

MENTAL HEALTH EXPERIENCES OF BLACK LGBTQ+ YOUNG PEOPLE

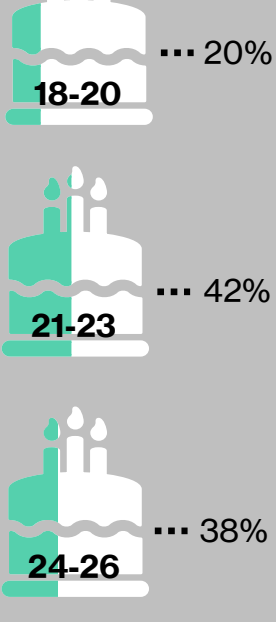
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background

Between August 2022 and April 2023, 24 Black LGBTQ+ young adults living in urban settings participated in semi-structured online interviews. The interviews covered four general topics: understanding identities, bias and discrimination, mental health experiences, and strategies for managing mental health.



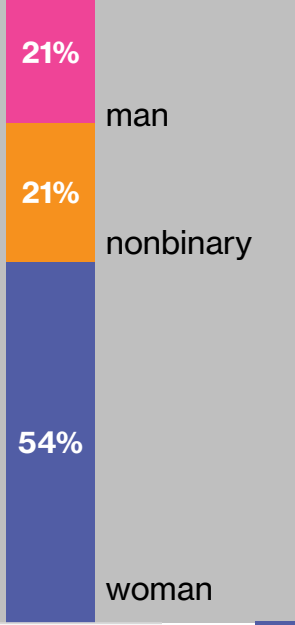
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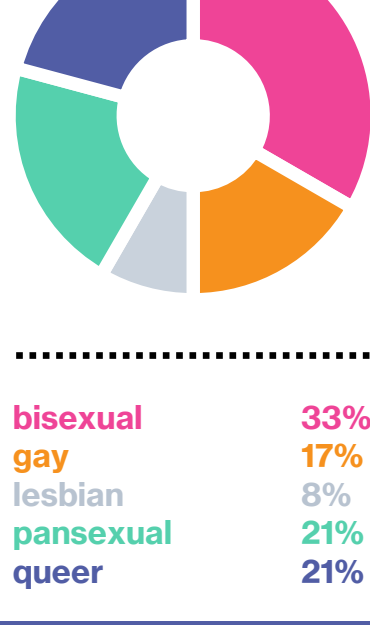
education



gender



sexual identity



Interviewees said that their Blackness tends to be the thing other people treat as most important. For a few folks, their Blackness and queerness [and sometimes gender] could not be separated. But far more often, people regarded their Blackness and queerness as distinct aspects of their identity and felt that they are Black first.

our identities are complex

I feel like in the world I will always present and know that people will perceive me as a Black man...I think in a way that my queerness, in my opinion, I don't know if it's the perception of other people, my queerness is clockable...So for me, I feel like that aspect of my identity is just as salient, but in a way it works differently because the experience I have in my Blackness as a Black man is so different than my experience as a person who can outwardly express for instance, "Oh, I'm queer, I'm bisexual." – Roderick, 25, Bisexual, Man

I've gone to a place where I can't disentangle, I guess, my queer identity and my gender identity from my Black identity...The intersectional discrimination, where it's like you're capturing racism in a queer context, but also the experience of homophobia and transphobia in your cultural Black spaces as well. So, it's impossible to disentangle those things, especially as you navigate relationships, friendships, dating, whatever that looks like. – Bridget, 25, Pansexual, Woman

context matters

In predominantly white spaces, some interviewees feel like they have to "tone down" their Blackness and in spaces that aren't explicitly queer, some choose to dress in a way that more closely reflects gender norms or intentionally don't disclose their queer identity[ies]. In this way, folks noted that their Blackness and their queerness can be in conflict with each other; interviewees themselves can reconcile both identities but social contexts require that they make these adjustments to be accepted and/or safe.

When I do go into more professional environment, I try to appear as masculine as possible. But for me, I'm somebody who... I have both masculinity and femininity within me, but in those spaces, I feel like if I were more feminine, then they will obviously see that I'm queer. So I have to present myself in a more masculine manner so they could probably take me more seriously and see that first before anything else. – Reggie, 21, Queer, Man

I do have to figure out who I'm around and how much of myself I can show up as. My friend group is white and Korean women. So in those spaces, I think I try to connect to them more on my interests that are more acceptable to them...so I don't have to explain things about Black culture and I'm not coming off as, I don't know if the word is ghetto, but essentially ghetto because we are in the same field...I don't want them to have the same image of me as a colleague, so I have to tailor it to how much is acceptable to present. – Tianna, 26, Bisexual, Woman

For many, Black queerness evoked ideas of trailblazing, creativity, and joy! Almost every interviewee said the main benefit of community with other Black queer people is the ability to show up and be seen as your whole self. This is in contrast to general Black spaces, where many people anticipate homo/transphobia. But, at least in these spaces you can look "less queer." For Black queer folks in White queer spaces, there is a relatively higher level of hypervigilance because Blackness cannot be turned off.

community is valuable

I know that there's a lot of homophobia in the Black community, and I think that could inform some of my hesitancy with making my queerness bigger in my life. I see it on Twitter and Instagram and TikTok, just the biases people have against queer people and it's really scary, I think, because I've found a lot of solace in my Blackness and to think that comfort that has been created could be taken away because of another piece of my identity is really scary. – Nicole, 24, Queer, Woman

It's such a specific community to be a part of, but everyone in the community is so nice because it's having the two facets and then knowing people with the same two facets. It's like you understand each other even when you haven't met each other. You understand the experiences that those people have gone through, even though you may not have gone through the exact same thing, you know how they feel. – Olivia, 19, Bisexual, Nonbinary

socialization is multifaceted

Socialization to queerness ranged from "it's a sin" to "we don't talk about it" to unquestioned affirmation. Religion, specifically Christianity, was a factor in socialization to queerness for some. Many interviewees grew up in pro-Black families, but peers and media sent negative messages about Blackness. Respectability – policing hair styles and speech to be "acceptable" to white people and institutions – was common. Many who grew up male-presenting discussed rigid notions of Black masculinity, including a high degree of homophobia.

The one that affected me the most to this day is that being Black, specifically a Black guy, means that you can't show emotion; that you had to be doing some type of sport. I was told that being a black guy meant you have to be stereotypical male, that you had to like rap, that you had to love hood comedies, things like that. You had to fit in a specific type of box, and I was made to feel ashamed of it because when I was growing up, I was very sensitive. – Jayden, 20, Gay, Man

I grew up in a very pro-Black household, so my Blackness was never something I was necessarily ashamed of. I realized very early on that a lot of people would consider me ugly because of my complexion. I can just remember my mom fighting so hard for me to love myself as I am. I wasn't allowed to play with non-Black dolls. I was not watching the Disney Princess movies...I kept Brandy's Cinderella on. And yet somewhere in the mix, I also had a towel on my head pretending it was hair. – Kandi, 25, Pansexual, Woman

Every interviewee had a bias or discrimination story to share. Most people couldn't identify instances of intersectional bias or discrimination, but could easily recall experiences of racism or, separately, homophobia. Many discussed instances of homophobia and heteronormativity in Black spaces or, less often, racism in queer spaces.

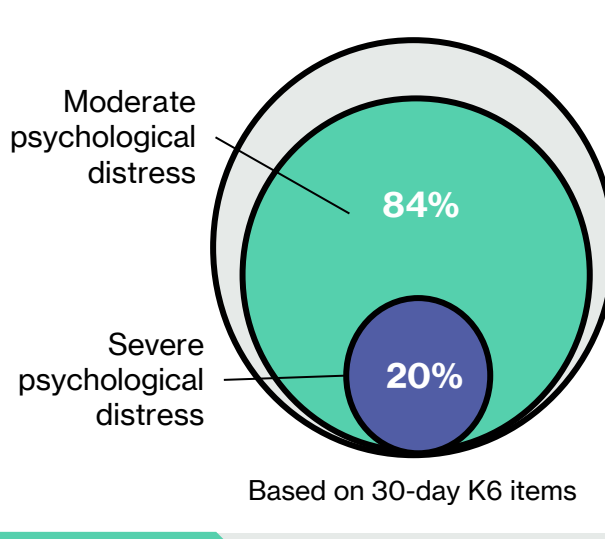
bias & discrimination are common...

I don't know if I actually have experienced discrimination because of both at the same time. If I was walking around somewhere maybe I present in a more heteronormative looking way or stereotypical cisgender way. So typically the extra discrimination of my sexuality isn't usually tagged on if I'm being discriminated against by my race. It would just be something about my race rather than both of them. – Emory, 23, Bisexual, Woman

I think I've gone to a gay bar that was all white and [my partner and I] received some looks and it's just the slight, I guess you can come in. I don't think there has been anything that's been blatant and disrespectful, just more so micro. But I don't know if that's because of how I come off and how my partner comes off. – Leilah, 23, Pansexual, Woman

...so are mental health struggles

Every interviewee described a period of poor mental health at some point in their adolescence or young adulthood. These experiences included managing ADHD, low self-esteem, social anxiety, major depression, anxiety, and suicide ideation or attempts. For some, these dips in mental health were related to minority stress (e.g., identity confusion, bias and discrimination). For others, they were related to general stress and the demands of moving into adulthood.



I suppressed [my queerness] for so long that it would put other things at the forefront...I'd be like, "Queer, well we're not going to focus on the queerness right now. Let's focus on the fact that you're fat." Instead of being mental, it became more physical attacks on myself. Then I would end up helping other people instead of helping myself like, "Let me just go into the mammy role and start helping people since that's what y'all want me to be, and that'll help." – Ashlee, 23, Queer, Woman

75% of interviewees received some form of professional mental health services since the age of 16.

Most people viewed therapy as an option for managing their mental health. Those who have never been expressed interest but had a hard time navigating systems of care (e.g., finding a therapist, using insurance). The trial and error in finding a therapist that "fits" is frustrating; for many people there was a preference for a therapist who has the same race, gender, and/or is queer. University counseling centers were commonly used but with mixed success. Although many people have found therapy helpful, others have experienced poor quality treatment, including microaggressions and unnecessary hospitalizations.

we've got mixed feelings about therapy

Then I went to college and eventually I started having suicidal thoughts and I still had my therapist, but I had stopped for a little bit. And I was like, "Okay, I'm going to go to the counseling center on campus and I'm going to see if I can get a therapist and continue on with these sessions." I think [the therapist] thought that I said that I actively wanted to kill myself. And so she sent me to the psychiatric unit. – Sammie, 18, Lesbian, Woman

I think what's keeping me from pursuing therapy is just the US healthcare system. I'm just afraid it's going to be super expensive or it's not going to be covered under the insurance. Or maybe I'll find someone who looks really good on paper and then I go in the office and it's not a good match. Then I have to do the whole thing again of finding someone. It's really those US healthcare specific things. To me, there's no stigma in reaching out for it and wanting to do it. – Justine, 21, Bisexual, Nonbinary

we have other tools too

Strategies with larger ring sections were mentioned more often.

The web connects those that interviewees mentioned using together. Thicker, darker lines indicate strategies were mentioned in tandem more often.

