

# DEEP DIVIDES

COVID-19's Impact on  
Central Indiana's  
LGBTQ+ Community

March 2021

**In early 2020,**  
**THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**  
**CHANGED EVERYTHING**

New public health precautions to combat the virus quickly became part of our everyday lives. The way we work, learn, and socialize seemingly changed overnight. Strains on essential services created new barriers to accessing basic needs. The nation plunged into an economic crisis. And a growing nation-wide movement for racial justice underscored the urgency of eradicating systemic racial inequities, many of which had intensified through the pandemic.

For those focused on Central Indiana's LGBTQ+ population, it quickly became clear that these multi-layered challenges were disproportionately affecting the LGBTQ+ communities they serve. To better understand COVID-19's impact on Central Indiana's LGBTQ+ community, a dynamic coalition of more than a dozen LGBTQ+ focused organizations – including the Damien Center, BU Wellness Network, Gender Nexus, The Glow Up Projects, Indiana Pride of Color, Indiana University's Office of the Vice President for Diversity, Equity, and Multicultural Affairs, Indiana Youth Group, Indy Pride, Indy Rainbow Chamber, the IUPUI LGBTQ+ Center, Never Alone Project, OutCare Health, and Step Up – joined efforts in late summer 2020 to complete a community-wide assessment.

Between October and December, 2020, this coalition of partners conducted a COVID-19 Impact Survey that garnered input from 336 individuals in and around Marion County.

While these responses represented just under half of the sample size of responses captured in the LGBTQ+ Community Needs assessment conducted in early 2020<sup>1</sup> before the pandemic had significantly impacted Central Indiana (336 responses vs. 682), the late 2020 COVID-19 Impact Survey participants represented greater racial, ethnic, and socio-economic diversity within Central Indiana's LGBTQ+ community, thanks to the trusted relationships and intentional outreach of partnering organizations.

**Deep Divides highlights the results of this COVID-19 Impact Survey of Central Indiana's LGBTQ+ community.**



## Disclaimer

The late 2020 COVID-19 Impact Survey was distributed both electronically through email and social media channels and in-person through service locations of partnering organizations. Given this approach, responses are likely limited to those individuals who are connected to participating community agencies. Based on these limitations, survey responses may not represent the full diversity of the LGBTQ+ community within Greater Indianapolis.



## Recommended Citation

The community partners who participated in this effort encourage the reproduction or distribution of this report, in whole or in part, provided that it is done so with appropriate citation. This study was funded by the Damien Center. This report was prepared by Taylor Advising. Citation recommendations of various styles include:

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Taylor, M, Witchev, A. Deep Divides: COVID-19's Impact on the LGBTQ Community: March 2021. Indianapolis, IN: Damien Center; 2021.

## Contact Information

For more information about this study, please contact the Damien Center President and CEO Alan Witchev at [awitchev@damien.org](mailto:awitchev@damien.org) or 317-632-0123.

# COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Thank you to the following community partners, whose efforts were critical in gathering community input for this report through the LGBTQ+ COVID-19 Impact Assessment survey in late 2020.



# PARTICIPANTS

Of the **336 individuals** who completed the 2020 LGBTQ+ Community COVID-19 Impact Survey between October and December, 2020...



All findings included within this report reflect the responses of these 275 LGBTQ+ community members unless otherwise noted.

## Most live in urban areas

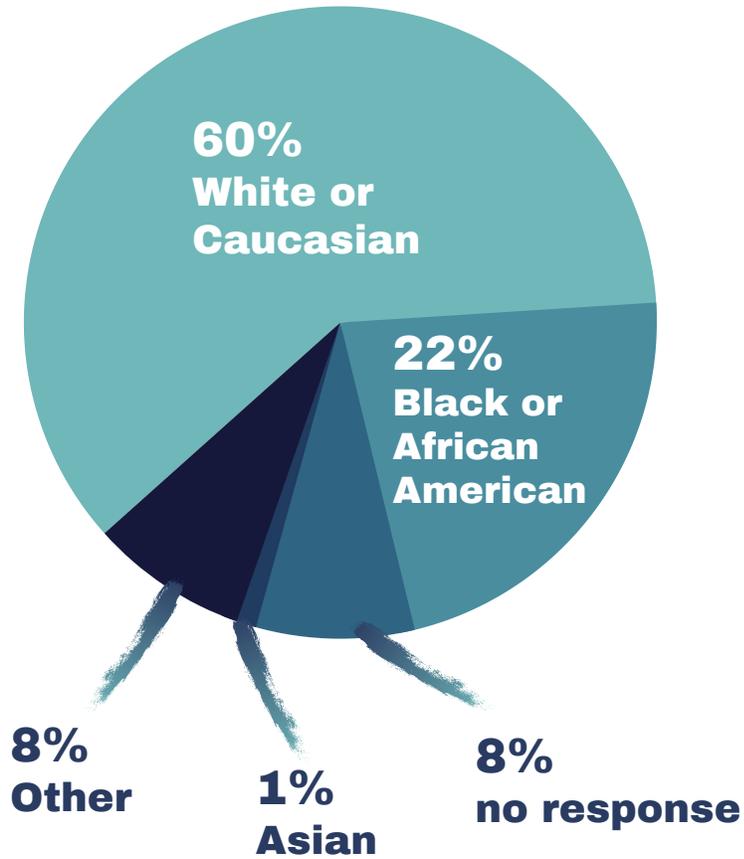
**74% Marion**  
**6% Hamilton**

## Others live in more rural communities

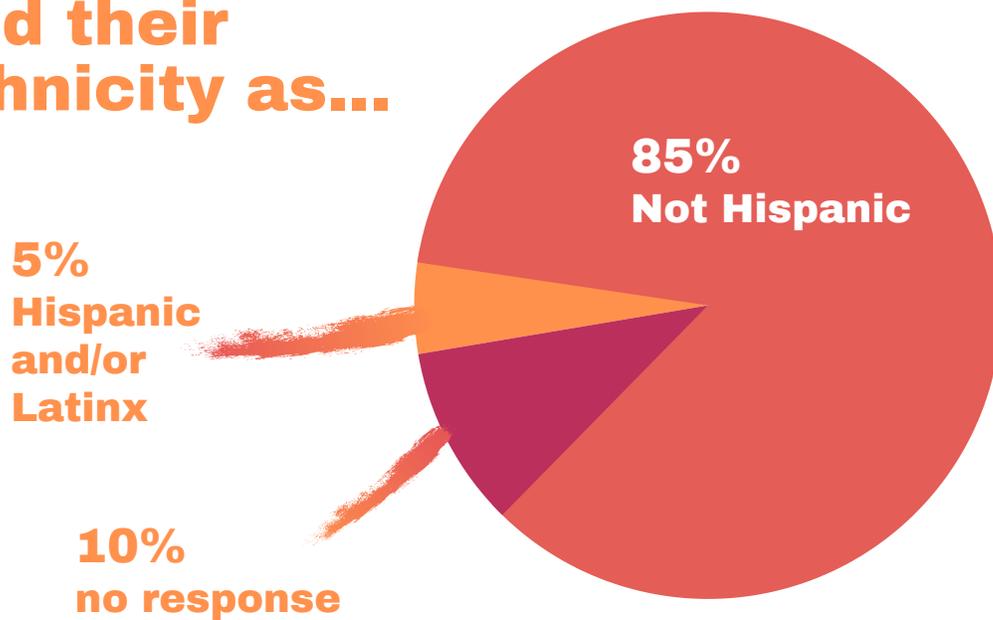
<b>2%</b>	<b>Johnson</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>Henry</b>
<b>2%</b>	<b>Monroe</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>Jackson</b>
<b>1%</b>	<b>Hancock</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>Morgan</b>
<b>1%</b>	<b>Hendricks</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>Putnam</b>
<b>1%</b>	<b>Boone</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>Tippecanoe</b>
<b>1%</b>	<b>Delaware</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>no response</b>

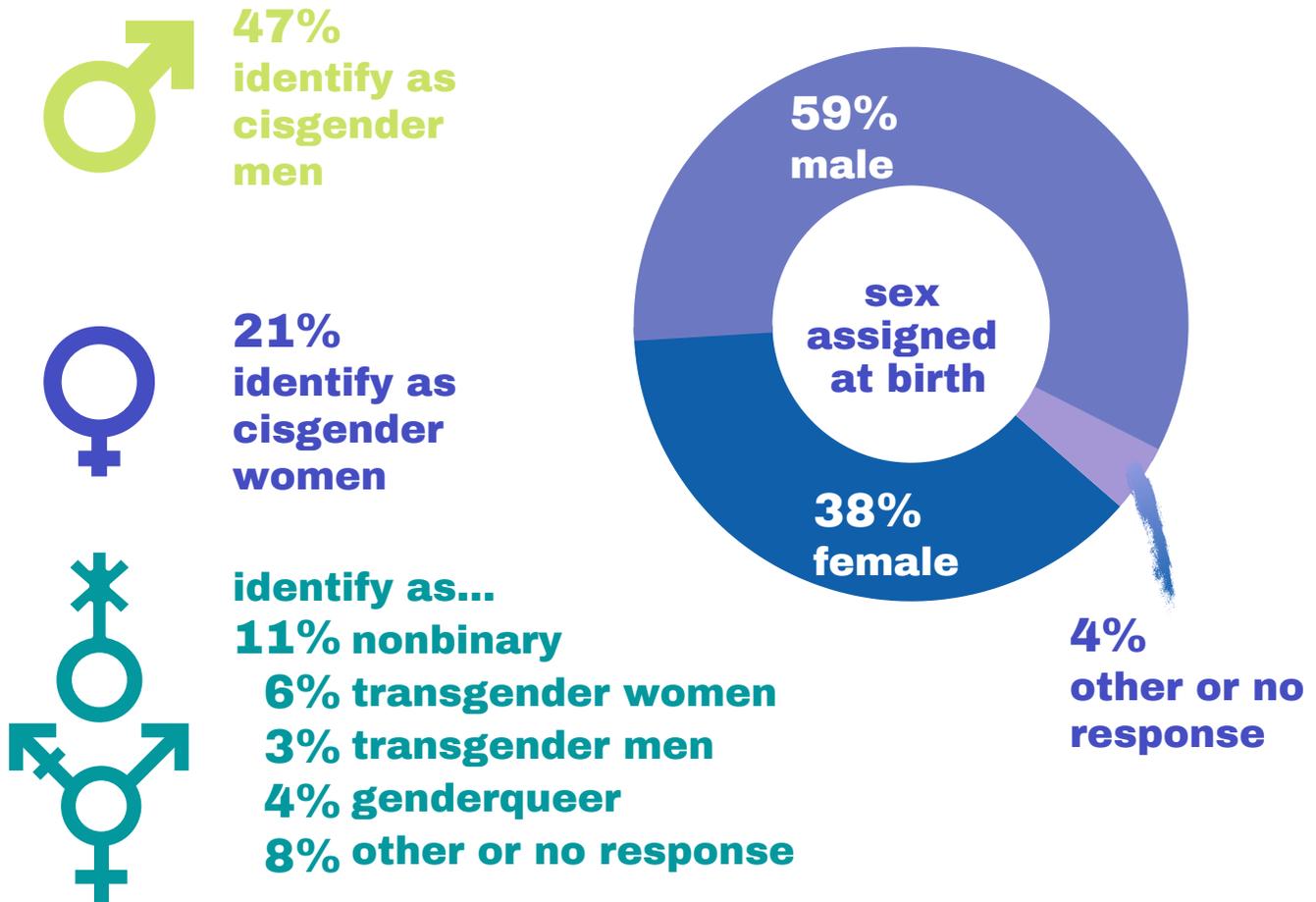


## They identify their race as...

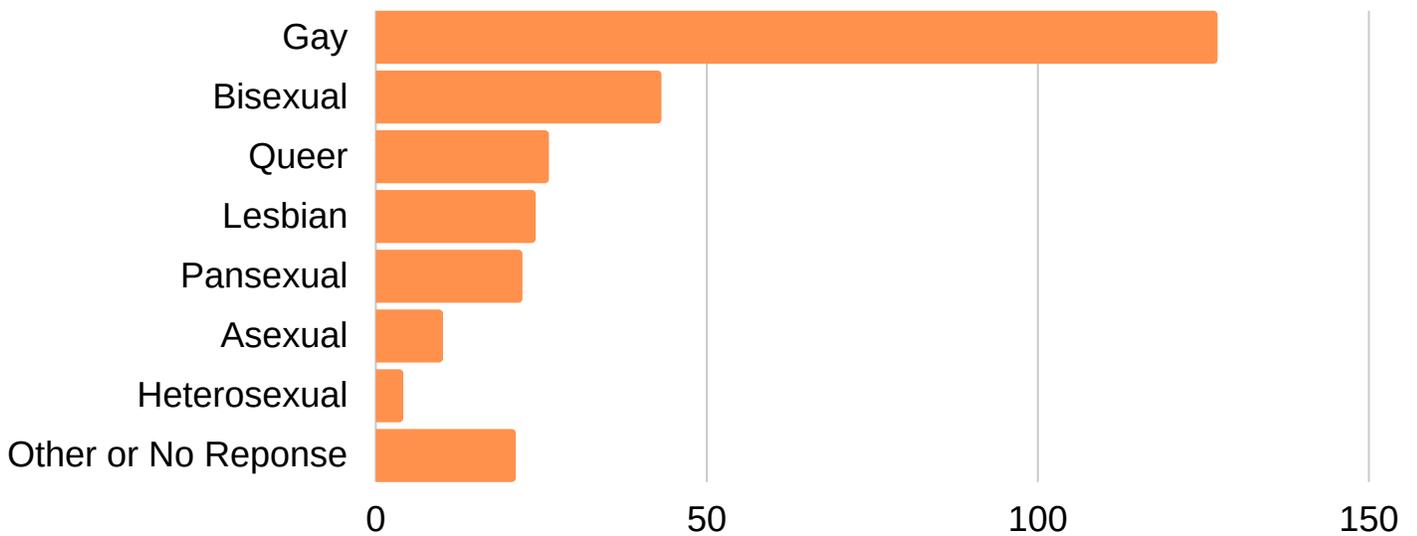


## and their ethnicity as...



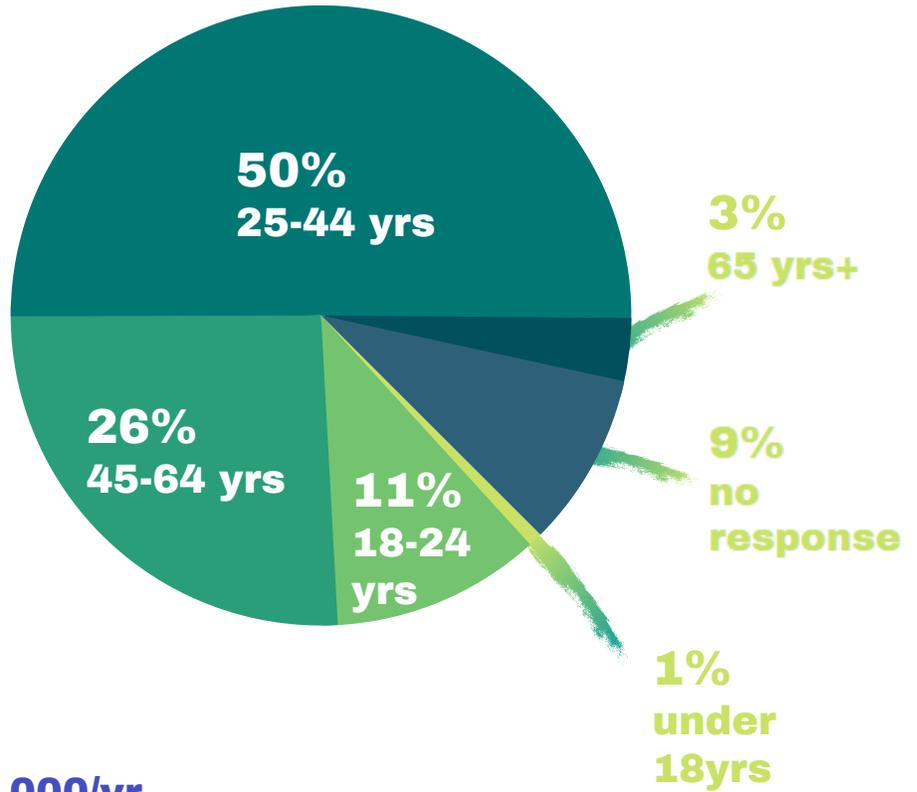


### Identify their sexual orientation exclusively as...

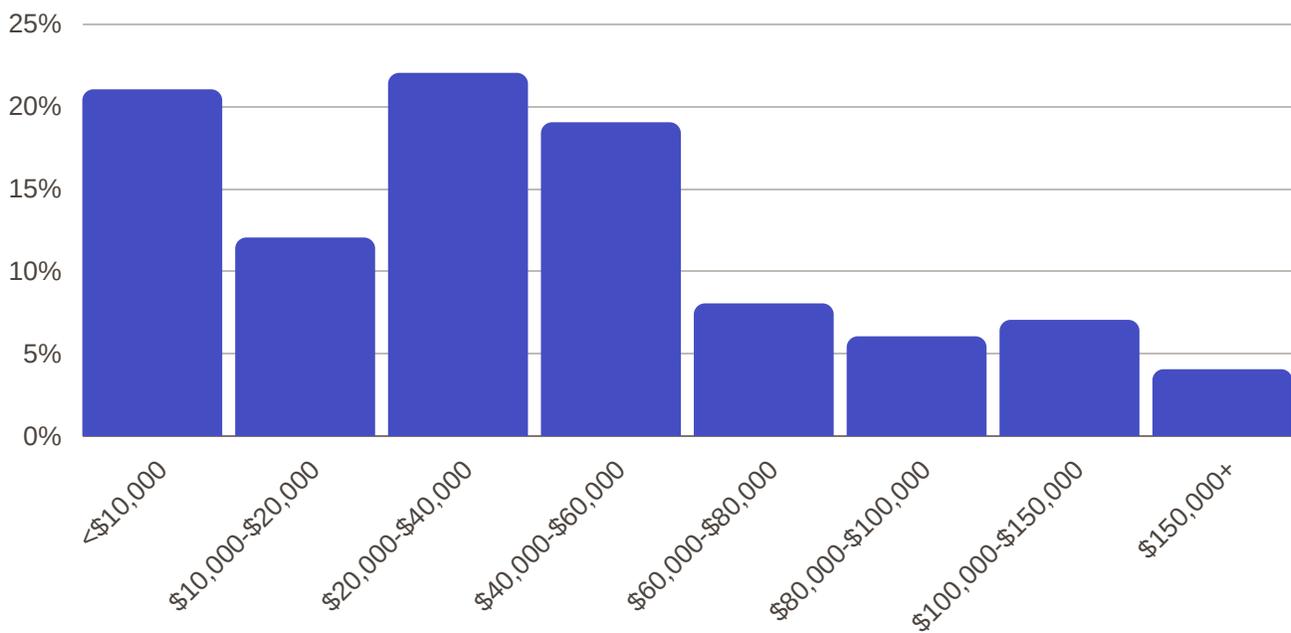


## Half are adults

between ages 25-44



**3 in 4**  
make less than \$60,000/yr



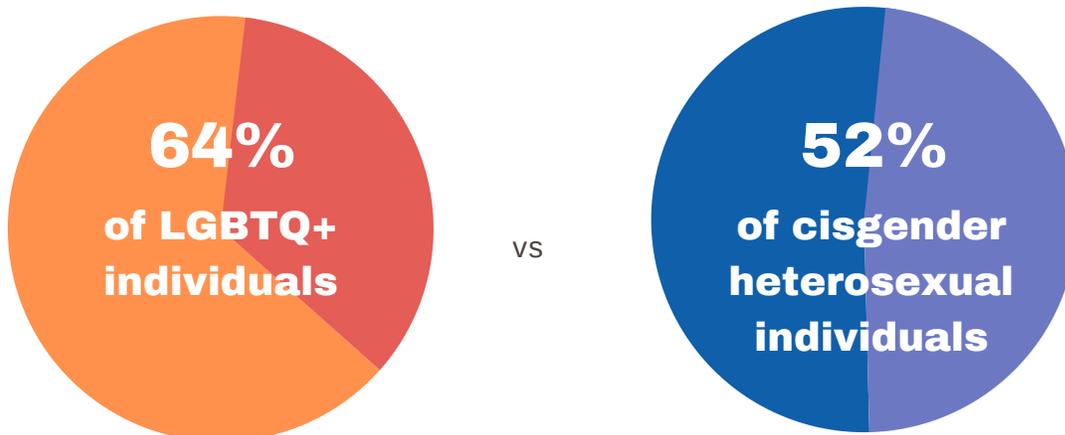
# CRITICAL NEEDS

When asked how the COVID-19 pandemic had changed their lives, **four key areas of concern emerged: Mental Health, Physical Health, Economic Stability, and Social Connections.** In each of these four areas, LGBTQ+ respondents reported a significantly greater decline in wellbeing when compared to responses from cisgender heterosexual individuals in these same areas.

## Mental Health

From day one, the pandemic introduced a number of substantial, new stressors into everyday life, such as dramatic changes to work and home life, isolation from social networks, and devastating levels of illness and death. As these challenges swept the nation, the compounding effects have had an undeniable impact on the mental health and wellbeing of Americans. In fact, according to the CDC, **more than 40% of all U.S. adults have reported struggling with mental health during the pandemic.**<sup>2</sup>

For LGBTQ+ populations, a group that has historically faced significant health disparities, this negative impact on mental health has been even more devastating. **Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health has gotten worse for:**

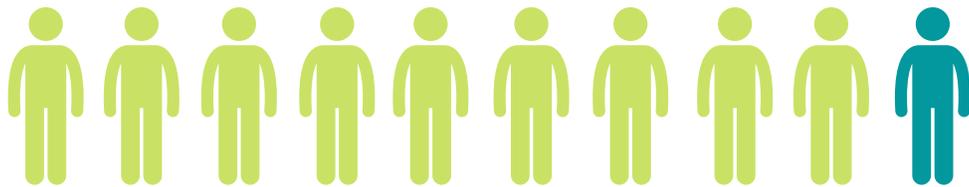


....demonstrating the deep divide that

**the LGBTQ+ population is 23% more likely to have had a decline in their mental health due to COVID-19.**

This divide is even greater for LGBTQ+ youth, for whom regular, positive social interactions are particularly important for managing stress, reducing depression, and lowering the risks of suicide.<sup>3</sup> In fact, opportunities for positive socializing have dramatically changed for young people during the pandemic, whether social distancing requirements have made it more challenging to experience feelings of belonging with peers or e-learning in isolation at home has erased the in-person interactions that are a regular part of school and extra-curricular activities.

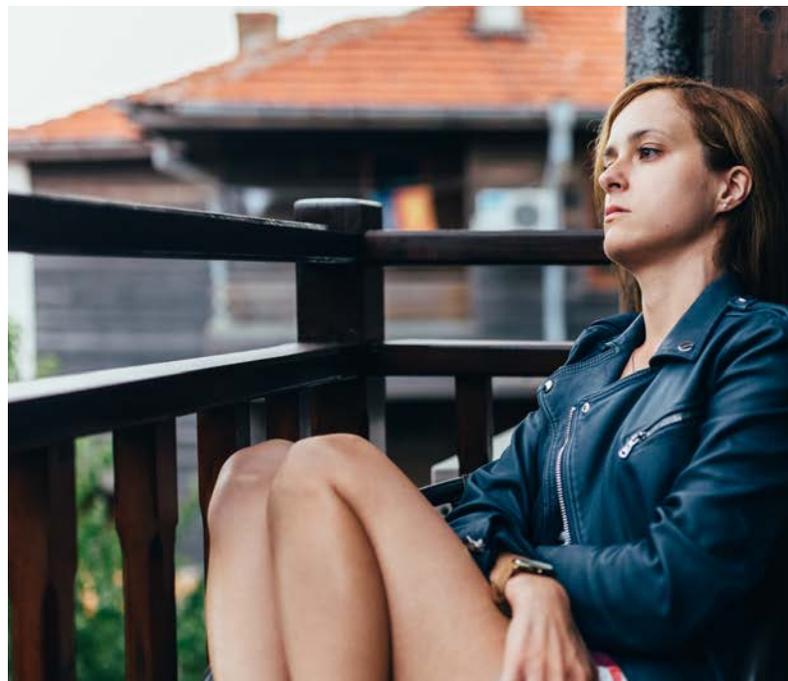
Perhaps it is due to these changes that:



**nearly 9 in 10**

**LGBTQ+ youth and young adults  
under 25 report their mental health  
has gotten worse due to COVID-19**

The pandemic's compounding effects on the mental health of LGBTQ+ survey respondents, particularly youth, reveal nothing short of a **mental health emergency in the Central Indiana LGBTQ+ community.**



## Physical Health

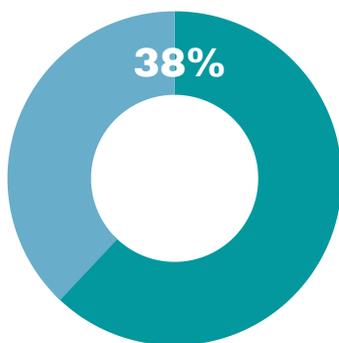
To build a comprehensive understanding of how recent circumstances have impacted the physical health of Central Indiana's LGBTQ+ community, it is important to first consider the existing health disparities of those who participated in this study, beginning with HIV status.



**1 in 3 know they are HIV positive.** Nearly half (46%) know they are HIV negative, but the remaining respondents (22%) are unsure of their HIV status or have never been tested. While evolving public health research suggests that those with underlying health conditions have an elevated risk of contracting or being seriously affected by COVID-19, risk levels do not appear to be heightened for HIV positive individuals as long as they are receiving effective antiretroviral therapy.<sup>4</sup>

However, according to the CDC, **members of the LGBTQ+ community are more likely to experience the underlying health conditions that are known to heighten COVID-19 risk - such as asthma, cancer, and diabetes - than their cisgender heterosexual peers.**<sup>5</sup>

Within the context of these known physical health disparities...



**nearly 2 in 5  
LGBTQ+ individuals  
report that their physical  
health has gotten worse**

In comparison to 23% of their cisgender heterosexual counterparts, **LGBTQ+ individuals are 65% more likely to have had a decline in their health due to COVID-19.**

The negative impact has been even more significant for **LGBTQ+ youth and young adults under 25, nearly half (47%) of whom report that their physical health has gotten worse** - a figure more than twice the 23% of their cisgender heterosexual peers who report experiencing a decline in their physical health during this same time period.

While the effects of COVID-19 have clearly had a substantial impact on the overall physical health of Central Indiana's LGBTQ+ community, respondents also demonstrated sharp declines in other facets of their wellbeing.

## Economic Stability

Since the onset of the pandemic, business closures, unemployment claims, and economic concerns have impacted every community across the nation, and Central Indiana's LGBTQ+ community has been no exception.

In fact, when LGBTQ+ individuals were asked about the impact COVID-19 had on their employment since March of 2020...

**17%**  
**had lost their job**

**16%**  
**reported a decrease in  
overall working hours**



While a devastating number of Hoosiers have lost paid work during the pandemic, those in the LGBTQ+ community have experienced these adverse effects at an alarmingly higher rate than the cisgender heterosexual population.

Survey respondents who reported being unemployed and looking for work between October and December 2020, included...

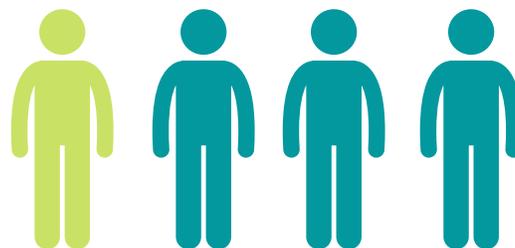


...demonstrating the deep divide that

**the LGBTQ+ population is 143% more likely to be unemployed during COVID-19**

Whether or not the pandemic has resulted in job loss for an individual, the devastating economic impact COVID-19 has had on the LGBTQ+ community is inescapable. **43% of LGBTQ+ respondents reported that their financial stability has declined** since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and

**1 in 4**  
**say their ability to meet basic needs like food and housing has gotten worse**



While these economic challenges have directly affected the economic stability of Central Indiana's LGBTQ+ community as a whole, those who also identify as Black or African American, HIV positive, and/or under 25 years old, have suffered even greater consequences. Unemployment rates among these groups with intersecting marginalized identities underscore this deep divide.

In November 2020, Indiana reported an overall unemployment rate of 5%.<sup>6</sup> Comparatively, during this same time period, those respondents who reported they were **unemployed and looking for work included...**



**Black or  
African  
American  
LGBTQ+  
individuals**



**HIV  
positive  
LGBTQ+  
individuals**



**LGBTQ+  
Youth and  
Young Adults  
under 25**

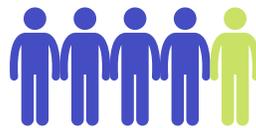


These disproportionately high rates of unemployment for LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly those with multiple intersecting marginalized identities, have affected far more than their household income and financial stability.

In fact, **for those in Central Indiana's LGBTQ+ community who have lost their jobs during the pandemic, the heightened impact on their overall wellbeing has been detrimental.**

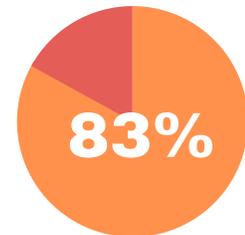


**report their physical health has declined**



**4 in 5**

**report feelings of social connectedness have gotten worse**



**report their mental health has declined**

## **Social Connectedness**

Those who have experienced job loss are not the only individuals in Central Indiana's LGBTQ+ community who have experienced a decline in important social connectedness. Even before the pandemic began, LGBTQ+ populations were already more prone to experiencing loneliness than their cisgender heterosexual peers due to a variety of isolating factors, including stigma, discrimination, and barriers to care.<sup>7</sup>

Factoring in the COVID-19 response - including public health regulations requiring social distancing, closures and reduced capacity of historically social spaces, and safety precautions driving individuals to work and learn at home - the likelihood of isolation, loneliness, and loss of social connections has become even greater for an already vulnerable population.



**3 in 4**  
**report decreased**  
**feelings of social**  
**connectedness**

In comparison to 62% of their cisgender heterosexual counterparts, **LGBTQ+ individuals are 21% more likely to have experienced this decline in feelings of social connectedness due to COVID-19.**

Yet, the full impact of this social isolation that's been experienced by Central Indiana's LGBTQ+ population during the pandemic may not be realized for years to come. Alarming, research even demonstrates that periods of isolation that last less than ten days can lead to long-term psychiatric symptoms that are still present up to three years later.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the correlation between social connectedness and overall life expectancy,<sup>9</sup> makes clear that a decrease in social connections has potentially dangerous implications for the long-term wellbeing and mortality of the entire LGBTQ+ community.

For those LGBTQ+ individuals under 25 years old, the pandemic's impact on social connections has been even more significant. **84% of LGBTQ+ youth report they have experienced a decline in social connections during the pandemic.**

According to the Trevor Project, as a result of this pandemic induced social isolation, many LGBTQ+ youth have been, in turn, confined to home environments that are unsupportive of their sexual orientation, which can lead to greater risks of depression and even suicide.<sup>3</sup>

Although this dramatic decline in feelings of social connections may not be the most discussed consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the devastating toll on the LGBTQ+ community could not be more clear.

# IMPLICATIONS

While the long-term impact of COVID-19 is yet to be seen, it is abundantly clear that a deep divide exists between the effect COVID-19 has had on LGBTQ+ populations and how it has impacted their cisgender heterosexual counterparts. In comparison to the reported impact COVID-19 has had on cisgender heterosexual survey respondents, LGBTQ+ individuals in Central Indiana are **65% more likely to have had a decline in their health, 23% more likely to have experienced a decline in mental health, 143% more likely to be unemployed, and 21% more likely to feel socially disconnected.**

This deep divide suggests that COVID-19 response measures must include a specific focus on programs and services that are culturally competent and accessible for the LGBTQ+ population, with particular attention on the following:

## 1. Meeting Critical Needs

To address both the current and long-term health disparities within the LGBTQ+ community, it is clear that increasing community-wide access to comprehensive, LGBTQ+ competent healthcare and mental healthcare is absolutely essential. Furthermore, programs and services that support for the economic wellbeing of LGBTQ+ individuals – such as employment services and assistance meeting basic needs – will be just as vital to strengthening the entire community's wellbeing through and beyond the pandemic.

## 2. Creating Safe Social Spaces

Providing more safe and accessible LGBTQ+ focused spaces and places will be a vital step toward re-building the social connections and sense of belonging that the COVID-19 pandemic has eroded, a critical step toward supporting the wellbeing of population particularly vulnerable to the devastating effects of isolation and discrimination.

### 3. Serving Intersecting Identities

As an integral part of these approaches to meeting the needs of the community, it will be necessary to focus on reaching those in the LGBTQ+ community with intersecting marginalized identities for whom the negative impact of the pandemic is intensified – particularly Black and African American LGBTQ+ individuals and LGBTQ+ young and young adults under 25.



Whether the community works to address these needs through increased services from existing agencies, the launch of an LGBTQ+ Community Center, or other collaborative efforts, these implications make clear what partnering agencies have known from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic:

**The disproportionate impact COVID-19 has had on Central Indiana's LGBTQ+ community simply cannot be ignored.**

# PUBLIC HEALTH REFERENCES

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**DAMIEN  
CENTER**  
ONE HOME FOR HIV WELLNESS

This report was  
prepared by

*Taylor*  
Advising

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