

# Perceived Impact of the Parental Rights in Education Act (“Don’t Say Gay”) on LGBTQ+ Parents in Florida

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## Abstract

Prior studies indicate that anti-LGBTQ+ legislation has negative consequences for the well-being of LGBTQ+ people, their families, and their communities. In July of 2022, Florida’s Parental Rights in Education Act, also called the “Don’t Say Gay” bill, was signed into law. The law aimed to limit K–3 instruction and discussion related to sexuality and gender, encompassing LGBTQ+ identities. The present study surveyed 113 LGBTQ+ parents in Florida about their experiences and perceptions related to the Parental Rights in Education Act. Qualitative content analysis revealed five major themes and 14 subthemes, including: (a) living in Florida: pros and cons; (b) initial reactions to the law; (c) feelings over time; (d) coping with worries; and (e) beyond “coping”: considering the future and possibility of relocation. Recommendations center on the need for counseling psychologists to use their privilege and training to advocate on behalf of LGBTQ+ parents, families and others impacted by this legislation.

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**Significance of the Scholarship to the Public**

*In 2022, Florida's Parental Rights in Education Act ("Don't Say Gay bill") was signed into law. In a survey of 113 LGBTQ+ parents in Florida, most participants reported anger, fear, disbelief, and sadness in response to the law, which they coped with via activism, seeking support, disengaging from the news, and other strategies. Almost 50% of the sample were considering moving out of Florida, and 14% had taken steps to do so, out of concern for their families' well-being in an increasingly stigmatizing climate.*

On March 28, 2022, Florida's Governor Ron DeSantis signed into law the "Parental Rights in Education Act" (HB 1557), also dubbed the "Don't Say Gay" law. The act went into effect on July 1, 2022. It reads: "Classroom instruction by school personnel or third parties on sexual orientation or gender identity may not occur in kindergarten through grade 3 or in a manner that is not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students in accordance with state standards." Florida is not alone: at least 20 other states proposed "Don't Say Gay" laws in 2022; and, in several states, versions of these laws (e.g., that limit or ban LGBTQ+ topics in the curriculum) have existed for decades (Sosin, 2022). Indeed, laws that bar or explicitly restrict educators from discussing LGBTQ+ issues in schools (sometimes dubbed "No Promo Homo" policies) first proliferated in the 1980s, when concerns about HIV and AIDS led to the expansion of sexual education in public schools, a move that generated a powerful response from religious conservatives who lobbied for anti-gay provisions in the curricula (Steinberg, 2021).

Both then and now, proponents of these laws defend them as necessary to uphold "family values," asserting that discussion of diverse sexual and gender identities will indoctrinate children to think such identities are acceptable (Lenson, 2015; McGovern, 2012; Steinberg, 2021). These proponents also often center "parents' rights" in their advocacy, pushing back against instruction that conflicts with their values (McGovern, 2012). Similarly, supporters of the Parental Rights in Education Act assert that it seeks to allow parents to determine if, when, and how to introduce LGBTQ+ topics to their children (Goldstein, 2022), thus underscoring the

centrality of parents' authority in children's education (Cavanaugh & Cauffman, 2019).

Opponents of the act were concerned that it would discourage and even silence discussion of LGBTQ+ topics in schools in general, beyond kindergarten through 3rd grade (K-3) (Goldstein, 2022; Paluska, 2022; Strauss, 2022)—concerns that were substantively affirmed in April 2023 when the Florida Board of Education expanded the ban on sexuality and gender for all K–12 education (Izaguirre & Farrington, 2023). Opponents worry that such prohibitions serve to erase LGBTQ+ people, culture, and history, and convey that something is wrong with LGBTQ+ identities, a message that negatively affects LGBTQ+ parents, children, and teachers (Diaz, 2022; Goldstein, 2022; Paluska, 2022). Indeed, major professional organizations, such as the American Psychological Association (2022) and the Florida chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics (2022), have condemned the law, highlighting the role of schools in promoting accurate information and creating a safe community. Further, public health scholars have noted that “policies that silence discussion about LGBTQ+ identities such as Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” law contribute to the persistent marginalization and stigmatization of LGBTQ+ people” and “create a de facto form of sanctioned discrimination that can lead to additional stigmatizing policies,” thus underscoring the potential snowball effect of legally sanctioned discrimination (Kline et al., 2022, pp. 1398–1399). Such scholars have also called for empirical research to document how LGBTQ+ people, and parents specifically, are experiencing this legislative crisis (Kline et al., 2022).

### *LGBTQ Parent Families and The Parental Rights in Education Act*

Although much of the media attention has focused on the implications of the Parental Rights in Education Act for LGBTQ+ youth and teachers (Goldstein, 2022; Sokol, 2023), LGBTQ+ parent families represent an additional group that may be affected by the law—yet who are often invisible in the mainstream media’s discussions of the law and its impacts. According to journalists who have spoken to LGBTQ+ parents, such parents have voiced concern that their children will be restricted from talking about, drawing pictures of, and completing writing assignments that feature their families at school (Hatzipanagos, 2022; Luterman, 2022). LGBTQ+ parents also worry that the law will cultivate an environment where, across grade levels, students will implicitly and explicitly stigmatize LGBTQ+ identities, and teachers will refrain from addressing LGBTQ+-related bullying, marginalization, and exclusion (Hatzipanagos, 2022; Kline et al., 2022; Luterman, 2022).

Even before the passing of the Parental Rights in Education law in Florida, LGBTQ+ parent families experienced erasure within schools, such as a routine lack of representation in curricula (Goldberg & Byard, 2020). Aware of the potential for invalidation of their families, LGBTQ+ parents may seek to avoid certain schools and daycares, yet may face limited choices amid geographic and financial constraints (Goldberg, 2014; Goldberg et al., 2018). The passing of the Parental Rights in Education law legally endorses the invisibility and harm that LGBTQ+ families have historically experienced within the school system. Amidst the oppression that LGBTQ+ parents generally, and in Florida specifically, often encounter within schools, it is important to document the perceived impact of the law on LGBTQ+ parents' well-being. Thus, this study seeks to understand LGBTQ+ parents' reactions to the Parental Rights in Education law in the context of the larger sociopolitical climate of Florida, as well as their experiences coping with the law and their plans for the future.

### *Theoretical Framework*

This study is guided by a stigma framework, which encompasses (a) structural stigma as a construct that includes "societal-level conditions, cultural norms, and institutional policies that constrain the opportunities, resources, and well-being of the stigmatized" (Hatzenbuehler & Link, 2014, p. 2) as well as a (b) minority stress model, which explains stress processes; that is, the mechanisms by which stigmatized individuals respond to and cope with their environment, including their experiences of prejudice, expectations of discrimination, concealment of identity, and internalization of stigma, as well as ameliorative coping processes (Meyer, 2003). As a state-level, government-sanctioned policy that silences discussion about LGBTQ+ identities, Florida's "Don't Say Gay" law represents a form of structural stigma that perpetuates "a culture of stigma and heterosexist social norms" (Rao et al., 2020, p. 452) and contributes to the marginalization of LGBTQ+ people, including LGBTQ+ families, resulting in stress (Kline et al., 2022).

Structural and other forms of stigma cannot be examined without a broader consideration of power and power differentials, where those with high status maintain their privilege by marginalizing stigmatized groups (Link & Phelan, 2014). Through the introduction and passing of stigmatizing policies, politicians are exercising their power to perpetuate stigma (Ayoub, 2018), making policies that systematically overrepresent socially conservative viewpoints with regard to LGBTQ+ rights (Flores et al., 2015). In the current study, structural stigma encompasses both the Parental Rights in Education Act and the sociopolitical discourse surrounding it, in that the law can be seen as reflecting, codifying, and perpetuating anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes

(Hatzenbuehler, 2016). The Parental Rights in Education Act permeates the norms and attitudes of communities and schools, generating a sense of disintegration between targeted individuals and their social context, resulting in stress (Kline et al., 2022; Meyer et al., 2011). In this way, structural factors are theorized to initiate or intensify stigma processes (e.g., concealment of identity, struggles with self-acceptance) at the individual level (Meyer, 2003), thus exerting direct and synergistic effects on processes that impact mental, physical, and relationship health (Hatzenbuehler, 2009, 2016; Hatzenbuehler & Link, 2014).

Scholars have pointed out that experiences and the impacts of structural stigma may not be felt the same for all members of a minoritized group (Patterson et al., 2020; Rao et al., 2020). Various dimensions of power and marginalization intersect with sexual and gender minority status, such that LGBTQ+ people may be differentially exposed to and uniquely impacted by structural stigma, including anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and associated political discourse (Flores et al., 2018; Grzanka et al., 2020; Meyer et al., 2011; Price et al., 2023; Schlehofer et al., 2023). Educational and financial privilege, for example, may allow some LGBTQ+ parents to reside in more progressive communities and/or send their children to more progressive schools, where attitudes and norms deviate significantly from and are more accepting than state laws or policies (Goldberg et al., 2018). Such families may in turn be less impacted by state-level structural stigma (Goldberg & Smith, 2011) amidst a greater sense of harmony and feelings of being “valued” (Meyer et al., 2011). Interpersonal resources, such as social support and community connectedness, may also buffer the negative effects of minority stress (Meyer, 2003, 2015; Scheadler et al., 2022), although not all LGBTQ+ parents have equal access to LGBTQ+ community and support—for example, due to structural inequalities such as racism as well as geographic barriers (Kinkler & Goldberg, 2011).

Ultimately, LGBTQ+ parents’ experiences of minority stress—and resilience—must be considered against the backdrop of structural stigma and their unique social locations, and in the context of larger systems of power and marginalization. In turn, the current study considered how LGBTQ+ parents in Florida are responding to and coping with the Parental Rights in Education Act—a piece of legislation that is situated within a particular geographic and historic context, which may amplify and nuance the stressful conditions that may result for both parents and children.

### *Anti-LGBTQ Legislation and LGBTQ Parent Family Well-Being*

The possibility that the Parental Rights in Education Act may impact LGBTQ+ parent families in important and meaningful ways is grounded in

prior research on the relationship between anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and LGBTQ+ adults' mental health. State amendments that deny LGBTQ+ people the right to be married, for example, constitute significant stressors and are directly associated with mental health consequences for LGBTQ+ people (Riggle et al., 2005, 2010; Rostosky et al., 2009). During the campaigns associated with marriage amendments in the United States, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer people reported hopelessness, anger, fear, and distress (Flores et al., 2018), although some also maintained hope that legislative setbacks would be overcome and equality would prevail (Rostosky et al., 2010). Anti-LGBTQ+ legislation as it relates to LGBTQ+ people's mental health has been studied most recently in relation to Donald Trump's presidential election and administration (Brown & Keller, 2018; Gabriele-Black et al., 2021; Gonzalez et al., 2022; Price et al., 2021). Trump implemented many policies that instantiated and reinforced LGBTQ+-related discrimination, creating minority stress for LGBTQ+ people, which manifested as increased symptoms of anxiety and depression; specific worries about employment protections, healthcare access, and the rollback of civil rights; as well as a general sense of unease, fear, and lack of safety (Brown & Keller, 2018; Gabriele-Black et al., 2021; Price et al., 2021; Radis & Nadan, 2021).

Consistent with structural stigma, stress may be amplified amidst uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding laws, changes to laws, and legislative proposals. When LGBTQ+ people encounter vague, unclear, or inconsistent information related to legal protections and rights, this creates a layer of additional stress, on top of the anger and fear they may already be experiencing (Kazyak, 2015). Some research has established that even just the threat of discriminatory policies, as opposed to the formal passage of legislation, has the effect of increasing adverse mental health outcomes among LGBTQ+ people (Gonzalez et al., 2018).

Research on anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and LGBTQ+ parent families specifically has established that such legislation has direct and indirect effects on parents' (Goldberg et al., 2013; Shapiro et al., 2009) and their children's (Goldberg & Garcia, 2020) well-being. A study of LGBTQ+ parents in the United States found that parents in couples with unequal rights were less "out" about their LGBTQ+ identity and worried more about family discrimination than parents in couples with full rights (Horne, Johnson, et al., 2022a). Further, structural stressors (unequal rights status), interpersonal stressors (less outness), and intrapersonal stressors (worries about discrimination) were linked to relationship dissatisfaction, which was related to higher parenting stress (Horne, Johnson, et al., 2022a). A study of LGBTQ+ adoptive parents in the United States further found that parents who lived in states with less favorable rulings, related to LGBTQ+ parenthood and adoption, reported poorer mental health than those living in states with a history of more favorable rulings (Goldberg & Smith, 2011).

Anti-LGBTQ+ legislation may impact mental health in part via its effects on social climate, including community, neighborhood, and school norms and attitudes—although it is important to note that the relationship between legislation and social norms is reciprocal, such that attitudes “not only reflect broader institutional factors, such as laws and policies, but also partly influence them” (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2017, p. 510; see also Flores et al., 2015). Both children of LGBTQ+ parents (Power et al., 2014) and LGBTQ+ youth (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008; Pacey et al., 2017) have reported greater victimization when living in communities and attending schools they perceive to be hostile to LGBTQ+ identities. Likewise, LGBTQ+ students living in more conservative regions of the United States (e.g., as indexed by more votes for Donald Trump) have been found to experience more victimization than heterosexual students (Hobaica et al., 2021; Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). Further, research has found that LGBTQ+ and heterosexual students who attend schools without LGBTQ+-inclusive curricula report lower feelings of safety and higher levels of bullying than those attending schools with such curricula (Snapp et al., 2015). Indeed, laws that effectively silence discussion about LGBTQ+ people within schools create messages of exclusion which give rise to, and amplify existing, stressors (Kline et al., 2022).

### *Coping With Minority Stress*

LGBTQ+ people and parents specifically may cope with the minority stress that is created by discriminatory legislation and hostile climates in a variety of ways, in part depending on their existing resources, and their immediate and broader context. Common coping responses include seeking support, self-care, activism, looking toward the future (i.e., hope), and avoidance (e.g., of the media, people, and spaces that amplify feelings of oppression and associated negative mood; Abreu et al., 2021a; Brown & Keller, 2018; Gabriele-Black et al., 2021; Gonzalez et al., 2022). Participating in and seeking support from the LGBTQ+ community, as well as activism and advocacy on behalf of the LGBTQ+ community, may also represent aspects of collective action that promote resilience and mitigate the relationship between discrimination and mental health (Breslow et al., 2015; DeBlaere et al., 2019; Scheadler et al., 2022). Such strategies of community-building and resistance may be particularly valued in environments where LGBTQ+ parents feel isolated and alone, such as schools and communities that lack a visible LGBTQ+ presence (Goldberg, 2014; Goldberg & Byard, 2020).

Yet, activism and advocacy may not always have entirely positive effects. Identity-based activism has also been linked to feelings of fear, frustration, and emotional “drain” among LGBTQ+ people (Goldberg et al., 2020; Scheadler et al., 2022), particularly when activist efforts are unsuccessful (Russell et al., 2011). LGBTQ+ parents have spoken about the burnout associated with

constantly having to defend, and educate others about, LGBTQ+ parent families (Gartrell et al., 2019). Such burdens may be amplified in the context of other marginalized statuses (e.g., being poor or Black; Radis & Nadan, 2021).

### *The Current Study*

Counseling psychologists (Grzanka et al., 2020), public health researchers (Kline et al., 2022), and legal scholars (Lenson, 2015; McGovern, 2012) have described the harmful potential impacts of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation such as the Parental Rights in Education Act, and noted the need for more scholarship on the effects of “Don’t Say Gay” laws in particular (Lenson, 2015) and on LGBTQ+ parents and their children, specifically (Kline et al., 2022). Given the anxieties voiced by LGBTQ+ parents in media reports surrounding the Parental Rights in Education Act, and research pointing to the effects of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation on parents and children, we sought to understand LGBTQ+ parents’ initial responses to the act, now signed into law, in the context of the larger sociopolitical climate of Florida, as well as how they were coping with stress related to the law, and their plans for the future. We used an online survey to obtain qualitative and quantitative data from 113 LGBTQ+ parents in Florida. Our research questions were:

1. At a descriptive level, how do LGBTQ+ parents describe their reasons for living in Florida, and what do they see as the downsides or drawbacks of living in Florida?
2. How do LGBTQ+ parents narrate their initial responses or feelings about the law, as well as any perceived changes in feelings?
3. How do LGBTQ+ parents cope with stress related to the law?
4. To what extent, and how, does the law impact LGBTQ+ parents’ plans for the future (e.g., with regard to staying in Florida, and making decisions regarding schooling)?

## **Method**

### *Sample*

See Table 1 for detailed demographic information. This sample of LGBTQ+ parents ( $N = 113$ ) was largely made up of cisgender (cis) women ( $n = 73$ , 64.6%); almost one-quarter were cis men ( $n = 26$ , 23.0%), and the remainder were trans, nonbinary, or “something else.” Most identified as lesbian ( $n = 60$ , 53.1%) or gay ( $n = 24$ , 21.2%). Parents were 45.3 years old, on average ( $Mdn = 44.0$ ;  $SD = 10.31$ ). Most identified as White ( $n = 68$ , 60.2%) or Latinx/Hispanic ( $n = 35$ , 31.0%). The sample was somewhat more likely to be



**Table 1.** Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Demographic Characteristic	N (%)
<b>Gender</b>	
Cisgender women	73 (64.6%)
Cisgender men	26 (23.0%)
Nonbinary individuals	5 (4.4%)
Trans woman	2 (1.8%)
Something else (e.g., women)	5 (4.4%)
Missing	2 (1.8%)
<b>Sexual orientation</b>	
Lesbian	60 (53.1%)
Gay	24 (21.2%)
Bisexual	13 (11.5%)
Queer	6 (5.3%)
Something else (e.g., pansexual, asexual and lesbian)	10 (8.8%)
<b>Race</b>	
White	68 (60.2%)
Latinx/Hispanic	35 (31.0%)
Asian	3 (2.7%)
Black	3 (2.7%)
Something else (e.g., American Indian)	2 (1.8%)
Missing	2 (.18)
<b>Education</b>	
High School Diploma	2 (1.8%)
Some College/Associates	13 (11.5%)
College Degree	31 (27.4%)
Master's Degree	35 (31.0%)
PhD/MD/JD (doctoral, medical, or law degree)	31 (27.4%)
Missing	1 (.9%)
<b>Family (Combined) Income</b>	
Under \$50K	5 (4.4%)
\$50K–\$100K	20 (17.7%)
\$101–\$150K	26 (23.0%)
\$151–\$200K	20 (17.7%)
\$201–\$250K	10 (8.8%)
Over \$250K	30 (26.5%)
Missing	2 (1.8%)
<b>Employment</b>	
Employed full-time	86 (76.1%)
Employed part-time	6 (5.3%)
Unemployed	3 (2.7%)

*(continued)*

**Table I.** (continued)

Demographic Characteristic	N (%)
Students	2 (1.8%)
Homemakers	11 (9.7%)
Something else (e.g., retired)	5 (4.4%)
Political Affiliation	
Democrat	90 (79.6%)
Independent	9 (8.0%)
Republican	5 (4.4%)
Green Party	1 (0.9%)
Something else (e.g., no party affiliation, Socialist, Libertarian)	5 (4.4%)
Missing	3 (2.7%)

Hispanic and less likely to be Black or Asian when compared to data on Florida's population as a whole: in 2020, 61.6% of Florida residents were White only, 18.7% Hispanic only, 12.4% Black only, and 6% Asian only (Florida Census, 2020). The majority ( $n = 90$ , 79.6%) reported a party affiliation of Democrat.

The sample was well-educated, with most ( $n = 97$ , 85.8%) having at least a college education. Most ( $n = 86$ , 76.1%) reported a household income of over \$100K. The sample was more affluent than the average resident in Florida, where the average household income is about \$83K (Income by Zip Code, 2022). Most described themselves as middle class ( $n = 41$ , 36.3%) or upper-middle class ( $n = 43$ , 38.1%), with fewer endorsing upper ( $n = 18$ , 15.9%), working ( $n = 9$ , 8.0%), or lower ( $n = 1$ , 0.9%) class, with one missing. Most ( $n = 92$ , 81.4%) were employed.

Most ( $n = 90$ , 79.6%) were married, with 10 (8.8%) partnered but not married. Nine (8.0%) were divorced or separated. Fifty-six (49.6%) were biological parents to at least one child, 31 (27.4%) were nonbiological and legal parents to at least one child, and 33 (29.2%) were adoptive parents to at least one child. Few were stepparents ( $n = 5$ , 4.4%) and foster parents ( $n = 4$ , 3.5%). Fifty-three (46.9%) had one child, 45 (39.8%) had two children, and 15 (13.3%) had 3–6 children. Across all 113 families, respondents were the parents of 197 children: 90 cis girls, 88 cis boys, and 10 trans/nonbinary children, with nine missing data. Respondents were parents of 76 children under six, 72 children aged 6–17, and 49 children aged 18+. (All parents of 18+ year-olds had at least one child under 18.) They were the parents of 98 White children, 35 Latinx/Hispanic children, 15 biracial/multiracial children, 10 Black children, and four Asian children, with 35 missing data.

Geographically, the sample resided in a few key counties. Almost half lived in either Miami-Dade ( $n = 30$ , 26.5%) or Broward ( $n = 23$ , 20.4%) County.

Miami-Dade County, which includes Miami, Miami Beach, and Hialeah, has a large percentage of Latinx or Hispanic (69.1%) and immigrant (54%) residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). It leans somewhat Democratic: 38% of voters are registered as Democrats and 29% as Republicans (Florida Department of State, 2022). It is generally regarded as LGBTQ+ friendly (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2021; Zane, 2018), although some parts of the county (e.g., Hialeah) are seen as less LGBTQ+ friendly than others (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2021). Broward County, which includes Fort Lauderdale, Pembroke Pines, and Hollywood, has a large population of Latinx or Hispanic (32%) and immigrant (35%) residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). It leans Democratic (48% of voters are registered as Democrats and 21% as Republicans; Florida Department of State, 2022) and is generally regarded as LGBTQ+ friendly (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2021).

Smaller numbers of participants lived in Alachua County ( $n = 10$ , 8.8%; e.g., Gainesville), in which 11% identify as Latinx or Hispanic, 10% are immigrants, and 47.8% are registered Democrats; Leon County ( $n = 7$ , 6.2%; e.g., Tallahassee), where 7% identify as Latinx or Hispanic, 6% are immigrants, and 52% are registered Democrats; and Palm Beach County ( $n = 7$ , 6.2%; e.g., Boca Raton), where 24% identify as Latinx or Hispanic, 25% are immigrants, and 40% are Democrats; Florida Department of State, 2022; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Even smaller numbers resided in Pinellas ( $n = 5$ , 4.4%), Seminole ( $n = 4$ , 3.5%), Orange ( $n = 3$ , 2.7%), and Saint Lucie ( $n = 3$ , 2.7%) Counties. Between 1–2 respondents lived in an additional 13 counties.

## Procedure

The current study used an online survey with closed- and open-ended questions to obtain data. An online survey was chosen over qualitative interviews as the authors believed that this was the most efficient and effective means of gathering data, as it allowed respondents to complete it on their own time. In addition, research has documented the acceptability and rigor of conducting qualitative research via online surveys (Kazmer & Xie, 2008), and specifically with hard-to-reach LGBTQ communities (Abreu et al., 2021a; Riggle et al., 2005).

Correspondence with key stakeholders (e.g., attorneys in Florida, senior staff at LGBTQ+ nonprofit organizations and advocacy groups, leaders of employee resource groups) and LGBTQ+ parents in Florida informed the development of the survey instrument. We selected these stakeholders and parents based on prior collaborations and/or professional interactions with the two researchers; or, they were suggested by colleagues because of their personal and professional identities (e.g., which involved contact with LGBTQ+ people in Florida). These individuals generally provided input via

email (in one case a phone call). The principal investigator also received input, via email, from several LGBTQ+ parents in Florida who participated in another study of hers about 10 years previous. The survey was proofed for ease of use by two psychology doctoral students. Minor edits were made such as rewording survey questions to be shorter and clearer. The survey was also reviewed by stakeholders, who shared that it captured the objectives of the study, the questions were easy to read, and the language used was accessible to community members.

Respondents were invited to participate if they were an LGBTQ+ parent of at least one child under 18 and currently lived in Florida. Participants were recruited widely, using personal and professional contacts, LGBTQ+ and Florida specific groups and organizations (e.g., employer LGBTQ+ and diversity related groups), and attorneys and other professionals who work with LGBTQ+ people in Florida. The survey was hosted on the online platform Qualtrics and took about 25 minutes to complete (*Mdn* = 27 minutes). It contained a variety of closed and open-ended questions and was available to complete June 13–September 9. Respondents had the option to be entered into drawings for one of five \$50 gift cards. The survey was approved by the institutional review board at Clark University.

All data were inspected for evidence of inconsistent responding, unusually low response times, or completion of < 75% of the items. This resulted in the deletion of four responses. In total, the sample was comprised of 113 LGBTQ parents, with 90 complete responses (79.6%) and 23 partial responses (20.4%), with partial responses all > 75% of the closed-ended survey items.

Scholars have warned about the threat of bots and fraudulent cases to data integrity that comes from recruiting through social media platforms (see review in [Pozzar et al., 2020](#)). Using the indicators of fraudulent data put forth by [Pozzar et al. \(2020\)](#), the research team checked for duplicate IP addresses, repeated responses in every closed-ended and open-ended questions, and zones that showed that the survey was completed outside of the United States. No cases were classified as fraudulent (although as noted above, four were removed because they completed < 75% of the items). We attribute our success in avoiding fraudulent data to our recruitment strategies. Because of our knowledge of the potential for bots, we strategically tapped into our large network of contacts to avoid having to share it through social media platforms such as Twitter. We relied on attorneys, colleagues, and friends in Florida, as well as LGBTQ community centers and diversity, equity, and inclusion affinity groups in workplaces and university campuses in Florida. We asked all sources to avoid posting on social media but encourage them to share among their contacts internally (e.g., workplace, organizations, friendship networks).

## Survey Questions

The survey contained a number of demographic items. It also contained closed- and open-ended questions focusing on parents' responses to the Parental Rights in Education Act, feelings about the broader sociopolitical climate in Florida, their coping in response to the law and related stress, their reasons for living in Florida, and their plans to remain in Florida in the future.

## Author Reflexivity and Positionality

As the first author (AG), I am a White, Jewish, cisgender woman who was raised by a queer parent. I have over 20 years of experience researching LGBTQ+ parent families and other diverse families (e.g., adoptive families), including interviewing both LGBTQ+ parents and young adults with LGBTQ+ parents. My personal and research experiences have sensitized me to the ways that systemic discrimination can result in the marginalization, silencing, and invisibility of families that do not fit the heteronormative, cisgender, biogenetically-related "norm" or ideal. My personal and scholarly biography also impacted my desire to investigate LGBTQ+ parents' perspectives on the Parental Rights in Education Act. I recognize the ways in which my lens both facilitates and limits my understanding of this topic. In some ways, I am an insider: As a researcher whose career has focused on studying LGBTQ+ families, and who has written several books on the subject, I have developed trusting relationship with members of this community, which has enhanced my access to, and ability to ask difficult questions of, its members (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). In turn, I take seriously my role and privilege as a scholar who seeks to give voice to the often-silenced perspectives of a marginalized group (Bridges, 2001). However, I am aware that my insider status frames my approach to this topic, such that I carry certain knowledge, assumptions, and values about the ways in which the rights of LGBTQ+ families are under attack, which has the potential to impact survey construction, data analysis, and interpretation. This, combined with various vectors associated with geographic and social locations that render me an outsider (e.g., I am not a resident of Florida), led me to seek (a) input from stakeholders and LGBTQ+ parents in Florida during the survey development phase, and (b) a collaborative partnership with the second and third authors, whose personal, geographic, and scholarly positionalities diverge from and complement my own.

The second author (RA) is a Latinx, first-generation, cisgender, gay, queer-presenting man. This author is an assistant professor in psychology whose research addresses the intersection of Latinx LGBTQ+ youth and their families and communities, as well as transgender and gender diverse youth and their families and communities. This author has extensive advanced

qualitative research expertise. At a personal level, this researcher is parenting an 8-year-old child, with their same-gender partner, in Florida. Therefore, this law affects their family in multiple ways. The combination of the professional and personal provided this author a unique lens that was crucial during the data analysis and manuscript writing.

The third author (AF) is a Latinx, first-generation, cisgender, gay man. This author is an assistant professor in political science whose research primarily investigates public opinion, LGBTQ+ politics, and policy. This author is primarily a quantitative researcher, whose political science background and expertise in structural stigma complement the team. This author does not reside in Florida and is not directly affected by the law. Together, the authorship team is well-positioned to provide an in-depth, rigorous, and nuanced account of the participants' narratives.

## Materials

The survey contained demographic items, and a series of closed- and open-ended questions that included: 1. What are your major reasons for living in Florida? Check as many as apply: (a) to remain close to family and friends, (b) job related reasons, (c) it's where I grew up, (d) weather (e.g., warmth), (e) things to do (e.g., beaches, Disney World), (f) diversity, (g) cost of living/reduced taxes, (h) other reasons. 2. Please elaborate/explain any of the above or feel free to share more in your own words. 3. What are the major downsides of living in Florida? Check as many as apply: (a) political climate, (b) bills/legislation (please specify), (c) cost of living, (d) weather (e.g., heat, natural disasters), (e) far from where I grew up and/or family, (f) tourism, and (g) other reasons. 4. Please elaborate/explain any of the above or feel free to share more in your own words. 5. What was your initial reaction to the "Don't Say Gay" bill/law? How did your reactions and worries, if relevant, evolve over time? 6. How worried are you about the effects of the "Don't Say Gay" bill/law on your children and family? (1 = *not at all worried*, 2 = *not very worried*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *somewhat worried*, 5 = *very worried*). 7. How have you coped with this worry, if relevant? 8. Have you considered moving? If you have considered moving or wish you could move: How realistic/possible is this? What steps have you taken? What is holding you back? What are you giving up if you move? 9. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience as an LGBTQ+ parent in Florida?

## Data Analysis

Counts and descriptive statistics were calculated for closed-ended items (e.g., reasons for living in Florida). Responses to the open-ended portion of the survey ranged from one sentence to over one page of text, with most

respondents providing responses of three to five sentences. The first author used qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018) to examine responses to this portion of the survey. Qualitative content analysis is a standard method for examining open-ended responses to survey questions, generating new insights through a process of systematically identifying, coding, and categorizing primary patterns or themes in the data. It is an iterative process that typically involves (a) reading, collating, and coding data; (b) contextualizing data by meaningfully describing its content with references to exemplar quotes; and (c) relating the findings to a set of research questions (Krippendorff, 2018).

The first author's analysis focused on parents' descriptions of their responses to the law, worries, and coping, and was informed by prior literature, stigma, and minority stress perspectives. She first read all open-ended responses to gain familiarity with the data, including overarching themes. She made note of, and bracketed, her own experiences and preconceptions in an effort to facilitate a curious and open stance in relation to the data, and the ability to approach the data with a fresh perspective. Then, responses were annotated: that is, via line-by-line coding, the first author labeled phrases relevant to the primary domains of interest (e.g., worries). These codes were abstracted under larger categories and subcategories, which were positioned in relation to each other, such that connective links were established (e.g., the relationship between child age and parents' concerns) in an effort to meaningfully describe parents' experiences living in Florida in 2022 amidst the uncertainty of what the Parental Rights in Education Act might mean for their children and families. For example, parents whose children were very young (infants/toddlers) or older (e.g., high school aged) voiced fewer concerns surrounding the law. A tentative scheme was produced and reapplied to the data, such that all data were then recoded according to the revised scheme. A process of numeration (i.e., counts) facilitated the successive refinement of codes, such that the final themes selected were those experienced by a sufficient number of participants (Creswell, 1994).

*Trustworthiness.* To enhance trustworthiness in the study preparation and data collection phases, we pursued a data collection strategy (i.e., an online survey) that we believed would result in high-quality and contextually-valid data (Elo et al., 2014; Lincoln et al., 1985). We also pretested the survey instrument with key stakeholders (Elo et al, 2014). Finally, we posed both open- and closed-ended questions to participants in an effort to obtain multiple forms of data that would lend themselves to a deeper and richer understanding of the phenomena of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Morrow, 2005).

To enhance trustworthiness in the data analysis process, we as a research team sought to maintain reflexivity through open discussion of our assumptions and positionality throughout the process of examining, organizing,

and interpreting the data (Morrow, 2005). In addition, three student research assistants analyzed half of the responses to the open-ended portions, as a basic check on primary themes and respondent counts, to strengthen the credibility of the analysis. Agreement was over 95%; minor discrepancies were discussed and reconciled. For example, one coder counted worry and fear as separate reactions to the law, and another coder combined them. This led the first author to make minor modifications to the scheme, such that, for example, some reactions were collapsed (shock and horror; fear and worry). In an effort to further enhance credibility of the analysis, the second author reviewed several versions of the coding scheme, providing input on each iteration and working collaboratively with the first author to examine the fit between the data and the emerging analysis (Goldberg & Allen, 2015; Nowell et al., 2017). Upon review of the final coding scheme, the second author made several suggestions for reorganization that were integrated into the final write-up of the results.

In our presentation of findings, we aimed for *thick descriptions*—in-depth and contextually-based descriptions—as well as meaningful and appropriate use of quotations to illustrate key concepts (Lincoln et al., 1985; Morrow, 2005). We also sought to develop a complete understanding of the context surrounding the investigation, in order to meaningfully capture and convey our participants’ (i.e., LGBTQ+ parents in Florida in 2022) experiences using their particular words and expressions (Elo et al., 2014; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

## Findings

We present five major themes and 14 subthemes regarding the experiences of LGBTQ+ parents living in Florida as a result of the passing of the “Don’t Say Gay” law. The five major areas of the Findings section are: (a) living in Florida: pros and cons; (b) initial reactions to the law; (c) feelings over time; (d) coping with worries; and (e) beyond “coping”: considering the future and the possibility of relocation.

### *Living in Florida: Pros and Cons*

Participants were asked their primary reasons for living in Florida, and were given a list of possible responses, derived in part from findings of a prior study of LGBTQ+ parents in Florida (e.g., Goldberg et al., 2013). Participants were able to endorse as many reasons as they desired. Fifty-five participants (48.7%) indicated that they lived in Florida to remain close to family and friends; 53 (46.9%) indicated job related reasons; 43 (38.1%) said that it was where they grew up; 34 (30.1%) endorsed weather (e.g., warmth); 18 (15.9%) said things to do (e.g., beaches, Disney World); 17 (15.0%) indicated diversity; and 11 (9.7%) invoked cost of living and/or reduced taxes. Fifteen



participants (13.3%) cited other reasons, including: convenience of air travel, divorce/custody arrangement requires it, and love for city and state.

When asked about the major downsides of living in Florida, 84 participants (74.3%) indicated political climate, 60 (53.0%) endorsed bills and legislation, 38 (33.6%) said cost of living, 30 (26.5%) indicated weather (e.g., heat, natural disasters), 22 (19.5%) indicated that it was far from where they grew up and/or family, and six (5.3%) cited tourism. Eighteen (15.9%) participants cited other, and often multiple, reasons. These were often specific forms of legislation, such as The Parental Rights in Education Act (18); anti-abortion legislation (6); “Stop WOKE” legislation, which prevents teaching practices that address the reality of racism and issues of privilege or oppression based on race or gender more broadly (6); and anti-trans legislation (2). Eight individuals highlighted the DeSantis administration more generally, and four mentioned restrictions on voting rights. “My objections are the abortion restrictions, the “Don’t Say Gay” bill, the WOKE act, and restrictions on speech/right to assemble... and the gerrymandering and restriction of voting rights,” said a White lesbian cis woman in Putnam County. A few commented on nonpolitical aspects of living in Florida as downsides, such as weak infrastructure, overpopulation, and cost of living (e.g., low salaries, cost of parking).

Participants were given the opportunity to elaborate on the downsides of living in Florida, and those who did so often underscored their concerns about the state’s conservative and “toxic” legislation, especially those that targeted LGBTQ+ people, education, and women’s health. They also emphasized the general sociopolitical climate and dominant right-wing “rhetoric,” observing that the state was becoming “overtly racist and homophobic.” Several noted their intersectional identities (e.g., Black lesbian, queer parent of a trans child, gay father of a child with a disability) and emphasized how the political climate and the Parental Rights in Education Act in particular made them feel vulnerable on multiple levels (“Our family feels unsafe and targeted”).

## **Initial Reactions to the Law**

Respondents were asked, in an open-ended manner, about their initial reactions to the Parental Rights in Education Act when it was proposed, and how, if relevant, their reactions and worries evolved over time (e.g., as it gained traction in the press and was eventually signed into law). Most ( $n = 110$ , 97.3%) responded to this question.

## Negative Reactions

Eighty-one participants (73.6%) named at least one negative emotion in response to the law (e.g., “My initial reaction was anger and sadness over having our identities targeted for political reasons”).

*Fear and Worry.* Fear and worry were the most frequently mentioned initial responses ( $n = 35$ , 31.8%). “I feel like the laws are not protecting me and my family; I’m scared for our health and overall well-being,” said a White lesbian cis mother in Flagler County. A White lesbian cis mother in Santa Rosa County shared:

Our daughter is still very young, but it makes me anxious for how she will be treated and see herself with all of the negative connotations surround[ing] gay parents. It’s a viewpoint that I had to deal with growing up and I don’t want that for her.

*Anger and Fury.* Anger and fury were often articulated ( $n = 21$ , 19.1%), with parents noting the senselessness and unnecessary nature of such targeting and exclusion. “Anger. Doesn’t even make sense. They’ll use any excuse to be divisive,” said a White lesbian cis woman in Broward County. “[I’m] angry. It’s unnecessary and excludes an entire group of people... Not saying the word [gay] doesn’t make us go away,” said a Latinx bisexual cis woman in Broward County.

*Other Negative Reactions.* Shock and horror were frequent reactions ( $n = 15$ , 13.6% of 110): “The thought that this is happening in 2022 is mind-blowing,” “I was shocked that my state would implement such hateful laws that would exclude my family and make our kids feel *less than* in school”; as was disbelief and confusion ( $n = 10$ , 9.1%): “With everything going on in the world and especially in our country, why are we focusing on this?” Other reactions included sadness ( $n = 9$ , 8.2%): “I’m saddened for children who can’t speak their minds, saddened as a parent because we’re moving backwards”, disappointment (e.g., in lawmakers;  $n = 7$ , 6.4%), disgust ( $n = 5$ , 4.5%), and denial ( $n = 2$ , 1.8%). Five additional parents (4.5%) noted that they were sad but unsurprised.

## Other Reactions

Not all parents expressed strong negative emotions. Some vocalized a lack of intense concern ( $n = 29$ , 26.4%), which was usually rooted in (a) feeling that the law would not directly impact them because of their children’s age or

educational context, (b) perceiving the law to be reasonable and thus not a threat to their family, and (c) believing that it was unenforceable.

*No Direct Impact.* Eighteen parents (16.4%) voiced a relative lack of concern due to their children's age (very young or older) and/or their educational context (e.g., private schools). Those with young children noted that they were not yet in school, and thus the law would not affect them; and parents hoped that the law would be overturned or prove unenforceable. Parents of older (e.g., high school aged) children felt that they would be relatively "immune" from the effects of the law, given its primary focus on elementary school. Parents of children in private schools felt similarly, observing that their children would be protected from the direct effects of the law, thereby minimizing its impact. A White bisexual cis woman in Miami-Dade County said, "Fortunately, our son is in a private school so we are sheltered a bit from the direct impact of the... bill" but acknowledged that "the general political climate in Florida is scary."

*Law is Reasonable.* Six (5.5%) parents voiced that they were unbothered or indifferent, as they did not view the law as a threat to their families. They believed that "age-appropriate" materials should be taught in classrooms, and did not interpret the law's language as undermining their family: "It just says don't teach students in K-3rd grade about sex. I agree. Our daughter knew from toddlerhood that we were her parents and she had two dads; she didn't need a teacher explaining that," said a White gay cis man in Brevard County. A White lesbian cis woman in Alachua County suggested that "there may have been a grain of a good idea that was then taken way too far" but added, "I don't believe that changing genders should be discussed in the elementary classroom unless it is in regards to something brought up by a student."

*Law is Unenforceable.* Five parents (5.5%) expressed that they were unconcerned, believing that the law would ultimately prove to be either "not as big of a deal as expected" or "unenforceable." A White lesbian cis woman in Leon County, for example, felt that it was meant to score "political points with a conservative base [but was] unenforceable."

### *Retrospective Descriptions of Feelings and Their Perceived Change Over Time*

Some ( $n = 22$ , 19.5%) participants articulated their feelings over time. This subsample of participants largely addressed intensifying concerns, while a minority noted decreasing concerns.

*Worry and Concern Intensified.* Among those who commented on how their feelings about the law evolved over time, most ( $n = 15$ , 68.2% of 22) shared that their fears, worries, and concerns grew more pronounced, such that they became more anxious about how it would affect their children, noting that it could very well have the effect of normalizing and encouraging discrimination, resulting in an inhospitable and possibly unlivable environment for their families. Said a White lesbian nonbinary parent living in Alachua County, “I worried initially that it would re-inflate culture wars and re-ignite anti-LGBTQ+ stereotypes. I worried it would make the climate more hostile for my kids. As it continued, and as the rhetoric escalated... I became more concerned.” One White queer cis woman living in Leon County shared: “I have become increasingly paranoid that we will have to seek asylum or something to be safe”; in turn, “I have made a packing list of things that we would need if we needed to make a quick exit from the area.”

For some parents, fears and worries intensified amidst growing awareness that the law was not a singular event but part of a larger cultural shift in Florida and beyond that had implications for their personal and family well-being. They highlighted the larger sociopolitical climate of Florida, viewing it as just the most recent example of a shifting movement towards greater conservatism and increased hostility towards marginalized groups. In turn, they shared their alarm related to not simply “Don’t Say Gay” legislation, but the broader and increasingly hostile climate in Florida, which they saw as simultaneously reflecting and signaling anti-LGBTQ legislation. A White queer cis woman in Miami-Dade County said, “My fury and fear have increased as it’s become clear that it isn’t just Florida; anti-LGBTQ politics and demonizing trans people in particular is becoming a major tactic for people who, without exaggeration, would like to destroy democracy.” A White gay cis father in Broward County said,

The Don’t Say Gay law is just one of many horrible policies being imposed by Republicans like DeSantis. They are also trying to prohibit gender affirming health care, stopping the teaching of racism and homophobia, and defunding organizations that support equality and protect vulnerable populations.

*Lack of Concern Evolved Into Fear and Worry.* Five participants shared that although they were initially relatively unconcerned, they became fearful and worried as they witnessed the intensification of anti-LGBTQ+ climate in Florida surrounding the Parental Rights in Education Act, and began to consider the implications of the law for their family’s safety and well-being at school and within Florida at large. A White lesbian cis mother living in Alachua County, who was initially “not that worried,” said:

I felt it promoted an agenda that there is something “not right” or harmful for children to be aware that some people make different choices and have families that are diverse. Further, it is harmful to those children who have same-sex or nonbinary parents or relatives by promoting the idea that their families are undesirable or unsavory. It broke my heart to see our state go back to a restrictive past.

A Latinx lesbian cis woman in Miami-Dade County who initially saw the law as “ridiculous” said that over time, she became alarmed,

as we began to see [growing] control on queer voices in Florida. I became fearful of the possible future where my son could not talk about his own family at school and I fear for the mental and physical safety of queer educators.

*Worry and Concern Decreased.* Two participants said that they were initially concerned—but, as they did more research on the legislation to manage their fears, they were reassured by what they learned or concluded. A Latinx trans woman in Miami-Dade County said:

Once I read the actual bill, it allayed some of my fears. I am okay with and support the idea of not teaching or telling young children (under third grade) [about LGBTQ people or sexuality]; however, I am concerned that the “age appropriate and developmentally appropriate” part is too vague and could be interpreted too loosely.

### *Coping With Worries*

When asked, in an open-ended question, how they had coped with worries related to the act, parents named a variety of strategies. A total of 105 (92.9%) responded to this question. Many identified multiple strategies, with 70 (66.7%) naming at least one strategy.

*Activism.* A dominant coping strategy was activism: 25 participants (23.8% of 105) said that they had participated in activism against the Parental Rights in Education Act, including protests and demonstrations, “becoming active with organizations that are challenging these laws,” donating money to organizations fighting the legislation, and voting. “Activism is the best response I think; I did so much after 2016, and a lot of it was fun, and I made good friends... I know that it’s actually psychologically key,” said a White bisexual cis woman in Miami-Dade County. A few of these parents shared that part of their activism was speaking out on social media, at work, and at their children’s school, in order to “make [their] voice heard.”

Notably, several parents spoke to how their activism and parenting served as a means of queer resistance and empowerment for them and their families. A White lesbian nonbinary parent in Alachua County said:

Our county has become a focus of political intervention in the state and so [our children] witness these debates playing out in the paper, online, and in our comments in the house. They witness us speaking up, writing letters to the editor, and appearing at school board meetings.

A Latinx lesbian cis mother in Miami-Dade County said:

We do our best to instill the right things in our children to help them grow to be kind collective members of society. As queer parents, we do this all in spite of a society that actively tries to silence us. But what they do not understand is that we also raise our children to scream above the silence and fight for the right to love and exist without persecution. [They] are still trying to push a White heteronormative narrative onto our rainbow queer world.

**Social Support.** Some coped with their feelings surrounding the law through the use of social support ( $n = 30$ , 28.6%), including connecting with, talking to, and getting support from friends ( $n = 24$ , 22.9%) as well as family ( $n = 12$ , 11.4%): “I have many wonderful friends and a loving family of origin and that is key”; “I have been getting closer to other LGBTQ families”; “[I’ve been staying connected] through social media and a lot of lively discussion with family and friends.” Four (3.8%) mentioned talking to their partner and two (1.9%) mentioned talking to their children.

**Avoiding News and Media.** Another key coping strategy was avoiding the news and media. Twenty-three participants (21.9%) said that they had avoided the news and/or social media: “I avoid the news and I deactivated social media”; “I don’t follow the news.”

**Therapy and Medication.** Eleven (10.5%) coped with the help of medication and/or therapy: “I know I can call her if I need to and have a one-off session”; “I’m already in therapy so I’ve been processing there.” In the context of describing how they had coped, several respondents noted that they had struggled with and were in treatment for depression and anxiety before the bill was introduced. A White bisexual cis woman in Saint Lucie County said, “I personally already suffer from [posttraumatic stress disorder] and anxiety, so it has made it so much more difficult to deal with these things.”

**Being More Out.** Seven participants (6.7%) mentioned efforts to be more visible and out (e.g., wearing clothing, stickers, or pins that signify LGBTQ+).

identity or support; putting rainbow stickers on their car or Pride flags on their house), “we need to resist, not acquiesce to these racist and homophobic laws”. Said a Latinx gay cis man in Miami-Dade County, “I am... trying to show that I am gay myself by wearing clothing or pins or stickers that show LGBTQ+ support and share my identity as one in this community.”

*Planning for the Future.* Some participants identified planning for the future and a possible eventual departure from Florida as a way to cope with anxiety related to the Parental Rights in Education Act. Seven (6.7%) said that they had explored other employment opportunities (“I’m talking to colleagues outside of [workplace] about job opportunities”) and/or moving (“we are planning an escape route”; “I’ve been making plans and researching options to sell our house, so we can move”).

*Other Coping Strategies.* Seven (6.7%) mentioned isolation as a coping strategy (“we’ve definitely isolated ourselves”) including separating from friends who “I ethically cannot be friends with. It’s been lonely.” In addition to isolation, one parent mentioned exercise; one mentioned “stress eating,” which had resulted in weight gain; one mentioned substance use; and one mentioned journaling.

*No Need for “Coping”.* Some participants dismissed the need for coping. Namely, six parents (5.7%) indicated that they did not see the relevance of or need for coping because they were not particularly worried about the law’s impact or how it would change life for their children or families. A Latinx bisexual trans woman in Miami-Dade County said, “I’m not worried. There has always been some anti-LGBTQ feelings in Florida, but I don’t think/feel they’re getting worse.” A White lesbian cis woman in Broward County said, “Well, my kids are still young so I haven’t done much yet, and I don’t have any extra time with twin 2-year-olds.”

### *Beyond “Coping”: Considering the Future and the Possibility of Relocation*

As noted above, some participants shared that they were coping with distress related to the law by planning for the future, including possible relocation. Interested in the extent to which participants were considering relocation, we explicitly asked participants if they had considered moving out of Florida, and found that almost half of the 105 who responded ( $n = 51$ , 48.6% of 105) had “considered moving,” with 15 (14.2%) affirming that they had “actively taken steps” to move out of Florida. Participants often elaborated, saying, for example: “I considered moving back to NY since we moved down here. I will never go back in the closet and am allowed to be here and live just like

everyone else” (White lesbian cis parent in Palm Beach County) and “We are looking into options to sell our home and move out of the state. It does not feel that it would be safe to continue living in Florida” (multiracial queer non-binary parent in Broward County).

To obtain more details regarding participants’ intentions to remain in or leave Florida, participants were asked, in an open-ended query—if they had considered moving or wished they could move, how realistic this was, what steps they had taken, what was holding them back, and what they were giving up if they moved. Ten respondents (9.5%) said that this was very realistic, explaining that they were saving money, actively looking for jobs, and exploring the housing market. Said a Latinx gay cis father in Broward County:

We are looking at [state] and researching home purchase and licensure endorsement, and also looking at cost of private schools for the two youngest. Currently, we are running scenarios where we leave and the other where we put the girls in private school. It’s a cost benefit analysis.

Five parents (4.8%) said they were looking into moving out of the country, with three noting that they or their partners had dual citizenship: “Should Trump (again) or DeSantis become president, we have an exit plan to move out of the country,” said a White gay cis man in Broward County. Seven parents (6.7%) said they wanted to move, and planned to in the future, but were waiting for specific milestones to occur (e.g., finishing fertility treatment; having a baby; children to be school-aged; children to graduate high school; retirement). A White lesbian cis woman in Manatee County said, “We plan to wait about 1 year. We have begun looking at houses in other states. [I’m pregnant] and we don’t want to move when I’d have to find a new OBGYN.”

Some participants expressed feeling torn, specifically mentioning that they loved their communities of friends and family ( $n = 6$ , 5.7%), beautiful homes ( $n = 2$ , 1.9%), and/or great jobs ( $n = 2$ , 1.9%), while at the same time bemoaning the political climate (and in some cases other factors such as the high cost of living) in Florida. Said a Latinx queer cis man in Alachua County,

I am terrified that I would need to make decision to leave Florida and leave my parents. The idea of having to leave to protect my child and my partner and I is scary but one I am willing to do.

These participants often felt that they were engaged in an unwanted, unpleasant cost-benefit analysis. As a multiracial queer nonbinary parent in Broward County stated:

We have done research and reached out to realtors and people selling or renting homes in some of the locations that we’d be interested in moving. We’ve held off



on putting our house on the market, but we are prepping it to... sell. Family is the biggest thing holding us back. We both grew up in [here] and have older parents, one who is quite ill. We also feel that the bond between our son and family is important. We have built a life here and have friends that we would be leaving. My wife would be losing many years in [her job as a teacher], but we do not see how she will be able to... work here due to this legislation. Unfortunately, I do not see how we will be able to stay here for much longer.

A White lesbian cis mother in Flagler County said:

I was in the process of buying an office and opening my own practice when the “Don’t Say Gay” bill passed. I decided to not move forward with the purchase. I have spent \$20,000 traveling to look at practices to purchase in LGBTQ+ friendly states, speaking to attorneys... etc. We are giving up everything. Our lives and my career [are] here. We want to stay and fight, but I’m not sure it’s best for my children.

Some parents ultimately felt that moving was currently too difficult to envision, as they had too many ties and obligations rooting them in Florida, such as extended family ( $n = 8$ , 7.6%), jobs that would be difficult to find elsewhere ( $n = 6$ , 5.7%), caregiving for older parents ( $n = 3$ , 2.9%), children with serious disabilities ( $n = 2$ , 1.9%), and their own health issues and disabilities ( $n = 2$ , 1.9%).

Five participants (4.8%) commented that while the laws and political environment of Florida were distasteful to them, they lived in more progressive regions of the state that somewhat protected them from Florida’s discriminatory laws and sociopolitical climate, and were therefore unlikely to move in the near future. A White lesbian cis woman in Broward County shared, “The area I live in is far more liberal than the rest of the state. So, we are somewhat insulated from things.” A White gay cis father in Pinellas County reflected that he and his husband felt safer (e.g., “comfortable holding hands”) in his current community in St. Petersburg “than we did when we lived in Fort Lauderdale. [Here], there are hundreds of homes with pride flags... but there’s always someone. We have a few Republican neighbors.” He felt comfortable “for the time being,” but noted, “time will tell.”

## Discussion

The passage of laws and policies that stigmatize groups can be a unique stressor to group members. A well-developed literature has established direct and indirect ways that structural stigma impacts LGBTQ+ people (e.g., [Hatzenbuehler, 2016](#); [Horne, Johnson, et al., 2022a](#); [Price et al., 2021, 2023](#)). Scholars have also documented how responses to stressors are not uniform for

all members of stigmatized groups (Patterson et al., 2020; Rao et al., 2020). The current study, which builds on the existing literature, specifically set out to investigate how LGBTQ+ parents in Florida were responding to and coping with the threat of the Parental Rights in Education Act, which, amidst an increasingly hostile sociopolitical climate, threatens to silence and marginalize their children and families. Responding to calls for research on how vulnerable Floridians are responding to and being impacted by the act (Kline et al., 2022), it provides a snapshot of LGBTQ+ parents' attitudes and concerns in a time of acute legislative crisis.

### *Responding to and Coping With the Law*

Although the consequences of the Parental Rights in Education Act were still uncertain, inasmuch as the participants were surveyed during the summer, the fact that it was accompanied by an increasingly hostile sociopolitical context across the state was enough to create fear, anger, disbelief, and sadness. Such emotional responses echo prior work on how LGBTQ+ parents responded to the election of President Trump (Gabriele-Black et al., 2021), but differ in that the parents in this study were generally not surprised by the Parental Rights in Education Act, in that it fell in line with many other recent legislative attacks on LGBTQ+ people and families (Abreu et al., 2021a). It also differs in that, contrary to prior work on LGBTQ+ people's responses to anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, parents' concerns were mostly centered on their children, and, secondarily, their families: indeed, the Parental Rights in Education Act is centrally focused on the daily learning environment of children (Kline et al., 2022). Participants also voiced a sense of collective uncertainty regarding how the legislation would affect their families, which created an added layer of stress (Gonzalez et al., 2018; Kazyak, 2015). They did not know how, or how much, the law would ultimately impact their families' lives, which left them feeling fearful and unsafe, echoing the sentiments of a sample of Black lesbian mothers who were interviewed before and immediately after President Trump took office (Radis & Nadan, 2021). Similar to these mothers, our participants voiced fears associated with being a potentially "targeted" group, under scrutiny by the government, which generated unease about being the focus of ongoing future sociopolitical bias. These findings point to the increased stress exposure that LGBTQ+ people confront as a result of structural stigma, which can contribute to emotional dysregulation and distress (Hatzenbuehler, 2009).

Notably, a minority of participants were not especially worried, interpreting the Parental Rights in Education Act as either reasonable, unenforceable, or not applicable to their families because of the age of their children and/or the type of school they attended (i.e., private). Certain privileged statuses may also have enabled them to feel less urgency about their family's future, mitigating perceived or feared consequences associated with

state-sponsored stigma (Pachankis et al., 2017; Schlehofer et al., 2023). For example, LGBTQ+ parents of a higher socioeconomic status often possess the resources to find LGBTQ+-friendly schools (Goldberg et al., 2018). This highlights how the minority stress created by the law is not uniform, but distributed unequally across diverse LGBTQ+ people and parents (Kline et al., 2022; Meyer, 2003, 2015; Rao et al., 2020), some of whom have more power than others to make alternative schooling arrangements or even to move altogether. This highlights the need for attention to the intersectional nature of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and its consequences, as LGBTQ+ people who are of Color, immigrants, have disabilities, and/or are poor likely experience greater structural stigma and exclusion, and possibly greater stress (Grzanka et al., 2020; Kline et al., 2022).

Significantly, some participants indicated that their worry intensified over time, as the law took effect and was seemingly accompanied by an increasingly hostile social climate for LGBTQ+ people and other marginalized groups. Laws and policies impact and are impacted by social climate, as documented by research showing associations among anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, social and political climate, and mental health outcomes of LGBTQ+ parents and children (Goldberg & Smith, 2011; Lick et al., 2012). A few participants, though, asserted that their worry about the implications of the Parental Rights in Education Act subsided over time. Overall, our findings are consistent with research on the insidious and cumulative effects of minority stress on LGBTQ+ people as a result of enforcing structural stigma such as passing oppressive laws, but also underscore the need to conduct longitudinal research on LGBTQ+ parent families to determine how patterns of response to the “Don’t Say Gay” law and similar legislation shift and evolve over time (Kline et al., 2022).

Parents coped with the stress associated with the law and what it might mean for their families in a variety of ways. Almost one-quarter were engaged in activism, a well-documented strategy to deal with and offset minority stress, and one that can be seen as an empowering means of resistance (Goldberg et al., 2020; Riggles et al., 2008). As a form of collective action, activism can promote resilience and buffer the effect of structural stigma on mental health (Breslow et al., 2015), but can also be exhausting if unaccompanied by boundaries and other forms of self-preservation (Scheidler et al., 2022). It is notable that some parents in this study described involving their children in activism, thus modeling for them a documented form of queer family resistance that integrates diverse socialization processes such as preparation for bias and pride in their family structure (Goldberg & Smith, 2016; Oakley et al., 2017).

Consistent with the current literature (Matsuno & Israel, 2018), participants drew on support from friends and family to cope with minority stress as a result of the systemic oppression of LGBTQ+ people. Social support may be

particularly important during times of heightened stress associated with legislative threats to one's identity, particularly from those who share one's identity (Gabriele-Black et al., 2021; Horne, McGinley, et al., 2022b). Consistent with research finding that LGBTQ+ people may cope with systemic oppression and anti-LGBTQ+ political rhetoric specifically via behavioral disengagement from politics (e.g., Gonzalez et al., 2022), almost a quarter of participants described actively avoiding the news and social media to protect their own and their family's well-being. Such distancing can be viewed as a self-protective mechanism, aimed to mitigate minority stress (Gabriele-Black et al., 2021), which may be successful in some cases given that greater exposure to political discourse about LGBTQ+ rights and/or negative messaging about LGBTQ+ people in the media is related to poorer mental health among LGBTQ+ people (Hughto et al., 2021; Raifman et al., 2018).

Smaller numbers of participants coped by seeking out therapy, as well as actively taking steps to be more out in their lives. Being more out, such as via advocacy, may also be a form of personal empowerment in response to oppressive structures, although it also carries risks associated with vulnerability and burnout, particularly among multiply marginalized individuals (Scheidler et al., 2022). Seeking out therapy, like seeking out social support, can be viewed as a proactive coping strategy aimed to reduce minority stress, especially if therapists are LGBTQ-affirming and trained to execute effective, evidence-based interventions (Chaudoir et al., 2017).

Finally, some parents coped with their fears and uncertainty by contemplating leaving or taking steps to leave Florida to protect themselves and their families. This finding compliments other recent work on how members of the LGBTQ+ community and their families (e.g., parents of trans youth) are coping with the rise of anti-LGBTQ+ laws in the United States (e.g., Abreu et al., 2021b). It is essential to recognize such relocation fantasies as a compulsory response to the stress created by structural stigma, whereby laws such as the Parental Rights in Education Act serve to create an inhospitable and unwelcoming environment (Rao et al., 2020).

### *Living in Florida and Relocation as a Strategy for Survival*

Participants endorsed meaningful, nontrivial reasons for living in Florida, with many naming family and caregiving commitments, friends and community connections, and employment reasons as key factors tying them to the state. Yet, many participants also highlighted the political climate and/or specific legislation, including but not limited to the Parental Rights in Education Act, as undermining their enthusiasm for living in and remaining in Florida. Indeed, almost half of participants were actively considering moving out of Florida, and few were resolute that they would remain in Florida. Many

felt torn between the homes, family, friends, and careers that they loved, and the recognition that the current climate was not improving and their families might not be safe. They saw laws such as “Don’t Say Gay” as indicative of a larger political push that fosters an intolerant culture and hostility towards LGBTQ+ parents and students (Dawson, 2021). Similar trends have been observed in recent research on the impact of anti-trans laws and policies on parents of trans youth (Abreu et al., 2021b), and speak to the impact that the introduction and passing of anti-LGBTQ+ laws and policies—a form of enacting and perpetuating structural stigma (Patterson et al., 2020)—is having on LGBTQ+ people and families. Prior research has documented the long-term psychological effects that structural stigma, such as discriminatory laws, have on LGBTQ+ people, even when such laws are not enforced, inasmuch as they often create stress and result in feelings of dehumanization, disempowerment, and hopelessness (Rao et al., 2020; Russell et al., 2011). For people living in states where their basic rights are being threatened, and who possess the resources to be able to leave, relocating may seem necessary—even more important than staying close to family, living in a beloved home, or retaining employment in a great job. But not all LGBTQ+ parents can relocate, for financial, job-related, caregiving, or other reasons. Even in our well-resourced sample, some parents highlighted these and other factors as grounding them in Florida, preventing them from planning for or even fully imagining escape as an option.

### *Strengths and Limitations*

The current study has a number of strengths as well as several key limitations. One key strength is that our study provides an initial or “baseline” snapshot of how LGBTQ+ parents in Florida are coping with pivotal legislation that has the potential to become increasingly stressful for residents in the months and years to come. Our ability to examine LGBTQ+ parents’ responses to structural stigma in “real time,” as its fallout was only becoming known, is a strength, as scholars often study the effects of legislation only after significant time has passed since its institutionalization (Kline et al., 2022). Future work is necessary to explore LGBTQ+ parents’ and children’s experiences across the school year and beyond—as well as how LGBTQ+ parents are responding to the expansion of the law to K–12 education (Izaguirre & Farrington, 2023). Indeed, some participants in this study indicated that their fears were mitigated by the fact that the act only applied to K–3 schooling; in turn, of interest is how its expansion is creating intensified and/or new concerns for LGBTQ+ parents as they face the possible silencing of conversations about LGBTQ+ people across all grade levels in public schools (Kline et al., 2022).

Another key strength of our study is that, unlike previous recent surveys of the impact of anti-LGBTQ+ laws and policies on members of the LGBTQ+

community (e.g., [Abreu et al., 2021a](#)), our sample has a good number of people of Color. Perhaps, this is the case because Florida has a large portion of Latinx/Hispanic individuals. On the other hand, our study did not actively inquire about intersectional experiences, although some respondents invoked concerns about legislation that restricts teaching about race and ethnicity in the context of highlighting their concerns about the Parental Rights in Education law and the overall climate of Florida. Because Florida has passed a number of other oppressive laws and policies in the last few years (e.g., Stop WOKE Act; [Luneau, 2022](#)), LGBTQ+ people of Color may be experiencing higher levels of stress related to how various oppressive laws and policies affect their different intersecting identities. Along these lines, LGBTQ+ people of Color may be using culturally appropriate coping strategies that are different from those used by their LGBTQ+ White counterparts ([Abreu et al., 2021a](#)).

A limitation of our study is our recruitment strategy. Because most of our recruitment happened by sharing our study with specific organizations and researchers' personal contacts, it is plausible that we only reached a narrow group of LGBTQ+ individuals who live in Florida. Although this was done intentionally to avoid fraudulent respondents, we may have failed to capture other reactions and forms of coping to this law. Subsequent research may benefit from drawing samples from vendors (e.g., Prolific) that can screen on key demographics (e.g., LGBTQ+ status, parental status, geographic location). Although more costly and not probabilistic, the resultant sample may be more demographically diverse, particularly as it relates to income and other dimensions of privilege. Indeed, our sample was generally affluent; in turn, it is essential that we gain insight into how the Parental Rights in Education Act and similar legislation impacts LGBTQ+ parent families with fewer economic resources, who may face greater constraints on their ability to relocate or pursue alternate schooling arrangements.

In surveying LGBTQ+ parents about their experiences and perspectives related to the Parental Rights in Education Act, we obtained a snapshot of a very specific (and often invisible) segment of the population, who will likely be influenced by this law. Yet, we did not capture the views of children of LGBTQ+ parents, nor LGBTQ+ youth, who represent key groups who are affected by the law. Researchers would benefit from gaining insight into their opinions and experiences—although it is important to acknowledge the many barriers to obtaining high quality survey data from youth themselves, including obtaining parental consent and using effective means of recruitment ([Fletcher & Hunter, 2003](#)).

## *Implications for Practice, Research, Advocacy, and Education and Training*

Counseling psychologists have a long history of advocacy and activism with and on behalf of marginalized communities, including LGBTQ+ people (e.g., DeBlaere et al., 2019; Hargons et al., 2017; Whitman et al., 2007). Such activism has taken a variety of forms, including training school counselors in LGBTQ+ affirming practices (Whitman et al., 2007) and developing empirically based guidelines for affirming practice with LGBTQ+ populations (American Psychological Association, 2022). They also call attention to the harmful effects of oppressive social systems, including the legal system (Fine et al., 2018). Contemporary counseling psychologists are advised to evaluate how their expertise, professional role, and context (e.g., geographic, employment) can be leveraged to enable them to best advocate for LGBTQ+ individuals in Florida and beyond. DeBlaere et al. (2019) suggested that counseling psychologists have a responsibility to play a role in dismantling systems of oppression and using their privilege to advocate for those most impacted by these systems. To accomplish this, counseling psychologists should work alongside community leaders and organizers, and engage in research to impact activism (Hargons et al., 2017).

With regards to clinical practice, counselors across the United States, and especially in states where legislation such as the Parental Rights in Education Act is being debated and/or has been passed into law, need to be aware of how LGBTQ+ parents and their children are coping amidst ongoing efforts to invalidate and/or erase their identities. The uncertainty associated with such legislation is, in and of itself, a stressor (Home, Johnson, et al., 2022a; Kazyak, 2015); indeed, the LGBTQ+ parents in our study expressed a sense of dread surrounding the legislation, but some also voiced hope that its impacts would not be as bad as expected. Clinicians have an important role to play in supporting LGBTQ+ parents in acknowledging and coping with the stress associated with an uncertain and swiftly changing legal and political landscape (Kuper et al., 2022), as well as the stress of navigating laws that limit or ban LGBTQ+ topics in schools.

Clinicians should be aware of the impact of minority stress on LGBTQ+ people and their families. Specifically, clinicians must understand that anti-LGBTQ+ laws may lead to internalized negative messages about oneself and about LGBTQ+ parent families, as well as heighten negative mental health outcomes in anticipation of experiencing rejection and discrimination. Thus, it is important for clinicians to acknowledge the impact that these laws are having on LGBTQ+ parents and their children (keeping in mind the wide range of emotional reactions that our participants shared) and be prepared to support them in developing coping strategies. In addition, given the numerous negative messages to which LGBTQ+ parent families are exposed, it is crucial

for clinicians to center the unique and positive aspects of being an LGBTQ+ person when working with this population (Rostosky & Riggle, 2015). This approach can help to affirm for LGBTQ+ parent families that these oppressive laws are not a reflection of who they are or their family structure, but rather a direct result of the rise of bigotry in the United States. In doing so, clinicians can use effective LGBTQ+-focused evidence-based practices, such as expressive writing interventions, to enable LGBTQ+ parents to make emotional connections and to better understand how different forms of LGBTQ+ oppression affect them and their children (see Abreu et al., 2020; Levitt et al., 2022). Moreover, clinicians should support clients in accessing resources that will enable them to fight against such legislation if desired but also enable them to rest and/or mitigate the effects of such legislation on their families (Grzanka et al., 2020; Kuper et al., 2022).

Regarding research, more work is needed to explore how LGBTQ+ Floridians, and parents in particular, are managing in the aftermath of the Parental Rights in Education Act being signed into law. Laws may be misunderstood or misinterpreted such that their implementation may go beyond or deviate from the actual language of the statute; of interest is whether and how LGBTQ+ parents of children of different ages and in different school settings are experiencing overreach or mis-application of the law. Also of importance is understanding whether LGBTQ+ parent families are experiencing more subtle effects of the legislation, such as distancing or hostility from other parents. And, of interest is whether LGBTQ+ parents have withdrawn from school communities (e.g., as volunteers) and how this affects them, their children, and schools.

Finally, research is needed to examine how the stress of anticipating and managing the marginalization associated with the Parental Rights in Education Act and other forms of discriminatory legislation affect not only parents as individuals, but their couple and family relationships. The feelings of worry, fear, shock, and dread that parents noted, for example, may not only impact LGBTQ+ parents' mental health, but may strain their couple relationships and parenting capacities: indeed, recent work found that legal inequities and related worries about discrimination were linked to relationship distress, which was linked to higher parenting stress, among LGBTQ+ parents (Horne, Johnson, et al., 2022a).

Regarding training, counseling psychologists need to be trained on the ways in which LGBTQ+ individuals are necessarily embedded in a larger network of interlocking systems that have the power to oppress or uplift and empower. Consistent with counseling psychology values of person-environment interactions and understanding the impact of culture on the well-being of marginalized groups (e.g., Scheel et al., 2018), counseling psychology programs should bring attention to how anti-LGBTQ+ laws and policies have negative effects on the LGBTQ+ community as a collective. For



example, the Parental Rights in Education law not only affects LGBTQ+ parents, but could affect the well-being of nonparent LGBTQ+ people as well via witnessing the dehumanization and erasure of people who share their experiences and identities. In addition, counseling psychology programs should prepare their trainees to identify, and work to address, the harms caused by anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, and should provide models for combining research, clinical work, and advocacy in this area (Alexander & Allo, 2021; Heesacker, 2018). For example, counseling psychology programs could incorporate the scientist–practitioner–advocate model (Mallinckrodt et al., 2014; Miles & Fassinger, 2021) into their training in order to enhance doctoral students’ understanding of how science, practice, and advocacy work in synergy, which will enable them to more effectively address the impacts of anti-LGBTQ+ policies on clients’ presenting concerns.

## Conclusions

Although often invisible in larger discussions of legislation related to teaching about sexuality and gender in schools, LGBTQ+ parents, children, and families have been impacted by the passing of the Parental Rights in Education Act in Florida. Participants in our research reported a variety of reactions to the law, with the majority expressing fear, anger, and disbelief. Participants also shared ways in which they are coping, such as through activism and seeking social support, as well as planning for the future. This study contributes to research on the impact of structural stigma, in the form of anti-LGBTQ+ laws and policies, on the well-being of LGBTQ+ people and their families. Drawing from our findings, we call on counseling psychologists to engage in individual and systemic interventions in order to affirm and advocate for LGBTQ+ parents and their families.

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