

WELLBEING IN THE ŌTAUTAHI LGBTQIA+ COMMUNITY

Research overview and findings

What is this research about?

In late 2018, All Right? completed the Rainbow Community Resilience Research, An Exploration of Wellbeing in the Ōtautahi LGBTQIA+ Community, under the leadership of Suran Dickson with Dr David Betts.

This research collects the views of the rainbow community of Christchurch, with the intent to better understand the strengths of the community, increase visibility and education and therefore reduce discrimination and enhance self-esteem.

The researchers spoke with 26 people in focus groups and heard from 263 people in an online survey – all a mix of genders, ages and ethnicities. Initial findings were reflected back to the community at an engagement event with about 60 people, with opportunity for clarifying input.

Key findings

- Overall the research pointed to a mostly optimistic community.
- In the key areas of education, health, and workplace wellbeing there are some things going well—and some things that need to change.
- In general, progress has been made in safety and inclusion—but 74% of survey respondents had experienced negative or offensive comments in public over the last three years.
- Respondents reported a decrease in homophobia—however, many commented that transphobia is a key issue.
- There was a clear sense that kinship and connection are vital to wellbeing—but 44% felt they didn't have enough connection to the rainbow community.
- Popular topics included mental health, the need for better sexuality education in schools, the need for better education of the general public about LGBTQIA+ people, lack of queer venues and spaces, and limited visibility of LGBTQIA+ people.

Where to from here?

Looking to the future, it was felt the city needed clear guidance from education, business and service leaders so that the LGBTQIA+ community is not just tolerated but embraced – creating a vibrant, diverse and evolving city.

It was felt this would diminish voices of prejudice while enhancing the self-worth of the queer community and attracting progressive and diverse thinkers to our city.

SUPPORTING OUR YOUNG PEOPLE AT SCHOOL

Information for schools and educators

Safety

School didn't feel particularly safe for lesbians or young gay men, and even less so for other LGBTQIA+ groups. More than half of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that school was a safe place for transgender or queer/non-conforming people.

'There is lots of bullying in changing rooms.'

Visibility

There is a common understanding that with more LGBTQIA+ orientated groups in schools and universities now, this has improved visibility of the community and had a significant impact on safety and inclusion. However, there is still a way to go.

'As a teacher, I didn't feel comfortable being 'out' at an all-boys school in Christchurch, despite having been out at other schools.'

Sex and relationship education

Participants didn't believe the sex and relationships education offered at schools was of a high enough standard for anyone, let alone LGBTQIA+ young people. Half of respondents expressed the need for higher quality sexual education in schools and 24% believed the need to challenge binary gender ideals in schools is a key concern for the community.

'I had no education about STIs then got chlamydia and learned that way!'

'I learned about gay sex from porn. It's very much not the same as real life.'

Inclusion

There were common accounts of troubling levels of homophobia in same sex schools, including hyper-masculine behavior in all-boys schools, lack of intervention from teachers around homophobia, lack of inclusion, and avoidance of queer issues in sex and relationships education. The majority of the participants responded that their teachers were not well-versed or able to challenge homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in schools, contributing to feeling a lack of safety and inclusion in school environments.

'My teachers didn't challenge it (homophobic language) so other kids just knew they could get away with it.'

What can we do about it?

- Provide school/staff support of an LGBTQIA+ oriented group, if one doesn't already exist.
- Review sex/relationship education to ensure all communities feel part of the discussion and ensure education is delivered by people who take a respectful attitude towards the content.
- Partner with local queer organisations such as Qtopia or other training providers to promote training on diversity issues for schools.
- Train teachers in how to identify and handle homophobia, transphobia and biphobia.
- Develop school policies that support safety and inclusion for LGBTQIA+ students and staff.
- Support the annual Pink Shirt Day and make use of its school resources.

SUPPORTING EMPLOYEES & CUSTOMERS

Information for businesses & workplaces

Safety

53% of people surveyed agreed that their workplaces were safe and inclusive. Some referred to the benefits of being able to bring their 'whole self' to work.

However 55% felt they did not need to be 'out' at work as they said they were just there to do a job—whether as a personal preference or for their own protection. One 20-year old said he would 'never be out at work' in his future career, as he believed it to be an unaccepting field (agriculture). This sentiment was echoed in other sectors, such as construction.

This may be an indicator that some industries and workplaces have work to do to ensure they attract the best young talent and create accepting cultures where staff can be themselves at work.

Visibility and inclusion

Education of the majority occurs when the minority group are visible, welcome and heard. 67% of people surveyed would like to see their work environment display a rainbow friendly emblem such as a poster. There was seen to be an opportunity here to shed conservative images and connect into the LGBTQIA+ community to make the city more rainbow friendly.

'The LGBT poster at my gym made me feel safe.'

Language

Homophobic, biphobic and transphobic language was still considered to be an issue. Some participants felt that disparaging language wasn't always intended to be hurtful or homophobic. It was felt visibility and education would prevent peers making unwitting word choices that could hurt others.

'I see homophobia all the time, people don't really know they are doing it.'

What can we do about it?

- Partner with local queer agencies such as Qtopia or other training providers for training on diversity issues for businesses and to increase awareness and respect of the rainbow community.
- Use inclusive language and images on internal and external communications material.
- Develop recruitment and workplace policies that support safety and inclusion for LGBTQIA+ staff, potential staff and customers/service users.
- Support the annual Pink Shirt Day event and make use of its workplace resources.

SUPPORTING OUR OLDER PEOPLE & THEIR FAMILIES

Information for rest homes

A time of rapid change

Homosexuality was illegal in New Zealand 32 years ago. It would be challenging to find a similar minority group in society who have experienced such a rapid and significant rate of social and legislative change in such a short period of time. The experiences of a 15-year-old transgender male can be assumed to be vastly different to a 65-year-old gay man who lived through homosexual law reform.

Acknowledgement and respect

30% of the respondents agreed with the statement, 'I am worried about not being looked after or respected as an LGBTQIA+ person when I am at retirement age', with another 26% neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

The additional statement of 'I am confident I can find an LGBTQIA+ friendly rest home in the city' returned similar results. There is concern that if people become less articulate or their voices less heard as they age, their sexuality or gender identity might become less respected.

'Some people go back in the closet when they go to a retirement village.'

'You'd have to 'come out' again in a rest home or not be out.'

Social interaction

The research showed clearly that kinship and connection was vital to wellbeing, and that the rainbow community took strength from each other.

Some mentioned a lack of provision for social opportunities, however participants also reported letting each other know about existing activities. Lack of information about social opportunities for older people might therefore be an issue.

'Our community is a source of strength, we take pride in ourselves.'

'It's harder for older people, I'm too old for bars so it's tricky accessing the community.'

Both older and younger LGBTQIA+ people commented that social activities did not need to be exclusive to a particular age group – there was interest in cross-generational activities and mingling too.

What can we do about it?

- Train staff on diversity issues to ensure LGBTQIA+ people feel safe and respected and that their relationships aren't treated any differently to their heterosexual or cisgender/gender-conforming peers.

- Partner with local queer agencies such as Qtopia or other training providers for training on diversity issues for businesses and increasing awareness and respect of the rainbow community.
- Use inclusive language and images on internal and external communications material.
- Develop policies to support safety and inclusion for LGBTQIA+ staff, residents and their families.
- Promote resources like the Pink Pages online directory and the Silver Rainbow initiative.

CREATING MORE SUPPORTIVE HEALTH SERVICES

Information for primary care providers

Mental health

Poor mental health is a significant concern and respondents felt it had the greatest impact on wellbeing and sense of community for the LGBTQIA+ community.

Themes of previous experiences of stigma and a lack of dedicated and competent mental health services to support the LGBTQIA+ community emerged through the research.

'Self-harm and suicide are a big deal.'

'Issues go inward and no one is available. We're all too busy treading water.'

Substance use

When asked about issues facing the LGBTQIA+ community in Christchurch, 20% responded that drug and alcohol abuse were a concern – nearly 10% of the participants indicated they used drugs and roughly 22% reported drinking alone to manage their stress. However contributors stated that drugs weren't as big a problem here as other big cities and whilst alcohol is a significant problem, probably no more so than the rest of the NZ population. Note that this finding clashes with health data, which shows disproportionate drug and alcohol abuse in the rainbow community.

Awareness of services

One of the findings from the focus groups was lack of knowledge as to what services exist, how safe they are and where someone in need might find support.

For young people, Qtopia, Kindred and Youth Hub 298 were mentioned, however there seemed to be a lack of support options for older people and fertility services were considered to be ill-equipped to respond to the needs of rainbow people.

'What services?'

'I haven't been to a counsellor because I have LGBT related worries, as I wouldn't know where to go.'

GP services

Just under half of contributors were not out to their GPs, a potentially concerning situation if patients don't feel comfortable being themselves or talking openly.

Strong themes emerged regarding the importance of inclusive language and practice, appropriate cultural training and engagement and fewer assumptions about heterosexual practices and cisgender identities as the default.

'We've just been at the funeral of a friend who died of pneumonia; he had undiagnosed HIV and I doubt he was out to his GP.'

'I get asked massively stupid questions about sex.'

'I came out (as non-binary) to my GP today. He was educated to call trans people 'it'.'

What can we do about it?

- Increase awareness around which services were knowledgeable and compassionate by promoting resources like the Pink Pages online directory.
- Ensure forms and language are inclusive; avoid making assumptions.
- Support training for medical professionals and other staff on diversity of sexual orientation, gender identity and sex characteristics to ensure LGBTQIA+ people are safe, respected and understood.
- Use inclusive language and images on communications material, like posters in the waiting room, pamphlets, etc.
- Develop policies that support safety and inclusion for LGBTQIA+ staff, clients, and their families.

CREATING A MORE SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY

Findings for community leaders

A city of change

Taking the research findings as a whole, Christchurch has a thriving LGBTQIA+ population of thoughtful, diverse and good hearted people – some who feel happy and safe, and others not. There is a feeling that Christchurch has an opportunity to shed the conservative image of old and connect to the rainbow community, creating a narrative focused on an accepting and innovative city. It was felt this would have the potential to attract progressive and diverse thinkers who might otherwise be tempted by Wellington or Auckland.

Safety

Some people find Christchurch an unsafe and at times aggressive city, others felt a sense of safety and belonging. Whilst negative or offensive comments had been directed at 74% of online respondents in the past three years, 90% felt more accepted than they have in the past, which suggests attitudes are changing. Despite this, safety is still an issue. When asked about their most pressing concerns, 22% referred to bullying and safety.

'We are really comfortable holding hands and only rarely is anything said...we did get called faggots recently though.'

'I have been yelled at, chased, had things thrown at me; I don't feel comfortable holding hands with my partner. It hasn't changed heaps, there are lots of people out there whose attitudes haven't changed.'

Venues

The lack of venues specific to queer people post-earthquake was a common theme. Clearly kinship and connection are vital to wellbeing, however 44% of online survey participants felt they didn't have enough connection to the rainbow community. People felt a designated space would increase visibility, connection, opportunities to be 'seen' and to support others who were in need.

'There is nowhere distinct to go, not many places you can safely be gay.'

'I have some queer friends but I don't feel like I am part of the Christchurch queer community. I would love to meet other fellow queers but I don't know where to start looking.'

Visibility

Almost all contributors felt that greater visibility would further increase general society's understanding and therefore help the LGBTQIA+ community feel safer.

'We don't have a Pride parade, but we could have a rainbow (pedestrian) crossing, like Wellington does.'

'More gender-neutral toilets; the bus exchange toilets are awesome.'

What can we do about it?

- Look for ways the LGBTQIA+ community can be supported and celebrated.
- Ensure public places and events are inclusive.
- Use inclusive language and images on internal and external communications material.
- Reach out to local LGBTQIA+ friendly organisations about funding and sponsorship opportunities.
- Promote Christchurch as a queer friendly city.

LEARNINGS FOR PARENTS OF RAINBOW CHILDREN

Supporting children to be themselves

Support from whānau and friends

A theme for focus group members was ensuring they have a support network in the form of both family and friends – for most, it was a mixture of the two. Some had struggled with familial relationships in the past but made a kind of peace with their parents over time as the latter had grown to understand or accept their sexuality or gender identity.

77% of respondents agreed that having at least one person in the family support their sexual orientation or gender identity made things easier.

'I'm in touch with my family but they don't accept me. My family are out of their comfort zone and don't have anything to go by – they have no experience with this difference.'

'I had no such thing as a support network as a teenager, and I considered suicide.'

'Mum and Dad raised me with boys' and girls' clothes, which was cool! My parents really don't mind that I am gay, they just don't care.'

Age and acceptance

Within the focus groups, no apparent differences between age groups appeared; some younger people had very accepting parents, some didn't, and the same pattern occurred in the over 40-year-old groups. One young transgender man's grandmother had paid for his top surgery – a touching example of how age isn't necessarily a barrier to acceptance. Survey results, however, showed a tendency to find younger family members more accepting than older generations.

Coming out

Many of the participants reported that their experiences coming out to their whānau were positive, however, there were also narratives highlighting how negative attitudes towards gender and sexual diversity could create long periods of separation in family networks. Common narratives included that many family members became more accepting over time, and that sometimes supportive attitudes and actions varied within families. Some commented that they would have benefitted from family support before they came out, for instance if parents had been explicitly supportive of LGBTQIA+ people.

'Dad is a dick and doesn't want to learn but my Mum is willing to learn, I teach my Mum.'

'When I was younger my mum told me she'd disown us if we were gay. I now have a superficial relationship with my mother, she has not been very accepting.'

'My mother probably doesn't remember all the dodgy comments [she made] about lesbians while I was closeted, but I sure do.'

What can you do about it?

- Be there for them, and know that there is nothing wrong with your child's identity and nothing about them needs changing. Affirm your child and their sense of who they are.
- Display a willingness to learn about your child's sexuality, gender identity, and the rainbow community.
- Try and find a support group if your child is interested in it. RainbowYOUTH has a database of support groups across the country. You might also want to find a support group for yourself.
- Stand up for the rights of your child, especially if they are not adequately supported, for example, at school, in their activities or by their GP.