

Union Values and LGBTQ+ Worker Experiences:

A Survey of UFCW Workers
in the United States and Canada





About UFCW OUTreach

UFCW OUTreach tasks itself with ensuring full equality for LGBTQ+ workers on their jobs and in their unions, to build a labor environment that embraces diversity, encourages openness, and ensures safety and dignity. OUTreach works to educate all UFCW leaders, staff, and members about LGBTQ+ communities and to build support and solidarity for LGBTQ+ workers and all communities that share the union's common goals and interests. The group's mission is to build mutual support between the union's International, regionals, locals, and the LGBTQ+ community to organize for social and economic justice for all.

UCLA Labor Center

About the UCLA Labor Center

The UCLA Labor Center believes that a public university belongs to the people and should advance quality education and employment for all. Every day we bring together workers, students, faculty, and policymakers to address the most critical issues facing working people today. Our research, education, and policy work lifts industry standards, creates jobs that are good for communities, and strengthens immigrant rights, especially for students and youth.

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Executive Summary

LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, et al.) people are an increasingly organized portion of the United States and Canadian workforce. In 2013, members of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) formed OUTreach, a constituency group that works to secure rights and protections for LGBTQ+ workers against discrimination and mistreatment on the job. Their advocacy efforts have centered on ensuring access to workplace benefits through collective bargaining agreements, providing educational programming, and collaborating on political advocacy campaigns.

After several decades of patchwork civil rights legislation, LGBTQ+ workers are now legally protected from discrimination in employment under national law in both the United States and Canada. Yet awareness and implementation of nondiscrimination protections are uneven, and LGBTQ+ workers are still susceptible to differential treatment. There has been limited research about working conditions for LGBTQ+ people in terms of health and safety, unequal treatment on the job, and access to benefits. Likewise, there is very limited information about the leadership of LGBTQ+ workers in contemporary union organizing or the scope and effects of union support for LGBTQ+ workers' rights.

This report explores LGBTQ+ workers' contributions to union organizing and how they and their allies have benefited from union advocacy. Three significant findings and recommendations are outlined below. We used a participatory and research justice approach, working closely with UFCW OUTreach to collect and analyze the data. Using mixed-sampling methodology, we surveyed 1,004 union members and conducted 15 interviews with LGBTQ+ workers in diverse industries and regions across the United States and Canada. In addition, we conducted a review of relevant policy and academic literature.

Finding #1: UFCW Is Fighting for LGBTQ+ Rights and Social Justice

LGBTQ+ union members and their allies are leading the way in challenging discriminatory laws and policies and instituting greater protections so that LGBTQ+ workers can thrive at work and in their communities.

- Many of the LGBTQ+ members we interviewed were leaders in their workplaces, fighting against discrimination and for worker rights, protecting their coworkers, leading collective bargaining, and joining in their locals' political work and solidarity efforts.



- More than two-thirds of respondents (68%) said that nondiscrimination protections in collective bargaining agreements should be a top priority for local unions to improve conditions for LGBTQ+ workers.
- Almost three-quarters (71%) of members who identify as LGBTQ+ said that working to elect pro-LGBTQ+ candidates would motivate them to participate in union and political activities, and more than half (58%) would be motivated by working to elect pro-union candidates.

Finding #2: Union Contracts and Education Protect LGBTQ+ Workers

Many UFCW local unions ensure protections are included in collective bargaining agreements, offer workplace training on LGBTQ+ inclusion, and demonstrate solidarity with LGBTQ+ social justice efforts. We found strong support for union organizing for LGBTQ+ worker protections.

- The vast majority (87%) of all members surveyed believe that LGBTQ+ workers should be protected by their union contracts.
- The majority (59%) supported bargaining to remove discriminatory health care policies excluding gender-affirming care, and over one-third (36%) said that this was a top priority for improving conditions for LGBTQ+ workers.
- Only one-third (35%) of survey participants had received training related to LGBTQ+ issues, and more of these members had engaged their union representatives and filed grievances related to anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination than those who had not been trained. Survey respondents identified staff and shop steward training as one of the top priorities for improving conditions for LGBTQ+ workers.

Finding #3: Improving the Workplace for LGBTQ+ Workers Requires Cultural and Systemic Change

LGBTQ+ workers are often on the front lines in their jobs—working closely with co-workers, serving customers, and providing essential services to the community, all areas where instances of overt discrimination and feeling unsafe at work continue to occur. LGBTQ+ workers encounter cultural attitudes and systemic inequities that may be minimized or go unnoticed. Workers who are intersex, transgender, nonbinary, or gender nonconforming (referred to here as ITNB+) are particularly likely to experience harassment and fear for their safety at work. UFCW is working toward an intersectional union culture that advocates for equity and LGBTQ+ worker rights.

- More than three-quarters of LGBTQ+ workers (77%) and half (55%) of ITNB+ workers perceived their local union as accepting of LGBTQ+ workers.
- Nearly a quarter of LGBTQ+ workers reported being bullied or harassed because of their sexual orientation or gender identity (24%), and many more had heard negative comments, stereotypes, or jokes (43%).
- Nearly two-thirds (67%) of ITNB+ and almost half (42%) of LGBTQ+ participants had felt unsafe in their current workplaces at least once because of their gender or sexuality.
- Two-thirds of members said they did not have access to gender-neutral bathrooms at their workplaces, and several reported that bathroom inaccessibility was a significant health and safety issue.

Recommendations

While progress has been made on the political front, dominant social institutions and cultural values uphold the binary gender system and heterosexual nuclear families as the norms, which are institutionalized in the culture, policies, and practices of a typical workplace where they can appear neutral.¹ Social and economic justice for LGBTQ+ people is about not only changing negative attitudes or beliefs but also acknowledging historical exclusions and proactively working toward equity. The following are recommendations to improve LGBTQ+ workplace experiences:

- **Develop proactive union agendas, policies, and structures that recognize and protect the rights and identities of LGBTQ+ workers.**
 - » Collaborate with local and regional LGBTQ+ organizations to defeat anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and pass civil rights, worker rights, and economic justice policies.

- » Train stewards and union representatives to practice allyship and better inform LGBTQ+ union members of their rights and the services available to them.
 - » Demand employer accountability in incorporating bystander intervention training that promotes allyship, specifically around LGBTQ+ discrimination, exclusion, and bias.
- **Create visible, clear, and concrete organizational structures for LGBTQ+ leadership and participation at every level of the union.**
 - » Institute LGBTQ+ OUTreach chapters throughout the United States and Canada.
 - » Increase access to leadership positions within the union to ensure that LGBTQ+ workers and members, especially young people and people of color, are represented and promoted within all tiers of the union.
- **Develop issue-based, worker-centered organizing and labor education programs that focus on lifting up and affirming LGBTQ+ worker rights and identities.**
 - » Create a gender-inclusive culture by modeling gender-neutral language, refraining from assuming gender identity, and normalizing pronoun sharing practices (e.g., adding pronouns to name tags at workshops, meetings, and workplaces).
 - » Using an intersectional analysis, ensure that a gender and LGBTQ+ equity lens is engaged throughout all union political activity, communications, presentations, trainings, and workshops.
 - » Require comprehensive LGBTQ+ education and training for all union members, focused on eradicating homophobia and transphobia in the workplace, understanding institutional oppression of LGBTQ+ people, learning strategies for LGBTQ+ allyship, and creating an inclusive workplace environment.
- **Create worker-centered safe spaces where workers can address, denounce, and resist LGBTQ+ workplace violations, discrimination, and harassment.**
 - » Strengthen grievance and collective bargaining language to include nondiscrimination language that covers gender identity, sexual orientation, and gender expression.
 - » Train union representatives in active listening during one-on-ones, courageous conversations, peer check-ins, and creation of action plans to resolve conflicts workers raise about grievances and discrimination issues.
 - » Continue to advocate for and expand local and federal legislation that protects LGBTQ+ workers from structural forms of oppression (e.g., dress codes and gender-specific bathrooms).



Introduction

Discrimination against LGBTQ+² people has a significant impact on economic equity. LGBTQ+ people face higher rates of poverty than non-LGBTQ+ people, especially transgender and bisexual people, LGBTQ+ people of color, and those living in rural areas.³ Unions have aligned with LGBTQ+ advocacy groups to fight for legislation prohibiting discrimination in employment on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. In Canada, protections against discrimination in employment were recognized nationally under Section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1995 and were then codified by the Canadian Human Rights Act in 1996 (sexual orientation) and 2017 (gender identity or expression).⁴ In the US, 21 states and the District of Columbia have explicit legislative protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in employment, housing, and public accommodations.⁵ As of June 2020, protections from discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity were upheld by the Supreme Court as implicit in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.⁶

Despite these recent gains, the fight for LGBTQ+ equity and social justice is far from over.⁷ Even in regions with long-standing nondiscrimination protections under the law, LGBTQ+ people continue to experience stigma and mistreatment on the job.⁸

LGBTQ+ people are an increasingly organized portion of the United States and Canadian workforce. LGBTQ+ union members and their allies in both countries have mobilized to form coalitions and constituency groups to integrate civil rights protections into their union constitutions, contracts, collective bargaining agreements, and economic justice campaigns. The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union has joined broader labor organizing and solidarity movements to fight for the rights, safety, and dignity of LGBTQ+ union members and their families in Canada and the United States, mobilizing to form coalitions and constituency groups to integrate civil rights protections into their union constitutions, contracts, collective bargaining, and economic justice campaigns.⁹

Over the past three decades, LGBTQ+ union activists and leaders have won considerable gains within their local and international unions, including the successful formation of UFCW OUTreach as a recognized constituency group in 2013. This group has led robust collective bargaining strategies, education programming, and national advocacy campaigns. Union locals have also recently bargained contracts that include “protections around pronouns, anti-harassment language, non-discrimination, health and safety” and removal of provisions that exclude transgender people from health care coverage.¹⁰

UFCW is committed to diverse, inclusive, and growth-oriented organizational models that affirm and promote LGBTQ+ worker members and “recognize that oppression works to undermine workers across the lines of gender, race, class, Indigeneity and sexual orientation.”¹¹ UFCW OUTreach joins the movement led for more than half a century by LGBTQ+ people and advocacy groups to secure protections for LGBTQ+ people against discrimination in hiring and on the job and to ensure equal access to workplace benefits such as parental leave and equitable health care.¹²

UFCW OUTreach collaborated with the UCLA Labor Center to conduct this study to gain a deeper understanding of the current experiences, issues, challenges, and barriers that LGBTQ+ workers face across diverse industries. The goal of the study was to examine and amplify UFCW LGBTQ+ worker experiences through an intersectional lens, taking into consideration the lived oppression of LGBTQ+ people while highlighting the role LGBTQ+ leaders and their allies play in advancing economic, racial, and gender justice within the labor movement. By examining how UFCW union leaders and members understand and engage in LGBTQ+ worker issues, we have developed concrete recommendations to address workers’ needs, develop and expand resources and tools, and highlight the power of union collective bargaining in advancing social justice.

Research on the experiences of LGBTQ+ workers and allies within their unions is a relatively underexplored field.¹³ We believe that this first-ever binational study focused on the experiences of UFCW members offers a significant contribution to the field by providing an analysis of contemporary LGBTQ+ worker issues and identity politics in the Canadian and US labor movements.

About This Study

This report highlights the experiences of LGBTQ+ workers employed in industries represented by the UFCW and its affiliates in the US and Canada. UFCW industries—including retail, groceries, drug, and department stores, food processing and meatpacking plants, and medical cannabis and health care centers—represent more than 1.3 million workers in the United States and Canada, including gig and migrant workers.

We used a collaborative and participatory approach to research design. UFCW OUTreach leaders and UCLA Labor Center researchers worked together to survey 1,004 union members and conduct 15 interviews with LGBTQ+ workers in diverse industries and regions across the United States and Canada. Surveys were conducted online in English, Spanish, and French. Members of UFCW OUTreach participated in analyzing the findings and interpreting data for this report.

Among the six industry sectors, the majority of survey respondents (62%) and interview participants (58%) were employed in the grocery sector, followed by retail, with 17% of survey respondents and 14% of interview participants. Less than 10% worked in industry sectors like packing and processing, health care, hospitality, cannabis, finance, and security. UFCW OUTreach Executive Board members were actively engaged in interviewing survey respondents, whose voices are captured throughout this report.

Because of the binational scope of this study, respondents were categorized into eight regions. Survey respondents from Canada represented one-third of the total sample size. A little less than one-fifth of respondents were from the Mid-Atlantic, Northwestern, and Western regions. One-tenth of survey respondents were from the Central and Midwestern regions. The Northeastern and South Central regions captured less than 5% of survey respondents. For the 15 interviewees, almost half were from the Mid-Atlantic region. Participants from the Canadian, Northeast, Midwest, Northwest, and Western regions constituted 10% of interviewees.

The first section of this report examines the political participation and leadership of UFCW LGBTQ+ members on LGBTQ+ issues. The second section focuses on creating safe and inclusive workplace environments. The third section describes workers' experiences with LGBTQ+ discrimination and inclusivity in UFCW industries. When asked what they would change to improve the union and workplace climate for LGBTQ+ workers, the majority of respondents brought up the need to transform union policies and create a more inclusive union and workplace culture through education, training, and worker-to-worker dialogue. We include pathways and priorities for future action within each section.



Snapshot: LGBTQ+ Workers and Communities in UFCW

LGBTQ+ people and their families and friends live in every region and work in every industry represented by UFCW. They are diverse in age, national origin, ethnic identity, faith, and political affiliation.

Definition of Terms in This Report

LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer, with the plus sign to acknowledge the array of other terms people use to describe their gender or sexuality.

ITNB+ stands for intersex, trans, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming, with the plus sign to acknowledge the array of other terms people use to describe their gender beyond the binary.

Most ITNB+ participants also identify as LGBTQ+, but a few do not. We use **LGBTQINB+** to refer to participants who said they were either LGBTQ+ or ITNB+ or both (29%).

Non-LGBTQ+ refers to participants who do not identify as either LGBTQ+ or ITNB+.



Taking action for LGBTQ+ equity and social justice improves working conditions for all workers, including people with LGBTQ+ children, parents, siblings, friends, and coworkers. We found that the vast majority of UFCW members we surveyed had at least one friend or family member who was LGBTQ+ and more than three-quarters had a coworker that they knew was LGBTQ+ (see figure 1).

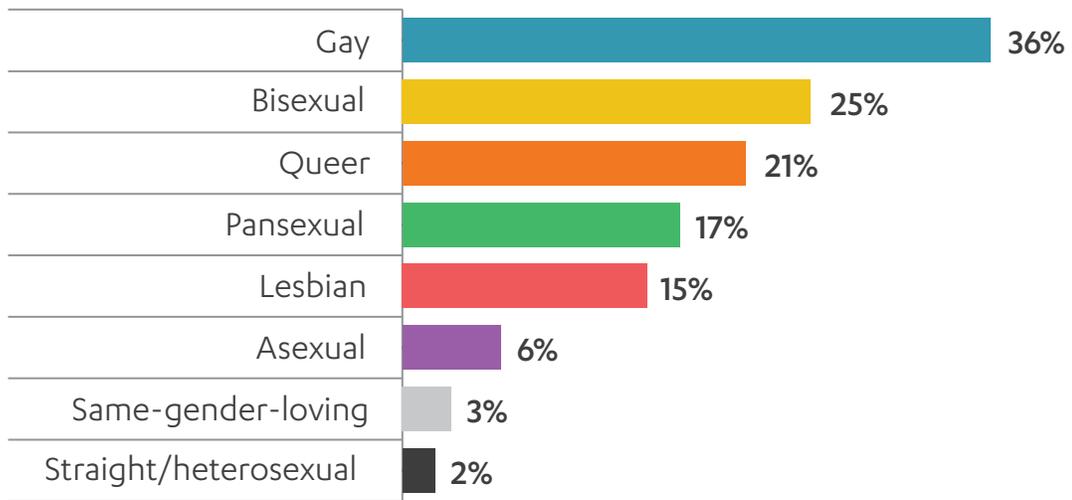


Although the survey was open to all workers, we sought out the participation and perspectives of LGBTQ+ members. Twenty-eight percent of survey participants said that they identify as LGBTQ+ (see figure 2). Of those, 36% identify as gay, 25% as bisexual, 21% as queer, 17% as pansexual, 15% as lesbian, and 6% as asexual. About 7% of participants selected more than one of these categories, and a few wrote in other identities that were not listed (e.g., demisexual, aromantic, polysexual).

The majority of participants who are not LGBTQ+ identify as straight or heterosexual. However, there was not a binary relationship between LGBTQ+ people and those who identify as heterosexual or straight. For example, there were a few workers who described themselves as asexual, same-gender-loving, or another term, but do not identify as LGBTQ+. Although most bisexual respondents identify as LGBTQ+, several bisexual respondents do not. Conversely, a few transgender women and men identify as LGBTQ+ but described their sexual orientation as heterosexual or straight.

Figure 2: LGBTQ+ study participants

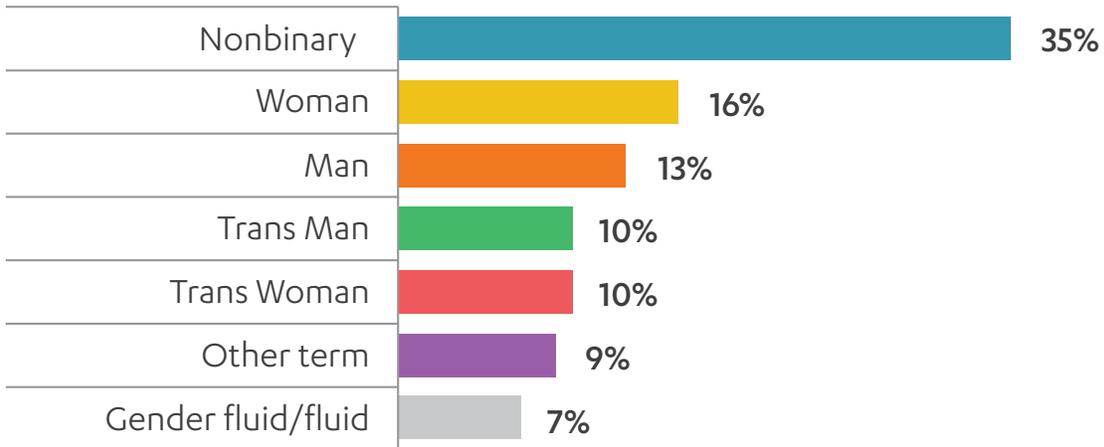
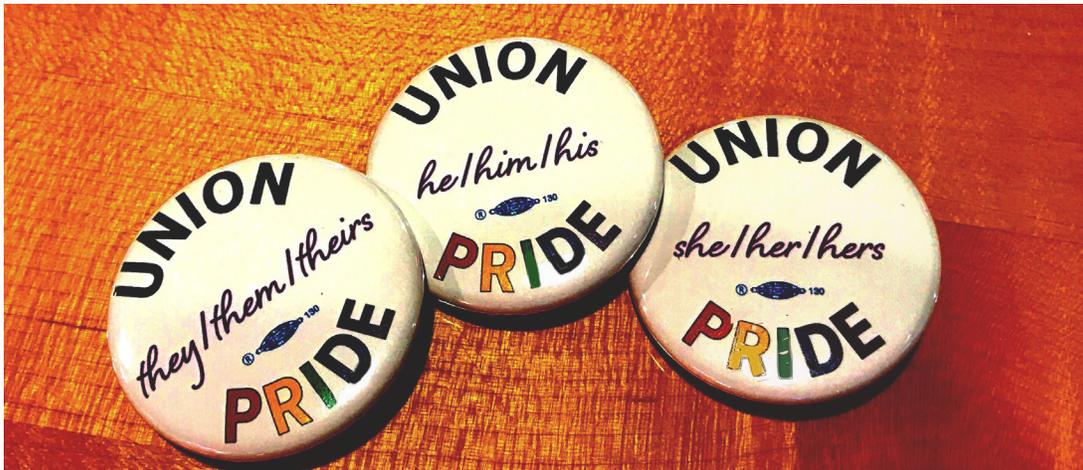
Terms used by LGBTQ+ participants to describe their sexual orientation



Note. Survey participants could select all that applied.

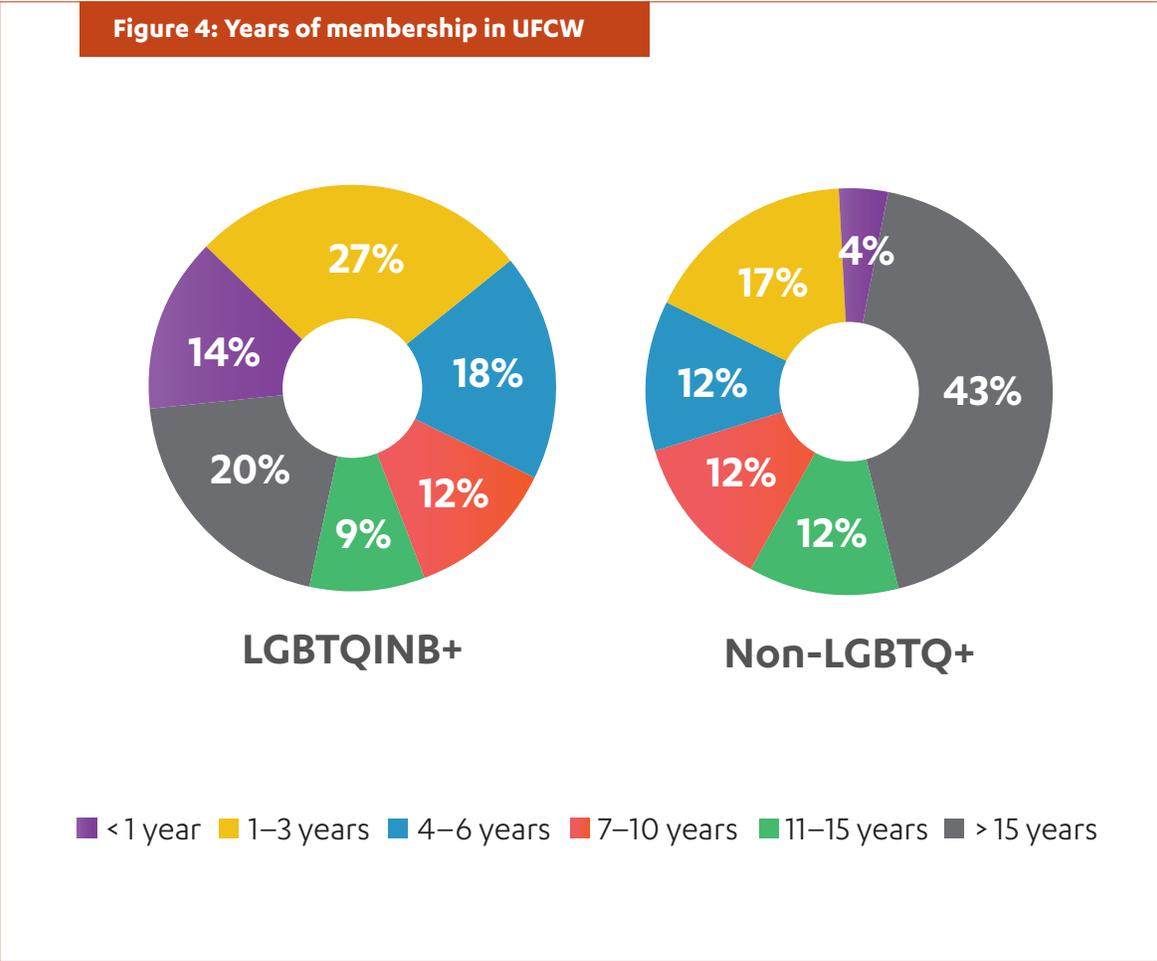
About 9% of participants are ITNB+ and are diverse in terms of their gender identities. About one-third identify as nonbinary, about a quarter are women and trans women, another quarter are men and trans men, and the rest used others terms to describe their gender (e.g., transmasculine, agender) (see figure 3). More than half of LGBTQ+ participants worked in the grocery industry, followed by retail, health care, and packing and processing.

Figure 3: Intersex, transgender, nonbinary workers by gender



Note. Survey participants were asked if they were “intersex, transgender, nonbinary, or gender nonconforming” (yes, no, prefer not to say). All participants were also asked to describe their gender with a write-in response option only. This graphic depicts the write-in responses only from participants who said they were ITNB+. We distinguish the terms *woman* and *man* from *trans woman* and *trans man* to reflect the distinctions participants made themselves.

Many were long-standing members of UFCW, and nearly one-third had been members for more than 10 years (see figure 4). LGBTQINB+ workers were younger than their non-LGBTQ+ counterparts (see appendix).





UFCW Is Fighting for LGBTQ+ Rights and Social Justice

Give everybody the megaphone. If something is bothering more than one person, give them the megaphone and let them tell others why it's bothering them or how it's impacting them in a negative way and also in a positive way. So if there's something to celebrate, give the workers and give the people their voice. Give the workers a voice.

— UFCW member and maintenance worker in Pennsylvania

LGBTQ+ people have played an enduring role in the history of the labor movement, and unions have been critical in advancing LGBTQ+ protections and rights.¹⁴ Bill Olwell, a UFCW leader, is one such advocate who dedicated his life's work to fighting for both civil and labor rights.

Story of Bill Olwell



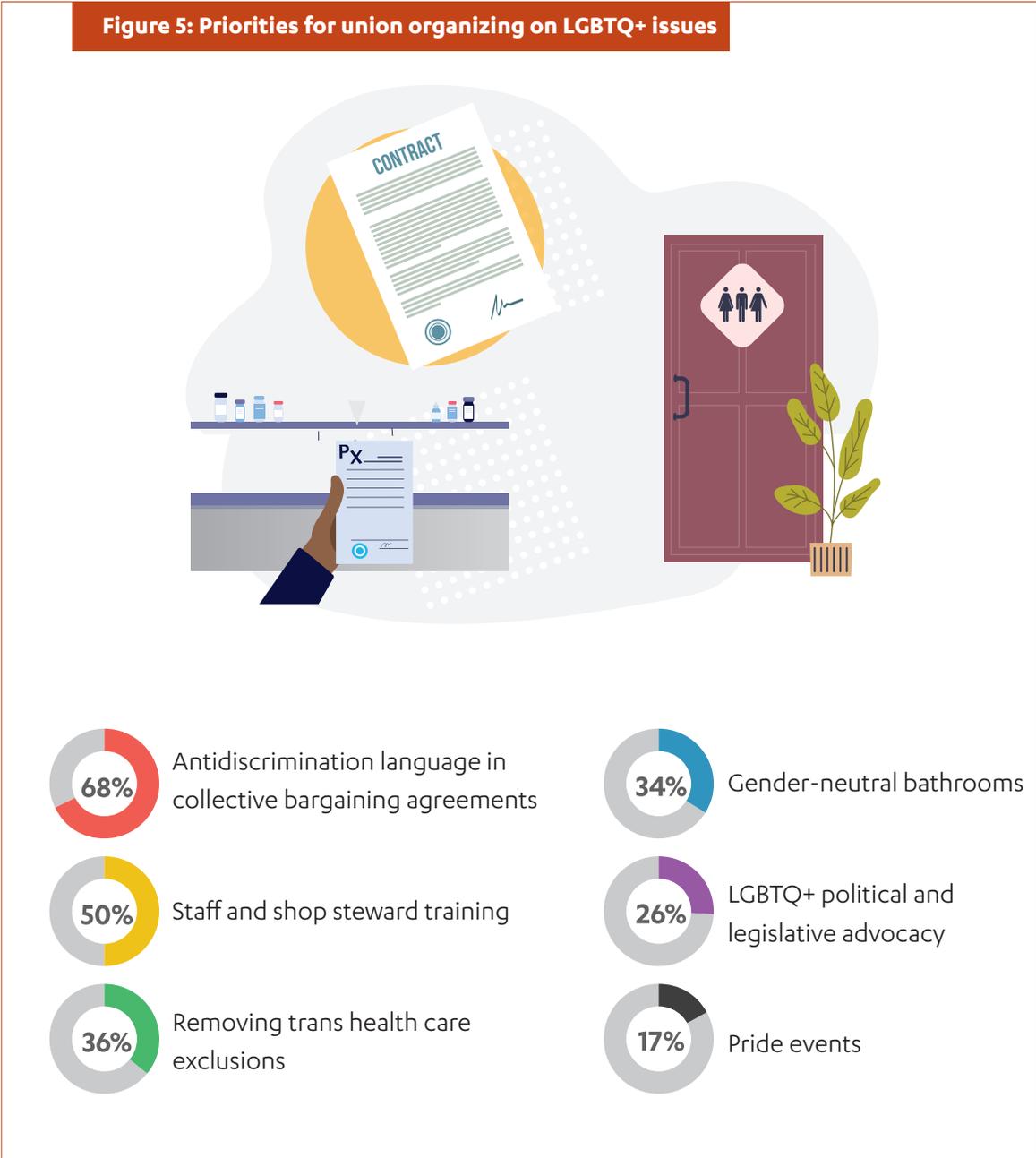
In 2015, UFCW OUTreach named its Champion of Equality Award in honor of **Bill Olwell**. Bill was an openly gay man who served as president of the Seattle Retail Clerks Local 1001 and the King County Labor Council in the 1960s and 1970s. Olwell was instrumental in the merger between the Retail Clerks and the Amalgamated Meat Cutters from the United Food and Commercial Workers and was elected to the International executive board and then as International executive vice president in 1981. He ended his career after serving on the executive committee of the UFCW International. Despite his exemplary career as a UFCW organizer and leader, Olwell experienced discrimination and negative campaigns waged against him because of his sexual orientation. As leaders in the labor movement become supportive and outspoken advocates for LGBTQ+ rights and more leaders like Olwell are elected to head unions, actions that undermine worker solidarity are thankfully becoming a thing of the past.¹⁵

In the last several years, UFCW LGBTQ+ leaders and allies have created campaigns and taken action for LGBTQ+ workers:

- In 2014, Local 99 campaigned against Arizona Senate Bill 1062,¹⁶ which would have allowed business owners to refuse services to LGBTQ+ people on the basis of religious beliefs¹⁷
- Local 21 worked in coalition with Washington Won't Discriminate Coalition to defeat Initiative 1515 that aimed to restrict bathroom and locker-room access based on sex assigned at birth.¹⁸
- Local 770 in California collaborated with LGBTQ+ groups to advocate for social equity in the cannabis industry.¹⁹
- UFCW Canada advocated with LGBTQ+ groups to push for the recognition of gender identity and gender expression in the Canadian Human Rights Act, which was codified into law in 2017.²⁰
- At the 2018 annual convention, union leaders approved Resolution 11 to support bargaining for the removal of health care policies that discriminate against transgender and gender-nonconforming workers and to advocate publicly for equal access to health care.²¹

A Canadian health care worker who had been with the union for 15 years described the role of LGBTQ+ leaders, specifically LGBTQ+ women, within UFCW in securing rights and protections: “I was one of the folks that wrote the first [collective bargaining agreement]. . . . Our first negotiating committee of women, we were all queer. So it was like, obviously, that’s getting written everywhere. We educated the union a lot actually.”

Given a list of potential priorities for LGBTQ+ issues, more than two-thirds of survey participants selected antidiscrimination language in collective bargaining agreements as a top priority. They also noted the need for more training, gender-neutral bathrooms, and gender-affirming health care access (see figure 5).



Union Organizing for LGBTQ+ Rights

Union leadership and member support for LGBTQ+ rights and protections are vital to effective political organizing. Within the rank and file in UFCW, we found strong evidence of LGBTQ+ leadership and widespread support for union organizing for LGBTQ+ rights, equity, and social justice. About three-quarters of survey participants agreed that their local union was already taking action to support LGBTQ+ workers. The vast majority of members affirmed that LGBTQ+ issues should be considered by union leaders when supporting political candidates (see table 1). A Mid-Atlantic grocery worker shared, “I would say UFCW needs to be more outspoken” about LGBTQ+ issues so that “LGBTQ people know that it’s okay to be who they are.”

Table 1: Support for union organizing for LGBTQ+ rights

Union positions	% agree	% neither agree nor disagree	% disagree
 My local union takes action to support LGBTQ+ workers	75	22	3
 LGBTQ+ issues should be considered when supporting political candidates	78	16	6
 LGBTQ+ issues must be supported by union leaders	83	13	4

Others also emphasized the need for more visibility and direct action. One grocery worker recommended more leadership opportunities for LGBTQ+ workers, “promoting more LGBTQ people within,” and creating spaces for “people to feel comfortable to talk.” Leadership opportunities for LGBTQ+ workers should go hand in hand with greater opportunities for conversations about structural change.

Structural change requires that the union be more explicit about its support for LGBTQ+ members, as one Canadian grocery worker shared:

The union does put out various posters on the staff room wall. Big rainbow posters and stuff with various messages are so powerful. I would love to see the union have a stronger presence during Pride week. I think there’s a lot of value in that. They’ve had some limited presence, but I’d like to see them have a more powerful, bigger presence—not just having two people show up, walking in the parade with their union shirt on—like big flags, big bold prints, because I think those are really powerful. They send a message to both the customers and the staff that the union is there, and it reminds people that the union does support the LGBTQ+ community. I think there’s a lot of power in that visibility.

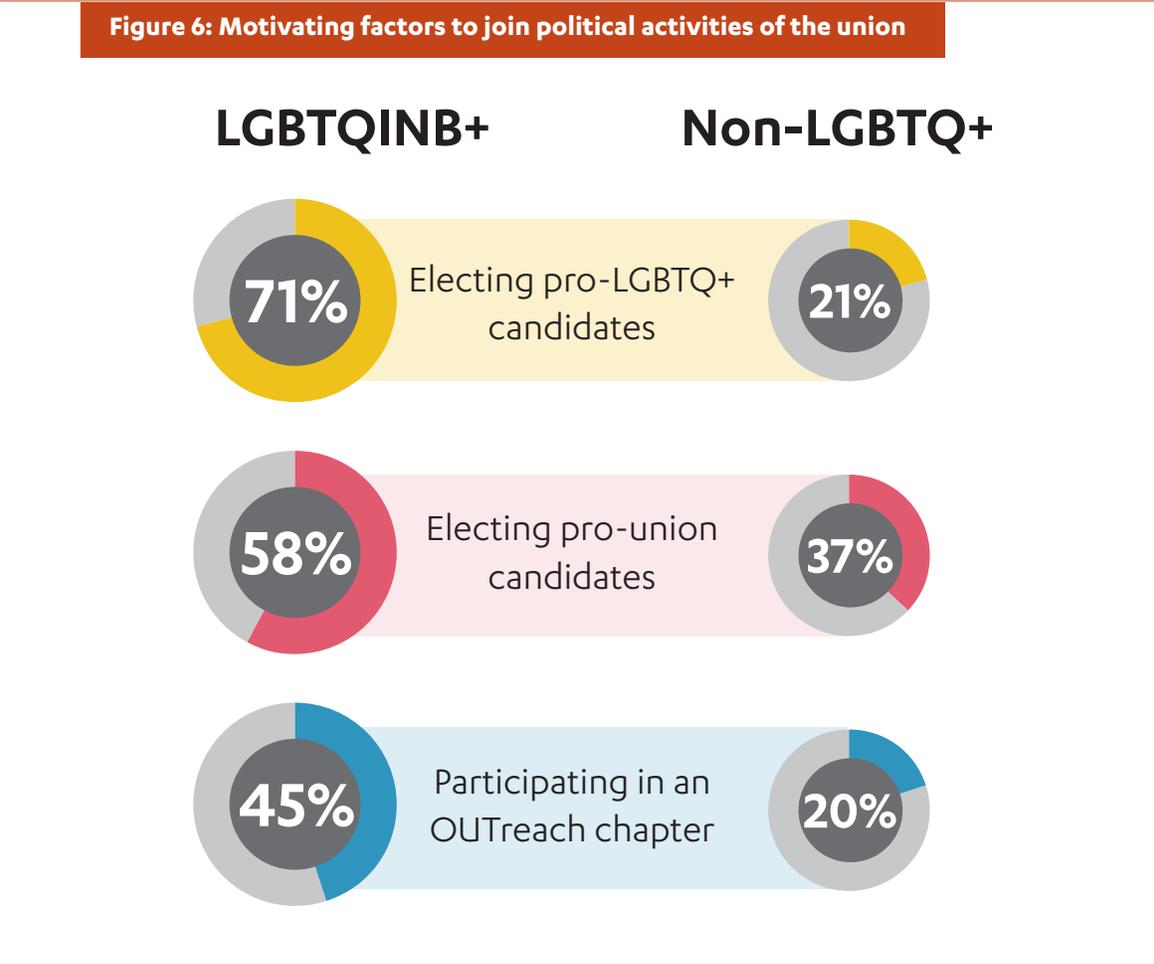
Having this type of explicit support for LGBTQ+ workers is vital to create safe and inclusive environments. As a maintenance worker from the Mid-Atlantic said, “I think the biggest thing would be visibility, just to show that there is a part of the union that represents and would advocate for those workers’ rights, that you identify with that community.” This type of direct commitment to defend and protect LGBTQ+ workers would let them know that they can bring their full selves to work, including being out about their LGBTQ+ identity.

Union and Political Work of LGBTQ+ Workers

Engaging LGBTQ+ members in the union’s political activities is a particularly important equity strategy. It is estimated that 21% of eligible LGBTQ+ voters are not registered to vote, compared to 17% of non-LGBTQ+ adults.²² People of color may be particularly disenfranchised by voter suppression laws that target both LGBTQ+ people and communities of color.²³



About one-third of LGBTQINB+ workers said they had participated in political activities related to the union, including phone banking, door knocking, and leafleting at the worksite. About 71% of LGBTQINB+ members said that working to elect pro-LGBTQ+ candidates would motivate them to participate in union and political activities, and 45% said they would be encouraged by joining an OUTreach chapter. Working to elect pro-union political candidates was also a motivating factor for more than half of LGBTQINB+ members (58%), compared to only 37% of non-LGBTQ+ respondents (see figure 6).



A US Mid-Atlantic grocery worker with over a decade of membership in the union noted the importance of electing candidates who are both pro-union and pro-LGBTQ+: “We genuinely support people who are good with workers’ rights, but pro-LGBTQ would be wonderful as well. If your representative doesn’t see you for who you are, how can they represent you accurately?” Backing campaigns and candidates with a proactive stance on both LGBTQ+ and worker rights is one key strategy for engaging LGBTQ+ members in the union’s activities and building a sense of belonging among members, with direct political benefits for LGBTQ+ people and communities.

Taking Public Action for LGBTQ+ Rights

One way that unions have demonstrated visible solidarity for LGBTQ+ workers is by participating in local Pride parades, rallies, and festivals, and LGBTQ+ people and their allies notice when unions do not participate (see figure 7). This union member in the Northeast said her local union displayed support for a number of issues but not LGBTQ+ rights. She recounted a conversation she had with her union representatives: “I see you all do all of these walks, you do all these marches. . . . I’ve never seen you in no parades, no Pride parades, no nothing.” That member went on to successfully organize the local’s first-ever contingent in the local Pride parade last year.

Over a third of workers surveyed had participated in Pride activities.



The vast majority of LGBTQ+ people who participated in Pride said they did so to celebrate their own experience, whereas most non-LGBTQ+ people said they participated to support friends or family members. While nearly half of LGBTQ+ workers participated as a political advocacy opportunity or to “take a stand on an issue,” less than a quarter of non-LGBTQ+ members who participated in Pride said they did so for political reasons (see table 2).

Table 2: Reasons for participating in Pride

Reasons for participating	% of LGBTQ+	% of non-LGBTQ+	% of all
To support family or friends who are LGBTQ+	65	81	72
To celebrate their own LGBTQ+ experience	89	6	53
For political advocacy / to take a stand on an issue	47	24	37
To support a coworker who is LGBTQ+	32	33	32
For union solidarity	25	36	30

Pathways toward LGBTQ+ Union Organizing and Political Power

Develop proactive union agendas, policies, and structures that recognize and protect the rights and identities of LGBTQ+ workers.

Institutional change is only possible when organizations intentionally create policies and structures that protect the rights and identities of historically marginalized and vulnerable workers.

- Endorse pro-LGBTQ+ candidates at all levels of government.
- Collaborate with local and regional LGBTQ+ organizations to defeat anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and pass civil rights, worker rights, and economic justice policies.
- Train stewards and union representatives to practice allyship and better inform LGBTQ+ union members of their rights and the services available to them.
- Foster a culture of recognition and safety by incorporating bystander intervention training that promotes allyship, specifically around LGBTQ+ discrimination, exclusion, and bias.

- Identify and develop more LGBTQ+ union stewards so workers can approach trusted allies to address discrimination.
- Cosponsor and promote OUTreach chapter functions, social spaces, and events focused on LGBTQ+ issues, to develop a sense of belonging.
- Write and feature articles focused on LGBTQ+ issues on all communication media (e.g., bulletin boards and email lists).
- Integrate inclusive gender-neutral language in collective bargaining agreements and union meetings.

Create visible, clear, and concrete organizational structures for LGBTQ+ leadership and participation at every level of the union.

- Unions have the power to shift and reframe the structures and culture within their institutions to affirm and recognize LGBTQ+ members' rights and identities as valued and respected members.
- Establish consistent nondiscriminatory policy training courses that are mandatory for all union leaders and staff workers.
- Promote accessible union grievance procedures to address discrimination and workplace biases.
- Advocate to employers to regularly review hiring practices, grievances, scheduling, and promotions, with a focus on equity for LGBTQ+ workers and other vulnerable worker communities.
- Institute LGBTQ+ OUTreach chapters throughout the United States and Canada.
- Increase access to leadership positions within the union to ensure LGBTQ+ workers and members, especially young people and people of color, are represented and promoted within all tiers of the union.
- Conduct annual equity assessments within locals to ensure racially and ethnically diverse LGBTQ+ workers and members are represented and promoted within all tiers of the union.

Union Contracts and Education Protect LGBTQ+ Workers

I hate seeing injustice, so everyone on my floor was like, “We need you. We need you.” Especially on my floor, we have a lot of seasoned associates who feel that one person cannot make a difference, that things aren’t ever going to change, and I’m not about that. I’m about one person can [create] change. If we dance together, people have the power.

— UFCW member and retail worker in New York

All UFCW members in Canada are protected under national law from discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. But at the time of our study, only 20 US states, Washington D.C., and Puerto Rico had protective legislation on the books,²⁴ and about 3.9 million LGBTQ+ people worked in states without specific legislation.²⁵ After our survey closed, however, the US Supreme Court ruled in *Bostock v. Clayton County, Georgia* that LGBTQ+ workers are protected nationwide under existing provisions of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act that prohibits discrimination based on sex.²⁶ This was an important victory for LGBTQ+ people across the United States, especially those who have continued to face exclusion in labor markets and discrimination in the workplace.²⁷

Achieving full access to employment and safe and equitable working conditions requires more than legal remedies. LGBTQ+ workers are not always aware of the scope of their rights, and those who experience or observe anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination may not always be equipped to take action. Many UFCW local unions have included protections in collective bargaining agreements, offered workplace training on LGBTQ+ inclusion, and demonstrated solidarity with LGBTQ+ social justice efforts.

Collective Bargaining for Equity and Protections

Collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) are one of the key tools at the union’s disposal to improve workplace conditions and increase equity for marginalized workers. UFCW leaders have negotiated for explicit policies that prohibit discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation in the workplace, filling the gaps in legislative protections. UFCW OUTreach organizers have provided sample language for nondiscrimination policies such as, “The Company agrees that it will not discriminate against or treat any worker differently because of Union membership, support or activity, . . . sexual orientation, or gender identity or expression”²⁸

Most members we surveyed agreed that LGBTQ+ workers should be protected in their union contracts, some were unsure, and very few disagreed (see table 3). More than two-thirds reported that their current union contract protects LGBTQ+ workers, and more than half of LGBTQ+ workers felt protected at work because of their CBAs (see figure 8).

Table 3: General perception of union support for LGBTQ+ workers

General perceptions	% agree	% neither agree or disagree	% disagree
 LGBTQ+ workers should be protected by my union contract	87	10	3
 LGBTQ+ workers are protected by my union contract	70	26	4



Figure 8: Sense of safety for LGBTQ+ workers



UFCW organizers have also negotiated for access to gender-neutral bathrooms at work and to close gaps in company health care policies. In 2018, UFCW passed Resolution 11 in support of bargaining to refuse health care policies that discriminate against transgender and gender-nonconforming workers. In the US, only 13 states prohibit health care discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation,²⁹ and the Trump administration has dismantled existing federal policy protections.³⁰ In this context, the collective bargaining process may be the only line of defense for ensuring equitable access to health care benefits. In Canada, where the national health care system includes some, but not all, forms of gender-affirming care, numerous local unions have strengthened benefit provisions in collective bargaining contracts to ensure access to equitable health care. UFCW Canada has also partnered with Fierite Canada Pride and the Canadian Professional Association for Transgender Health to outline and further advocate for equal access to gender-affirming medical care.³¹

The majority of participants supported collective bargaining for these protections, though some were opposed. Nearly one-third of members surveyed said they were unsure where they stood, suggesting that a good portion of members are uninformed about LGBTQ+ equity issues (see figure 9).

Figure 9: Support for CBA protections for LGBTQ+ workers

	Yes	No	Don't Know
Nondiscrimination protections based on sexual orientation	61%	11%	28%
Nondiscrimination protections based on gender identity or expression	60%	11%	29%
Benefits for gender-affirming health care	59%	12%	29%
Guaranteed access to gender-neutral bathrooms in the workplace	55%	16%	29%



Participants said that knowing the union was negotiating for explicit language in their contracts was a powerful demonstration of the unions' commitment to LGBTQ+ people. As one Midwest grocery worker put it, working at a unionized jobsite meant "knowing that things are actually in our contract that we can go back to and, if it needs to come to a grievance, the language is there to support people. . . . Because the [union] took the time to put it in the contract," it is clear that these issues are "in their hearts."

Some workers claimed a greater sense of job security knowing that they could not be fired just because they were LGBTQ+ and that they would be supported by the union. A transgender grocery worker on the West Coast explained how scared he was of losing his job when he transitioned on the job. He spoke of his relief in finding that the union would "support me and back me up and let me know that I'm not alone. . . . I'm taken care of."

Less than half of members surveyed believed that their CBAs had provisions that prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation (46%) or gender identity (39%). Far fewer reported that their CBA included provisions to increase access to gender-neutral bathrooms (12%) or gender-affirming health care (10%). Many survey participants were unsure if there were specific protections in their CBAs protecting LGBTQ+ workers (see figure 10).

Figure 10: Worker awareness of protections for LGBTQ+ workers in CBA

	Included	Not included	Not sure
Nondiscrimination protections based on sexual orientation	46%	11%	43%
Nondiscrimination protections based on gender identity or expression	39%	13%	48%
Guaranteed access to gender-neutral bathrooms in the workplace	12%	40%	48%
Benefits for gender-affirming health care	10%	23%	67%



Using CBAs to increase LGBTQ+ equity requires that organizers are equipped before, during, and after negotiations with accurate information about resources. Increasing educational programming that focuses on LGBTQ+ equity issues and sharing examples and strategies from successful negotiations can help ensure that contracts are being used effectively to address historic inequities and meet evolving needs.

Ensuring Equitable Access to Benefits for LGBTQ+ Workers

Nearly a quarter of private sector workers in the United States do not have access to health insurance. Prior to the passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA), an estimated 34% of low-income LGBTQ+ people were uninsured.³² Transgender people face particular inequities in access to care, including explicit exclusion of health insurance coverage for gender-affirming care. While the passage of the ACA has been a historic achievement in expanding access to care for low-income people, the Trump administration has actively worked to eradicate protections prohibiting health care discrimination against LGBTQ+ people.³³

Unions play a critical role in fighting for affordable health care for workers and their families. Nine out of 10 union workers have access to affordable union-negotiated health care compared to two-thirds of nonunion workers. Union workers pay lower health insurance premiums—8% less for individual coverage and 15% less for family coverage.³⁴

UFCW OUTreach has been a strong advocate in the area of transgender inclusion in health care. In Canada, UFCW collaborated on an exploratory landscape analysis in 2014 to determine which provinces provided for publicly funded gender-affirming medical care, and worked with advocacy groups, medical community experts, and grassroots activists to press for ongoing improvements in gender-affirming medical care across the country. While many more improvements need to be made, some publicly funded gender-affirming health care now exists throughout Canada. In the United States, many UFCW health funds that are jointly administered with management trustees have eliminated the exclusion of gender-affirming health care. From California to Pennsylvania and many places in between, health plans have been made more inclusive. In 2015, UFCW OUTreach provided testimony to the Department of Health and Human Services to include regulations in the ACA to ensure protections for transgender and gender-nonconforming people.

As these protections continue to face attacks especially in the United States, UFCW International passed its own resolution to safeguard health care for the union's members. In 2018, Resolution 11 made a public commitment to eradicate these forms of targeted health care exclusions and to defend the health rights of transgender and gender-nonconforming people. This past year, when the Trump Administration announced the proposed elimination of transgender inclusion in Section 1557 of the ACA, OUTreach once again provided testimony opposing such action.

Union leadership on issues of health and health care is a priority for many LGBTQ+ workers. One Canadian grocery worker emphasized that it is crucial for the union to address “intersecting points [when] figuring out how to protect workers.” As a trans woman with a physical disability, she went on to describe some of the intersections for LGBTQ+ and disability rights: “We’ve got actually quite a few people with mental health



issues. We've got a few people with physical disabilities—none as major as mine, but if you're trying to deal with a shoulder that gives you problems, that's still a big thing in a grocery store. I'd love to see the union start looking at those intersections."

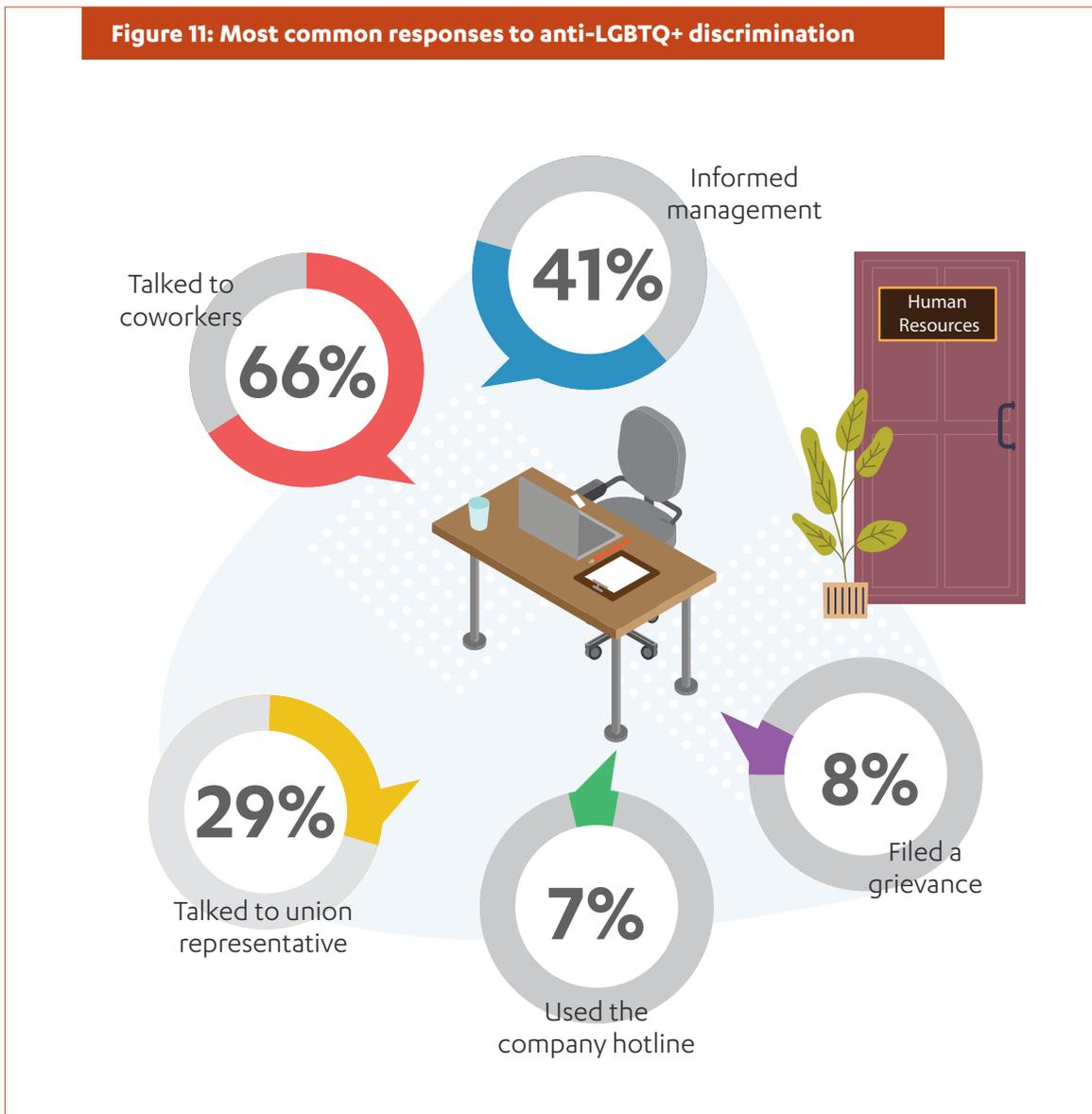
Union-led educational campaigns can help ensure that LGBTQ+ people and benefits departments understand their legal and contractual rights and can access additional information. As one transmasculine worker in the Mid-Atlantic shared, "If I wanted to transition in the workplace, how would I go about doing that? Are there any resources that I can look to, to see what my protections are? Where there aren't protections even? Because there's a lot of state, federal, county, and city level stuff that changes a lot, and a lot of people aren't protected in a lot of ways. So what are the protections by the law? What are the protections in the contract? . . . It's just sort of a blank."

A trans man in California explained how the union benefits department had been helpful when looking for a gender-affirming health care provider: "For me, being transgender, I am grateful for the support, and I'm grateful that they gave me resources. And the health department showed me places where I could go that would be LGBT friendly."

Eliminating barriers so that all members are informed about their protections and benefits is important for the well-being of LGBTQ+ people and their families. LGBTQ+ workers have been historically excluded from family-related health benefits, including health insurance benefits for family members and family medical leave that have been designed for legally recognized family structures. The majority of LGBTQINB+ participants said they had not accessed health insurance for a family member or benefited from family medical leave. Fewer LGBTQINB+ participants had applied for these benefits than those who were not-LGBTQINB+. The findings related to family medical leave were particularly striking: One in two non-LGBTQ+ participants had applied for and received family medical leave, compared to only 1 in 5 LGBTQINB+ people. Understanding if and why LGBTQ+ people do not equitably benefit from these forms of compensation may be an important area for further research and action.

Responding to Anti-LGBTQ+ Discrimination

Even when nondiscrimination policies are in place, workers need tools and effective pathways to respond to bias and seek remedies without retaliation. Only 41% who had observed anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes, harassment, or discrimination in the workplace in the past five years had reported it to management, about 29% had talked to their union representative, 8% had filed a formal grievance, and 7% reported it to the company ethics hotline (see figure 11). While hotlines and formal grievance processes are crucial resources, many workers may not know the problems are actionable or if these resources are safe for addressing LGBTQ+ mistreatment.



Coworker solidarity and allyship can play an important role in the process of changing attitudes, intervening in harassment, and formulating responses to discrimination. Sixty-six percent of those we surveyed said they had talked to their coworkers about observing or experiencing LGBTQ+ mistreatment. Training and education can help members, and especially shop stewards and union staff, to identify when anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination happens and respond appropriately.

LGBTQ+ members had used a range of strategies to directly address discrimination or harassment in the workplace. A grocery worker in the Northwest shared that she let her manager know when his comments about her physical appearance were making her uncomfortable. She also went to his manager to discuss the problem which solved the problem: “He hasn’t really said two words to me since!” A Mid-Atlantic deli worker and shop steward said when she saw bias or discrimination, she took it up with the department managers, human resource staff, and even the store director to “squash the issue.” While these workers addressed these issues themselves, being able to rely on the union to step in and take action provides protection against backlash or retaliation.



Providing Workplace Education on LGBTQ+ Equity

Most people have not had the opportunity to learn about the history of LGBTQ+ activism and its intersections with the contemporary labor movement. It was clear from our survey that some members do not understand or significantly underestimate the need for the union to pursue LGBTQ+ equity efforts and demonstrate political solidarity.

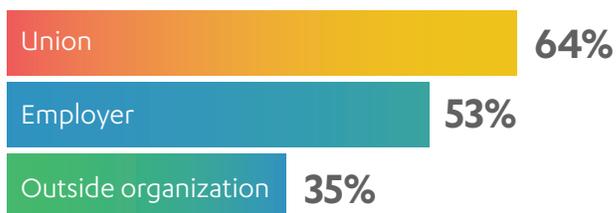
UFCW OUTreach has developed and championed workplace training programs to address gaps in awareness about LGBTQ+ social justice struggles and reduce workplace discrimination and harassment. About a third of survey participants had received training in their current workplace that included LGBTQ+ content. Most training was provided by the union or the employer, with some by an outside organization (see figure 12).

Figure 12: LGBTQ+ inclusion training in the workplace



Received LGBTQ+ inclusion training at the workplace

Training was provided by:



Union-led workplace training can help ensure that workers understand existing LGBTQ+ protections included in their CBAs and options for engaging the union in response to anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination and harassment. Training can also shift values and attitudes about protecting LGBTQ+ rights. Survey participants who had received training were more informed about LGBTQ+ protections in their CBAs and supportive of using CBAs to secure those protections. Those participants also demonstrated greater awareness and responsiveness to anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination in the workplace and were more likely to talk with their union representatives when they saw or experienced anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination (see table 4).

Table 4: Impact of inclusion training on knowledge and support of LGBTQ+ protections in CBA

Impact of inclusion trainings	% of trained members	% of untrained members
Knew that their CBA had or did not have protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity	74	51
Informed management about anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination (among those who observed it)	45	34
Talked to a union rep about anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination	41	19
Filed a grievance about anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination	11	4

LGBTQ+ workers highlighted the need for training and education as a priority, and some provided examples of how training recommendations were incorporated at their workplaces and union meetings. For example, one Canadian retail worker shared that they had seen the following practices incorporated at their worksite: “Pronouns included on name tags and in email signatures; gender-neutral restrooms; a diversity training for all staff; and signage alerting customers and staff to use gender-neutral language if they are unsure of someone’s identity.”

A Canadian health care worker spoke to the power of union-sponsored LGBTQ+ training, saying that it had been one of the single most important factors in creating a shift in culture and ensuring everyone understood that there are “consequences to your actions.” Not only did she witness a shift in culture, but she expressed feeling “thankful and grateful that they have taken up this cause,” allowing her to be more vocal about LGBTQ+ issues at work.

Survey respondents and interviewees voiced their support for workplace training as a strategy to improve the workplace environment. However, LGBTQ+ workers emphasized that the content and how it was delivered should be an important consideration. A grocery worker on the West Coast spoke about the need to acknowledge and create spaces for LGBTQ+ community members in the context of workplace training and membership meetings. A Mid-Atlantic grocery worker suggested “identifying rank-and-file leaders, and train[ing] them” to deliver workshops. In respondents’ view, member-led training, a bottom-up approach, would be more empowering than human resources training where “all everyone’s going to do is just make fun of it.”

Formal training would also alleviate the pressure of having to informally provide education for coworkers and management. A grocery store worker in the Northwest said she would like to see “more materials presented for people that don’t identify as LGBTQ because I remember a lot of people would come to me with questions, and I would be their go-to person for these kinds of issues.” A Canadian fuel employee also mentioned this problem and the need to identify someone in the union who could address anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination and provide more education. As one health care member in the West noted, “the more education and training, the better, to hold people responsible for their actions. I feel very proud and safe to work for [my company] knowing it’s an LGBTQ+ safe workplace.” Educational workshops that widen circles of accountability can be a first step for fostering a work environment where LGBTQ+ workers feel safe.

Pathways toward Union Power and Justice

Develop issue-based, worker-centered organizing and labor education programs that focus on lifting up and affirming LGBTQ+ worker rights and identities.

When union leaders, stewards, organizers, and educators intentionally integrate and highlight the experiences of historically marginalized and excluded worker communities into their programming, a redistribution of worker power and paths toward workplace equity are possible.

- Create a gender-inclusive culture by modeling gender-neutral language, refraining from assuming gender identity, and normalizing pronoun-sharing practices (e.g., adding pronouns to name tags at workshops, meetings, and workplaces).
- Use an intersectional analysis to ensure that a gender and LGBTQ+ equity lens is engaged throughout all union political activity, communications, presentations, trainings, and workshops.

- Increase LGBTQ+ worker inclusion and equity through identity-affirming resources and materials, for example, by displaying and distributing posters and workplace materials about protections for LGBTQ+ workers.
- Support worker-led trainings that highlight the history of the LGBTQ+ movement and its leaders.
- Require comprehensive LGBTQ+ education and training for all union members, focused on eradicating homophobia and transphobia in the workplace, understanding institutional oppression of LGBTQ+ people, learning strategies for LGBTQ+ allyship, and creating an inclusive workplace environment.
- Identify key union members who are willing to answer any questions pertaining to LGBTQ+ issues.

Figure 13: Examples of LGBTQ+ inclusion training materials

LGBTQ Mini-Glossary: Pocket List of Definitions

LGBTQ: An acronym for "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Two-Spirit, Queer and Questioning" people.

LESBIAN: A female who is attracted physically and

GENDER IDENTITY: A person's internal sense or feeling of being male or female—gender expression relates to how a person presents their sense of gender to the larger society. Gender

Handling Harassment Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in the Workplace in 3 Minutes or Less!

1. STOP THE HARASSMENT

- Interrupt the comment or stop the physical harassment.
- Do not pull worker aside for the purpose of confidentiality unless absolutely necessary as this may "out" a not ready to be
- Make sure all th the area hear y

2. IDENTIFY THE

- Label the form i "You just made i comment based sexual orientati
- Do not imply ti member of that identifiable gro

3. BROADEN THE RESPONSE

- Do not personalize your res at this stage. Instead state, f "At this workplace WE do not or "Our community does not ac hateful thoughtless behavior

Tips for Negotiating Gender Inclusive Language into Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBA)

An inclusive harassment provision may include the following language: *Harassment includes any* *sexuous comment or conduct against a worker that ought to be reasonably known to be unwelcome. Any* *offensive verbal, physical or visual behavior directed towards a person and based on the grounds of gender,* *sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or* *assessant. Any conduct that disrespects a worker's dignity* *is considered harassment.*

PENSION BENEFITS

- Allow anyone to be listed as a beneficiary (eg. Domestic partners)

WORKPLACE SAFETY

- Amend name badges and documentation to include a person's preferred name
- Negotiate gender neutral restrooms
- Add language to support a workplace Gay Straight Alliance

Taking Action to Create Trans-Positive Workplaces in 12 Easy Steps!

1. Talk to your union and employer about developing a policy aimed at identifying and confronting transphobia in the workplace.
2. Review your workplace equity statements and anti-violence policies. If there is nothing specific to trans workers, propose to your union and employer that gender identity become a specific ground for protection.
3. Ensure that all workers have the right to participate in gender-segregated activities, if any exist, in accordance with the worker's gender identity.
4. Designate a steward or union member in your workplace who can act in an extended advocacy role for trans workers.
5. Accommodate locker room accessibility, which may include use of a private area (e.g. washroom) or a separate changing schedule (before or after the other workers have changed).
6. Develop a workplace policy for consistent use of preferred name.
7. Integrate trans-sensitivity and advocacy training into workplace health and safety meetings, company meetings and union meetings.
8. Negotiate trans-related language in your collective agreements.
9. Integrate trans content into your workplace and local union education.
10. Ensure the right to use a washroom that best corresponds to a worker's gender identity. If trans workers do not feel safe using this washroom, ensure that they have access to a private washroom if they choose.
11. Develop a flexible or gender-neutral dress code to enable a worker's right to dress in accordance with his or her gender identity.
12. Support the development of a trans-inclusive GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance) in the workplace.

ZERO-TOLERANCE POLICIES

Bullying, Harassment, Workplace Violence, Homophobia, Transphobia

Adapted from UFCW OUTreach constituency group and UFCW International

Adapted from GLENN/Colorado

Improving the Workplace for LGBTQ+ Workers Requires Cultural and Systemic Change

In terms of LGBTQ+ issues, I'd like to see us try and find those risks and address them before they happen. I don't necessarily have a good example to follow up with that, but it just seems like, in general, we tend to wait for something to go wrong and then try and fix it.

— UFCW member and grocery worker in Canada

Anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes and informal degradations can create unwelcoming conditions for LGBTQ+ workers.³⁵ Stigma can erode job satisfaction and increase stress associated with poor health outcomes.³⁶ These experiences have a reverberating impact on workers' families, friends, and communities.

A Culture of Acceptance

Workers had varying perceptions of LGBTQ+ acceptance in the workplace (see table 5). While there was a strong sense of acceptance by union staff, fewer perceived their managers and coworkers as accepting, and customers were perceived as the least accepting.

Table 5: LGBTQINB+ workers' perceived acceptance of LGBTQ+ people in the workplace

Workplace groups	% of very accepting	% of somewhat accepting	% of not accepting
Union staff	77	20	3
Managers	53	40	7
Coworkers	54	39	7
Customers	25	61	14

Non-LGBTQ+ participants viewed workplaces as more accepting than LGBTQ+ participants. This gap in perspective was most notable in relation to the acceptance of ITNB+ workers. While only one-fifth of ITNB+ workers felt managers were very accepting of ITNB+ people, more than half of non-LGBTQ+ participants felt management and co-workers were very accepting (see table 6). Those who have not previously observed anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination may believe it does not exist and are less likely to recognize it when it happens.

Table 6: ITNB+ workers' perceived acceptance of ITNB+ people in the workplace

Workplace groups	% of very accepting	% of somewhat accepting	% of not accepting
Union staff	55	36	9
Managers	21	56	23
Coworkers	28	52	20
Customers	7	46	47

LGBTQ+ workers described how this gap in perspective led managers to ignore, minimize, and even rationalize discriminatory behavior. As one Northeastern retail worker shared, “Senior management dismisses LGBT harassment by saying, ‘Words don’t hurt people’ and to just get along and be quiet. This has happened on several occasions.” Another Northeastern grocery worker shared their manager’s similarly dismissive attitude: “They said, ‘I know your generation is the generation where everyone gets their feelings hurt, but words don’t hurt’ and was told to ignore it.”

Those interviewed for the study offered suggestions for how companies might make their support for LGBTQ+ people more visible for both managers and customers. For example, one grocery worker suggested including pronouns on name tags and in email signatures and “signage alerting customers and staff to use gender-neutral language if they are unsure of someone’s identity.” Signage could include “All Are Welcome” with a rainbow or Pride symbol to signal the company’s inclusive culture.³⁷

Even when the same policies are applied to all workers, there can be disparate impacts on LGBTQ+ workers, including being forced to disclose information about sexual orientation or gender identity in an unaccepting workplace. One grocery worker described one of her coworkers feeling pressured to come out in order to get benefits for his deceased husband and wondered whether a person in a heterosexual relationship would have to produce a marriage license to begin processing these same benefits. The coworker had not disclosed his same-sex partnership to management, so being asked to produce this type of document was “forcing them to be out.” Situations like this disrupt the misconception that LGBTQ+ identity is primarily a private matter that is irrelevant to worker organizing.

The overall situation has improved in recent years, especially in union workplaces. In surveys and interviews alike, LGBTQ+ workers with long UFCW tenures commented on the changes in values and practices they had witnessed in their workplaces and within the union. Reflecting on her experience over the years, a Canadian health care member recounts how different her experience was in the past: “It’s totally changed. . . . I would say for the first 10 years I was there, [I] was kind of closeted. . . . With the union doing a lot of work around LGBT stuff lately too, it’s like I feel like my whole life has been brought together. My work, my self, my human beingness, and then the union together, so it feels really good.” A newer grocery worker in the Northwest also noted the positive impact of increased workplace diversity and LGBTQ+ visibility in the union: “Talking with fellow LGBTQ+ coworkers has made me feel more welcome, and a lot of other coworkers have been affirming of my gender. I was also pleased to see that our union supports queer rights and had involvement with a local Pride event.” The union’s support empowers workers to advocate for their LGBTQ+ coworkers. A union member in the Northeast shared how she took action to stop a culture of nonacceptance after a colleague left because of their manager and after noticing how scared some young employees were.

Anti-LGBTQ+ Discrimination in the Workplace

Almost half of all participants had observed or experienced some form of anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination or mistreatment in their workplaces within the past five years. LGBTQ+ workers were more aware of anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes, whether or not they were directly targeted; 72% had observed discrimination, compared to only 40% of non-LGBTQ+ participants (see figure 14).

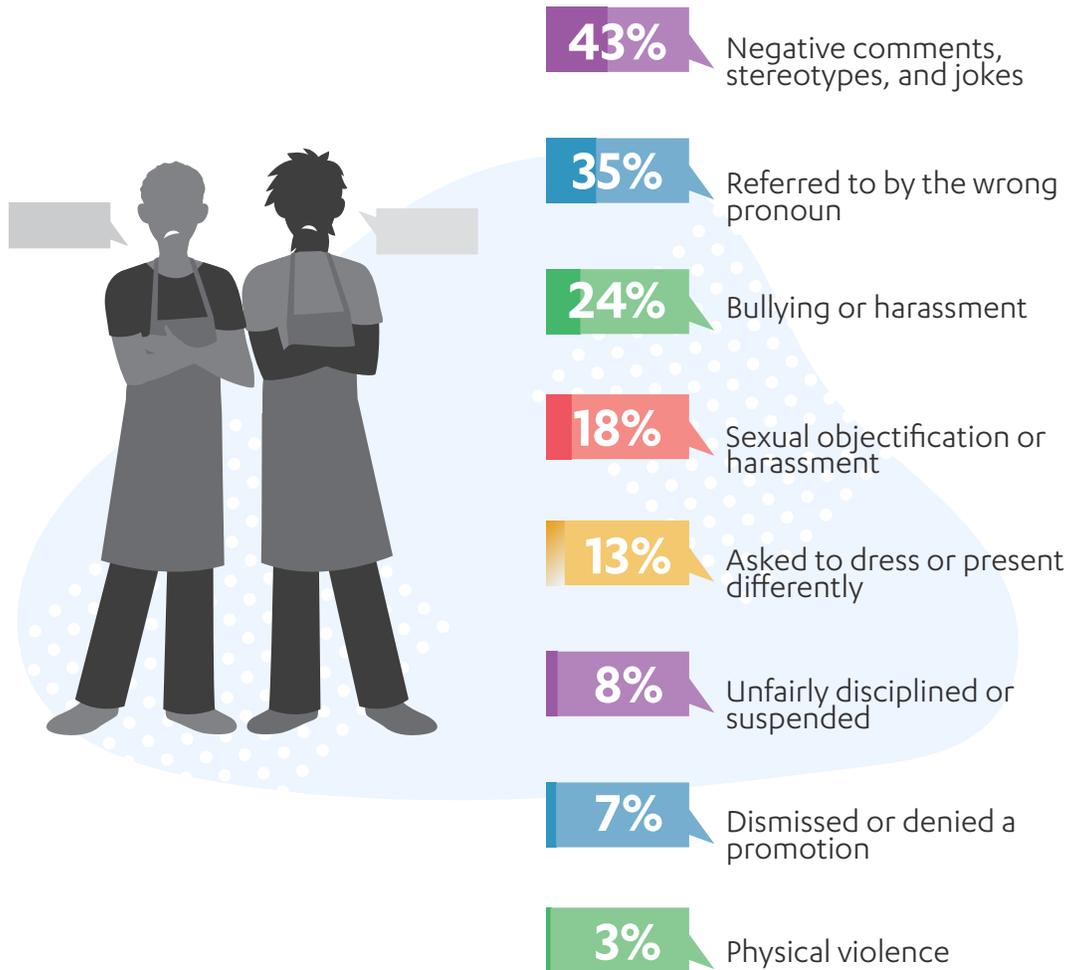
Figure 14: Observed or experienced anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination in the workplace in the last five years



Note. Some but not all ITNB+ participants also identify as LGBTQ+.

Almost half of all participants reported hearing negative comments, stereotypes, and jokes related to LGBTQ+ people, and a quarter experienced or witnessed bullying or harassment of LGBTQ+ workers. Other experiences ranged from unfair discipline and denied promotions to physical violence (see figure 15).

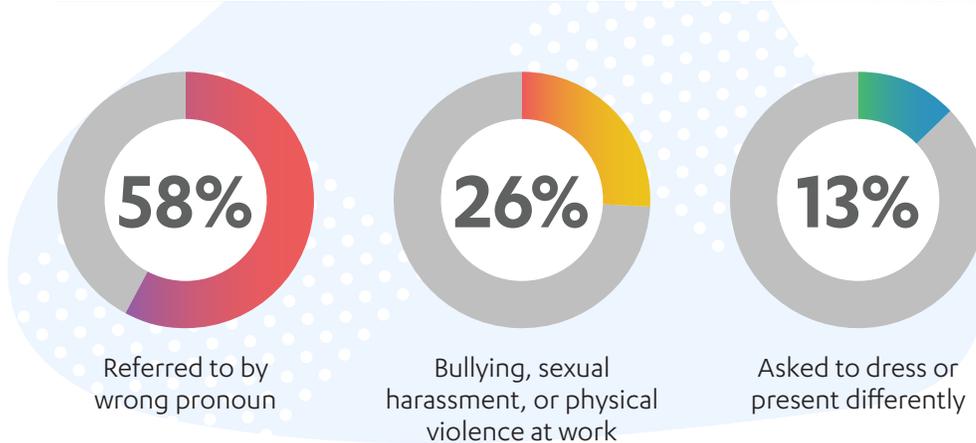
Figure 15: Anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination in the workplace



A queer Canadian health worker described the discrimination she experienced by a homophobic boss: “[My] boss told me right to my face that she was homophobic. . . . She separated all the gay people; one got moved upstairs, the other one got let go, and that kind of stuff. So it was blatant.”

ITNB+ participants were particularly likely to have experienced bullying and harassment at work, and nearly half reported being misgendered or referred to by the wrong pronouns (see figure 16).

Figure 16: Anti-ITNB+ discrimination in the workplace



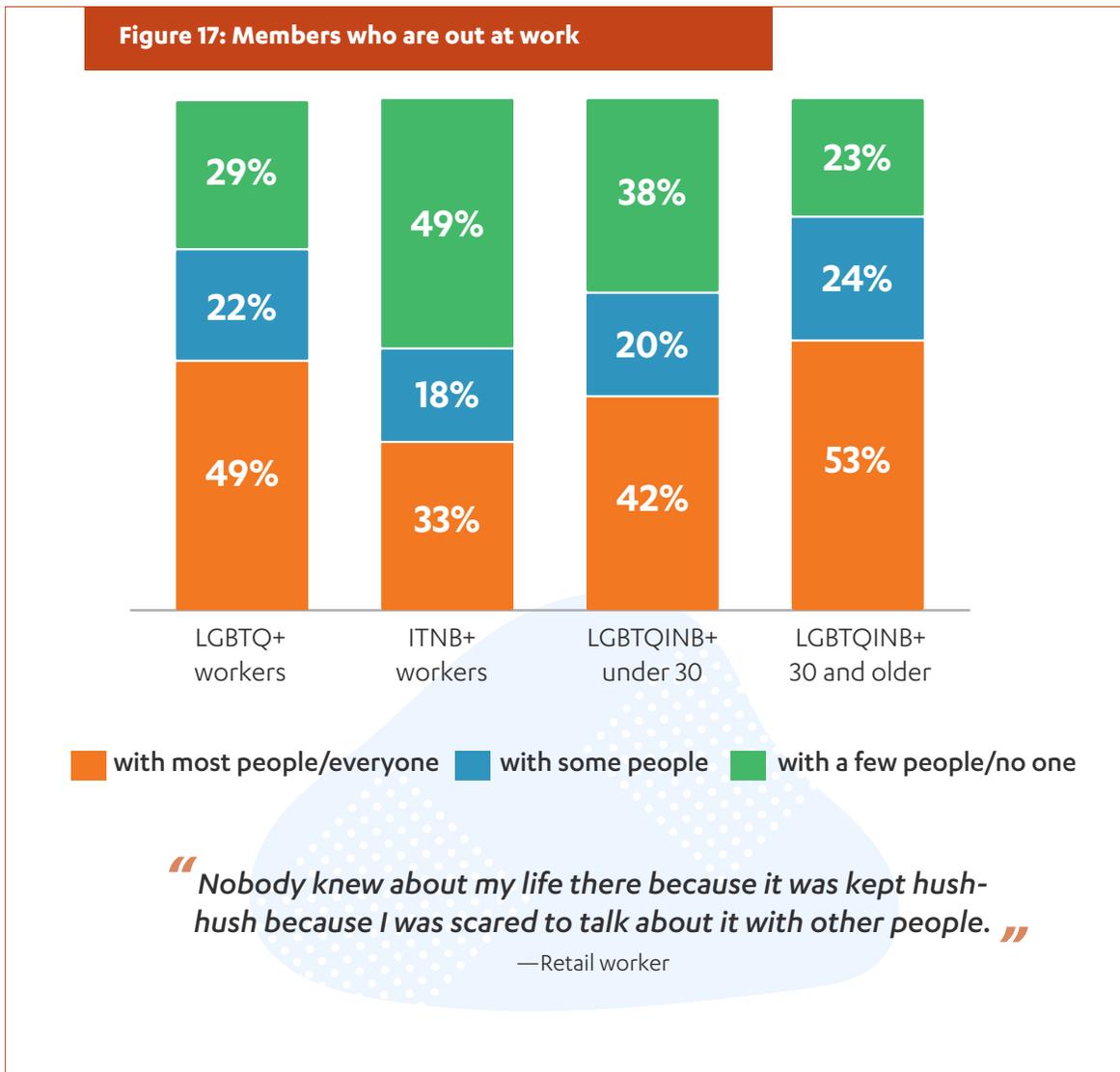
A transgender grocery cashier recounted engaging the union when he experienced discrimination by management. After changing his name and being granted a new name tag, an acting store manager sat him down and told him he needed to go back to using his old name tag. The worker recalled, "I felt so hurt, but I did what he told me." He then sought the help of the union, explaining to their union representative, "I cannot pretend anymore." The union's support and advocacy was crucial for this worker to obtain recognition as an LGBTQ+ person and acknowledgment that no one has the right to deny him his identity.

Open and Out at Work

This is just micro, my little world on the front end. When someone new comes into our store as a worker, [I hope] that no one assumes anything about them, and they feel okay to be exactly who they are and know that they won't experience any covert or overt discrimination because of who they are. That would be the pie in the sky, hope-filled dream for the future.

—UFCW member and grocery work in Virginia

One important indicator of an inclusive workplace is whether LGBTQ+ people feel comfortable with coworkers knowing about their identity, relationships, or families. For some, the decision to simply mention a spouse or partner by name, talk about weekend plans, or share important life events may involve careful deliberation about whether it is safe to do so.



About half of ITNB+ workers and a third of LGBTQ+ workers said few people or no one at work knew about their identity (see figure 17). Although more young workers identified as LGBTQINB+, they were generally less open at work than those over age 30. This difference may be because younger adults are at different stages in identifying their orientation and the socio-emotional processes involved with feeling ready to share that information with family, friends, or coworkers.³⁸

Many workers shared their comfort with being out at work. A grocery worker from the Midwest shared how she engages in “water cooler conversations that breech certain topics. I like to poke the bear. I like to have conversations that not a lot of other people like to have, and I like to challenge that. So I like to bring that up and see what other people’s perspectives are that I work with. I don’t think it’s a negative feeling towards the community or anything like that; it’s just kind of unspoken. But I do think it’s a comfortable climate.”

A retail worker from the East Coast shared that in her past job, no one knew about her partner: “Nobody knew about my life there because it was kept hush-hush because I was scared to talk about it with other people.” Coworkers would refer to her partner as a friend or her sister. In her current workplace, she feels like she has a voice and platform as a “gay leader, a woman of color,” attributing this in part to being in a unionized workplace and her involvement as a union leader.

From the Mid-Atlantic region, a maintenance worker recalled how he emphasized the union’s interest in LGBTQ+ issues as a way to comfort a coworker who did not want to talk about the OUTreach survey. He listened to her concerns about where “the information would go” and responded by assuring her that “that’s what the union’s for. That’s why we’re having an OUTreach program. That’s why this is happening, because it hasn’t ever before.” Letting her know she was supported by the union gave her the confidence to talk about LGBTQ+ issues at work.

Participants who were not open at work were concerned about being stereotyped, perceived as unprofessional, or losing social connections or relationships (see table 7). Nearly one-third said they felt unsafe being open as LGBTQ+ at work, and nearly one-quarter thought their direct supervisors would not be receptive. Some feared that they would be harassed, ostracized, denied a promotion, or fired.³⁹

Table 7: Fears about being open at work

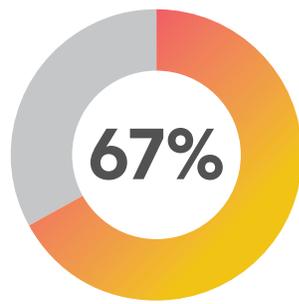
Participants' Fears	% of all LGBTQINB+ participants
Being stereotyped	53
Being perceived as unprofessional	49
Losing connections	45
Feeling unsafe	31
Unwelcoming direct supervisor	22

A Canadian grocery cashier described how being out at work was “a tricky balance.” She described how some coworkers were “quite open” while others “chose to stay in the closet.” She cited “not feeling safe” as the reason why some would not come out at work and talked about how coworkers assess the situation: “It’s not uncommon for a young person who’s new to the store to maybe approach me or somebody else who’s open and have a chat.” In a similar vein, a Mid-Atlantic deli worker discussed how a fellow coworker was unsure about it being “safe for him to come out at work.” In Virginia, the larger community was also “not so friendly about homosexual people; they tend to harass people.”

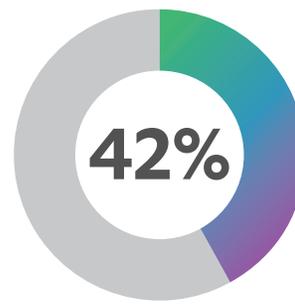
Safety at Work

Many LGBTQ+ members we interviewed spoke about instances of not feeling safe at work, and all of them acknowledged LGBTQ+ coworkers who felt unsafe at work, including some who even quit their jobs. Over two-thirds of ITNB+ participants and almost half of LGBTQ+ participants said they had felt unsafe in their current workplaces at least once because of their gender or sexuality (see figure 18). A Midwestern grocery worker spoke about how the union had helped make their workplace a safer space for LGBTQ+ folks by including language about trans rights in their contract, with this qualification: “In those ways, we’ve done a good job, but I do think that there’s still more that we could do.” That wariness may explain the difficulty we had in recruiting more participants for interviews.

Figure 18: Participants feeling unsafe at work



ITNB+ Workers



LGBTQ+ Workers

Advocating for Gender-Neutral Bathrooms

It doesn't have to be overnight, all of the sudden, all of the washrooms are gender-neutral. But if you're going to start a renovation, why not incorporate that on one floor at a time and just give the reasons why. And while you're doing things like that, you can also help, by the way, [with] communication: Here's a good person to talk to in your union if you're having any issues. I'd just love to see more communication and education for people.

— UFCW member and chemical worker in Canada

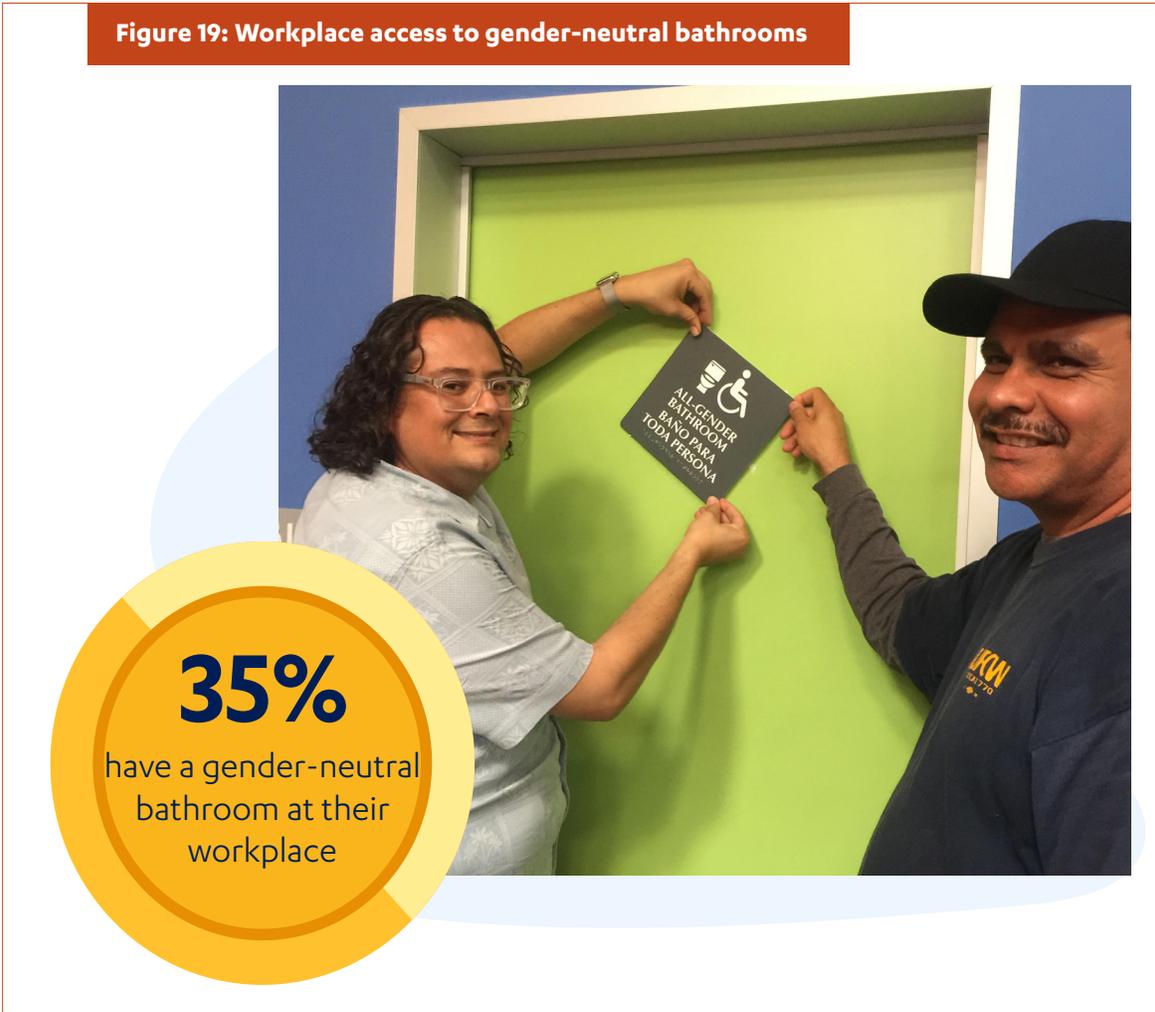
In 2015, the US Department of Labor (DOL) Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) released *A Guide to Restroom Access for Transgender Workers* that stated that all employees, including transgender employees, should have access to bathrooms that correspond with their gender identity.⁴⁰ While this has been a crucial protection, it is often insufficient. A gender-nonconforming Canadian chemical worker described the stress of navigating bathrooms and dress codes at work: "I find it really hard to adhere to the dress codes, and I really find the fact that we have one female and one male washroom that's shared to be quite unnerving throughout the day. I think that's probably my biggest pet peeve is having to choose the washroom I go to."

Transgender and nonbinary workers in the United States and Canada spoke about negative interactions with their coworkers regarding using the restrooms, including coworkers who "freak out." Such incidents can become daily encounters. A Canadian

trans woman working at a grocery store described the need to advocate for herself in response to negative encounters in the washroom: “There have been a few times when we’ve had new people come into the store, new employees, and they’ve had a problem with me using the woman’s washroom. That is just something that I will not stand for. I just go straight to whoever is the manager on duty, and I don’t leave it as optional. It’s like, “You will talk with this person now.” Although she had been successful in getting management to quickly respond to problems with coworkers, sharing bathrooms with customers raised an additional set of anxieties and challenges. One grocery worker from the West Coast spoke about wanting to use the men’s room but not feeling comfortable using a facility that was shared with customers. Reaching out to the union representative proved helpful in gaining access to a gender-neutral bathroom.

Local unions are playing an active role in ensuring access to gender-neutral bathrooms as a basic working condition (see figure 19). Gender-neutral bathrooms are not labeled by gender and are usually single-occupancy. Guaranteeing access to proximate, single-occupancy, gender-neutral bathrooms is a structural solution that not only increases safety and dignity for transgender and nonbinary workers but can also help address a range of other bathroom privacy needs.

Figure 19: Workplace access to gender-neutral bathrooms



Pathways toward Social Justice

Create worker-centered safe spaces within the union and affiliated community centers where workers can address, denounce, and resist LGBTQ+ workplace violence, discrimination, and harassment.

Paradigm shifts within labor unions and labor education spaces can improve workplace experiences and conditions for LGBTQ+ workers. Unions should empower all workers with additional resources and training regarding navigating and advocating for LGBTQ+ inclusion and equity policies.

- Clarify and streamline processes for reporting and documenting workplace discrimination and harassment.
- Offer frequent training programs for workers on how to address discrimination, harassment, or mistreatment of LGBTQ+ people, whether from customers or coworkers, and stand up for inclusion, equity, and LGBTQ+ identities throughout the workplace.
- Train union representatives in active listening during one-on-ones, courageous conversations, peer check-ins, and creation of action plans to resolve conflicts workers raise about grievances and discrimination issues.
- Continue to advocate for and expand local and federal legislation that protects LGBTQ+ workers from structural forms of oppression (e.g., dress codes and gender-specific bathrooms).



Conclusion

This report highlights the power of the union to act as a catalyst for change for LGBTQ+ workers. Working alongside other advocates and organizations, unions have been able to create safer and more equitable workplaces. But the work is far from over. LGBTQ+ workers, their families, friends, and communities continue to face many forms of inequities and indignities. To ensure equity for LGBTQ+ workers, unions must continue to take bold and courageous steps in solidarity with movements for LGBTQ+ social and economic justice.

LGBTQ+ workers, like those highlighted in this report, have the power to enact change at work and in the world. Investing in the leadership of LGBTQ+ workers and their allies is one way that unions can help strengthen their power. Increasing LGBTQ+ worker representation fortifies LGBTQ+ workers' sense of belonging and creates opportunities for greater collaboration among workers to improve working conditions.

In an economy riddled with unfair workplace policies and toxic workplace cultures, labor activists like those from UFCW and UFCW OUTreach, alongside their allies, are confronted with the urgency to work with and for the worker community to address the struggles LGBTQ+ workers encounter in their daily work lives. The voices of those highlighted here are a testament to their varied work and life experiences and how they have been affected by racial injustice, ableism, classism, sexism, and xenophobia. Embracing the work that lies ahead will ensure that union leaders and workers can engage together to attain social justice for LGBTQ+ workers.

Appendix

Table A1: Characteristics of survey sample

	% of all survey participants	% of LGBTQINB+ participants	% of non-LGBTQ+ participants
Industry			
Grocery	62	64	61
Retail	17	20	16
Packing and processing	9	4	11
Health care	5	4	6
Other industries (e.g., hospitality, cannabis, finance, security)	7	9	6
Region			
Canada ^a	33	32	33
Central	8	15	6
Mid-Atlantic	14	8	16
Midwestern	7	5	9
Northeastern	3	3	3
Northwestern	14	18	12
South Central	2	6	1
Western	18	12	20
Age^b			
18–24	9	20	4
25–29	10	17	8
30–34	13	18	11
35–44	21	21	21
45–55	22	15	25
55–64	21	8	26
65+	3	1	4
Race/Ethnicity			
Indigenous, Native American	3	3	2
African American, Black	5	3	6
Asian, Pacific Islander	4	2	4
Latinx	8	5	10
Multiracial	4	7	2
White	72	76	72
Other	5	4	5

Note. Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

^a Of the 363 Canadian participants, 46% were in Ontario, 25% in British Columbia, 19% in Saskatchewan, 5% in Alberta, and 5% in other provinces and territories.

^b Mean age was 43.

Table A2: Characteristics of interview participants

	% of all interview participants
Industry	
Grocery	58
Retail	14
Packing and processing	7
Health care	7
Other industries (e.g., hospitality, cannabis, finance, security)	14
Region	
Canada	21
Central	-
Mid-Atlantic	43
Midwestern	7
Northeastern	15
Northwestern	7
South Central	-
Western	7
Age	
18–24	-
25–29	43
30–34	-
35–44	29
45–55	-
55–64	21
65+	7
Race/Ethnicity	
Indigenous, Native American	-
African American, Black	7
Asian, Pacific Islander	-
Latinx	14
Multiracial	7
White	65
Prefer not to say	7

Glossary

ALLY: An individual (usually heterosexual) who is supportive of and identifies with the LGBTQ community or some identity other than their own. Allies believe in dignity and respect for all people and are willing to stand up in that role.⁴¹

BISEXUAL: Physical and emotional attraction to both men and women.

GAY: Physical and emotional attraction to people of the same gender; can include both men and women or refer to men only.

GENDER EXPRESSION: How a person presents their gender to the larger society (e.g., feminine, masculine, androgynous).

GENDER FLUIDITY: The belief that social constructions of gender identity and gender roles lie along a spectrum and cannot be limited to two genders; a feeling that one's gender varies from traditional societal notions of two genders.

GENDER IDENTITY: A person's sense of their own gender in society (e.g., man, woman, nonbinary, etc.).

INTERSEX: An umbrella term for differences in sex traits or reproductive anatomy. Intersex people are born with these differences or develop them in childhood. There are many possible differences in genitalia, hormones, internal anatomy, or chromosomes, compared to the usual two ways that human bodies develop.⁴²

LESBIAN: A woman who is attracted physically and emotionally to other women.

LGBTQ: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Two-Spirit, Queer or Questioning.

NONBINARY: Not identifying exclusively as a man or a woman. A nonbinary person may identify as both a man and a woman, somewhere in between, or completely outside these categories. While many nonbinary people identify as transgender, not all do.⁴³

PANSEXUAL: Physical and emotional attraction to people of any gender identity.

QUEER: Historically, a negative term, but reclaimed by some LGBTQ people as a positive way to refer to their sexual orientation or identity; also used popularly to refer to a perspective or a politics of non-normativity.

QUESTIONING: A person who is unsure of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

SEXUAL IDENTITY/ORIENTATION: Deep-seated feelings of emotional and sexual attraction—to people of the same gender (lesbian or gay), another gender (heterosexual/straight), or any gender (bisexual, pansexual, etc.).

TRANSGENDER: Describes a person whose gender identity, outward appearance, expression, and/or anatomy does not fit into conventional expectations of male or female; often used as an umbrella term to represent a wide range of nonconforming gender identities and expressions.

TWO-SPIRIT (OR 2-SPIRIT): Some indigenous people identify themselves as Two-Spirit, rather than lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. Historically, in many Indigenous cultures, Two-Spirit people were respected leaders and medicine people and were often accorded special status based on their unique abilities to understand the perspectives of both men and women.

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Notes

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