

# OLDER LGBTQ TENNESSEANS AND COVID-19

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LGBTQ Americans are at heightened risk of negative health and economic outcomes as a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. This is due to the higher prevalence of underlying conditions, including diabetes, heart disease, asthma, and HIV,<sup>1-4</sup> and greater exposure to affected industries<sup>5</sup> among LGBTQ Americans. A recent issue brief by the Human Rights Campaign finds that LGBTQ Americans are more likely to work in jobs in highly affected industries, increasing the likelihood of exposure to the virus and to economic risk.<sup>6</sup> LGBTQ Americans are also less likely to have health insurance, increasing the likelihood of negative economic impacts if they do get sick.<sup>7</sup> In a recent national survey, LGBTQ Americans reported high rates of job loss, wage reduction, food insecurity, and difficulties accessing medical care as a result of the pandemic.<sup>8</sup>

We expect these issues to be more acute for older LGBTQ adults in Tennessee. LGBTQ people are estimated to be 3.5% of the Tennessee population.<sup>9</sup> About 25% are age 50 or older. Prior to the epidemic, LGBTQ Tennesseans were already more likely to be uninsured, be food insecure, and have incomes less than \$24,000 annually. One of every four HIV positive people in the state are 55 or older.<sup>10</sup>

New data, collected as part of the [Vanderbilt University Social Networks, Aging, and Policy Study \(VUSNAPS\)](#) and in collaboration with the [Vanderbilt LGBTQ Policy Lab](#), track the impact of COVID-19 on older LGBTQ Tennesseans between the ages of 50 and 76 years old. Below, we include aggregated information from the survey and detailed comments from older individuals in the LGBTQ community to demonstrate how coronavirus is affecting LGBTQ Tennesseans.

Older LGBTQ Tennesseans view coronavirus as a substantial threat to their health and life. Many report substantial economic effects,

including job loss, wage reduction, and the inability to pay rent, as a result of the epidemic. Several are considered essential workers in healthcare and other service industries and are worried about exposure to the virus. Older LGBTQ Tennesseans also report negative mental health effects in relation to massive social disruptions, discontinuation of support groups for substance use like AA, and isolation. Many in this age group are taking care of aging parents and others in their communities. Older LGBTQ Tennesseans in our sample report low levels of trust in the federal government's response to the epidemic and moderate levels of trust in the Tennessee state government's response.

### **Older LGBTQ Tennesseans view coronavirus as a significant threat to their overall health and life.**

- 83.3% agree that coronavirus is a significant threat to their overall health.
- 70.3% agree that coronavirus is a significant threat to their life.

### **Older LGBTQ Tennesseans report substantial economic effects, including job loss, wage reduction, and the inability to pay rent, as a result of the epidemic.**

- “[Spouse] had a significant pay cut at work. I lost part of my benefits package.”
- “[I have] no work. [I am] only receiving unemployment...[I] had to make arrangements with landlord to pay rent as I receive my funds. In 6 years, I had never been late with my rent.”

Several are also concerned about potential job losses and wage reductions that may happen soon.

- “My work has also forced us to work from home, and that has been a challenge. And, my work may lay me off in the next few weeks, very stressful.”

### **Several are considered essential workers in healthcare and other service industries and are worried about exposure to the virus.**

- “As a nurse in a hospital, there is the added stress of wondering if I will become infected/ill. Additionally, this has increased my workload so I am definitely more tired.”
- “I work in a grocery store. Since covid, it is now a very stressful job in a low-key, ambient sort of way. Instead of being some invisible drudge, now we are front & center. People keep thanking me for what I'm doing, but I feel more like a hostage than hero. I have "survivor's guilt" about it. I'm grateful to have income but worried that I'll catch covid and die and no one will take care of my dog when I'm gone. If I take time off, I feel guilty that my friends at work are at risk when I'm not. The customers are now looking to us to validate their fears, or their conspiracy theories or they have no regard at all for the danger that their self-involved reckless behavior puts us in.”

## **Older LGBTQ Tennesseans are experiencing high levels of stress, isolation, and disruption of their social support networks.**

- 93.0% report that coronavirus epidemic has affected how often they see friends or family.
- 32.6% report feeling isolated every day in the last week.
- 33.0% report feeling depressed at least some of the time in the last 30 days.
- 33.0% report feeling hopeless at least some of the time in the last 30 days.
- 4.3% have considered suicide in the past year.

Many highlight specific disruptions that are causing increased stress, depression, and isolation.

- “I can't go to meetings that might have been helpful, like Al-Anon.”
- “My Mom has been hospitalized, and [neither] I nor other family can visit her.”
- “I haven't left my property in about a month. I haven't been in the company of a living human being for about 3 weeks, other than the Walmart delivery guy for a few minutes.”

## **Older LGBTQ Tennesseans are taking care of aging parents and others in their communities during the epidemic.**

- 57.6% have helped someone with getting groceries, running errands, or getting to a doctor.

Others are taking care of aging parents and trying to navigate exposure risks to themselves and to others that they care about.

- “I am the primary care-giver for my 77-year-old parents, and we have had to be more careful about exposure.”

## **Older LGBTQ Tennesseans in our sample report low levels of trust in the federal government's response to the epidemic and moderate levels of trust in the Tennessee state government's response.**

- 12.4% trust the federal government to combat coronavirus.
- 77.8% do not trust the federal government to accurately report information about coronavirus.

Older LGBTQ Tennesseans have somewhat more favorable views of the state response.

- 27.3% trust the Tennessee state government to combat coronavirus.
- 36.7% agree that the Tennessee state government wants to protect them from coronavirus.

## **Methodology**

From April 1 to May 4, 2020, 134 older LGBTQ Tennesseans enrolled in VUSNAPS and completed the online survey. VUSNAPS aims to capture relationships among social networks, policy context, and health for older LGBTQ people in the US South. Recruitment is ongoing in Tennessee, Alabama, and

North Carolina. We expect to survey over 1100 older LGBTQ adults in the South during the coming months and will continue to provide updates on how the epidemic is affecting this population. More information about the study is available at [www.vusnaps.com](http://www.vusnaps.com). This study is funded by the National Institute on Aging.

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