

Modern Day Snapshot of LGBT Australia: It's (Not) Better These Days

An overview of interviews conducted with hundreds of teachers, health professionals, homophobia-curious others and non-heterosexuals, adult and young, across the country.

FIRST, the good news: there has never been a better time to be lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) in rural, regional or remote (rrr) Australia. In 2010 rrr Australia boasted more LGBT and LGBT-friendly supports than at any other time.

NOW, the bad news: unless LGBT young people are linked into these supports, their experience is similar to LGBT people a decade earlier.

Not that being linked in is a guarantee. One rural worker spoke for many when she said:

"Before I started this job I thought that [LGBT young people] did have it better these days because of the role models, the media, the internet...But I find they've got it just as hard...I thought it would be easier but they're still getting kicked out of home, beaten up on the street, harassed at school... The terror they must go through..."

With each rrr Australian tour location reporting an LGBT-hostile environment, more so for young men, it is perhaps easier to understand why most teachers and health professionals report a higher level of depression and general mental health problems amongst LGBT young people.

One rural youth counselor explained: "In a community where you are isolated because you can't talk to anyone or you'll face violence if you do talk to anyone or you hear people yelling 'that's so gay'...where that stuff is everywhere, pervasive... it's tough..."

With few exceptions, most schools and mainstream organisations

had not had conversations about supporting LGBT young people or challenging homophobia. At best they said they would work out what to do if a young person "came out".

Perhaps unsurprisingly LGBT and LGBT-friendly supports reported being under-resourced, and often ill-equipped, to handle the demand, with most lacking certainty in where to even start.

The cost to rrr Australian communities is clear. As one senior education official said: "Young [LGBT] people leave our community because there is nothing here for them...I know some of them and they feel they didn't have the opportunity to have any life here...The main reason they gave was community attitudes..."

There was no tour location that lacked stories, good or bad, of LGBT people in that community, despite impassioned warnings not to go to certain parts of Australia.

The reality: LGBT Australians live EVERYWHERE.

Similarly, there were no significant differences in general LGBT young people's experience between states and territories, although ALL had tales, good and very bad. And unfortunately metropolitan centres cannot claim to be much better havens than their country cousins.

In what is a major challenge for the future, not one mainstream service provider, school or non-LGBT person even mentioned gender identity. Challenging homophobia might be part of the solution. As food for thought, one peak LGBT organisation observed:

"It's invariably the homophobia that is the fear that impacts on [our] transgender and intersex clients..."

Finally, LGBT young people were asked across the country, "What are your hopes for the future?"

Time and again, LGBT young people were clear, without prompting: To be able to hold the hand of their partners in public without fear, concern or anxiety of something happening to them or the one they love.

In 2010 young people and rrr communities reported that we have a long way to go to achieve this.

Quick Facts

- Despite there being more LGBT and LGBT-friendly organisations and projects, it's largely not easier for LGBT young people these days.
- Teachers and health professionals report that LGBT young people face higher rates of depression and mental health problems.
- Communities acknowledge homophobia's cost, yet at best, schools and organisations wait for young people to "come out" before taking action.



The reality:
LGBT Australians
live EVERYWHERE.



LGBT Life in rrr Australia

Private Comfort vs Public Concern

ORIGINAL PROJECT QUESTION:

Is life outside metropolitan Australia really difficult, impossible and/or non-existent?

Again, the good news first: lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people inhabit every nook and cranny of Australia, often, for adults at least, by choice.

There was not a part of regional, rural or remote (rrr) Australia where the Beyond 'That's So Gay' Tour did not find everyday LGBT people.

Now the bad news: despite their informed decisions, LGBT people and those that support them report that rrr areas are often an unwelcoming, LGBT-hostile place. One regional male teacher said: **"Well it's not really condoned, but it's not condemned..."**

Not one LGBT person spoke of living a life in rrr Australia that was uncompromised.

One rural-based gay man described it for most:

"You need to be discreet about your sexuality....because everyone knows everyone...it could get spread around...and you don't have control over who is told, when they are told and you don't know how they'll react..."

This reality and the stories of what has happened when someone's 'sexuality' is "spread around" has seen rrr areas get a bad reputation for LGBT people. Too often metropolitan LGBT people and supporters questioned why LGBT people would live anywhere but (east coast) metropolitan Australia. For remote areas this can turn to hysteria.

Despite adult LGBT people often being clear about their reasons for being in rrr Australia and reporting

feeling relatively safe and supported in their communities, there is still a reluctant deference to metropolitan areas.

"It's not like in [capital city]..."

Although, on the whole, adult LGBT people reported feeling relatively safe and supported in their communities LGBT young people, according to most, leave for metropolitan Australia as soon as possible. One rural policeman bluntly put it like this:

"They all fk off to [the city]..."**

It seems that things have only gotten better at the margins. Most tour locations described a significant drop in LGBT hostility over the past ten years. Yet it does remain.

Even "these days" this hostility can have a very real impact on LGBT people.

A rural lesbian worker observed: **"The people coming out in the North West are 30 years older than [LGBT people] in [regional centre]...The gay men move out or they hide...We still have people that are the only gay in the village..."**

Each state and territory had similar stories and pockets of concern.

Yet all this paints a picture of a largely uninhabitable rrr Australia. Adult LGBT people were quick to dismiss this myth.

One gay man in regional Australia reflected on moving from Sydney: **"There is this perception that there isn't enough to do...But I think a lot of people come here for that, they want a change...So social life is more about BBQs and the beach... So I feel more connected to LGBT community than I did in the city..."**

It's a theme that has echoed across rrr areas: living outside metropolitan Australia offers a different opportunity for "community",

albeit one that is not as constant, commercialized or passively entertaining.

Perhaps this is the reason that adult LGBT people are prepared to pay the price of public compromise to move, and return home, to rrr Australia. The benefits of rrr areas for LGBT people centre around people (e.g. family and/or a partner), place (e.g. their connection to home) and/or purpose (e.g. work or lifestyle change).

Unlike a decade ago, those returning home report a positive experience.

Nowadays, there are young LGBT people who are rejecting the idea that they must automatically move to the city.

Said one young gay man:

"I don't want to and I don't have to move away..."

Another young lesbian:

"I want to stay [here] and don't want to go to [the city]...I want to study [here]...If I had to I'd move, but otherwise I'd stay here..."

Like LGBT young people, rrr Australia is ready for something different to the silent, homophobic and metro-centric status quo. So many assumed that any community conversation on tour would need to be provoked or forced.

In 2010 it was clear that in rrr areas, people, supportive and not, were ready to talk Beyond 'That's So Gay' if they were given the excuse and permission to do so.

RRR Australia is sick of being the topic of conversation, and want to become part of it.

The unanimous response to the tour over 38-weeks, in ALL parts of Australia?

"It's about bloody time..."



LGBT Coping in rrr Australia: Surviving and Conditional Thriving

ORIGINAL PROJECT QUESTION:

What do we need to do better to ensure that all Australians feel able to live safe and supported wherever they choose to call home?

Good news: lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people, young and old, are thriving in all parts of rural, regional and remote (rrr) Australia.

Bad news: whether an LGBT individual thrives or barely survives in rrr Australia is more dependent on them winning the genetic and/or social lottery than their environment.

Time and again teachers, health professionals and homophobia-curious others say that LGBT people's quality of life "depends". One lesbian dynamo explained it: **"It depends on if you are a white male professional in [the city] versus an Aboriginal lesbian in [a rural community]...It becomes the haves and the have nots...In an [inner city gay-friendly suburb] you can be as gay as you like... But really it's not that open... There is no street in [the city] where two guys can hold hands..."**

Thus LGBT people, young and old, can experience even the same place as relatively safe and supportive or unwelcoming and hostile. Yes, even those apparent LGBT havens like Broome, Byron Bay and Daylesford. So on what does LGBT quality of life "depend"?

Supportive People

Having people around them who supported and cared for them negated many other negative contributing factors to LGBT people's lives. Too often LGBT people spoke of supportive people being a case of good luck or accident.

As one young rural gay man put it: **"I don't know...If I'd had bad reactions from [friends and family], then I probably would have moved..."**

Being female

Without factoring in race and religion, including Aboriginal young women, rrr communities are clear that men and women have very different experiences. As one female rural youth counselor said: **"The guys find it harder, mental health wise, because they probably get bullied more for being gay...Gay guys cop it worse than lesbians..."**

Age

There were clear differences observed across LGBT cohorts. Young LGBT people tend to fare worst in rrr areas. Said one male rural youth counselor: **"They are faring worse, because if you look at the data they are still overrepresented...Mental health, self-harming behaviours, sexual health..."**

From post-secondary school to around their mid-30s, LGBT people, especially men, are said to be missing in rrr Australia action.

From their mid-30s, LGBT people often come into their own in rrr areas, predominantly because this signals other factors of rrr success such as job and financial security, lack of dependence and being in a stable relationship. But don't mention class.

Being 'Discreetly Open'

Most admitted "you can be gay but...". But? Even if people know, you must be 'discreetly open'.

A rural adult lesbian explains the first: **"There are a lot of people who are out...[But] they're discreetly open... [They] don't say anything..."**

A female rural teacher reflected: **"It's alright just as long as you**

don't say it, speak it, stand up...It's country towns...It's like in the US military, 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell'..."

Palatable Contribution

A pattern that repeated across rrr Australia was that LGBT-ness could be forgiven, yes 'forgiven', if LGBT individuals contributed (see Amber's story). Add to that being palatable. One rural youth worker explained: **"[It's] harsh here if you step outside of what's acceptable..."**

Passing

A great deal of homophobia is avoided in rrr areas due to LGBT individuals ability to 'pass' as heterosexual. Explained one young rural gay man: **"I haven't experienced that mainly because of my ability to pass... I've done fine because I pass, but people who don't pass wouldn't..."**

Other factors

Although not essential to thriving in rrr Australia, having a connection to local LGBT organisations, projects and groups (if available, inclusive and active) can make a significant difference to an LGBT individuals quality of life. So to those LGBT people who have lived for a time in metropolitan Australia, seemingly refining their ability to cope and challenge homophobia away from their community's scrutiny. This might involve "suffering" homophobic fools (i.e. enduring the ignorance of others).

One rural lesbian explained: **"If I go to a GP and they ask, 'Why are you here?' I reply, 'I'm here to see if you're good enough to be my doctor'..."**

What hasn't changed in the past decade is that whether an LGBT individual thrives or barely survives depends largely on them, their ability to cope and their skilful navigation of often hostile and unwelcoming environments.

