

# OUT in Belize



ReportOUT

**A Research Report Examining the Human Rights Abuses and Development Needs of Sexual and Gender Minorities in Belize**



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**ReportOUT is a global SOGIESC human rights organisation**

For more information, please visit our website: [www.reportout.org](http://www.reportout.org)

Registered Charity Number (England and Wales): 1185887

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# Who are ReportOUT?

Since 2019, ReportOUT have been at the forefront of protecting the human rights of sexual and gender minorities in the United Kingdom and globally. As a registered charity in England and Wales (registered charity number 1185887) we are **fearless, determined and relentless** in our belief that human rights are fundamental to advancing the lives of sexual and gender minorities, and their communities. We recognise that we need to succeed in our aims and objectives by also using principles from international development alongside human rights frameworks, and we believe that both of these approaches should **always include sexual and gender minorities as part of them**. We align all of our work with Agenda 2030, in that no one should be left behind.

## ReportOUT's official aim and objectives are:

To promote human rights (as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and subsequent United Nations conventions and declarations) throughout the world for sexual and gender minorities by all or any of the following means:

- Eliminating infringements of human rights;
- Research into human rights issues;
- Raising awareness of human rights issues;
- Educating the public about human rights;
- Monitoring abuses of human rights;
- International advocacy of human rights;
- Providing technical advice to government and others on human rights matters.

## Our guiding principles:

- **Principle 1:** No one should be left behind in delivering the articles set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- **Principle 2:** Every person has a part to play in achieving the goals and targets set out in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.
- **Principle 3:** Positive change should be led by communities within a nation state and ReportOUT will support them to do this.

When it comes to formal research projects, ReportOUT is proud to follow the Amsterdam Network Guiding Principles, which were born out of concern that an advocacy community in one country should not speak for groups in another country, without a clear and informed mandate to do so. It sets out clear guidance about how we at ReportOUT, work as an organisation with others in different nation states, and parts of the globe. ReportOUT is a volunteer-led charity, with volunteers and Trustees originating from over thirty nation-states.

# Introductory Note: Drew Dalton

ReportOUT is delighted to present the findings of our 'OUT in Belize' research study. We worked in close partnership with Our Circle in Belize to construct this study, which shines a light on the lived experiences of LGBTQI+ Belizeans. ReportOUT exists to document the lived experiences of LGBTQI+ communities across the globe, working in partnership with local subject matter experts and this has been our first 'deep dive' study on a country in Central America. The work of Our Circle has been critical in supporting Belize's LGBTQ+ community and it has been a privilege to work with them in their mission to make Belize a 'Land of the Free' for all citizens, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Belize represents something of a paradox in its approach to sexual and gender minorities. Decriminalisation in 2016 and the emergence of Pride events the following year are positive developments, as was the Belizean government's acceptance of several anti-discrimination recommendations in healthcare arising from their most recent UN Periodic Review. However, our research project demonstrates that significant barriers still exist for LGBTQ+ Belizeans to achieve full equality in their daily lives. Nearly half of respondents remain unwilling to come out in their workplace for fear of discrimination and 88% have experienced some form of discrimination: verbal, physical or psychological. 73% of respondents believe that discriminatory language against LGBTQ+ individuals is a daily reality, demonstrating how legal acceptance has not yet translated into broader societal equality. The role of the church remains strong in perpetuating stigma and hatred, with examples of so-called conversion therapy seen in our study and examples of hate speech, which have not been punished by existing anti-discrimination laws.

The Belizean government should rightly be commended for introducing anti-discrimination laws and accepting recommendations as a result of their most recent Universal Periodic Review at the UN. Yet, our study alerts us to a warning that without dedicated focus on embedding these actions, via education and training, ongoing monitoring and enforcing the law where it is broken, LGBTQI+ Belizeans are at risk of remaining marginalised. Therefore, we leave this report with recommendations which will aid the Belizean authorities in fulfilling these obligations for the benefit of achieving a more just and equal society for all.

**Drew Dalton**  
**Chair of Trustees, ReportOUT**



**Drew Dalton**  
**Chair of Trustees**  
**ReportOUT**

# Introductory Note: Derricia Castillo-Salazar

"Working with the ReportOUT team provides the Belizean community an opportunity to collectively amplify our testimonies about the turmoil we face daily, because of our sexual orientation and gender identities. The results of this collaboration promise to provide much needed evidence and data to be able to meaningfully engage stakeholders, government officials, and service providers, to truly make Belize the "Land of the Free" for all persons. The data collected to generate this report is integral to the work we do to create visibility and inclusion for LGBT persons and their families, whether formed or chosen! We appreciate this support and look forward to future partnerships like this to complement and support the work we do!"

**Derricia Jael, Managing Director, Our Circle**

"Working with the ReportOUT team was a pleasure. The dedication and diligence from this group of volunteers inspires us at Our Circle and reminds us that with the right team we can make great strides towards equality."

**Denae Fairweather, Board President, Our Circle**



**Derricia Castillo-Salazar**  
**Managing Director**  
**Our Circle**



# Our Research Partner



**OUR CIRCLE**  
Making a Difference Together!

## **Our Circle**

Our Circle is a national organisation that provides quality services to family units formed by Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) persons across the country. Informed by the issues and experiences raised through our frontline services, we also provide training and advocacy support, to enhance the visibility, inclusion, and rights of LGBT-formed families living in Belize. Our Circle's frontline work is delivered by our network of extensively trained volunteers. The services are supported by Our Circle's staff team and the organisation's Working Board of Directors.

## **Vision**

The Our Circle Team envisions a Belizean society where all LGBT-formed family units, regardless of creation or composition, live in communities that recognize, respect, protect, and value them.

## **Mission**

The mission of Our Circle is to advance legal and lived equality for LGBT-formed family units, and for those who wish to form them, through building community, changing hearts and minds, and driving policy change.

## **What we do: Support, Sensitisation, and Advocacy**

Our Circle provides confidential and non judgmental support and information through peer support services housed at the Our Circle Resource Centre. Through strategic partnership, we have been able to bring additional capabilities and resources to support hundreds of LGBT-formed family units in Belize.

Our Circle has been providing sensitisation to voluntary and statutory agencies and community groups for over 6 years. Our team has a wealth of experience of sensitisation in relation to LGBT-formed family equality and service provision. We have supported LGBT-formed family units' movements to build more grassroots engagement to transform systems that perpetuate injustice.

Informed by the issues and experiences raised in our front-line services, coupled with independent research, Our Circle is committed to building influence and visibility for the rights of all LGBT-formed family units in Belize. We pay particular attention to those who may face additional barriers including, migrants and family units in rural Belize so that they too can enjoy family equality.

# Our Research Team at ReportOUT



**Phil Thomas**  
**Lead Trustee, ReportOUT:**  
**Human Rights Researcher**

Firstly, ReportOUT thanks Our Circle for partnering with us and helping to create this report highlighting the human rights abuses faced by sexual and gender minorities in Belize. ReportOUT would also like to thank Our Circle for their provision of all images used in this report.



**Chloe Singleton**  
**Human Rights Researcher,**  
**ReportOUT**

This project would not be possible without Drew Dalton, Chair of Trustees at ReportOUT, whose passion motivates us all. Furthermore, thanks to the guidance of Phil Thomas, Lead Trustee, the project slowly but surely formed from an idea into its complete stage.



**Kristýna Ryčovská**  
**Human Rights Researcher,**  
**ReportOUT**

ReportOUT is a fully volunteer-based organisation. Thanks go to our Human Rights Researchers: Charlotte Dickson, Chloe Singleton, Maria Lima, and Kristyna Rycovska, who have analysed and collected primary data, to finalise this project. Additionally, thanks to Emma Felisi, who has contributed greatly, however, has since left the project.



**Charlotte Dickson**  
**Human Rights Researcher,**  
**ReportOUT**

## **Suggested citation:**

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**Maria Eduarda Lima**  
**Human Rights Researcher,**  
**ReportOUT**

# Key Research Findings

**The key findings of this research study demonstrate that:**

## **Sexual and gender minorities in Belize do not feel safe:**

- Belize does not feel safe for sexual and gender minorities: 88% have experienced some form of abuse, threat, or attack, including: verbal abuse (30%), online abuse (24%), threats of violence including sexual violence (20%), violent and/or sexual attack (11%).
- The prevalence of police brutality towards sexual and gender minorities was rated on average 6 out of 10, with 10 being 'very widespread'.
- 3 people detailed personally experiencing conversion therapy or torture, and 29% felt that it was widespread.



## **Discrimination and stigma pervade public life:**

- Direct discrimination was experienced in health care (15%), employment (27%), housing (17%), education (15%) settings
- Discriminatory treatment or language was experienced in general society, such as in cafes and bars (27%), shops (27%), and places of worship (29%).



## **Sexual and gender minorities in Belize want more community and statutory support:**

- The average level of agreement with the statement "there are enough support services available for sexual and gender minorities in Belize" was a 5 out of 10.
- The average level of agreement with the statement "the Belizean government has obeyed the expected standards as set out in the international laws and agreements that it has signed up to" was 4.6 out of 10.



**ReportOUT have provided a list of recommendations at the end of this document which must be implemented to ensure that the human rights and development needs for sexual and gender minorities in Belize are protected and developed.**



# Review of the Literature: Life in Belize



# Review of the Literature

## **ABOUT BELIZE:**

Belize is a small Caribbean country on the North Eastern Coast of Central America, with a population of roughly 441,471 (estimated 2022). Between 25-30% of the population live in Belize City, whilst 50% are spread across rural areas. Though Belize's official language is English, 56.6% of the population speak Spanish. In terms of religion, 88% of the population are Christian (CIA World Factbook., 2023). No research has previously been undertaken on the estimated number of sexual and gender minorities living in the country. The status of SOGIESC (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression, Sex Characteristic) minorities living in Belize is complex, due to an intersection of social attitudes and lack of protective legislation, meaning that whilst not officially illegal, they still are subjected to a variety of discriminations across different sectors of society. There are clear signs of progress, however, such as Belize's first ever Pride Week held in 2017, and work by activist groups such as Our Circle demonstrates that there is a growing place for sexual and gender minorities to be 'out' in Belize.

## **1. The History of Sexual and Gender Minorities in Belize**

Belize, though located on the eastern side of the Mexican Yucatán peninsula in Central America, is considered part of the Caribbean region, as it shares more culture and history with these small island countries than with its neighbouring Spanish-speaking countries (Evans, 2013). As a previous British colony, it is a member of the Commonwealth and has retained English as its official language (Evans, 2013). However, Kriol is the "English-lexified Creole that has become the oral lingua franca of the country" (Schneider, 2017).

Western media has frequently discussed the attitudes of Commonwealth Caribbean people towards gender and sexual minorities over the past two decades, taking an interest in what it has dubbed 'Caribbean homophobia' (Gaskins, 2013). However, such accounts fail to appreciate that the laws criminalising same-sex intimacy 'are remnants of the region's colonial past' (ibid.). When Britain established its first colonies in the Caribbean region during the early 1600's, colonisers quickly, and undemocratically, implemented British common law which reflected British Christian morality without consideration of the extant local order and culture (Tisdale, 2018, p. 101). The British were allegedly more wary of the proximity of the Caribbean colonies to the equator; according to British folklore, heat increased promiscuity and 'the potential for same-sex activity', making them quick to introduce sodomy laws to the region (Smith and Kosobucki, 2011, p. 16). Despite this fear, the colonial environment within the Caribbean 'was much more relaxed than the British "home base"', and only late in the 19th century did 'outright hostility towards homosexual acts [become] common' (Gaskins, 2013, p. 431). Prior to this hostility, colonisers lived in a predominantly male society with little possibility for heterosexual sex, and a distinctive characteristic of British Caribbean society was a 'sexual licence' with minimal legal restriction despite the existence of buggery laws (Gaskins, 2013, p. 431). When Caribbean colonies gained independence, the majority of countries maintained their British-imposed laws, including sodomy laws, and the influence of British Christianity on local understanding meant that there was a 'pervasive belief throughout the Caribbean that homosexuality was immoral and akin to incest or adultery' (Tisdale, 2018, p. 103).

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The slave trade became instrumental for the growth of capitalism within the Caribbean and many slaves were brought from West Africa (Gaskins, 2013). Some people may believe that African beliefs are homophobic and therefore African slave communities also contributed towards homophobia within the Caribbean (Smith and Kosobucki, 2011). However, this is unlikely, given that prior to colonisation diverse gender relations have been recorded and were primarily used by colonisers as reason to impose their Christian ideologies (Evaristo, 2014). Furthermore, many of those brought over from West Africa to the Caribbean were Akan who 'had beliefs in multiple gods, including bi-sexual gods' (Smith and Kosobucki, 2011). Therefore, historical analysis shows how it is likely that 'the spiritual traditions of these West African people created a social and cultural space for male homosexuality' in the Caribbean (Gaskins, 2013). Belize's has an indigenous Maya population; 'direct descendants of the original indigenous inhabitants of the Yucatán peninsula' (Minority Rights Group International, 2017).

Some research has noted how the sexual activities of Maya people were freer and more varied than current sexual practices, and they would recognise, discuss and depict various sexual behaviours without proscribing labels or permanent identities (Aimers, 2014, p. 157). Sexual depictions in Mayan art would most commonly show two males as opposed to two females, suggesting 'an almost homoerotic sensibility' (Aimers, 2014). Additionally, there are accounts of 'bi-sexed' gods in the region, suggesting a fluidity to the male and female identities in Mayan culture (Aimers, 2014).

## 2. Legislation and Protections for Sexual and Gender Minorities in Belize.

Despite having ratified various Human Rights instruments, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), the Belizean legal system has contributed to maintaining and reinforcing the oppression experienced by gender and sexual minorities. Until recently, Belize criminalized private sexual relations between consenting adults of the same sex. Section 53 of the Belizean Criminal Code defined sex between men as "carnal intercourse against the order of nature", punishable with up to ten years of imprisonment (Lazarus, 2020).

In 2010, the activist Caleb Orozco, supported by a transnational Coalition of NGOs (Orozco, 2018), launched a Constitutional Challenge against Section 53. The Supreme Court of Belize issued its judgment on the case in August 2016, declaring Section 53 unconstitutional on the basis that it violated the rights to dignity, equality before the law, freedom of expression, privacy, and non-discrimination (Supreme Court of Belize, 2010). However, although void and unenforceable, Section 53 has yet to be struck from the Criminal Code (Human Dignity Trust, 2024) and the Belizean constitution still lacks explicit mention of sexual orientation as a prohibited category for discrimination. Furthermore, while criminalisation represents an important turn in Belize's recognition of sexual minorities as subjects of rights, this has not been reflected in other areas of the national legislation. Belize's Immigration Act, for example, still includes "homosexuals" in a list of "prohibited immigrants" (Chapter 156, §5(1)(e)). Therefore, a foreign national's sexual orientation – either actual or perceived – may be invoked by the state as a reason to deny them entry to the Belizean territory or may constitute grounds for deportation. In a report presented to the 107th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Committee, UNIBAM and the Heartland Alliance for Human Needs and Human Rights mention that the Act is also enforced against gender minorities (UNIBAM, 2013).

Similarly, discrimination is felt within family law. In terms of human rights related to family life, family constellations formed around gender and sexual minorities remain vulnerable. Marriage, civil unions, joint adoption, or second-parent adoption are not available to same-sex couples (ILGA, 2020, p. 226). This has been raised as a major socio-economic

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concern for activists such as Caleb Orozco, as it amounts to economic exclusion (CIVICUS, 2022).

These and other legislative gaps affecting gender and sexual minorities were encompassed in the Equal Opportunities Bill, an anti-discrimination draft bill proposed in 2020. The bill was intended “to protect individuals from discrimination based on twenty-one characteristics, including lawful sexual activity, intersex status, gender identity, and sexual orientation” and referred to both direct and indirect discrimination committed by public or private institutions (Government of Belize, 2020). However, due to the intense resistance mobilised primarily by religious actors (Belize Breaking News, 2020), it was withdrawn by the House of Representatives in September 2020 (Government of Belize Press Office, 2020). Consequently, there are no specific protections in place addressing discrimination against gender and sexual minorities.

The Belizean legal system also fails to protect increasingly recognised gender minority rights. Name change and gender marker-change, for example, remain unavailable (ILGA, 2020).

No information could be retrieved on protections for intersex persons, suggesting that discussions about intersexuality might still be missing in the public debate about gender and sexual minorities.



## ***SURVEY INSIGHT:***

“ I just want to be able to hold my partner's hand and walk down the damn street or the aisles of a grocery store without feeling the need to hide or worry about drama that might come from being 'caught' ”

*OUT In Belize survey respondent, 2022*

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## 3. Contemporary social attitudes towards sexual and gender minorities.

Within Belizean society, people are becoming increasingly open to recognizing the existence of sexual and gender minorities. Larger cities, such as Belize City, are generally considered safer for sexual and gender minorities than rural areas, with certain tourist-heavy areas such as San Pedro and Ambergris Caye being seen as more open to SOGIESC tourists (GayTravel.com, 2022). Despite legal conditions remaining largely unaltered, as stated by a transgender advocate interviewed by ReportOUT in August 2021, social attitudes in Belize have begun to change recently.

Overall, Belize remains one of the countries more accepting of homosexuality in the Caribbean region alongside Suriname, with Regional Director for UNAIDS Ernest Mossiah stating that in a survey conducted with 773 Belizeans 34% of the polled stated they would accept a homosexual man, with a similar number confirming they would tolerate homosexual individuals (Humes, 2015). Out of the remaining, around 32% stated they would not accept homosexuality, or that they would feel hatred towards the person who identifies as such (Humes, 2015). Similarly, UNAIDS published a large public opinion survey in Belize conducted in 2013 which showed 75% of respondents agree that people should not be treated differently based on their sexual orientation (UNAids, 2020). Overall, surveys conducted throughout the last 10 years indicate a progression towards larger acceptance and tolerance of homosexuality in Belizean society, but this progress has remained slow; 'casual' verbal, physical and emotional abuse remains a feature of daily life for many in Belize, as will be discussed in the next sections.

Ulysease Roca Terry, a gay-identifying Belizean fashion designer living with HIV who was arrested in 2020 for breaching COVID-19 regulations, has been reported to suffer from verbal and physical abuse and bullying while in police custody, and died mere days later (UNAids, 2020). A video of the abuse emerged on social media, leading organizations such as the United Belize Advocacy Movement, to highlight how abuse of sexual and gender minorities is increasingly taking place online as well. Alongside violence committed by law enforcement, police also offer little to no physical protection in case of societal discrimination or violent attacks. Continued discrimination in society as detailed by Kevin Mendez, a local SOGIESC activist, President of Belize Youth Empowerment for Change and Human Rights Youth Ambassador, includes sexual and gender minorities being disowned and misunderstood by families, suffering in their job prospects and thus financial security, violent attacks on the street, teenage suicide, youth sex work, sexual exploitation, and so much more (Mendez, 2017).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many of these effects were amplified, as people were forced to move back home to their families to stay afloat economically, meaning that many gender and sexual minorities had to go back into hiding, leading to continued physical and mental abuse. Similarly, Belizean sources have commented that COVID-19 has led to an increase in bisexual men seeking out sex work to survive due to limited support from the Belizean government and society (interview with local Belizean, ReportOUT, 2021).

The experiences of transgender people with social discrimination and hostility are often singled out in literature. In this context, the concern is that, as there is no way for transgender people to change their names or their gender markers legally, it is impossible for transgender people to 'hide' or blend into broader society when going about their daily lives (Belize, OUTRIGHT Action International). This leaves them open to social discrimination from their local communities, as well as when it is required to show any legal documentation.

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## 4. The Role of Culture and Societal Institutions

The criminalisation of same-sex sexual conduct has resulted in many negative social attitudes, such as the increase in stigmatisation of sexual and gender minorities in Belize. Historically constructed negative attitudes are further pushed by influential politicians, the media, and culture, more generally.

Public officials such as the Minister of Human Development, Social Transformation, and Poverty Alleviation Minister Anthony Martinez, who publicly stated “my position is that God never placed anything on me for me to look at a man and jump on a man... I’ll fight tooth and nail to keep that law” (referring to same-sex criminalisation law).

Turning to the media as an important factor in constructing or perpetuating negative societal attitudes towards gender and sexual minorities, criminologist Stan Cohen introduces the concepts of moral panics and folk devils. The construction of folk devils - labelling a certain group as a danger to society, can then manifest into moral panics, meaning the group will become widely and societally known as an evil entity (Cohen, 1973). These groups are often characterised by media over-reporting and creating sweeping statements and overly dramatised headlines. These groups are, for example, demonised by the likes of Editor-in-Chief of the Amandala Press, Russell Vellos, who wrote: “I am going to deal with homosexuals, and I’ll use strong language...homosexuals’ prey on young children, and teenaged boys...I can think of no more obscene, disgusting, evil, wicked and perverted act that one man could do to another. Good Belizeans don’t just sit there and do nothing. Get up and help fight this evil in our midst.” (UniBam and The Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights, 2012). These statements are a clear example of how the media creates moral panics in its citizens, portraying gender and sexual minorities as folk devils, responsible for bringing moral decline to society (Cohen, 1973)

## SURVEY INSIGHT:

**“I want to make the people of Belize respect us as who we are”**

*OUT In Belize survey respondent, 2022*



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Furthermore, Belizean culture continues to be shaped by the lasting influence of its pre-colonial historical background. The continuous influence of Mayan culture has rendered the country more closed to its surroundings and hostile to social outliers, meaning that many gender and sexual minorities migrate to Northern districts of Belize, which are more culturally and socially Hispanic. Sexual and gender minorities, however, still tend to face discrimination from Hispanic communities due to the continuous influence of catholic values as well as a strong machismo culture (Day-Wilson, year unknown). Local sources have detailed personal experiences with religion in Belize, stating that the mixture of religion and the intense Machismo culture makes it difficult to come out, and leads many to experience discrimination from a young age (interview with local Belizean, ReportOUT, 2021). Fears and stereotypes have created a stigma surrounding AIDS, despite the relatively low case numbers in the country, and this continues to dominate discourses surrounding homosexual men (Middleton-Kerr, 2012). Also, stark social inequality and class differences further amplify the struggles of lower-class sexual and gender minorities in Belize, who lack access to a supportive community and resources (Middleton-Kerr, 2012).

## 5. The Role and Influence of Religion

According to the U.S Office of International Religious Freedom report on Religious Freedom in Belize (2020), the largest religious denomination is Christianity, with the members of the Roman Catholic Church forming the largest group and accounting for around 40% of the population. Protestants account for around 32% of the population, and this includes Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Anglicans, Mennonites, Baptists, Methodists and the Church of the Nazarene. The remainder of religious affiliations account for around 13% of the population, including Jehovah's Witnesses which form 2% of the population, and other groups include Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Rastafarians and the Salvation Army. It is estimated that about 15% of the population has no religious affiliation (U.S. Office of International Religious Freedom, 2020, p. 2).

The influence of religion within the political life of Belize is confined to the Senate, where the law provides that the Belize Council of Churches and the Belize Association of Evangelical Churches alternate in appointing a 'church senator' with the agreement of the Governor General (U.S. Office of International Religious Freedom, 2020, p. 3). The church senator advises on public policy that affects the political positions of various religious groups, and places the interests of religious leaders on par with the three other senators representing labor unions, the business community and the NGO community (U.S. Office of International Religious Freedom, 2020, p. 3).

In a joint shadow report submission by Heartland Alliance and United Belize Advocacy Movement (UNIBAM) to the UN Human Rights Committee in 2013, religious opposition was acknowledged as being significant within Belize in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity rights (Heartland Alliance and UNIBAM, 2013, p. 6). It outlined how the religious views of Belizean churches generally considered homosexuality as a sin, moral deviation and contrary to natural law, and that those engage in same-sex relations or who have a gender identity different to that assigned at birth have a disorder (Heartland Alliance and UNIBAM, 2013, p. 6). The report indicates that these 'deep-seated religious and cultural perspective[s]' influence the treatment and status of sexual and gender minorities within Belizean society. Furthermore, it is reported that younger sexual and gender minorities experience increased violence within particularly religious parts of the country, and the police often refuse to record reports from survivors in such religious communities (U.S. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2019, p. 16).

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As a consequence, the Catholic church continues to play a significant role in preventing progress of the rights of gender and sexual minorities in Belize, creating concern at UNAids about a new emerging and growing church-based movement against homosexuality. (UNAids, 2011, p. 35). The Council of Churches in Belize strongly opposed the decriminalization of homosexuality in Belize's criminal code in 2011, arguing that homosexuals were targeting children in order to 'recruit' for the homosexual agenda and declaring homosexuality to be a country-wide 'moral issue'. (Amandala, 2011). The Church remains one of the most significant organised resistances and counter-voices to sexual and gender minorities in Belize. This inevitably has had effects on public opinion and thus the actions of politicians, which continues to delay and prevent anti-discriminatory or protective legislation in Belize from taking effect (UNAids, 2011, p. 35).

Religious opposition towards sexual and gender minorities became particularly prominent when activist Caleb Orozco successfully challenged Section 53 of the Criminal Code which criminalised same-sex sexual relations between consenting adults. The law is a relic of the British colonial rule in Belize, drafted by Britain in the 19th-century, yet it remained in place within the new Criminal Code after Belize gained independence (Bowcott and Wolfe-Robinson, 2013). As previously mentioned, the challenge, filed in 2010 by Caleb Orozco and his organisation, UNIBAM, addressed the constitutionality of the provision that stated "every person who has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any person or animal shall be liable to imprisonment for ten years" (Criminal Code of Belize, Section 53). Interested parties in support of Orozco came from abroad, including the Commonwealth Lawyers Association, the International Commission of Jurists and Human Dignity Trust (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2013, p. 8). Yet, interested parties also joined the defence of Section 53 and they were all religious institutions within Belize; the Belize Church of England Corporate Body, the Roman Catholic Church in Belize and the Belize Evangelical Association of Churches (Tisdale, 2018, p. 104). According to a press release by the association at the time, the Belize Council of Churches said it would strongly oppose 'all changes in the Constitution of Belize that will not promote the sanctity of human sexual relations as established by God' (see Heartland Alliance and UNIBAM, 2013, p. 6). This unification of Church and State in defence of a law outlawing homosexuality was justified by a representative of the Council of Churches as protecting 'the moral voice of...society' (Sanchez, 2013; see also Lazarus, 2020, p. 378-379).



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## 6. Activism in Belize

### **Caleb Orozco and UNIBAM:**

The United Belize Advocacy Movement (UNIBAM) is an LGBT-led policy and advocacy NGO in Belize aiming to reduce stigma and discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals. The NGO was co-founded by Belizean activist Caleb Orozco, now the President of UNIBAM, who led the legal challenge against Section 53 (Caleb Orozco v Attorney General of Belize and others; Humes 2016). UNIBAM works closely with the MSM (men who have sex with men) community on HIV/AIDS analysis and provides public HIV education and referral services. Additionally, they undertake legal research on Belizean law, document violence and discrimination, conduct security and legal education workshops with the local SOGIESC community, and work to build leadership capacity amongst them. They have gained a large international outreach, working in various coalitions to advance UN resolutions and advocate for follow-up in UN reports. More details of their work are included on their website: <https://unibam.org/>. One of UNIBAM's most prominent campaigns in Belize is the "We Are One" wristband campaign, a national media crusade which launched during Orozco v Attorney General of Belize to 'change the hearts and minds of the Belizean public' (News 5, 2012). As Orozco explained, the campaign 'we are one in dignity and rights' is related to "the need to address some of the vile and inflammatory language that has been used in the media for the past year and a half...we all have the same expectations about the treatment of dignity and rights" (speaking on News 5, 2012). The wristband campaign was presented to the nation following a public service announcement which aired in the local media across the country (Cayetano, 2012). This campaign faced severe hostility (<https://edition.channel5belize.com/archives/66159>).

### **Our Circle:**

Our Circle are a national voluntary organisation supporting LGBTQ+ family units, aiming to enhance their inclusion, visibility and rights in society. The co-founder and President of Our Circle, Derricia Castillo-Salazar, is SOGIESC rights activist and envisions the organisation as one that educates, empowers, and builds the community (arc-international.net, 2017). The organisation is a partner in the Belize National Women's Commission (nwxbelize.org) and works locally to provide free, confidential HIV/AIDS testing services, counselling and support, and a human rights violation report scheme. Importantly, the organisation has sent many open letters to key government members and regarding security, census inclusion, community policing, policy language, inclusion in gender violence referral and more.



### **Trans in Action**

Trans in Action Belize (TIA) is an organisation established in 2014 advocating for the trans community in Belize, including people who identify as transgender, transsexual, transvestite and more. The organisation focuses on achieving societal and legal respect for these groups, as well as promoting their rights to be equal with the rest of the population (Trans in Action, 7NewsBelize). The co-founder and President of TIA, Zahnia Canul, is an activist who has initiated projects such as CEDOSTALC (Center of Documentation and Trans Situation in Latin American and the Caribbean), which focuses on documenting violations against transgender individuals which take place within Belize, including violations within education, healthcare, hate crimes and other legal issues (Trans in Action, 7NewsBelize). TIA is also partnering with the Ministry of Education to create health packages for trans people such as providing hormones and other injections for their transition (Trans in Action, 7NewsBelize).

# Review of the Literature

## 7. Dangers Faced by Sexual and Gender Minorities in Belize

Despite the recent progress made in social attitudes in Belize, severe structural challenges and threats remain to gender and sexual minorities in the country, including abuses of power by law enforcement. A lot of discrimination comes more from misunderstanding the experience of gender and sexual minorities, rather than purposeful hostility. Nevertheless, due to the combination of strict laws against same-sex existence, lack of education on SOGIESC issues, the power of the Catholic Church, and the strong machismo culture in Belize, sexual and gender minorities remain very vulnerable in society. When speaking to CIVICUS, Caleb Orozco detailed some of the dangers that sexual and gender minorities continue to face in Belize despite the legal change achieved through his legal challenge, including violence in both the family and the workplace (CIVICUS, 2022). Orozco highlights the dangers the police pose to sexual and gender minorities in Belize, saying that '[i]f you're of African descent and gay, expect police harassment' (CIVICUS, 2022).

The lack of sex education also has led to transgender persons facing the particular danger of doctors not having the proper knowledge for facilitating their transition such as injecting hormones properly or taking transition-facilitating medicine. Similarly, in regards to HIV testing, 41% of respondents in a survey in 2015, said that concerns surrounding the confidentiality of HIV testing prevented them from getting tested (Humes, 2015). The healthcare system remains one of the largest threats to gender and sexual minorities, as it does not offer sufficient protection or education of the unique threats facing sexual and gender minorities.

Similarly, UNIBAM is calling for an investigation into the treatment of detainees who are part of marginalised communities that were held for breaking COVID regulations, as they remain exponentially vulnerable when in contact with law enforcement. This was clear in the previous example of Ulysease Roca Terry. This demonstrates that sexual and gender minorities still lack legal protection.

## Recent Milestones for Sexual and Gender Minorities in Belize

There has been recent stagnancy in progress on the situation of gender and sexual minorities, and the progress that has been made has been slow. However, certain milestones have been reached which is important to highlight.

**2016:** Same-sex activity was decriminalized in Belize in 2016, with Belize's anti-sodomy law being declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court.

**2017:** Belize held its first Pride event, Pride Week.

**2018:** During the UN's Universal Periodic Review, Belize accepted 15 out of 17 recommendations pertaining gender and sexual minorities, vowing to improve their lives. This included addressing discrimination, hate crimes and violence, as well as measures to ensure sexual and gender minorities have adequate access to HIV treatments. Recommendations focused on setting up legislative measures to stop discrimination in sectors such as employment, housing, as well as educational campaigns to curb societal stigma (Stewart, 2018). This made Belize the first Caribbean country to accept this high number of recommendations.

# Research Methodology



# Research Methodology

## Research aims

The aim of our research project was to investigate the lived but often neglected experiences of sexual and gender minorities in Belize, with the intention that this research be leveraged to encourage social, cultural, and political change in the country and provide the adequate information to do so most effectively. We launched this survey in collaboration with our Belizean partners in order to best highlight the experiences of local Belizeans and formulate recommendations for the Belizean government pertaining to further action that should be taken to help improve the situation of sexual and gender minorities in Belize.

## Survey objectives

- To examine the lived experiences of Belizean sexual and gender minorities.
- To explore the ways in which Belizeans are left behind in terms of socioeconomic development by the Belizean Government and the challenges they face in their everyday lives.
- To examine the social, economic, and political barriers and pressures faced by Belizean sexual and gender minorities.
- To further analyse and process survey results and issues they highlight so it may inform and aid future policy decisions and activism regarding Belizean sexual and gender minorities.

## Literature review

Our report began with a literature review that outlines previously published research concerning sexual and gender minorities in Belize, their lived experiences, and the challenges they face. It draws from a variety of relevant published sources, including United Nations documents, reports by Belizean organisations supporting sexual and gender minorities, other human rights organisations, reputable news sites, surveys and academic articles.

Undertaking a literature review allowed us to triangulate our survey findings against existing literature on the lived experience of SOGIESC Belizeans. The literature review also informed the construction of our survey, as we hoped to address gaps within the already published literature regarding the Belizean SOGIESC community.

## Survey method

The survey has been informed by previous ReportOUT survey frameworks, and was constructed online with the input of our partner organisations, who provided various suggestions for questions to include to ensure the survey was relevant to Belizean society and its sexual and gender minority community. The final version included 98 questions, thematically structured in alignment with the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and contained a mixture of multiple-choice, open-answer, and scale-point questions. The survey was then provided to our partner organisations to distribute amongst their service users and community members. To increase the survey's outreach, digital posters and animations were created and posted across ReportOUT and Our Circles' social media accounts, displaying a QR code and weblink. Members of the ReportOUT research teams also utilised social media and websites to directly contact Belizean sexual and gender minority Facebook groups and known SOGIESC-welcoming institutions, such as hotels.

# Research Methodology

No harm was expected to occur to participants by completing this survey. However, given the sensitive and personal nature of the survey questions and the situation regarding sexual and gender minorities in Belize, it may be that some participants felt at risk. All participants were advised that the survey was safe and to only complete it in the company of trusted persons. The Our Circle web address was provided to them in the event that they required support, which linked them to contact numbers with Our Circle.

You can request a copy of the survey questions by contacting us at: [contactus@reportout.org](mailto:contactus@reportout.org)

## Data collection and analysis

This report has been based on information collected from the 14th of June 2022 until the 1st of September 2022, and a total of 50 respondents completed the survey. The findings in this report have been analysed by ReportOUT researchers, drawing on information gathered during the literature review and using the Sustainable Development Goals as reference points. Prior to publication, the report with the survey findings was proofread and quality-checked by partner organisations, ReportOUT lead researchers, and trustees. Key findings have been highlighted and detailed in this report and qualitative comments in the survey have been used throughout alongside relevant thematic areas and were used to identify trends in the results. Particular quotes have been incorporated to highlight specific areas of Belizean sexual and gender minorities' own lived experiences.



# Research Methodology

## Limitations

In celebrating the success of the survey, we also want to draw attention to some of its limitations, particularly in terms of representativeness of our sample. Firstly, around 76% of our survey respondents lived in urban settings. However, the World Bank reported in 2021 that only around 46% of Belize's population live in urban areas, suggesting that our survey might not truly reflect the experiences of individuals living in rural areas. We recognise that many of the organisations we approached to promote respondents for our survey and interviews are urban-based, which goes some way to addressing this disparity. In the future, further studies should be conducted where respondents from rural areas of Belize are more strongly targeted to ensure their lived experiences are documented. The sample's representativeness should also be considered with caution given that our sample as a whole were generally highly educated, which may not be representative of the wider LGBTQ+ community.

Furthermore, 82% of our respondents were aged between 19-40, and therefore we do not have many results for much older or younger sexual and gender minorities in Belize. Whilst a central aim of this survey is to discover the often-neglected lived experiences of sexual and gender minorities in Belize, the lack of youth participation was an accepted likely outcome of the present study, given the participant recruitment advertising was predominantly focused on adult settings such as bars, hotels, and social media groups. That said, ReportOUT upholds that the outcomes of the present study should still be considered in relation to Belize's SOGIESC youth and the environment within which they are growing up in. It is highly important that further investigation and research should be taken to closely examine the possible challenges, discrimination, and abuse that may be faced by young sexual and gender minorities in Belize. There is, similarly, little to no representation of the older, 50+ SOGIESC population in Belize, which is, again, a likely product of our participant outreach methods and their indirect tailoring to younger adults accessing the internet and social media. It will be necessary to investigate the experiences of older individuals further, to better build a picture of the life course experience of sexual and gender minorities in Belize.

We also recognize that we have very small sample sizes for intersex and transgender individuals, and hope that future studies can expand on research with this demographic. A more comprehensive breakdown of the participant demographics can be found on page 23.

When conducting a survey online, there is always the risk that many cannot participate if they have no internet access or technological devices to respond to the questions. Whilst we tried to encourage dissemination of the survey through mediums that were not always online, such as by contacting known SOGIESC-welcoming institutions and creating posters to be physically printed, the digital format of our survey excludes those without internet access or digital technology. This assumption was later confirmed by the survey findings, where a large majority of respondents reported that they had been made aware of the survey from ReportOUT's or Our Circle's newsletters, website or social media.

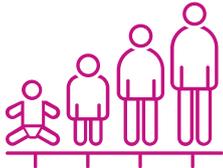
Based on these above limitations, it must be acknowledged that the present survey cannot be completely representative of the entire Belizean population and their experiences as sexual and gender minorities. Nonetheless, with no funding behind the survey, we are proud of the reach it has had and believe our findings are still relevant and important for documenting the lived experiences of a number of Belizeans.

# Respondent Demographics



## **SOGIESC Belizeans define their sexual orientation in many different ways**

A third of our participants were gay men (33%), followed by bisexual women (23%), lesbian women (17%), people who identified as pansexual (15%), bisexual men (8%), and heterosexual (4%).



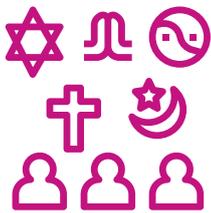
## **Our participants were mainly young adults**

Half of our participants were aged 19-30. The remaining half were aged 16-18 (2%), 31-35 (19%), 36-40 (13%), 41-45 (8%), 51-55 (4%), and 56-60 (4%).



## **Participants had a mix of gender identities**

The greatest proportion were cisgender women (44%), followed by cisgender men (33%). 13% were genderqueer; 6% were non-binary, and 2(%) were transgender men. A further 2% indicated they preferred not to say.



## **SOGIESC Belizeans were mainly religious**

Almost half of participants were Roman Catholics (49%), followed by atheist (23%), agnostic (11%), and Jewish (11%), with others preferring not to say.



## **Our participants were highly educated**

50% of participants were educated to an undergraduate level at college or university; a further 22% also held a postgraduate education. 65% had studied in Belize; 20% studied abroad, and 13% studied both in Belize and abroad.



## **Our participants mainly lived in urban areas of Belize**

All of our respondents lived in Belize, and were mainly located in urban areas, with 76% indicating they lived in a town or city. No participants disclosed they had a refugee, asylum seeker, or displaced person status.

# Key Findings

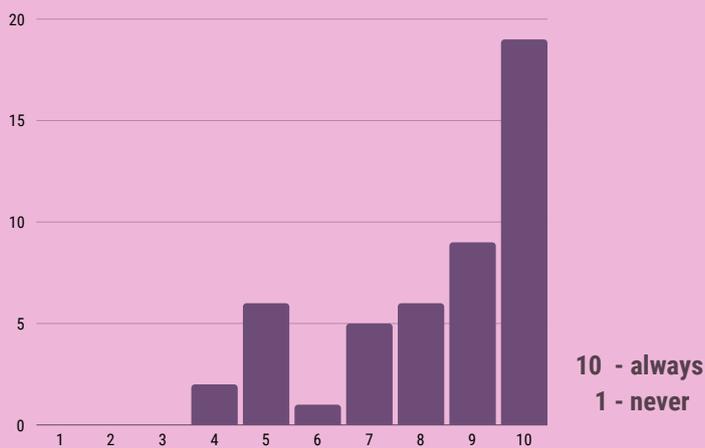


# Key Findings

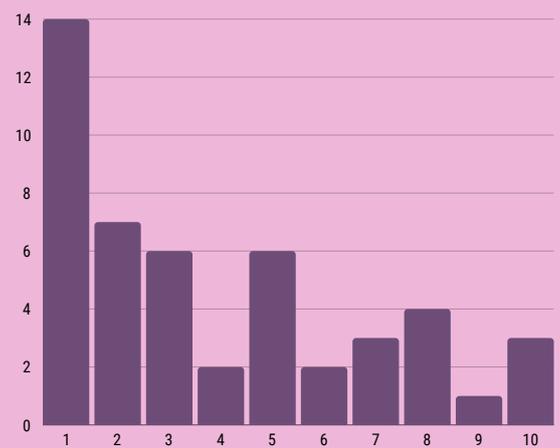
## 1. Food and Nutrition

Regarding food and nutrition, this research has yielded worrying results. Out of 50 participants, only 14 have reported they 'never' feel hungry, while the remaining 36 answered that, to some extent, they can state that they 'often' feel hungry. Similarly, while no participant said they never have access to sufficient and nutritious food, only 29% said they always did. This means that, for over 70% of individuals, access to sufficient and nutritious food was not necessarily guaranteed or constant. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), in a 2021 report about food insecurity in Belize, 45.5% of the general population were affected by moderate or severe food insecurity. In the report, the FAO describes moderate food insecurity as "uncertainty" about one's ability to obtain food or the need to "compromise on the quantity and/or quality" of the food consumed (FAO, 2021, 4), and "severe food" insecurity as the experience of "running out of food, and, at worst, gone a day without eating" (FAO, 2021, 4). Therefore, within these parameters, it is evident that gender and sexual minorities in Belize are overwhelmingly disadvantaged in terms of food security. The participants' irregular access to food is particularly alarming in light of the demographics represented in the present research where most participants are highly educated and in employment, as will be explored in the following section.

To what extent would you say that you have access to sufficient and nutritious food?



To what extent would you say that you often feel hungry?



## 2. Employment and Finance

The majority (62%) of participants worked in full-time paid work, with only 6% indicating that they had no form of employment at all. This puts the unemployment rate for our participants only slightly over the national rate at the time of the survey, which was at approximately 5% (Statistical Institute of Belize, 2023). On the one hand, a high employment rate would make good sense compared to the educational background of this population sample, as most participants have either a graduate (50%) or postgraduate degree (22%).

Yet, when it comes to personal finance, this research shows that higher education and paid employment aren't a guarantee of a good financial position amongst gender and sexual minorities in Belize. Besides the fact that most participants are struggling to feed themselves, as outlined above, an alarming 26% participants said that they either lived or weren't sure if they lived on the equivalent of 1.25 USD (2.50 BZD) a day. For reference, the Belizean minimum wage was at 3.30 BZD per hour at the time (Belize, 2022).

# Key Findings

The fact that some of the participants did not know whether their income was under 1.25 USD (2.50 BZD) a day also indicates a situation of vulnerability; it is likely that their income is either very close to 1.25 USD (2.50 BZD) a day or that they do not have a consistent source of income. Self-employed people, seasonal workers, or people who depend on financial help from family members, for example, could have periods with higher and lower income, making it a less straightforward answer than if they have a full-time paid job with fixed wages.

We find this data worrying and it points to a need for further research. As mentioned in our literature review, sources often bring up that one's gender and sexual identity are often obstacles in the job market. Thus, the causes for the dissonance we found between our participants' educational background and employment status and their standard of living could be directly related to a range of discriminatory practices, including in the job market, which may push these groups toward low-paid jobs. In this research, 26% of participants reported experiencing stigma and/or discrimination in employment due to their SOGIESC identity, with reported pay discrimination and unfair hiring/firing practices being one of the most common expressions of this.

## 3. Housing

Only a quarter of participants owned their home, while the rest were either renting and/or living with friends or family. This latter circumstance may relate to the fact that most participants were aged below 30. Moreover, though 12% of people felt that their housing was semi-permanent, such as slums or barracks, all participants still indicated they had access to adequate services such as toilets, clean water, electricity, and a reliable internet connection.

## 4. Climate Change and the Environment

Participants had a mixed response to the question of whether they saw climate change specifically affecting sexual and gender minorities. Common themes in their written answers (see page 40 for more on this) included how it may escalate the prejudice, discrimination, and inequalities faced by already marginalised sexual and gender minorities. In particular, concerns were raised that climate change would affect the housing situation, amenities access, and security of sexual and gender minorities.

Identifying climate change as something that can escalate the prejudice, discrimination and inequality that sexual and gender minorities already experience is consistent with well-established research. Whilst climate change affects everyone, it does not do so equally; climate change is understood to exacerbate existing inequalities and therefore has a 'disproportionate and immense impact on marginalized communities' such as sexual and gender minorities (ReportOUT, 2023). Indeed, climate change should be understood as a 'multiplier', intersecting with vulnerabilities and risk factors already present in communities and multiplying the challenges these communities face in a crisis (ReportOUT, 2023).

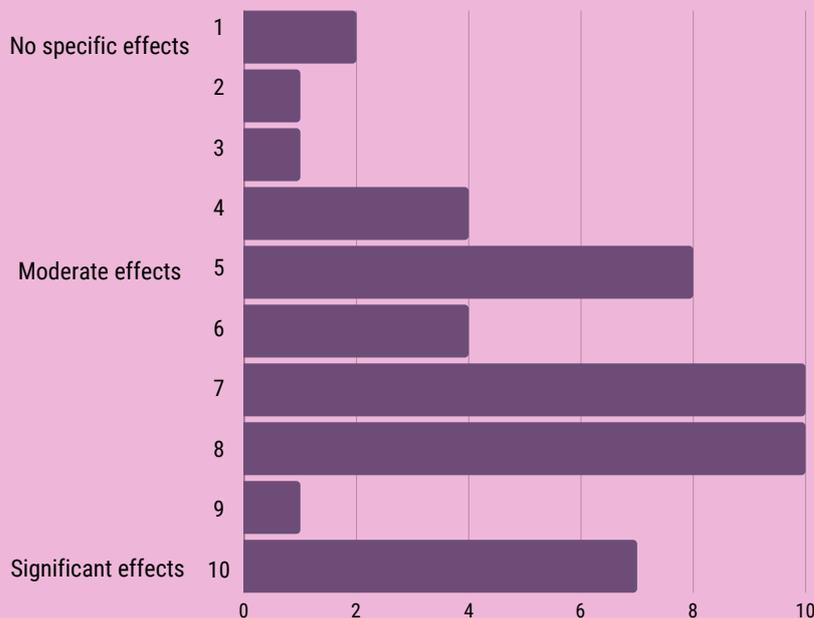
One of the most notable impacts of climate change is homelessness, with extreme weather bringing natural disasters which force individuals from their homes and making large swathes of land inhospitable (ReportOUT, 2023). Whilst many of our survey's respondents did not highlight specific impacts of climate change on sexual and gender minorities, there was mention of displacement and housing concerns. As has already been highlighted both by this report and our survey, sexual and gender minorities experience higher rates of homelessness due to various factors, such as being forced to leave their family homes due to threats of abuse or actual violence (Greenpeace, 2023).

# Key Findings

Outside of Belize, statistics in the U.S show that LGBTQI+ individuals have a 120% higher risk of experiencing homelessness, further demonstrating the prevalence of homelessness amongst sexual and gender minorities globally (Greenpeace, 2023). Those who are homeless are at more risk from severe weather, having less to physically shield themselves from in such crises (ReportOUT 2023b, p. 41). Overall, homeless individuals and those with inadequate housing, including sexual and gender minorities, 'will always be the most affected by natural disasters, temperature rise and polluted air' (Greenpeace, 2023).

In addition to concerns related to housing and displacement, many participants expressed concerns related to scarce resources as a result of climate change, highlighting how already existing discrimination and prejudice against sexual and gender minorities makes them a low priority when it comes to accessing resources. Indeed, if sexual and gender minorities exist on the margins of society, the chances they will be denied access to scarce resources increase (Jackson, 2023). The exclusion of those seen as 'others' in society when allowing access to scarce resources has been highlighted in our survey, with one participant highlighting how prejudice in society towards sexual and gender minorities means that 'we may [be] denied things that others considered "normal" may not be denied'. The denial of life-saving resources to marginalised sexual and gender minorities during times of crisis, where such resources are vital but scarce, has been documented during Hurricane Katrina whereby trans women were denied access to emergency shelters (Randall, 2020).

Whilst our survey demonstrated that many Belizeans share the well-documented and researched fears that climate change will disproportionately impact sexual and gender minorities due to pre-existing prejudices, it also highlighted that more discussion is necessary. One participant shared that the impact of climate change on their community was not something they had given much thought to but said more national discussion and awareness on the topic would be welcomed to highlight the issue. Despite much climate discourse now accepting the unequal effects of climate change and recognising that those marginalised in society are disproportionately affected, there remains a lack of consideration of the impacts of climate change on sexual and gender minorities as 'queer voices have largely been silenced within mainstream discourse' (ReportOUT 2023b, p. 12-13). Given the call by participants for more national discussion, our survey demonstrates this reality and highlights the need for greater awareness and understanding.



**On a scale of 1-10, to what extent do you see climate change specifically affecting sexual and gender minorities as a group in Belize or elsewhere?**

(Consider changing weather patterns, drought, famine, flooding, and so on - will sexual and gender minorities be more affected by this?)

Answer average: **6.58**

# Key Findings

## 5. Physical, Mental and Reproductive Health

Our results suggest that participants feel they are generally in good health, rating it on average as 7/10, with 10 being excellent. When asked to explain their rating, individuals mainly related their health score to the fact that they as an individual were doing their best to lead a healthy lifestyle and stay physically fit and active where possible. Mental health was rated at a slightly lower average of 6.7/10. Expanding on this, numerous participants commented that they had struggled with their mental health as an effect of their identity being stigmatised in society, and consequently struggling to come to terms with their own identity and self-worth.

*“As a gay man, who is often perceived as inferior and different from members of society, there has been a lot to overcome in regards to my self-esteem, self-worth, and self-image. I have struggled with mental health issues in the past due to homophobia, bullying and violence, and they still have an effect on my present perceptions of myself.”*

For many, this manifested through complex familial and personal relationships, as well as difficulty dealing with trauma, stress at work, and coping with wider factors such as maintaining a family and secure finances, understanding their own identity, and coping with societal discrimination. 18% of participants' answers commented that they experienced feelings of depression and/or anxiety, aligning with a growing body of research findings on minority stress exhibited in SOGIESC populations (Meyers., 1995), and the notable prevalence of mood and anxiety disorders amongst LGBT groups globally (Mongelli et al., 2019).

There is clear room for improvement in participants' self-rated physical and mental health scores. Notably, analysis of participants' comments about their physical health suggests that the average rating of 7/10 is more reflective that whilst they are individually taking responsibility for their health, they could benefit more from the healthcare systems around them, revealing that barriers such as access to quality healthcare, medicines, and their affordability were preventing individuals from achieving their optimum health. One participant clearly summarised this stance:

*“It could be better, but healthcare is too expensive. The hospital is part government, so a lot of the services are expensive or unavailable and you need to go private... [this is] out of this world expensive for the regular Belizean living on minimum wage”*

Similar themes also came up with regards to mental health, with comments alluding to the economic climate, discrimination, and the access, availability, and affordability of health care all being stressors on people's mental health.

*“Mental health care is not easily available in Belize”*

*“I need therapy due to childhood trauma but can't afford it now”*

*“My life hasn't always been easy and I carry those traumas with me”*

*“Daily life is stressful. Trying to hold it together becomes too much too often”*

# Key Findings

When prompted further about the presence of barriers in health care, a quarter of participants said they had faced barriers or obstacles when accessing health services of any kind. In particular, experience of stigma across health settings, ignorance and discrimination from treatment staff, and even disparities in the quality of care received by men and women from male doctors was mentioned, as was the inaccessibility of services due to financial and logistical constraints such as being unable to go in working hours. One participant's comment summarises how the intersection of these barriers, combined with heteronormative health policy and a lack of discrimination protections (see Legislation and Protections for Sexual and Gender Minorities in Belize, page 11), has led to multiple difficulties in accessing quality health care for sexual and gender minorities:

*"I can't access hormone treatment because doctors won't allow it. And my pharmacist friends don't know the correct dosage to give. I can't have gender alignment surgery because this is Belize, sadly, and that costs a ton of money. No place answers questions about hormone treatment. If I want my uterus removed, I have to ask my imaginary future husband for permission first. My body literally belongs to someone who doesn't exist. Getting tested for STD's and STI's is expensive unless you go to government hospital where it's not clean and you have to wait long hours only to not even get it done."*

*"I have been questioned and treated differently by healthcare members for having my same-sex partner visit and take care of me when sick at the hospital... I was also denied to give blood."*

In particular, participants recalled experiences of direct discrimination from staff across the health sector, detailing how differential treatment, staff ignorance, and sometimes a refusal of staff to acknowledge the correct language have led to poorer quality health care. This is a clear example of how the failure to ratify discrimination protections into the Belizean constitution (see Legislation and Protections, page 11) has led to explicit inequalities and an openly discriminatory culture in public services.

*"I pretend to be straight so I don't get discriminated against"*

*"I was once told by another pharmacist that my 'lifestyle' would lead to HIV/AIDS and that I must pray to God to heal my sick nature."*

*"Pretending not to know term or language of communication to relate to my sex preference or orientation"*

Crucially, our results also reveal that Belizean sexual and gender minorities are impacted by a lack of health service provision as well. ReportOUT's focus on reproductive health care showed that access was not universal (17% said they did not have access to reproductive health services such as sexual health care, HIV/AIDS support, contraception, etc.), and that of the 13 respondents who stated they required hormone therapy treatment, 12 said they were unable to access it. These findings strongly suggest that further research should investigate other specific areas of health care services to see if there are similar disparities and unmet needs.

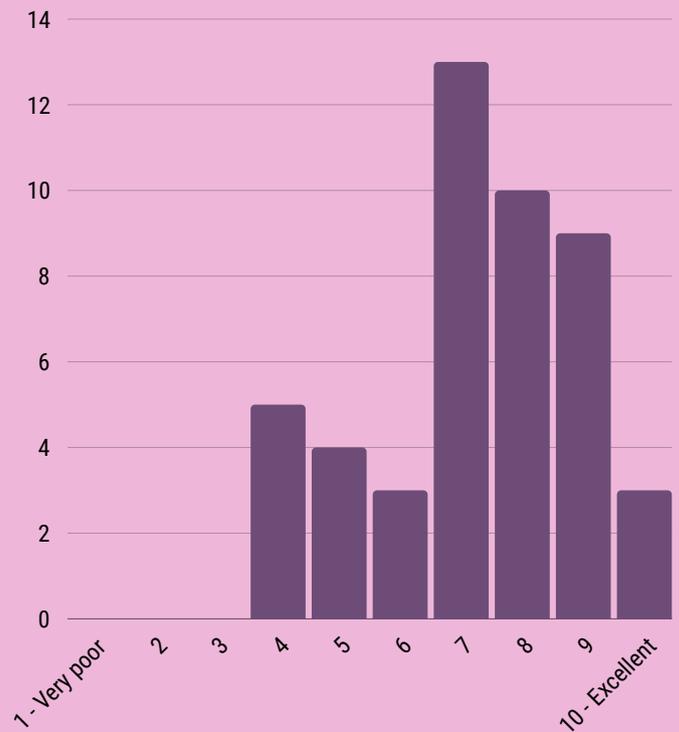
# Key Findings

On population health, 23% of participants felt they did not have adequate access to prevention measures and treatment for communicable diseases. This suggestion of disparities in public health measures is a potential area for concern and further investigation, as sexual and gender minorities are a widely acknowledged high-risk group (NHS Confederation., 2022) who are vulnerable to suffering disproportionately from poorer health outcomes (LGBT Foundation., 2020). An investigation into the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on sexual and gender minorities, which was not included in the present research, may be an opportunity to examine whether preventative measures had universal efficacy across Belizean society.

The presence of barriers arising from lack of provision, financial constraints, health policy, stigma and social attitudes, inadequate staff training, and physical inaccessibility detailed by our participants resonates with the broader literature on health inequalities. Specifically, they align with generally recognised 'wider determinants' of health, demonstrative of how structural and systemic factors beyond the receipt of medical treatment are influential on our health outcomes and conducive to an empowering – or disabling – environment for health behaviours (Marmot., 2010). The intersection of multiple discriminations, such as those experienced by Belizean sexual and gender minorities in this study, is a classic example of how such barriers from across the health system can be disproportionately impactful on minority groups (The Lancet., 2018). Though conclusions cannot be drawn on the universality of these experiences in Belize given that cisgender, heterosexual individuals were not the subject of the present study, the notable presence of barriers experienced by the sexual and gender minorities who participated points to a clear need for further comparative investigation in the context of health inequalities.

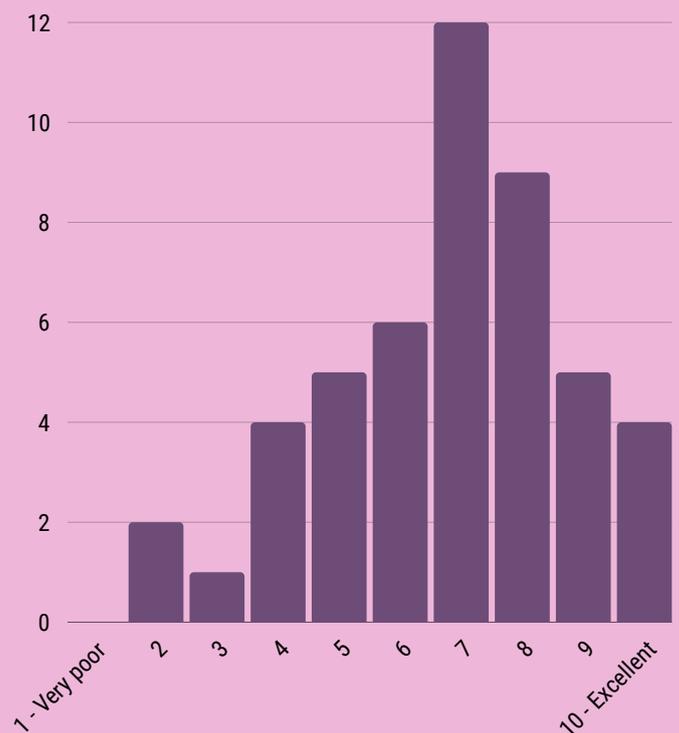
**On a scale of 1-10, where 1 is very poor and 10 is excellent, how would you rate your physical health?**

Average - 7.17



**On a scale of 1-10, where 1 is very poor and 10 is excellent, how would you rate your mental health?**

Average - 6.77



# Key Findings

## 6. Torture

There were three respondents in the survey with experience of conversion therapies and practices, all of which were perpetrated by religious figures and/or communities. Conversion therapy is a term “most widely used to describe [the] process of cis-gender, heteronormative indoctrination— that is, attempting to change, suppress, or divert one’s sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression”. The term itself suggests that sexual and gender minorities are in need of a ‘cure’ or must be ‘repaired’, neither of which is true (OutRight International, 2019, p. 3). Methods commonly used in these practices lead to both physical and psychological suffering, and the UN Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity has stated the practice of conversion therapy can amount to torture (IESOGI, A/HRC/44/53).

Despite the practice being discredited, shown to infringe on the human rights of individuals, and recent widespread recognition that it can violate the prohibition on torture, the practice of conversion therapy persists around the globe. Calls for bans have increased in recent years, yet to-date there is no ban or regulation of conversion therapy in Belize (ILGA database on Belize). One respondent shared a story of their experience with conversion therapy, saying that before coming out to their church they had experienced internalised homophobia. When they decided to come out to their church, they were excluded from activities involving children, and subsequently told that if they wanted to remain part of the church they must receive treatment to ‘reverse’ the ‘disease’. Such language is reflective of what was highlighted earlier, that conversion therapy wrongly seeks ‘cure’ sexual and gender minorities. The individual shared that they received a year of this so-called ‘treatment’ before leaving the church. This experience shared by a respondent reflects similar findings by OutRight International that in Latin America and the Caribbean, religious pressure appears to be the main driver of conversion therapy practice in the region. Moreover, the study found that efforts to ban or reduce conversion therapy within the region have been minimal (OutRight International, 2019, p.4). Bans are a crucial step towards eliminating the practice of conversion therapy and better protecting the rights, safety and dignity of sexual and gender minorities, however they must be accompanied by other measures that promote understanding and acceptance of these individuals within society to ensure they do continue to occur.

## SURVEY INSIGHT:

“*If I still wanted to be a part of the church, [the pastor said] I must undergo therapy sessions with several pastors in order to **reverse my ‘disease’**...whilst still living under my parent’s care, I underwent **a year of ‘treatment’**. It involved a series of **manipulation, gaslighting, mental abuse and constant references to being a disgrace.**”*

*OUT In Belize survey respondent, 2022*

# Key Findings

## 7. Family, Friends and Societal Attitudes

Results suggest that SOGIESC Belizeans are comfortable being themselves primarily around their close, trusted friends and family, but less so in wider society. 89% feel able to share their identity with their close friends, and 69% with family members, compared to only 16% being open about their identity amongst their religious community for example. Worryingly, less than half (45%) were comfortable sharing their identity with their employer, and even fewer (37%) would share it with healthcare staff.

It is clear therefore that the majority of SOGIESC Belizeans feel unable to openly be themselves in society, and this is likely due to the prevailing experience of discrimination across several sectors of society. 27% of individuals reported experiencing stigma and/or discrimination in employment due to their SOGIESC. This was most commonly in the form of abuse or harassment in the workplace, with pay discrimination, unfair hiring/firing practices and the denial of opportunities such as training being other reasons. 17% of individuals also detailed their stigma or discrimination when accessing housing due to their SOGIESC identity, predominantly by being denied leases or mortgages, unfair treatment from landlords and/or neighbours, being denied access to shelters and being evicted.

Nearly half (42%) of respondents felt that offensive language toward SOGIESC individuals was 'fairly' widespread, with 13% saying it was 'very' widespread. In comparison, 21% responded that offensive language towards SOGIESC individuals from religious leaders was 'fairly' widespread, yet 56% reported it being 'very' widespread. Some discrepancy was found regarding people's perceptions of the prevalence of offensive language in the media, as 23% said it was 'very widespread' and 27% felt it was at least 'fairly widespread', yet 31% of individuals thought it was 'fairly rare' and 17% said 'very rare'. Such differences in opinion could be due to variation in the respondents' age and consequent levels of exposure to different types of media. However, it is clear from statements seen across the press (see page 14) that certain editors are prepared to publish offensive language.

Nearly 75% of respondents felt that offensive language from religious leaders towards sexual and gender minorities was fairly or very widespread. The literature review highlighted the prominent role of the church in opposing the legal challenge to Section 53 of the Criminal Code, the legislation which criminalised homosexual acts. As has been explored earlier in the report (see page 15), there is significant opposition from religious leaders within Belize towards sexual orientation and gender identity rights. There are 'deep-seated religious and cultural perspective[s]' that influence the status and treatment of sexual and gender minorities within Belizean society, and this survey's findings demonstrate this (Heartland Alliance and UNIBAM, 2013). Moreover, there were respondents in the survey who had experienced forms of conversion therapy as a result of church leaders' discrimination, where an individual was told that if they wished to remain a part of the church they would have to undergo treatment. This further demonstrates the negative and harmful attitude of the church towards sexual and gender minorities.

'[The media's] followers and limited restrictions allow offensive language to be publicized'

'Offensive language is very common from evangelical so called "Christians"... the editor of the Amandala published that op-ed calling for all gay men to get shot point-blank.'

'Where there is not widespread offensive language, there are strong pro-heterosexual messages in the media.'

# Key Findings

These results align with findings from other studies, including a national opinion survey across the Belizean population that found a third of people recognise that gay and transgender people are treated unfairly compared to other groups (Live and Let Live Campaign., 2020). It is clear from our results that this discriminatory treatment is entrenched throughout sectors of society, and has been documented early in childhood with the experience of discriminatory treatment in education settings.

A positive sign is that demographic questions show that the majority of our participant cohort were still highly educated, and therefore have managed to progress through the school system. However, experiencing discrimination throughout schooling is known to hugely impact on sexual and gender minorities' physical and psychological wellbeing (UN OCHR., 2019), which can lead to impacts on employment prospects later in life (ILO, 2016). The explicit discrimination experienced by SOGIESC Belizeans described here shows that it went beyond classmate bullying and occurred at the hands of trusted adults and teachers.

*"I was reprehended not to fully express my identity"*

*"I almost got expelled"*

*"I was threatened expulsion from school"*

*"Teacher failed me for a test I passed just because my partner at the time dropped me off to class"*

*"A religious professor had made it very obvious with her treatment that she had a problem with me in regard to my sexuality and my same-sex relationship at the time, and became very vocal about her stance on homosexuality. She had commented about me with my other colleagues and professors and made it difficult for me to graduate. She graded me to a more difficult scale and often refused to assist me when I asked for help."*

*"I kept my identity secret until I graduated"*

*"I went to a catholic school which was hell"*

*“I asked for help”*

Fortunately, there is a clear sign of change being led by the Youth Advocacy Movement (YAM) under the Belize Family Life Association to deliver Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) (UN Belize., 2021). Whilst not exclusively an LGBT+ initiative, this movement being run by youth advocates is changing the rhetoric and education in schools around sexual health, relationships, and sexuality, covering topics such as HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, gender inequality, consent, and other crucial topics. Vitally, the training is inclusive and “openly addresses the stigma that surrounds STDs, HIV, and AIDs in the LGBTQ community” (Armstrong., 2021), marking the first step to normalising the conversation around SOGIESC health and raising awareness and understanding in a new generation.

# Key Findings

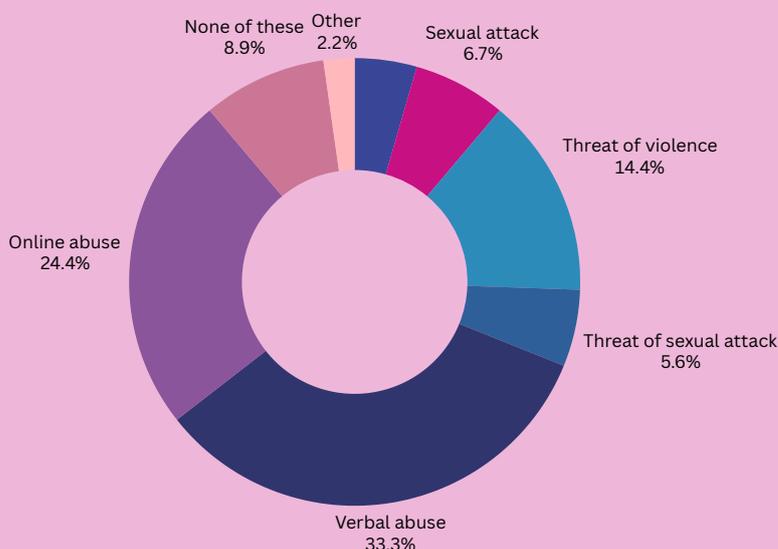
## 8. Violence and Safety

The findings of our survey show sexual and gender minorities do not feel safe in Belize. Respondents said that physical assaults towards sexual and gender minorities are fairly widespread, predominantly perpetrated by strangers, family and friends of friends. This physical violence has been highlighted in an interview between CIVICUS and Belizean human rights campaigner, Caleb Orozco, who spoke about widespread violence that sexual and gender minorities experience in a variety of settings, including within the family or at the workplace. It was also highlighted that police violence can be a concern for those of African descent (CIVICUS, 2022), demonstrating the complex intersectionality of prejudice and discrimination in Belizean society, which may not necessarily always be due to sexual orientation or gender identity.

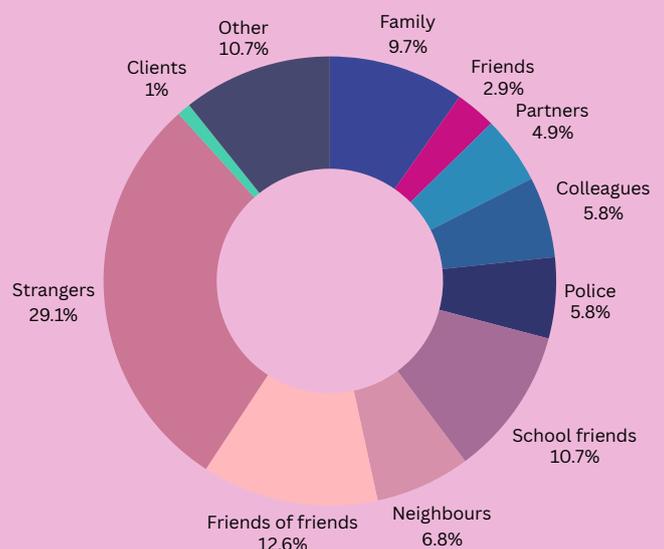
Orozco has been outspoken about the homophobic violence he has experienced, particularly during his time leading the legal challenge of Belize's laws that criminalised homosexuality. The UN Special Procedures have previously sent communications to the Belizean government concerning violence, intimidation, death threats and homophobic attacks targeting Orozco, expressing concern over the persistent criminalisation of homosexuality, a lack of protection for LGBT rights defenders and a climate of impunity regarding such attacks. In doing so, the UN Special Procedure mandate-holders reminded the government of its international human rights obligations, including under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights for non-discrimination (UN Special Procedures, BLZ 1/2012 and BLZ 2/2013). Such incidents not only evidence the widespread physical violence that our survey respondents identified, but also the specific and targeted attacks that human rights defenders, such as Orozco, experience when fighting for equality for sexual and gender minorities and the impunity surrounding such incidents.

The survey also found that perceptions on the prevalence of mob violence were mixed, with 67% of participants saying it is fairly or very rare, yet 37% believed it was fairly or very widespread. Mob violence is prevalent in Belize, and the country is considered one of the most violent in the world due to its high homicide rates (Baird, 2019). Little information is available online about the prevalence of mob violence against sexual and minorities, however, one story from 2014 was reported by the American news website, HuffPost, detailing a brutal mob attack involving stones and physical beatings against a transgender woman in Belize (HuffPost, 2014).

**Due to being a sexual or gender minority, have you been victim of any of the these?**



**Who were the perpetrators?**



# Key Findings

## 9. Policing and the Law

On a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 indicated 'does not happen' and 10 indicated 'very widespread', participants on average estimated the prevalence of police brutality to be around 6 out of 10. This rating suggests individuals are anecdotally aware of police brutality occurring towards sexual and gender minorities in Belize, and a minority (8%) have experienced it personally. An example given by one participant explained this commonly happens *"when police do house searches or on patrol on the streets or road"*.

*"I have heard stories from friends and colleagues being abused by policy officers due to their sexual identities in Belize, especially towards Trans persons"*.

Blackmailing at the hands of the police was slightly more common, with 13% having experienced this personally. The following two responses illustrate how, despite the successful challenge against Section 53 of the Belizean constitution, the combination of prevailing derogatory social attitudes towards SOGIESC groups and the lack of discrimination protections in Belizean law have led to a culture where SOGIESC groups remain vulnerable to an abuse of power from state actors such as the police.

*"They forced me to pay them cash since "I wanna be with man"*

*"[They were] threatening to jail me if I didn't pay a bribe because I was a 'criminal' for being gay"*

*"...called a "bunch of faggots" by a drunk policeman and had threatened to take us all to get arrested... [he] harassed us multiple times in regards to wanting money."*

*"Once me and a guy I was dating were just talking outside a club. Very close to each other. The officers asked us to stop or we'll be arrested"*

Fortunately, it seems that threats of arrest are rarely followed through, with only one participant reporting they had been arbitrarily detained due to their sexual orientation or gender identity, or so-called offences relating to it.

A minority (8%) reported similar harassment or harm at the hands of other state actors, such as the armed forces or social services. Worryingly, there is a suggestion that discrimination against sexual and gender minorities is also prevalent across the criminal justice system, as only three of the fourteen participants who had ever formally reported an attack felt they had received any form of justice for it.

# Key Findings

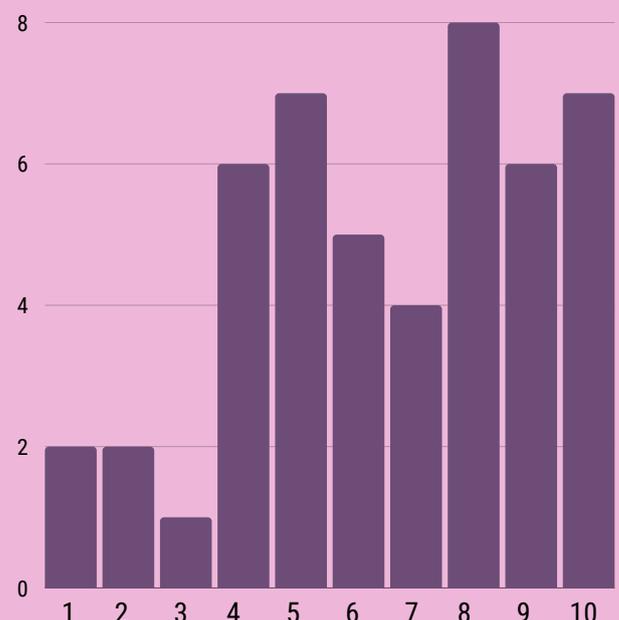
## 10. The Changes People Want

The final section asked participants a series of questions regarding how they would summarise the overall status of sexual and gender minorities within Belizean society and what changes they want for their future. Respondents generally expressed disagreement with the statement ‘to what extent would you agree that the Belizean government has obeyed the expected standards as set out in the international laws and agreements that it has signed up to’, with the average answer from 1 being ‘not at all’ to 10 being ‘it is doing this well’ being 4.58. This aligns with results from the present survey and literature review demonstrating discrimination and stigma pervade all aspects of public life, where it is at best ignored by, and at worst perpetrated by, state actors. The legal action taken in removing Section 53 of the Criminal Code has been a historical first step, however it is clear that this alone is insufficient to overcome a history of stigmatisation and penalisation of someone’s sexual orientation and gender identity. To continue to create positive change, it is evident that people feel the Belizean government can take a much more active role in protecting sexual and gender minorities from discrimination and ending their stigmatisation throughout society. Belize has ratified some of the main human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, yet currently the government appears apathetic to upholding these standards. However, their ratification of such treaties is promising and allows the government to begin facing pressure from the UN and the public to act accordingly and obey these standards.

When asked to rank the extent to which they agree with the statement: “there are enough support services available for sexual and gender minorities in Belize” from 0 to 10, with 0 being ‘completely disagree’ and 10 being ‘completely agree’, 57% answered ‘5’ or below. Expanding on this, participants were asked the open question of ‘what support systems do you use as a sexual and gender minority in Belize’, and 21% of the answers mentioned their friends. This highlights how some sexual and gender minorities may be reliant on more informal peer networks such as close and trusted friends, as opposed to organised voluntary, community, and social support. However, known organisations supporting sexual and gender minorities, such as Our Circle, UniBAM, and TIA were listed in other answers, revealing the pivotal role these groups play in supporting sexual and gender minorities. Unfortunately, 20% of participants said they did not have any support network; it is unclear whether this is due to a lack of awareness of the existing support organisations available or because they are still not openly ‘out’ within their community, and therefore not comfortable seeking support.

### ‘To what extent do you feel able to gather as a collective?’

One potential explanation for why there remains a proportion of individuals who do not feel at all supported may be because they do not feel able to gather openly as a collective. Answers to the above question on the Likert scale from 1 - ‘completely unable’ to 10 ‘very able’ averaged at 6.54, showing that this experience still very much varies amongst Belizeans. This may be testament to how certain areas are known to be more or less conservative and accepting of sexual and gender minorities than others; San Pedro, an urban tourist spot, is known to be far more progressive than certain smaller rural neighbourhoods for example.



# Key Findings

When asked to describe what they viewed as the most pressing challenges faced by sexual and gender minorities in Belize, respondents' answers conveyed a range of issues largely pertaining to the hostility of social attitudes towards the LGBT+ community and how the pervasion of discrimination across all sectors of public life, as well as the threat of physical violence. Thematic analysis of respondents' answers has been given below.

Theme	Exemplar quote
Visibility, acceptance, inclusion, and representation	<i>'...our hardest challenge is people not realizing that we're just another human like them, that we're somehow more different than we are. It's the root of the more concrete and obvious challenges we face like perhaps being denied employment or other luxuries.'</i>
Family rights and support	<i>'Family rights for sexual and gender minorities don't exist - wills, parental rights/adoption for couples, and recognition as a family in the eyes of the law entitled to all the legal benefits as common law unions...'</i>
Employment and finance	<i>'Job security, marriage equality, housing, safe spaces, access to prophylactic drugs, anti discrimination laws.'</i>
Health and access to health care	<i>'The LGBTQ community is at greater risk of being exposed by health care workers about their health conditions.'</i>
Discrimination and inequity	<i>'Job security, marriage equality, housing, safe spaces, access to prophylactic drugs, anti discrimination laws.'</i>
Social attitudes and stigma	<i>'Social stigma. Society in Belize still does not accept the lifestyle of people who choose a different path when it comes to their sexuality.'</i>
Violence and safety	<i>'The ability to be out, open, and vocal about any LGBTQ+ related comment...being out and open can have threats to violence or blackmail.'</i>
Trans rights	<i>'Trans violence and Trans hate is probably the most violent category of hate against the queer community. We face hate from within our own community. We can only depend on ourselves because trust really can get you killed.'</i>
Religion and the influence of religious groups in politics	<i>'Overall pushback from the churches in Belize standing against any advancement of human rights towards LGBT+ minorities in Belize.'</i>

# Key Findings

Individuals were also asked if they felt the situation was improving for sexual and gender minorities in Belize. Using the same Likert scale rating of 1-10, their answers averaged 5.81. Given the lack of legislative progress beyond the government's overturn of Section 53, this would suggest that the variation in individuals' experience is most likely due to the socio-cultural attitudes they are exposed to. For some, progress has been marked through the ability to find peers and seek the support of dedicated activist groups and the ability for rights groups supporting sexual and gender minorities, such as those involved in Belizean Pride Week, to openly gather as a collective. For others, conservative social attitudes and discriminatory practices have held back change.

Finally, we asked people what changes they want to see for themselves. Their answers centred ultimately on social inclusion, acceptance, and respect to truly feel they belong in their society.

## What changes do you want to see for sexual and gender minorities in Belize?

"To live a life where we feel free to live and be happy"

"Legislative, then social change...to feel safe walking down the street holding hands within a relationship, or going to public spaces without feeling judged"

"More gay and queer aligned spaces and events...queer recreational centres. I wish there were places where we could meet each other"

"A united community, where we look out for each other... not solely depending on the state to protect us but for us to actively take steps to protect and support each other despite our differences"

"Our recognition as a group and laws to facilitate our protection in that regard, as well as any access to gender-affirming healthcare".

"No discrimination, free from fear when expressing your gender identity in Belize...not have to worry about the neighbours watching you constantly. Free from fear from the churches that to this day talks down to any LGBT minority in Belize and shaping them to be a monster and pushing back against any advancement of human rights and minding their own business. Free from any form of discrimination and violence."

"Respect others and live a life we feel free to live and be happy."

"To make the people in Belize respect us as who we are"

# Belize and the UN SDGs



# Belize and the UN Sustainable Development Goals

## Overview:

Belize has gained space as one of the more influential actors in Central America, as they have demonstrated their interest in discourse around energy, migration and the environment, and have hosted a meeting to review the Small Island Developing States Accelerated Modalities of Action Pathway (SAMOA) progress in August 2018. Belize implements the Growth and Sustainable Development Strategy, which is underpinned by the Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2024). Amongst other successes, Belize has adopted a legislation that aimed at banning styrofoam and single-use plastics, with the phasing-out process starting in 2020 (Oceana, 2022). Overall, Belize is a part of 155 SDG-related activities, of which 140 are local and 15 are multinational, with the monetary resources of \$ 11.9 million.

During the discussion at the High Level Political Forum in 2017, Belize selected two SDG goals as their priority (Voluntary National Review, 2017). As a coastal nation, Belize's main priority is on SDG goal number 14- Life Below



**Dashboards:** ● SDG achieved ● Challenges remain ● Significant challenges remain  
● Major challenges remain ● Information unavailable

**Trends:** ↑ On track or maintaining SDG achievement ↗ Moderately improving → Stagnating  
↓ Decreasing \*\* Trend information unavailable

Water, as oceans are a key to sustaining tourism economy. For this goal, Belize has implemented the Integrated Coastal Zone Management and the Fisheries Resource Bill. Secondly, Belize chose goal number 5- Gender Equality. Within this area, Belize has implemented new gender equality policies alongside cross-cutting ministry collaboration.

Overall, Belize faces significant challenges, such as lacking the political adoption of the SDGs at all levels, and having an inadequate data collection system to monitor the progression or the regression of the SDGs.

Based on the extensive report by Sachs, Lafourtune, Fuller and Drumm (2023), Implementing the SDG Stimulus, Belize has shown progress in goals 12, 13, and 17, and a decrease in goal 1, 8, and 15. Additionally, Belize took no action and collected no data for goal number 10, Reduced Inequalities, which is crucial to sexual and gender minorities.

< The SDG Dashboard shows these trends in more detail.

# Belize and the UN Sustainable Development Goals

It is important to understand the sexual and gender minority community in Belize as a vulnerable group that faces additional challenges, as the effects of not meeting the requirements of the SDGS disproportionately impact this group. ReportOUT, with the help of Our Circle, have identified that the participants of this study have experienced discrimination mainly in education, poverty, access to food, and in adequate support by law enforcement.

## Goal 1: Eradicate Poverty

**1.1 By 2030, eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than \$1.25 a day**

**1.2 By 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions**

**1.4 By 2030, ensure that all men and women, in particular the poor and the vulnerable, have equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to basic services, ownership and control over land and other forms of property, inheritance, natural resources, appropriate new technology and financial services, including micro finance.**

Within our study, we found that 6% of our participants indicated that they had no form of employment, with one participant stating that they do not have a bank account. While the majority, around 62%, had a full-time paid job, 26% of all participants reported that they were unsure if they lived on the equivalent of \$1.25US dollars a day. Lastly, 52% reported that they lived on less than \$800 USD per month. One participant had highlighted that: "Even though I have a job and a place to live, I live with the constant fear of being fired and displaced because I am disabled and queer".

## Goal 4: Inequality in Education

**4.5 By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations**



15% of participants have experienced discrimination in education due to their sexuality or identity. Many have mentioned that they were threatened with expulsion. Another participant stated that a teacher has failed them at an exam, because their same-sex partner has dropped them off at school.



# Belize and the UN Sustainable Development Goals

One participant said that:

*“A religious professor had made it very obvious with her treatment that she had a problem with me in regards to my sexuality and my same-sex relationship at the time, and became very vocal about her stance on homosexuality. She had commented about me with my other colleagues and professors and made it difficult for my ability to graduate. She graded me to a more difficult scale and often refused to assist me when I asked for help”.*

ReportOUT, alongside the SDG guidelines, firmly believe that people should not be presented with obstacles in their education due to their sexuality or identity.



## **Goal 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts**

### **13.b.Promote mechanisms for raising capacity for effective climate change-related planning and management in least developed countries and small island developing States, including focusing on women, youth and local and marginalised communities**

The effects of climate change, such as rise in temperatures and pollution, is disproportionately felt by already marginalised groups, as they are more likely to have underlying health conditions or be living in poverty (WHO, 2023). Amongst these groups are sexual and gender minorities. We have asked our participants about their opinion on the issue and its effects on the community. On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 being the lowest impact, 10 being extreme impact, participants scored an average of 6.58 when asked: “To what extent do you see climate change specifically affecting sexual and gender minorities in Belize or elsewhere?”.

Like the World Health Organisation, participants believed that sexual and gender minorities are at a higher risk of experiencing adverse climate change effects as they are an already vulnerable group.

Participants have expressed the following concerns:

*“My main concern is how a devastating natural disaster would upend the already fragile living situation for marginalised LGBTQIA+ persons in Belize”.*

*“As the earth becomes more degraded, so are the resources and opportunities limited to communities, especially minorities and ostracised communities. Homelessness in particular with LGBT youth, unequal access to food and water, systemic homophobia and transphobia in regards to already limited economic and financial settings for queer people; as well as a higher risk of exposure to diseases and improper medical treatment are all linked to climate change and how it affects the lives of LGBTQ+ folk”.*

# Recommendations



# Context for Recommendations

Alongside the legislative gaps that currently leave Belizean sexual and gender minorities unprotected, and require immediate action to include existing international protections against discrimination into Belizean law, Belize's predominant problem seems to be the prevalence of societal stigma towards sexual and gender minorities, propagated particularly through religious and media outlets. This has created intersecting discriminations from state institutions, public service officials, and family members that have led to sexual and gender minorities facing systemic inequalities across a wide range of determinants, such as housing, healthcare, the legal system, and education.

Action must be taken now to rectify this through both a soft and a hard approach. Education provides a tool to implement 'soft', gradual change, helping to deconstruct societal discrimination by advocating inclusivity and changing behaviour patterns. It may be beneficial to use education as a tool to examine the roles, experiences, and definitions of both victims and perpetrators of discrimination and abuse. Fitting for the modern age, it will be beneficial to continue to educate children and adults to raise awareness of safe sex, safe relationships, safe online presence and social media, as well as how to recognise one's own behaviour as problematic or abusive. We hope that in the long-term, education becomes a safe setting, welcoming sexual and gender diversity and championing their voices, facilitating a generational shift in social attitudes and ending the stigmatisation of the gender and sexual minorities.

A 'hard' approach to implementing immediate, robust action should also be taken to investigate and enforce consequences for those perpetrating violence, torture, and other forms of abuse and discrimination on the basis of sexuality or gender. Explicit discrimination protections in the law are essential to dismantle the present inequalities that exist across society in relation to the workplace or housing market for example. Society must be inclusive and safe for all of its members, and social attitudes will not sustainably change until everybody is able to be visible and live without fear.

Finally, Belize must demonstrate its active commitment to the International Human Rights treaties it has ratified, as well as show consideration of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals in any future policy changes. SOGIESC individuals should be considered and ideally represented in all policymaking and particularly in long-term policy plans targeting the SDGs. An intersectional analysis of all domestic policy changes may be conducive to removing any inadvertent effects they have on widening inequalities.

# Recommendations

**Following analysis of the results of our extensive research study, ReportOUT and Our Circle recommend the following to the Belizean government:**

1. Legislation that discriminates on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, despite the Supreme Court of Belize's ruling that sexual orientation and gender identity are protected categories, should be revoked. This is, for example, the case with Belize's immigration law, which includes "homosexuals" in a list of "prohibited immigrants" (Chapter 156, §5(1)(e)).
2. Legal protections and policies to combat discrimination in the workplace, educational institutions, and healthcare should be advanced.
3. The good health and wellbeing of sexual and gender minorities in Belize needs to be prioritised. Healthcare settings must be accessible and destigmatised. Targeted work to improve access may focus on enabling anonymous appointments at vaccination clinics, phone call consultations, out-of-town clinics/pharmacies instead of local neighbourhood ones, etc. Improved education on healthcare, particularly vaccinations and hormone therapy may improve awareness and uptake. The right to privacy and respect across all healthcare settings must be upheld.
4. Educational campaigns may be valuable to deconstructing societal stigma and discrimination towards sexual and gender minorities, promoting awareness and understanding, and signposting to support. Education may also be a powerful tool to spreading understanding regarding safe sexual health and practices, safe use of social media and dating apps.
5. The prevalence of domestic violence and abuse from family and friends reported by respondents in this survey highlights the need for both stricter policing and robust pathways to justice, and also the utility of education in spreading awareness of what domestic abuse and violence can look like from both a victim and perpetrator perspective. Anti-violence strategies and trauma-informed policy would be valuable across the public sector.
6. The right to property, housing, and fair treatment in all housing settings must be upheld and enforced for SOGIESC Belizeans. Discrimination in housing settings must be formally investigated in order for change to be made, and it should be reported, measured, and policed. Gender equality in all settings must be upheld. Workplaces should be safe and free from discrimination, either at the hands of staff or service users. It is recommended that workplace discrimination, harassment, and pay disputes pertaining to sexual and gender minorities are formally investigated and reported.
7. Investigation must be taken into lack of police accountability and the lived experiences of police brutality. Action must be taken in response to these reports in order to ensure the protection of SOGIESC Belizeans' fundamental human rights to safety from violence.
8. Organisations which work with SOGIESC Belizeans need funding, training, and support from the state or other parties.
9. An urgent investigation of the prevalence of sexual or gender conversion practices, with particular focus of their occurrence within religious settings is necessary. Immediate action and consequences must be taken for those perpetrating this human rights violation.
10. Policies and actions taken in line with the SDGs such as climate action must have a recognition and emphasis towards protecting those most disproportionately affected, with sexual and gender minorities being considered and represented in policymaking.

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