

# At-Risk and Underserved: LGBTQ Older Adults in Seattle/King County Findings from *Aging with Pride*

Karen Fredriksen-Goldsen, PhD, Chengshi Shiu, PhD,  
Hyun-Jun Kim, PhD, Charles A. Emlet, PhD, Jayn Goldsen, BS

Report published by Aging with Pride, University of Washington, Seattle, WA

October 2015

WITHIN the rapidly aging and increasingly diverse population of Seattle/King County, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) older adults are emerging from the margins. LGBTQ older adults now represent about 2.4% of the older adult population in Seattle/King County; their numbers will more than double by 2030. LGBTQ older adults are at heightened risk of disability, poor health, mental distress and living alone, compared to heterosexuals of similar age. LGBTQ older adults have been historically invisible and largely overlooked in aging and health and human services, policy, and research. Although LGBTQ older adults share many of the same aging concerns as the general population, they also experience unique aging and health challenges as they encounter barriers and inequalities that can stand in the way of a healthy later life. *Aging with Pride*, the first national federally-funded project to examine LGBTQ aging and health reveals significant social, economic, and health disparities impacting LGBTQ older adults in Seattle/King County.

*“Isolation, finding friend support, caregiving and health  
are the biggest issues older gay persons face.*

*Who will be there for us, who will help care for us without judgment?”*

66-year-old lesbian participant



In May, 2015, *Aging with Pride* sponsored Aging the LGBTQ Way Town Hall in Seattle to gather input directly from members of the community, including LGBTQ older adults, family members, caregivers, and service providers. Over 100 people attended the Town Hall to share their hopes, fears, and concerns about the future of aging for LGBTQ people in Seattle, King County, and the Pacific Northwest.

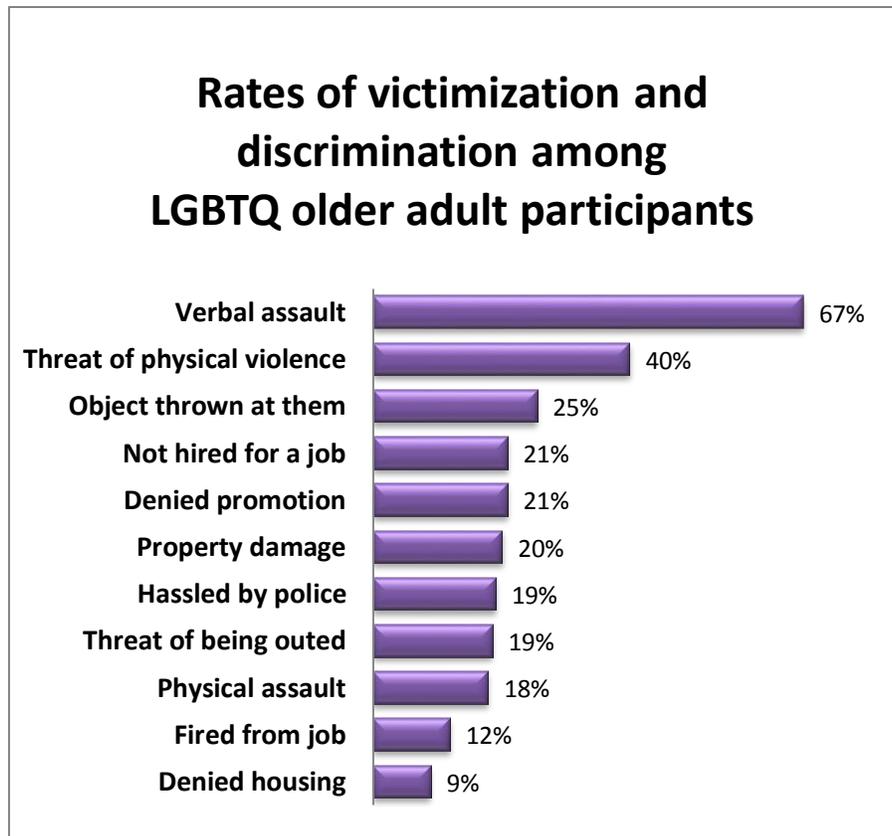
*Aging with Pride* also collaborated with several community-based agencies and individuals to distribute surveys to a diverse group of LGBTQ older adults. In 2010, during the first phase of *Aging with Pride*, 2,560 LGBTQ older adults participated across the nation. Of these 152 were residing in Seattle/King County. In 2014, additional LGBTQ older adults living in Seattle/King County participated in the survey. This report provides an overview of the findings from both the Town Hall and the data collected from 203 survey participants. This

**45%**  
**of LGBTQ older adult participants**  
**live alone**  
**and are at elevated risk of social isolation**

demographically diverse sample of Seattle/King County survey participants provides a snapshot and insights into the unique needs, strengths, and challenges facing these LGBTQ older adult participants.

**Key findings**

- LGBTQ older adults are at elevated risk of disability, poor health, and mental distress.
- The survey participants experience high rates of victimization and discrimination over their lifetime and bias in their everyday lives. Over two-thirds (68%) have experienced three or more incidents of victimization and discrimination.
- Most LGBTQ older adult participants feel good about belonging to the LGBTQ communities and are satisfied with their lives.
- Despite the fact that the vast majority of participants completed college, many are poor. Nearly one-quarter are living below 200% of the federal poverty level.
- Over 45% live alone and are at high risk of social isolation. More than half of the participants feel they lack companionship, feel isolated from others, or feel left out. About one in three have difficulty identifying someone in their lives to provide assistance if needed.



- Compared to their heterosexual peers, the participants are less likely to be partnered or married and have fewer children and other cross-generational ties. They rely heavily on peers for support; yet, many of their peers face their own aging and health challenges.
- One in five survey participants have served in the military. Only 14% of those that served in the military are accessing Veteran’s insurance benefits; yet, they are more likely to report poor general health, financial barriers to care and obtaining medication.
- LGBTQ older adults at elevated risk with many unmet aging and health needs include transgender older adults, those living in poverty, those with lower education, those living with HIV, LGBTQ veterans, LGBTQ older adults of color, and the oldest participants.
- Most aging and health and human services providers do not have adequate training to effectively serve LGBTQ older adults; of the participants, 16% have been denied services or were provided with inferior services due to their actual or perceived sexual orientation and/or gender identity.
- LGBTQ older adult participants are not able to obtain culturally relevant and appropriate services; one in six fear obtaining services outside the LGBTQ communities. LGBTQ communities, as well as the larger community, are inadequately prepared to support LGBTQ older adults.

Despite the challenging historical context of their lives, LGBTQ older adults have built their communities and developed unique systems of support. About 95% feel good about belonging to their communities and most are satisfied with their lives. The majority participate regularly in physical activity and nearly half attend religious or spiritual activities.

Although the LGBTQ communities have become more inclusive of its diverse population, few programs are prepared to provide

support or address the unique aging and health and human service challenges of LGBTQ older adults. By understanding the distinct factors that characterize the needs of LGBTQ older adults we can move forward in changing public

*“We need to get the nursing homes and the aging and medical facilities to be more in tune with the LGBTQ community and to help them to understand our needs.”*

*Aging the LGBTQ Way Town Hall participant*

policies and programs to serve these communities. Addressing the aging and health needs of LGBTQ older adults requires a comprehensive approach to transform services, practice and policy.

### **Priority Recommendations**

Develop, implement and evaluate an evidence-based cultural capacity training program for aging and health and human service professionals addressing unique risks, challenges and strengths of LGBTQ older adults, families and caregivers. This training will be framed within an equity and intersectional framework (including age, gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, culture, socio-economic status, geographic location, and ability) to ensure attention to diverse communities of LGBTQ older adults.

Develop, pilot test and evaluate a tailored and evidence-based LGBTQ older adult peer and cross-generational support program to provide engagement, functional assistance, and support as well as one-stop information, resource and referral for LGBTQ older adults, families, caregivers, and providers in aging, health and human services.

## Resources

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The full report *At-Risk and Underserved: LGBTQ Older Adults in Seattle/King County* is available at <http://CaringAndAging.org/>

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**Recommended Citation:** Fredriksen-Goldsen, K. I., Shiu, C., Kim, H.-J., Emllet, C. A., & Goldsen, J. (2015). *At-Risk and Underserved: LGBTQ Older Adults in Seattle/King County. Findings from Aging with Pride*. Seattle: Aging with Pride.

Research reported in this publication was supported by the National Institute on Aging of the National Institutes of Health under Award Number R01 AG026526 (Fredriksen-Goldsen, PI). The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health.

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4101 15th Avenue NE • Seattle, WA 98105 • 1-800-558-8703 • [AgePride@uw.edu](mailto:AgePride@uw.edu) • [CaringAndAging.org](http://CaringAndAging.org)

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