

First of its kind study shines light on LGBTQ+ farmer mental health

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New research from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign indicates LGBTQ+ farmers may feel a double burden of mental health challenges. Credit: Courtney Cuthbertson, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

LGBTQ+ people involved in farm work are over three times more likely

to experience depression and suicidal intent and about two and a half times more likely to experience anxiety than the general population. That's according to a [new study](#) led by farmer mental health experts at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

"For several years, I've done work around farm stress and mental health among farmers in general. We've found people who work in agriculture have adverse mental health compared to those who work in other areas. Similarly, there are findings that queer folks have worse mental health than their straight and cisgender peers. I was motivated to do this study because there's very little research that looks at the crossover of LGBTQ+ people who work in agriculture," said Courtney Cuthbertson, assistant professor and Illinois Extension specialist in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, part of the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences (ACES) at Illinois.

Studies have estimated at least 23,000 LGBTQ+ people are involved in U.S. farming; the actual number is likely higher, Cuthbertson said. The research team surveyed LGBTQ+ farmers across the U.S., asking standardized questions about sexual and [gender identity](#), stress, anxiety, depression, resilient coping, and [suicide risk](#), as well as agricultural commodity type. They received and analyzed 148 responses from 36 states, with greater representation among people in organic production and in California, Illinois, New York, and Texas.

About 72% of respondents were experiencing symptoms of mild to [severe depression](#); 70% mild to severe anxiety; and 52% were at significant risk of suicide.

"The percentages that had probable depression and probable anxiety disorder were in alignment with, if not higher than, general farming populations, which would indicate a double burden for LGBTQ+ folks in farming," Cuthbertson said.

"However, the percentage at significant risk for suicide was much lower than in samples of LGBTQ+ people who are not in farming. That leads me to wonder whether working in agriculture could have a protective effect for LGBTQ+ people regarding suicide risk."

When the subgroups were analyzed individually, it turned out that a greater proportion of people identifying as men experienced anxiety, depression, and suicide risk compared to non-men, a pattern mirrored in the farming community at large. Cuthbertson said this may be due to norms around masculinity in agriculture.

Further, gay respondents and those working in field crops and [beef production](#) were more likely to have probable depression, though beef producers were least likely to have a diagnosis of depression from a medical professional. Generally, more respondents appeared to have depressive or anxiety symptoms than had been medically diagnosed for these disorders. Again, Cuthbertson said that aligns with their research on farmers in general.

"Agriculture is intensive. Someone might feel the time costs to go to a provider come with a financial cost of not being productive during that time," they said. "And in a lot of agricultural communities, there's a stigma around mental health, where someone might not want their vehicle to be seen in front of the therapist's office."

"But for LGBTQ+ folks in particular, there may be concern about whether someone's identity would be validated or whether they would be greeted with the proper pronouns and addressed in a respectful way. They may not have supervisors or managers who are willing to let them take a break to go to therapy. They may also not have health benefits that would include mental health coverage."

The research team created several [fact sheets](#) based on this research, as

well as resources for allies in the farming community who want to support LGBTQ+ farm workers. Their advice includes adapting language to be more inclusive of non-cisheteronormative gender and relationship statuses; engaging in allyship or cultural competency trainings; and offering equitable resources and support to everyone.

"It's important to look at what's happening in the environment for LGBTQ+ folks, rather than assuming the problem lies with them. When we see things like depression, anxiety, or suicide, these are signs that something is distressing," Cuthbertson said. "Let's identify root causes and see what we can do about it, rather than problematizing a marginalized group."

Cuthbertson stresses that the contributions of LGBTQ+ people in the [farming community](#) should not be discounted or dismissed. "There have been so many conversations about making agriculture a more sustainable industry to ensure future food security," they said.

"I've made the argument that agriculture can't be sustainable unless it's sustainable for the people working in it, which means being attentive to mental and physical health as well as making the industry as inclusive as possible for any and all who want to be part of it."

The researchers suggest the following resources for LGBTQ+ farmers and for those struggling with mental health:

- The Queer Farmer Network: queerfarmernetwork.org
- The Cultivating Change Foundation: thecultivatingchangefoundation.org
- Concern Hotline, 1-800-447-1985: extension.iastate.edu/iowaconcern
- Trans Lifeline, 877-565-8860: translifeline.org
- National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, 988: 988lifeline.org

- Crisis Text Line, 741741: crisistextline.org

The study, "[Mental health among LGBTQ+ farmers in the United States](#)," is published in the *Journal of Agromedicine*. Authors include Courtney Cuthbertson, Dane Rivas-Koehl, Anisa Codamon, Alyssa Billington, and Matthew Rivas-Koehl. The research was supported in part by the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture.

More information: Courtney Cuthbertson et al, Mental Health Among LGBTQ+ Farmers in the United States, *Journal of Agromedicine* (2024). DOI: [10.1080/1059924X.2024.2368185](https://doi.org/10.1080/1059924X.2024.2368185)

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