84% of all individuals surveyed stated they had a regular doctor or nurse they see for medical care. When asked if they were “out” to their medical providers, 48% indicated they were “out” to all providers, 33% indicated they were “out” to some of them and 19% stated they had not disclosed any information regarding sexual orientation or gender identity.

Respondents also were asked to indicate how important some factors are in choosing health care services when in need. Quality (82%) and confidentiality (64%) were recognized as the most important factors. Other factors cited as “very important” were cost (42%) and location (40%).

However, there are differences in how LGBTQ individuals choose health care services. Youth ranked the ability to choose the gender of the provider as second only to quality of service. For African Americans, the ability to choose the race or ethnicity of one’s provider was ranked higher than the ability to choose the sexual orientation or gender identity. Transgender individuals were more likely to indicate a service provider’s reputation for serving the transgender community was significant.

**Table 6. Factors Considered “Important” or “Very Important” When Choosing Services (by selected subpopulations)**

<b>FACTORS WHEN CHOOSING SERVICE</b>	<b>TOTAL SAMPLE</b> (371 respondents)	<b>ELDERS</b> (24 respondents)	<b>TRANSGENDER</b> (14 respondents)	<b>AFRICAN AMERICAN</b> (20 respondents)	<b>LATINO / A</b> (16 respondents)
Ability to choose gender	50%	36%	50%	41%	67%
Ability to choose race/ethnicity	8%	5%	7%	35%	7%
Ability to choose sexual orientation/ gender identity	24%	32%	21%	24%	33%
Reputation for serving the transgender community	28%	24%	86%	41%	20%
Reputation for serving LGBTQ communities	63%	36%	79%	59%	60%
Assurances of confidentiality	88%	86%	86%	94%	80%
Location or accessibility	79%	82%	71%	77%	79%
Cost of service	76%	77%	86%	71%	80%
Quality of service	97%	100%	100%	100%	93%

## Safety

“Homophobia scares ... me. I lose sleep over it at night.”

Survey participants were asked to indicate whether they personally experienced or witnessed harassment or homophobia of LGBTQ individuals in the past 12 months. Other surveys of LGBTQ communities have included questions about harassment, and the results have detailed prejudice and misinformation present in all parts of the country.<sup>32,33,34,35,36</sup> On the national level, 14% of all hate crimes reported were motivated by a sexual orientation bias according to statistics compiled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.<sup>37</sup>

One-fifth of all individuals in this survey stated they experienced or witnessed harassment on a monthly basis on the street (22%) or at a public establishment (21%). One out of every five students experienced homophobia at school on a monthly basis. Table 7 further illustrates the frequency with which the overall sample experienced or witnessed harassment or homophobia of LGBTQ individuals.

On the national level, 14% of all hate crimes reported were motivated by sexual orientation bias.

**Table 7. Harassment of LGBTQ Individuals**

HARASSMENT	MORE THAN 1X/DAY	DAILY	WEEKLY	MONTHLY	YEARLY
At work	2.0%	3.1%	4.2%	10.2%	14.4%
At school*	6.5%	9.1%	9.1%	19.5%	18.2%
At home	0.8%	1.4%	2.0%	6.2%	5.6%
On the street	1.7%	3.2%	5.7%	22.4%	32.8%
At a public establishment	1.1%	2.5%	5.1%	21.2%	32.2%
By a firefighter, police officer, or other civil servant	0.3%	0.8%	1.1%	6.8%	15.9%
At your place of worship	0.3%	0.6%	2.3%	1.4%	4.8%
By friends	1.1%	0.0%	3.1%	4.5%	17.1%
By professionals	0.6%	1.4%	1.7%	10.0%	27.1%

\*Includes only those who indicated being a student.

**Being “Out”**

LGBTQ Rhode Islanders were less likely to be open about their sexual orientation or gender identity in comparison to LGBTQ individuals in other parts of the country.<sup>38,39,40</sup> For respondents, “coming out” was not a singular experience, but rather one to be repeated in a variety of forums. With each disclosure, the necessity of revealing this information was weighed along with the possible repercussions, benefits and drawbacks. For some, this was a source of anxiety and stress. For others, “coming out” was viewed as a liberating process that allowed them to be more honest about their lives.

“People aren’t out ... in their communities. As long as we remain in the closet, we won’t be counted.”

In the survey of individuals as well as in the focus groups, many reported they do not disclose this information for fear of losing employment, housing and/or the love of friends and family. This fear proved well-founded for several focus group participants, who shared stories of mistreatment when their sexual orientation or gender identity was revealed.

“Someone told my father I was a lesbian and he kicked me out of the house.”

“When I applied for housing, my interviewer made it clear that this was to be kept quiet.”

“My teacher referred to gays as a basket of fruits.”

“I dropped out of school because there was so much homophobia.”

Some elder focus group participants noted the chances of being met with hostility were far greater when they were “coming out” since homosexuality was once perceived to be a mental illness.

To further measure the climate for LGBTQ individuals in Rhode Island, participants were asked if they were “out” in different sectors of their lives. Some indicated they were “very out” to the people in their lives, while others felt they needed to hide their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Overall, people were most likely to be “out” to their LGBTQ friends and least likely to be “out” at work. For those currently in school, one in four chose not to disclose their sexual orientation or transgender identity at all. Survey respondents were more likely to be “very open” among family and friends than at work and school.



**Table 8. How Open (“Out”) LGBTQ Sample is Regarding Sexual Orientation/Gender Identity**

	NOT OPEN	SOMEWHAT OPEN	VERY OPEN
<b>FAMILY</b>			
Parents	13.3%	16.7%	61.1%
Siblings	11.3%	13.2%	61.1%
Other Family	19.2%	33.1%	40.7%
<b>FRIENDS</b>			
LGBTQ Friends	0.6%	4.4%	94.5%
Non-LGBTQ Friends	5.1%	30.0%	64.0%
<b>WORK</b>			
Supervisors	20.5%	15.8%	49.3%
Coworkers	16.7%	21.8%	49.0%
<b>SCHOOL*</b>			
Teachers	27.8%	30.4%	31.6%
Counselors	24.4%	10.3%	32.1%
Other Students	25.3%	25.3%	39.2%

\*Includes only those who indicated being a student.

Regardless of age, race, or gender, the process of “coming out” was largely made easier by the presence of at least one supportive friend or family member, and the assurance that confidence would be respected. Based on this small sampling of personal interviews and survey responses, Native Americans were the most likely to be “out” to their family, including parents, siblings and other family members. However, they indicated they were the least likely to be “out” to friends, both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ identified. Latino/a individuals were the most likely to be “out” to their LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ friends. Latino/a individuals were also the most likely to be “out” at work to both supervisors and coworkers, followed closely by African American individuals.

**Visibility**

Why bother to “come out?” Being “out” was described as having both negative and positive consequences. Being ostracized by family and suffering debilitating

depression were reported. However, positive aspects of being “out” were also named, such as a better sense of health and well-being, the opportunity to mentor others, feeling more integrated in the community and being more politically involved. As the act of “coming out” does not, in and of itself, guarantee support, participants were asked to indicate how much support they felt from family and friends, and at work and school. The results suggest being open about one’s sexual orientation or gender identity brings mixed responses.

**Table 9. How Much Support and Acceptance LGBTQ Sample Receives**

	NO SUPPORT	SOME SUPPORT	STRONG SUPPORT
<b>FAMILY</b>			
Parents	11.8%	29.2%	43.3%
Siblings	8.1%	31.2%	45.7%
Other Family	16.0%	36.1%	28.9%
<b>FRIENDS</b>			
LGBTQ Friends	–	5.3%	93.4%
Non-LGBTQ Friends	4.2%	27.7%	67.2%
<b>WORK</b>			
Supervisors	10.9%	22.4%	38.1%
Coworkers	9.7%	26.6%	40.3%
<b>SCHOOL*</b>			
Teachers	14.5%	23.7%	31.6%
Counselors	12.3%	16.4%	24.7%
Other Students	14.5%	35.5%	23.7%

\*Includes only those who indicated being a student.

### Inside the Community

Frequently, survey respondents pointed out the LGBTQ community is not one single community, but rather many communities with something in common. Respondents also felt it is becoming more diverse. As a result of its increasing size, the need to recognize, connect with and integrate racial and ethnic diversity

“Being out has removed any need to feel defensive, and feeling defensive is like a low-voltage drain on a battery. You might not be aware of it, but it is constantly draining energy. That drained energy can be put to much more productive use.”

“We are on the crest of teaching a new generation by how we live our lives. By living it honestly and openly we will change history.”

within LGBTQ communities was highlighted. Some felt LGBTQ communities should be part of a larger social justice or civil rights movement, working for broader changes in society that would support those individuals who are more disenfranchised.

Organizational leaders identified the need for collaboration, the opportunity to network and improved communication vehicles as being critical in order to sustain current progress. Leaders also agreed having a central gathering place or resource is important, although there were different opinions on what this place or resource should be and what services it should offer.

Nearly all key informants connected to specific organizations spoke of issues facing society at large (racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia) and the need to better include people of color within organized LGBTQ communities. Several people of color spoke of identifying more with their neighborhood, race, or ethnicity than with LGBTQ communities. People of color who responded expressed a desire for LGBTQ communities to be more sensitive to the presence of non-whites and the unique issues facing LGBTQ persons of color. Respondents of all races and ethnicities stated that they identified with progressive, activist and/or oppressed communities, not necessarily LGBTQ.

## Elders

“There’s lots of concern for [LGBTQ] youth, and I support that. But why is it elders are really the only ones who talk about the needs of elders?”

In the elder group, the feeling of invisibility was explored in great detail. Many participants felt LGBTQ communities reflect a youth-oriented culture and, at times, can be unwelcoming.

When ranking service priorities, increased support and services for LGBTQ elders was in the top five. The presence of groups such as Senior Action in a Gay Environment (SAGE) was cited as useful, but many participants wished to be included in a variety of areas that were not solely focused on growing older. They felt they had valuable life experience that was often untapped.

## Youth

“I’m out at school, and out to my aunt and dad. But not to my mom.”

Youth shared many of the concerns of the other groups, but what stood out was the added vulnerability they feel as a result of their dependency on family or other adult guardians for food and shelter. They also expressed anxiety – sometimes accompanied by extreme mental and physical stress – over being forced out of their homes if their sexual orientation were revealed. Youth related this stress can be eased by the support of friends. They were the most likely to report the benefits of support from both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ friends.

Not surprisingly, participants under the age of 18 felt that ensuring parents had the necessary information to support LGBTQ youth was a priority, ranking second only to ensuring safe schools.

## Transgender

“I don’t tell people I’m transgender. I just go by ‘he’, but it’s very stressful.”

Although transgender individuals were just as likely to be “out” as their non-transgender-identified peers, they were the least likely to receive support from LGBTQ friends, non-LGBTQ friends and extended family members. Transgender respondents were more likely to indicate a service provider’s reputation for serving

the transgender community as significant, and their priorities included combating transphobia within the LGB community (ranked as the top priority).

For transgender individuals “coming out” and/or transitioning often involved making bodily alterations, either through chemical or surgical interventions. While acknowledging their gender identity to themselves or others was one step, participants spoke further about having to save money to pay for health care expenditures not covered by health insurance.

Transgender respondents stated their lives were further complicated by the fact that, when changing employment, they may have to disclose information regarding their gender transition to an employer because accepted means of identification (e.g., licenses and passports) were often inconsistent with the individual’s current chosen name and gender identity.

### African American

“I live in a white world – white friends, white partner, white colleagues. I want to find more of a Black gay community.”

The African American group represented the broadest economic spectrum, and brought a unique perspective as a result. Several participants were homeless and referred to harassment by police which they felt was tied to their sexual orientation. Some participants related the feeling of invisibility, stating it was not easy to find other African American LGBTQ individuals. For African Americans in this scan, combating racism ranked as the top community priority.

### Latino/a

“Minorities in the gay community are pretty hidden, and very few minority services are offered, which then keeps people even more hidden.”

In the individual survey portion of this scan, Latino/a individuals were more likely than other racial and ethnic minorities to be out about their sexual orientation or gender identity to parents, non-LGBTQ friends and coworkers. At the same time, we were unable to identify enough participants to host a Latino/a focus group, even with exhaustive outreach. The Latino/a community leaders interviewed spoke of the need for more targeted focus on communities of color in addressing the needs of LGBTQ individuals.

# Survey of Organizations

## Groups and organizations – in and outside LGBTQ communities – providing a range of services.

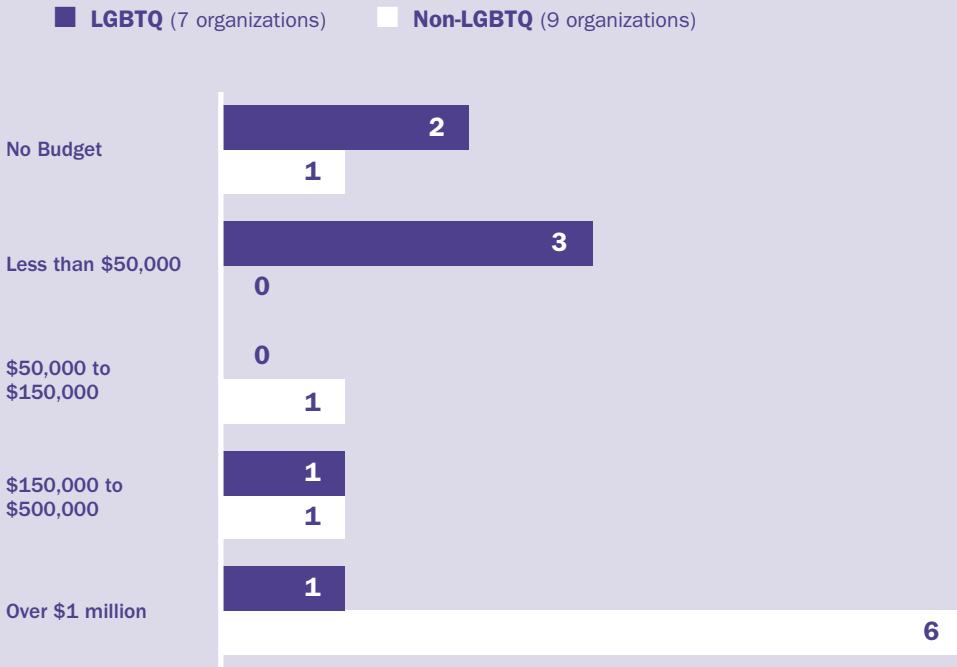
IN ADDITION to gathering information from individuals, the scan sought the perspective of organizations serving LGBTQ Rhode Islanders. To accomplish this task, a separate survey was created and mailed to 50 selected organizations. Sixteen completed surveys were collected and included in this analysis. While the responses may not be indicative of or applicable to organizations across the state, they nevertheless provide some insight and create a starting point for future investigation. (For a full list of responses to the *Survey of Organizations*, refer to Appendix I at [www.rifoundation.org/equity\\_action](http://www.rifoundation.org/equity_action).)

For sake of comparison, agencies were divided into two categories: LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ. LGBTQ organizations primarily serve LGBTQ communities, while non-LGBTQ groups serve populations which may or may not include LGBTQ individuals. (For a complete list of agencies that completed this survey, please refer to the *Scan Methodology* at [www.rifoundation.org/equity\\_action](http://www.rifoundation.org/equity_action).)

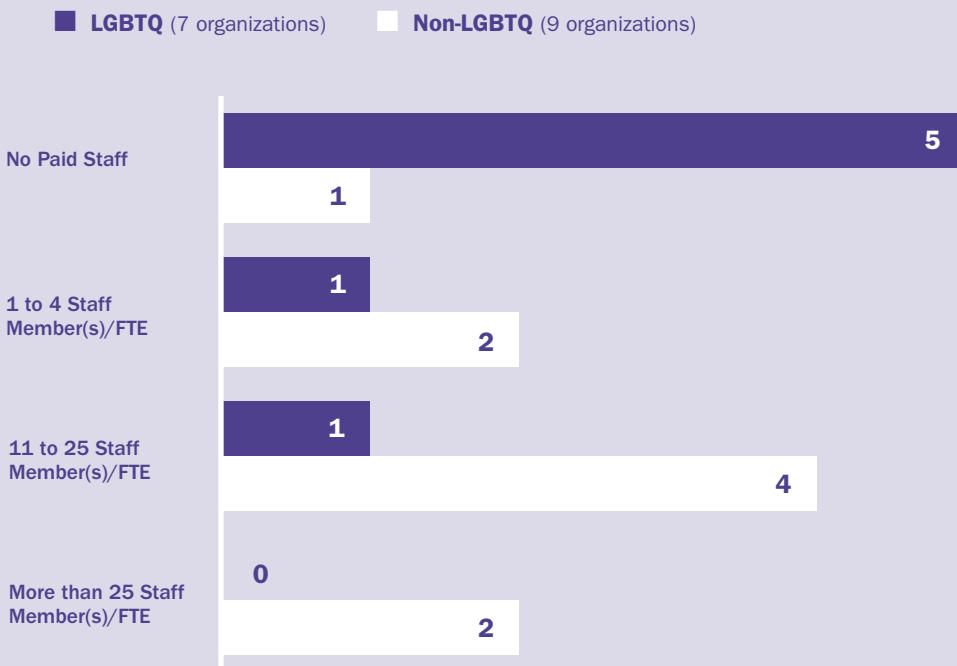
Based upon the surveys returned, LGBTQ organizations were more likely to have been recently established, have a smaller budget and employ fewer paid staff than the non-LGBTQ organizations surveyed. One organization also noted it was having difficulties finding new volunteers. Since the organization was volunteer-driven and had limited access to funding, its ability to continue providing services could be affected.

A combination of a tight economy, more restrictive federal administration policies and a lack of development expertise has resulted in limited funding sources for LGBTQ organizations and programs.<sup>41,42</sup> In fact, The Foundation Center

### Chart 1. Annual Budget of LGBTQ and Non-LGBTQ Organizations



### Chart 2. Paid Staff Members of LGBTQ and Non-LGBTQ Organizations



(a leading authority on philanthropy in the U.S.) in its most recent report, *Foundation Giving Trends 2001*, found, among the 1,000 largest foundations in this country, only 0.1% of the total grant dollars awarded in 1999 benefited LGBT organizations and projects. Further analysis by sector shows 0.1% of independent foundation, 0.1% of corporate and 0.3% of community foundation dollars funded LGBT issues.<sup>43</sup>

Rhode Island organizations surveyed reported they provide a wide range of services. Education and social/recreational services were predominant among LGBTQ groups, while providing human/social services was most common among non-LGBTQ groups. A full list of services provided is below:

**Table 9. Activities/Services Provided by Organizations**

<b>ACTIVITIES/SERVICES PROVIDED</b>	<b>LGBTQ</b> (7 organizations)	<b>NON-LGBTQ</b> (9 organizations)
Education/Awareness	5	7
Social/Recreational Activity	5	2
Community Organizing	4	3
Human/Social Services	3	8
Public Policy	3	2
Communications/Media Advocacy	2	1
Cultural Activity	2	1
Mental Health Services	2	4
Political/Advocacy Activity	2	2
Business Professional	1	0
Health Care	1	1
HIV/AIDS-Related Services	1	6
Legal Advocacy	1	2
Research	1	1
Religious/Spiritual	0	2
Sports	0	0
Substance Abuse Services	0	3



“As the community becomes larger, we will see more specialization and more groups of interest ... which provide more leadership.”

**Top Three Needs**

When asked about their top three needs, LGBTQ organizations ranked funding as number one. However, as might be expected from smaller and newer organizations, funding shared the top spot with business plan development and marketing or public relations assistance. Six non-LGBTQ organizations ranked increased funds to support activities as the number one priority.

**Table 10. Top Needs of Organizations**

NEEDS	LGBTQ (7 organizations)	NON-LGBTQ (9 organizations)
Increased Funds to Support Activities/Services	3	6
Business Plan Development	3	1
Marketing/Public Relations	3	1
Improved/Expanded Physical Facilities/Equipment	2	4
Increased/Improved Outreach Activities	2	0
Strategic Planning	2	0
More Staff	1	3
Administrative Support	1	0
Financial Management/ Bookkeeping and Accounting	1	0
Technical Assistance	1	0
Volunteer Recruitment and Utilization	1	0
Board Development/Training	0	4
Program Materials	0	1

“...we need to support the [LGBTQ] infrastructure that is there. There are some strong resources available and it is incumbent on them to ... empower people to take action.”

### Top Priorities

As with the *Survey of Individuals*, organizations were asked to rank the top five service and community needs. Three of the top five priorities were the same for organizations as they were in the surveys of individuals:

- ensuring schools are safe for LGBTQ youth (ranked number one by both),
- increasing access to LGBTQ-welcoming health care, and
- creating more community-wide events and celebrations including social, cultural, and recreational activities.

Similarly, four of the top five community issues chosen by individuals were the same for LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ organizations, although the ranking was slightly different. Those issues are:

- combating homophobia and transphobia in the non-LGBTQ community,
- expanding rights/recognition of LGBTQ families (such as civil unions or marriage),
- developing more of a sense of “community cohesiveness” within the LGBTQ community, and
- strengthening civil rights’ protections (including hate crimes and workplace discrimination).

With limited resources, each LGBTQ agency struggles to keep operating. Many community leaders expressed concern that organizations will face increasing challenges in meeting the needs of an ever-growing and diverse community. In addition, most community leaders interviewed cited the need for leadership development, mentoring and training to cultivate and sustain a new and more diverse leadership base within Rhode Island’s LGBTQ communities.

# Community Priorities

## Improving the quality of life for LGBTQ individuals and families.

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CREATING A VISION for the equitable treatment of LGBTQ individuals is central to this community scan. Respondents identified priorities in three separate areas: social services, community issues and future programs. A variety of choices were given for each question, and the top five in rank order are listed here.

### **Social Services:**

- 1 Ensuring schools are safe for LGBTQ youth.
- 2 Increasing services for people living with HIV/AIDS.
- 3 Conducting more research on the needs, concerns and strengths of LGBTQ populations.
- 4 Increasing access to LGBTQ-welcoming health care.
- 5 Creating more community-wide events and celebrations, including social, cultural and recreational activities.

### **Community:**

- 1 Advocating for civil rights' protections (including protections from hate crimes and workplace discrimination).
- 2 Expanding rights and recognition of LGBTQ families (such as civil unions or marriage).
- 3 Combating homophobia and transphobia within the non-LGBTQ community.
- 4 Developing a sense of "community cohesion" within LGBTQ communities.
- 5 Creating greater LGBTQ visibility in media (including visual, radio and print media).

### Future Programs:

- 1 Offering more social programs.
- 2 Creating a community and resource center.
- 3 Developing a community resource directory.
- 4 Building a business and professional network.
- 5 Organizing a film festival and other cultural events.

The scan's findings also suggest many of the community's priorities, such as the recognition of LGBTQ families and supporting elders, are profoundly entwined.

Finally, respondents recommended strategies for addressing these priorities.

### Community Life

#### Political Sector

- Educate policy makers.
- Educate and provide training to LGBTQ communities on lobbying and working with legislators.

#### Educational Sector

- Train teachers, guidance and counseling staff, principals, superintendents, and other school personnel.
- Determine how to support youth.
- Define "safe schools" and implement an action plan to create quality learning environments for all youth.
- Support Gay/Straight Alliances (GSAs) in schools.

#### Nonprofit Sector

- Develop and implement targeted programs that provide direct services to individuals who are most in need.
- Develop and implement programs that help people "come out," including mentoring and peer support.
- Develop and cultivate leaders within the community.
- Develop mentoring programs for youth.
- Develop curricula and trainings for health care providers (including physicians), social service providers, elder care providers, day care providers and teachers.
- Work with and train police.
- Integrate LGBTQ issues into non-LGBTQ agencies and services including those working on mental health, substance abuse, and domestic violence issues.
- Diversify boards of directors, staff and volunteers of non-LGBTQ agencies to include LGBTQ individuals.
- Support a community/resource center.
- Fund and promote partnerships among groups or agencies.

- Stabilize organizations by providing training and support in fund development, marketing, business management, board development, supervision, volunteer recruitment and other assistance.
- Convene groups to develop action steps for addressing the issues raised in the scan.
- Ensure LGBTQ organizations are present in communities of color and communities of color are represented in LGBTQ organizations.

### **Research and Evaluation**

- Monitor and assess the needs of LGBTQ communities as they grow and change.
- Better identify the needs of LGBTQ families.
- Conduct more in-depth research of LGBTQ communities and the diverse communities within it.

The community is diverse in its interests, and therefore it is expected that disagreement on the priorities and “agenda” would exist. Notwithstanding those differences, it is noteworthy that ensuring schools are safe for LGBTQ youth is the top service-related issue across the spectrum of respondents. A community and resource center also appears at the top of the list of community needs, followed by the need for more social programs.

The responses received from transgender individuals differed from all other groups when asked to rank the top five community issues. For this subgroup, combating transphobia within LGB communities, and homophobia and transphobia within non-LGBTQ communities led the list of community issues.

# Methodology

A number of techniques were used to reach as diverse a sample as possible.

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WORKING WITHIN LGBTQ COMMUNITIES presents specific methodological challenges. These challenges include: developing representative and/or non-biased samples, identifying the wide range of subpopulations within the LGBTQ communities, insuring their inclusion in any sample and obtaining feedback from groups that may be distrustful of public data collection efforts.

Data on sexual orientation and gender identity is not collected in the decennial Census; nor, for that matter, is it factored in most other data collection instruments. Accordingly, there is no historically exact count of the number of LGBTQ individuals in this country upon which to draw comparison. Still, previous studies regarding the prevalence of homosexuality (far less is empirically known regarding bisexual and transgender populations) estimate four to ten percent of the overall population identifies as homosexual.<sup>44,45,46,47</sup> Using these as a basis for estimation, there are currently between 42,000 and 105,000 lesbian and gay residents of Rhode Island.

Throughout this process, The Rhode Island Foundation worked with an *ad hoc* committee which helped to shape the survey content and conduct outreach to attract participants. Data collected through the *Survey of Individuals* and *Survey of Organizations*, augmented by qualitative findings from focus groups and key informant interviews, were the key information sources that enabled the creation of a final report which is as fully reflective as possible of the LGBTQ communities in Rhode Island.

For detailed information regarding the methodology used in this community scan, refer to the *Scan Methodology* at [www.rifoundation.org/equity\\_action](http://www.rifoundation.org/equity_action).

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