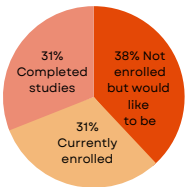


2023 RURAL FOCUS GROUPS SUMMARY

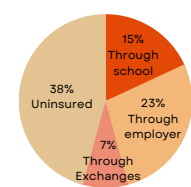
THE ESSENTIALS

PFund conducted virtual focus groups with 13 participants who identified as LGBTQ+. Focus groups were held via Zoom in November 2023. Participants were asked seven questions regarding access to higher education and healthcare in the Upper Midwest. Participants received a \$50 gift for their time.

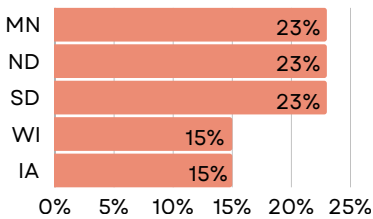
Post Secondary Enrollment Status



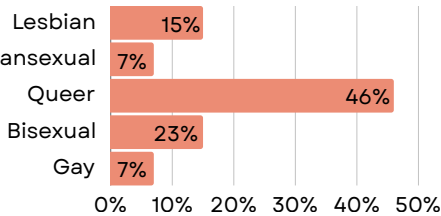
Health Insurance Access



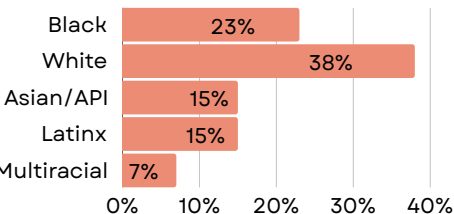
State of Residence



Sexual Orientation



Race/Ethnicity



PURPOSE

The purpose of the focus groups was to better understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals' access to higher education and healthcare in the rural areas of the Upper Midwest (Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wisconsin, Iowa, and the First Nations therein). PFund will use this information to help identify the needs of rural queer communities and how our programming might help address current gaps in services.

WHAT WE ASKED

Focus group participants were asked to complete via online polls some simple questions regarding their demographics and access to health care and higher education prior to and during the focus groups. Open-ended questions that we asked fell under three main categories:

- Education
 - How would you describe your access to higher/post-secondary education after high school?
 - What do you think could have helped improve your access to education after high school?
 - How would you describe your sense of belonging at the school you attended after high school?
- Healthcare
 - Please describe your experiences accessing healthcare in your area.
- General
 - Is there anything else you'd like to share that you feel PFund should know about?

WHAT WE HEARD

It's tough in the rural Midwest for queer folks.

Participants shared a sense of isolation living in a rural area. A lack of understanding and acceptance along with unfair treatment and conflated values creates an oppressive environment, giving LGBTQ+ person less of a sense of belonging and a feeling of needing to hide who they are.

"It makes it very hard to connect with other community members, because you know very few...and there's a feeling of isolation because of a lack of understanding and acceptance by the people around me because of some conservative values."

WHAT WE HEARD, CONTINUED

Barriers to accessing higher education are multifaceted.

From vetting and selecting a school to transitioning into a college campus environment, accessing education after high school comes with a complex set of challenges. Choices are limited as not all campuses are welcoming—let alone safe—for LGBTQ persons. Some focus group members shared that they experienced stereotyping and neglect at their institutions and struggled to find a sense of belonging. Furthermore, there is limited information and guidance throughout the transition process, and it can be hard to assess your own needs through this major life change. Lastly, in one case where a person relocated from a small rural area to a medium-sized city, they described the experience as having been “*body slammed with new things and realizing that [they’re] not that different.*”

Money is wanted, but guidance is also needed for accessing postsecondary education.

While more financial assistance was noted by some participants, there was greater emphasis on having advocates and/or mentors who could support LGBTQ+ persons who are trying to access and transition into college environments. This kind of role could help people with:

- Strategizing around barriers when selecting a college and/or accessing campus resources.
- Foster more of a sense of belonging by having someone to talk to who understands the experiences.
- Increase campus awareness and advocate for resources specifically geared towards LGBTQ+, race/ethnicity, and persons with disabilities and the potential intersections thereof.

Obstacles to accessing healthcare are multiple and complex.

Rural LGBTQ+ people face a myriad of challenges when accessing healthcare. First, there are limited resources in rural areas in general. One participant shared that there were only two psychiatrists covering three counties in their hometown. This resonated with several other participants who indicated that they were not aware of any queer providers in their area and that there are issues of inclusivity with providers they can access. A second issue that arose centered around a sense of a lack of safety accessing healthcare, specifically around fear of discrimination (both due racial and LGBTQ+ identities) and concerns for privacy. For those who are uninsured, their experiences with discrimination in healthcare play a major role in their lack of coverage, as illustrated by one participant when saying,

“I have this fear of discrimination because of past experiences, you know, as an LGBT guy. There is a lot of negativity when you're trying to seek health care. And you know, sometimes you end up falling into the wrong provider, you know, people that are actually discriminative and starting to question your existence or your own appearance. It's always very difficult to navigate or go back there in terms of maybe voicing out about your problem at a very early stage. And you know that situation may definitely lead to complications of issues because of negative experiences. And this is one of the problems I faced. And I actually am very much concerned about my privacy and also my mental well-being, based on this negative experience of accessing it. So I tend to [use] self-care, like homecare instead of navigating healthcare services.”

WHAT WE HEARD, CONTINUED

The difficulties of finding queer-friendly healthcare providers.

Participants voiced frustration around finding queer and/or trans-friendly providers. Similar to guidance for navigating education, having someone advocate for rural queer people who is familiar with the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ+ populations would be a boon. Going further, more LGBTQ+ providers and mandatory trainings for non-LGBTQ+ providers should be a priority for health systems. In lieu of these options, access to a vetted list of trans-/queer-friendly providers in their area would increase access, especially for those who are closeted at the time of needing care.

Evidence of the resilience of rural queer people in the Upper Midwest.

Whether accessing education or healthcare, rural LGBTQ+ individuals shared stories of resilience that have helped them navigate systemic barriers in these critical areas. For one participant, entering college started as an isolating experience, but ended up helping them to develop skills to mitigate internalizing the discrimination they experienced. For another, going to college helped them see how there are other people out there like them with similar intersecting identities. They were able to find a community and deepen their sense of personal identity because of it. A third participant shared their approach to vetting colleges, using a critical eye when reviewing college promotional materials, looking at LGBTQ+ forums, and doing campus visits to get an on-the-ground feeling of the college's environment. All of these examples point to the ability of rural queer people in the region to find ways of forging their own path forward despite the barriers placed in front of them.

FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

Continue exploring the unique needs of rural LGBTQ+ individuals and communities.

The 2023 virtual focus groups for rural individuals were only able to scratch the surface of the topics covered due to each focus group lasting an hour. Nevertheless, the information collected points to a set of complex and intersecting barriers that prevent queer people in rural areas from accessing higher education and healthcare resources. PFund will build upon the foundation established from the pilot version of this focus group project to refine recruiting techniques and develop additional questions that explore these important topics. We intend to hold another set of focus groups in late 2024.

Hold in-person focus groups for rural queer folks in 2024 in conjunction with PRISM programming.

Virtual focus groups are a wonderful way to connect with rural queer people across PFund's entire service area of the Upper Midwest. However, it can be difficult to build rapport with participants in or cultivate engaging conversations in a virtual environment with limited time. To help address this issue, in 2024 PFund intends to convene in-person focus groups with individuals connected to PFund's PRISM program. Launched in 2022, PRISM (Promoting Rural Interconnections for Sexual Minorities) provides funding and networking resources to rural-serving organizations from across the Upper Midwest. In August 2024, PFund will be able for the first time ever to convene a multi-day in-person gathering for PRISM grant recipients. We will convene a focus group on rural issues as part of this gathering to explore more in-depth the challenges facing rural queer individuals in our region.