

NINA MOINI: The state has released the first results of a multi-part study looking into the experiences and needs of LGBTQ+ Minnesotans. More than 7,000 people responded to a community needs survey by the Council on LGBTQIA2S+ Minnesotans. Our next guest, Emma Watts, is back on the show to talk through the findings. She's the executive director of the council. Thanks for coming back on the show, Emma.

EMMA WATTS: Thanks for having me. Happy to be here.

NINA MOINI: So we talked to you last year in April-- wow, I can't believe, time has really flown-- as you were launching the survey. Can you remind us what some of your main goals were?

EMMA WATTS: Yeah, absolutely. It feels like a full circle moment to be back here talking about the findings. Our goals were pretty simple-- to understand the experiences and needs of LGBTQIA2S+ Minnesotans through a variety of vehicles, including surveys, and focus groups, and an organization and provider survey. And to fulfill our mission to work toward the economic, social, and legal, and political equality for Minnesota's LGBTQIA2S+ community.

NINA MOINI: So this was voluntary. And so how do you feel with the number of responses you got, with the demographics of who responded?

EMMA WATTS: Yeah, we feel great about our responses. And we have to think about our responses too in the context at which the survey was conducted. It was conducted between March and December 2025, which was a period of extraordinary national attention and policy action targeting LGBTQIA2S+ people, particularly transgender people. And so we weren't sure if this would affect the way in which people showed up.

But what our responses show, with 7,300 people sharing their experiences, is that people want to tell their stories. And they want to be heard. And we're especially proud of how diverse our responses are from across Minnesota, across age and race, geography.

And one particular strength of our survey is the number of transgender respondents we got. 40% of our adult respondents and 71% of the children represented in this survey are transgender. And that's a huge strength for us in understanding the needs.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. What did you find in the results? I mean, you mentioned some of the challenges that everyone is experiencing right now, but would you highlight for us some of the main challenges that you heard from people?

EMMA WATTS: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, what stood out to me was how consistently we saw challenges across so many different parts of people's lives. We saw very high levels of mental health concerns, substantially higher than what we see in Minnesota's general population data, though it's not an apples to apples comparison. We also saw high rates of discrimination, harassment, and verbal abuse, barriers within the health care system like cost and discrimination, difficulty finding affirming providers, and significant concerns about housing and economic security. And when we take these findings together, it shows how interconnected these issues really are, particularly the connection between mental health or well-being and things like discrimination, stigma, and barriers to care, and why it's so important to look beyond any one statistic to understand what's affecting people's well-being.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. And this isn't to push back on anybody's experience, but how do you define discrimination? Or where were they seeing it-- employment, housing? Tell me a little bit more about that.

EMMA WATTS: Yeah, absolutely. We saw discrimination across a variety of places, and spaces, and experiences, including housing, and accessing legal services, and within the health care field as well. We saw many folks change providers because of discrimination, because they were experiencing stigma or their provider was not educated on LGBTQIA2S+ issues or not affirming of those issues. We also see discrimination come in the form of lack of safety or violence. And that took place in many public spaces, including schools, and public transit, and even some discrimination accessing government services.

NINA MOINI: What did you hear from folks that is working, things that make people hopeful that they feel like they could build upon?

EMMA WATTS: Yeah. There are definitely encouraging findings, particularly around home relationships and community support. Nearly all of our adult respondents, 97%, said that they feel safe in their home and with their partner. And most respondents did report having supportive friends and chosen family.

We also saw that more than 3/4 said that they live in communities that are supportive and accepting of LGBTQIA2S+ people. And, of course, we'd like those numbers to be 100% But, given the current national environment and the level of concern parents expressed about federal anti-LGBTQIA2S+ plus policies, I think it speaks volumes to the importance of the protections we have here in Minnesota, and relationships, and community supports, and the ways in which our nonprofit systems provide those for folks.

NINA MOINI: Is there anything that, in particular, surprised you in the data?

EMMA WATTS: I don't know if anything in particular was surprising as much as it was alarming. I think the mental health numbers were particularly alarming because of how much higher they were compared to the general population. And I think it really affirms what we're seeing in community, which is the substantial toll that, again, discrimination and barriers to care really have on people's lives.

The other thing that I think, again, wasn't maybe so much surprising, but was really important to see and for us to think more about was the number of people moving to Minnesota, and specifically moving to Minnesota because of our state's legal protections for LGBTQIA2S+ people. This is something we've heard anecdotally and see every day when we go to events or interact with our communities, but isn't something we have great data on.

NINA MOINI: And that's important, right-- I hear that a lot from people, that people tell stories, and anecdotes, and everybody sort of has the sentiment or the feeling of what's going on, but that data can lead to more action. So how are you planning to use these results moving forward?

EMMA WATTS: Yeah. This is a project that's not supposed to end with a report on a shelf. Our summary report, we view it as, really, the starting point. And it's a strong one, but it's not the end of this work. The next thing we're going to do is dig deeper into the data to better understand disparities and what factors are associated with positive or better outcomes.

We're also going to bring the findings back to communities across Minnesota to help us interpret what we're seeing and identify solutions. And, ultimately, we want to translate this data into action and use that to shape the council's priorities and our recommendations and bring those findings and solutions to policymakers.

NINA MOINI: And I'm seeing here you would want a final report spring of 2027, so around next year. What does that mean for the upcoming legislative session?

EMMA WATTS: Right. Yeah, we have a lot of great data as it is with our summary report. And in the next couple of months, we'll be releasing data books, which highlight some of the disparities we're seeing across age, and race, and gender, and geography. And we'll bring those findings into this coming legislative session and work with legislators in real time to interpret and put into action the findings that we're seeing.

What we plan to do is, over the next several months, talk to community and talk to our council members. And in that final report, not only include the findings that we've been talking about here, but also include our recommendations and our strategic roadmap to move Minnesota forward.

NINA MOINI: All right, Emma, thanks for coming back on the show and sharing your findings with us. We appreciate your time.

EMMA WATTS: Yeah. Thanks so much for having me.

NINA MOINI: Emma Watts is Executive Director of the Council on LGBTQIA2S+ Minnesotans.