

Despite the presence, in the collective imagination, of **LGBTQ** people's linear migratory movement from rural areas toward cities to express their sexual orientation or gender identity more freely (Conner and Okamura, 2021; De Pedro et al., 2018), many choose to remain in rural areas or to move there at a later point (Cover et al., 2020). This fact sheet is the result of a literature review conducted in summer 2021 aiming to shed light on the experiences of **LGBTQ** people living in rural areas. While the majority of the research discourse on this topic centres on the risks and challenges that **LGBTQ** people experience when living in rural areas, a more positive narrative is slowly emerging, adding nuance and better representing the multiple life experiences of sexually and gender-diverse people who live outside major urban centres, meaning metropolitan or highly densified cities (Conner and Okamura, 2021; Pacey, 2020).

LGBTQ PEOPLE IN RURAL AREAS

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The UNIE-LGBTQ research project, in the aim of better understanding the various inclusion and exclusion factors for **LGBTQ** people in Québec, has worked to better understand the experiences of **LGBTQ** people in rural areas. Because studies on **LGBTQ** populations and communities are most often urban-centred (Fisher et al., 2014), it was important to include questions to draw out distinctions on this topic to better grasp the experiences of people living in rural areas. As such, through qualitative interviews, we learned that of the people we met, 101 lived outside a metropolitan region for at least five years. This represented about 10% of the people who responded to the UNIE-LGBTQ survey. This fact sheet is the result of our work to shed light on the experiences of **LGBTQ** people living outside major urban centres.

The factors harming the well-being of **LGBTQ** people in rural areas

One of the elements that harms the well-being of **LGBTQ** people living outside major urban centres is the social climate of small communities, which can be hostile (Oswald and Culton, 2003), homophobic (Hastings & Hoover-Thompson, 2011; Lépine et al., 2017) and transphobic (Movement Advancement Project, 2019). Some people living in rural areas report suffering discrimination on the basis of their gender identity (Movement Advancement Project, 2019) or their sexual orientation (Swank et al., 2013), while others anticipate that this may happen (Morandini et al., 2015).

Specifically, 43% of 28,000 American trans and non-binary people reported, in 2015, that they had experienced at least one form of transphobic discrimination in the previous year alone (Movement Advancement Project, 2019). In a similar vein, 21% of 285 American LGB participants reported having experienced a verbal homophobic threat at least once in the previous year, while 20% reported two or more (Swank et al., 2013). These studies' authors came to the conclusion that revealing one's sexual orientation in a rural setting increases the risk of experiencing discrimination. As for disclosure, it appears that LGBTQ people disclose their sexual orientation significantly less often to their friends in remote rural regions (<10,000 residents) as compared to urban environments, and they worry more about doing so. This climate of fear fosters the invisibility of LGBTQ people by leading them to selectively disclose or hide their sexual orientation or gender identity (Morandini et al., 2015). This fear of rejection within the living environment is present in all generations, including adolescents (Abrahamson, 2020; Yarbrough, 2004) and elderly people (Guest, 2019).

Another key issue that emerges is the sense of isolation that LGBTQ people may feel when living in rural areas (Chamberland and Paquin, 2007; Hastings and Hoover-Thompson, 2011; Lépine et al., 2017), whether due to the low incidence of friendships and romantic relationships or because they lack a sense of belonging to a community. As such, it is more difficult to meet diverse people in remote areas, not only because of the lower population density but also because there is a lack of social spaces that would provide opportunities to meet people (Hastings and Hoover-Thompson, 2011) and insufficient community resources to provide information and support and to meet the needs of LGBTQ+ people (Chamberland and Paquin, 2007; Hastings and Hoover-Thompson, 2011). Low access to professionals who are appropriately trained on the realities of LGBTQ+ people in order to provide judgement-free services in the field of health and social services is also an issue (Barefoot et al., 2017; Rosenkrantz et al., 2017). While some professionals may offer sensitive and appropriate services, many services are not appropriately tailored, particularly regarding the disclosure of sexual orientation and gender identity; this is especially true in more conservative areas (Barefoot et al., 2017; Rosenkrantz et al., 2017). The results of the Movement Advancement Project (2019), based on data from the U.S. transgender survey (of 28,000 trans and non-binary respondents across the United States) show that there are four major challenges associated with being a trans or non-binary person in a rural area: 1) greater visibility, 2) the domino effect, meaning that acceptance or rejection in one living environment (ex.: school) may spread to other environments (ex.: work, social networks) because of hypervisibility, 3) fewer alternatives (ex.: employers, housing, professionals), and 4) less formal support.

All these challenges, particularly homophobia and the difficulties in being themselves in rural areas, lead people to internalize negative social messages in the form of internalized homophobia (Annes and Redlin, 2012). The mental health of LGBTQ people is more precarious in rural areas than in major urban centres due to internalized homophobia, lack of social support and anticipated rejection (Cain et al., 2017). While it's impossible to generalize these overall results to all remote regions, a research report carried out in Gaspésie and Îles-de-la-Madeleine in 2017 underscores that sexually and gender-diverse women and young people under age 20 report having more mental health problems, including suicidal ideation for the youngest among them (Lépine et al., 2017). These results can be added to those of Lyons et al. (2015) and Poon and Saewyc (2009), who note that adolescent boys and trans people living in rural or remote areas are at greater risk of reporting precarious mental health (Movement Advancement Project, 2019).

A need to bring a nuanced view to people's motivations for leaving rural areas

Popular beliefs hold that emerging LGBTQ adults are leaving their rural areas in favour of major urban centres because they are drawn to social environments that foster relationship actualization (Cover et al., 2020). Another common belief is that major urban centres are more welcoming of sexual diversity than rural areas (Kazyak, 2011). However, these beliefs are not shared by all the gay and lesbian participants in the study by Chamberland and Paquin (2007), as these respondents did not consider their rural communities to present a hostile or intolerant climate in regard to sexual diversity. Rather, this migration can be explained by strategies of limiting the disclosure of one's sexual orientation due to the close social ties brought about by the low demographic density. Coming out is a marker of hypervisibility in the rural context and comes with potential con-

sequences. When people disclose their sexual orientation selectively to the people they are close to, it's possible that the secret might get out and be learned by individuals in the area to whom they did not choose to disclose. As such, some participants in the study by Chamberland and Paquin (2007) underscored how the broad acceptance of LGBTQ people in urban centres is more of a myth, because the key difference is the anonymity provided by the option to melt into the crowd, meaning that it's possible to disclose one's sexual orientation without the entire network or living environment becoming aware of it.

The preliminary results of the work by Mantha and Thibault (2019) detail a variety of motivations the lesbian study participants listed for leaving their region of origin, including emancipating from their family, pursuing a romantic relationship, pursuing postsecondary studies, developing a career, exploring their sexuality, coming out, and hoping to become closer to the LGBTQ community. As such, there are multiple reasons for choosing to leave a rural area, and these may or may not have anything to do with exploring or affirming one's sexual orientation or gender identity outside the region of origin.

As well, people's motivations for leaving rural areas for the city seem to have evolved over time. In a comparative study examining narratives about movements from rural areas to cities, Cover et al. (2020) wanted to look at the reasons motivating Australian LGBTQ people of two generations to move toward major urban centres, specifically people born in the 1970s and those born in the 1990s. While both cohorts reported having experienced homophobia in their original living environments, the older cohort reported having left their areas because of a climate that was more hostile toward sexual and gender diversity, while the younger cohort instead cited motivations related to their studies and career, or to diverse social factors, such as the lack of a university or a social life in rural areas. The participants from the younger cohort did not describe experiences of hiding their sexual orientation or gender identity, or of isolation, nor did they mention having grown up in a homophobic environment. As well, Poon and Saewyc (2009) and Wienke and Hill (2013) explain that LGB people don't experience more LGB-phobia in rural areas, and that in fact, urban environments may be more deleterious to their mental health, particularly for lesbians (Wienke and Hill, 2013). We can see that multiple discourses exist about rural experiences; they are sometimes contradictory and may reflect the plural experiences of LGBTQ people living in or establishing themselves in rural areas (Conner and Okamura, 2021; Gariscsak, 2018; Hulko and Hovanes, 2018).

Factors fostering the well-being of LGBTQ people

To add nuance to the urban-centred discourse, it is important to showcase the diversity of points of view in order to better understand the complexity and multiplicity of people's experiences (Paceley, 2020). In addition to the recognized advantages of some regions, such as their inherent charm and rhythm of life, some people consider their rural environments to be enriching due to their quality of life, tightly woven interpersonal relationships, participation in local social groups, and sense of acceptance (Chamberland and Paquin, 2007; Oswald and Culton, 2003). Guest (2019) underscores how their participants developed heterogeneous social networks based on locally available support and that they didn't picture themselves living anywhere else, despite the challenges with accessing services, and even sometimes when they kept silent about their sexual orientation. As such, they were not more isolated in rural areas (Oswald and Culton, 2003). In a comparative study on the well-being of LGB people in urban and rural environments conducted with 632 participants living in the United States between 1988 and 2006, Wienke and Hill (2013) showed that LGB people living in rural contexts had higher self-reported scores for general health and happiness than LGB people living in cities. People who had chosen to remain in their hometowns did so because of quality of life and the opportunity to have an impact on their communities; many people simply didn't want to leave the place where they grew up or had spent most of their lives (Conner and Okamura, 2021). Since people know each other more in rural areas, neighbourhoods place greater importance on people's character and personality, or whether they're involved in the community, to determine whether to perceive them as good people rather than relying on their sexual orientation (Kazyak, 2011). De-centring a risk-based narrative by addressing the strengths of LGBTQ residents of rural areas, as well as their resilience, helps provide a more nuanced lens that's more representative of a range of experiences (Paceley, 2020).

A few recommendations

Considering the few studies to date on the well-being of LGBTQ people living in rural areas, it goes without saying that few recommendations have been formulated.

Increasing the visibility of LGBTQ people in rural areas, which would clearly be beneficial to adolescents, is also relevant for fostering social and emotional support. As such, Poon and Sawyc (2009) recommend creating support groups that place LGBTQ adults within the community in relationship with younger people. This would be especially pertinent in school settings as a strategy to reduce the sense of isolation and suicidal ideation some adolescents experience. In the same vein, putting into place—and of course, funding—LGBTQ organizations to foster the creation and maintenance of social activities is a recurrent strategy for breaking isolation (Cohn and Hastings, 2010; Lépine et al., 2017; Movement Advancement Project, 2019). Regular activity programming would be ideal for meeting people's multiple needs (Cohn and Hastings, 2010). In fact, two-thirds of the people surveyed by Lépine et al. (2017) said they wanted to take part more often in local LGBTQ activities. Coordinating such organizations with health and social services is a determining factor in ensuring continuity of services and improving the referral process (Lépine, 2017). As well, staff training is essential for fostering a welcoming, supportive climate in schools (Abrahamson, 2020; Hastings and Hoover-Thompson, 2011) as well as within the health system, especially when it comes to affirming services for trans and non-binary people (Poquiz et al., 2021). It would be especially important for health professionals and community organizations to provide support for parents after their child discloses their sexual orientation or gender identity (Cohn and Hastings, 2010). Lastly, conducting research on the well-being of LGBTQ people in rural areas and on the health inequalities they experience is important for transcending urban-centrism and creating knowledge that's relevant for all (Guest, 2019). In addition to there being few studies that measure the repercussions of rural living on LGBTQ people, these studies often have methodological shortcomings, such as small sample sizes (Rosenkrantz et al., 2017). A systematic review of these authors shows the importance of including longitudinal and large-scale studies in order to better understand the various processes that influence individuals' well-being. Of course, many factors influence the experiences of LGBTQ people including the unique history and social climate of each region, as well as changes that occur over time. Their lives may sometimes be affected by specific challenges associated with living in remote areas, and at other times may be filled with appreciation and gratitude for their enriching living environments.

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For more information on the project
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