


Working with Pride:

Young LGBTQ+ Workers, Labor Violations, and Safety Concerns

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Although California has made significant strides in LGBTQ+ rights over the past couple of decades, many people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or non-heterosexual continue to face discrimination and unfair treatment at work.¹ Such reality holds in Santa Cruz County, where LGBTQ+ individuals make up a significant portion of the young adult workforce. This fact sheet draws on original data from the Thriving Youth Study, led by the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center and the UCSC Center for Labor and Community, which surveyed Santa Cruz County residents and workers aged 18 to 34.² The findings point to the urgent need for stronger protection and labor law enforcement, primarily for young LGBTQ+workers.

In our survey, 29 percent of respondents identified as LGBTQ+. While the survey does not offer a precise count of LGBTQ+ workers in the county, survey weights adjust results to reflect the demographics of Santa Cruz County's young adult population, including in-school enrollment, age, race, and gender. Our finding suggests that LGBTQ+ individuals are a sizable part of the local young workforce.

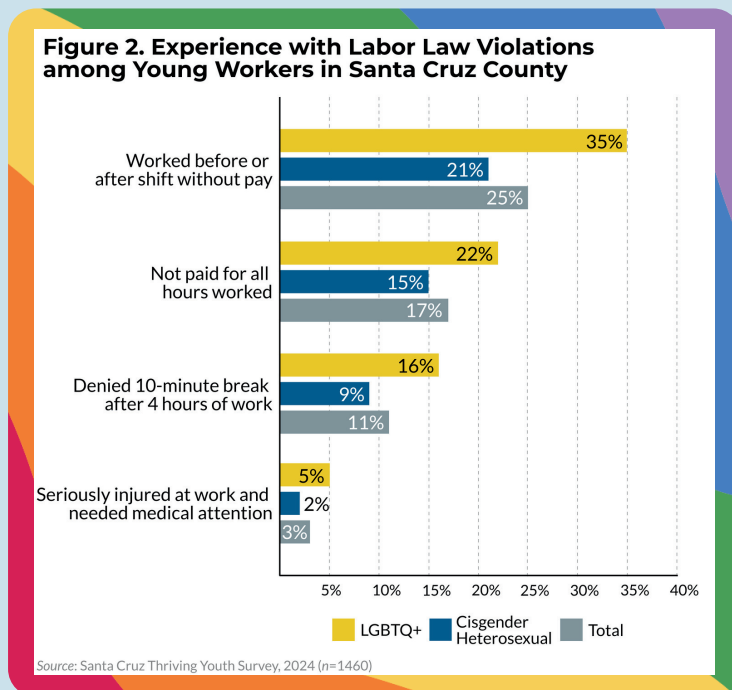
A square infographic with a white center and a colorful, multi-colored border. The text inside the white center reads: "29% of young workers identified as LGBTQ+".

**29% of young
workers
identified as
LGBTQ+**

Source: Santa Cruz Thriving Youth Survey, 2024 (n=1460)

Our survey reveals troubling labor law violations and unsafe working conditions that affect young workers, especially those who identify as LGBTQ+. As demonstrated in Figure 2, 35 percent of LGBTQ+ respondents reported working off the clock, compared to 21 percent of cisgender heterosexual young workers.³ About 25 percent of LGBTQ+ respondents said they had performed unpaid work, versus 16 percent of their cisgender heterosexual peers. Meanwhile, 16 percent of LGBTQ+ workers were denied legally required breaks after their four-hour work shift, compared to 9 percent of workers who identified as cisgender heterosexual. And while 3 percent of respondents reported serious injuries during their work shift, the percentage was slightly higher among those who identify as LGBTQ+.

Further study is underway to help explain why LGBTQ+ workers in Santa Cruz County experience higher rates of wage theft and workplace injury. Previous research has shown that nationally, LGBTQ+ people face more discrimination than their cisgender heterosexual peers, and are over-represented in specific industries such as food service, retail, and education.⁴ These findings underscore the urgent need for targeted action to reduce labor law violations and improve workplace safety for all in Santa Cruz County, including LGBTQ+ young workers.



Strengthening enforcement of existing labor laws and bolstering anti-discrimination protections allow LGBTQ+ workers to demand their rights without fear of retaliation. Accessible education on worker rights and training for employers and managers on inclusive labor practices can build safer and fairer workplaces for LGBTQ+ employees. Creating environments free from discrimination against LGBTQ+ and other marginalized groups requires enforced employer accountability. Most importantly, expanding union representation and supporting young workers' rights to act and bargain collectively will help employees empower themselves in their workplace. By advancing these strategies, we can help ensure that all young workers in Santa Cruz County—regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity—are paid fair wages and employed in settings that uphold their rights, safety, and dignity.

Footnotes

¹ Smith, Caleb and Haley Norris. 2025. "The LGBTQI+ Community Reported High Rates of Discrimination in

2024." <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-lgbtqi-community-reported-high-rates-of-discrimination-in-2024/>

² In spring 2024, UC Santa Cruz and Cabrillo Community College students collected surveys from Santa Cruz County workers, students, and residents. The survey sample included 1,460 young adults aged 18-34 who were employed full-time or part-time at the time of the survey.

³ We recognize that identities are complex and not easily captured by categorical labels. We use cisgender heterosexual to describe individuals who do not identify as LGBTQ+—specifically, those whose gender identity aligns with their sex assigned at birth and who are primarily attracted to a different gender. While imperfect, this term offers greater specificity in distinguishing individuals outside the LGBTQ+ community.

⁴ Medina, Caroline et al. 2022. "Fact Sheet: LGBT Workers in the Labor Market," Center for American Progress, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/fact-sheet-lgbt-workers-in-the-labor-market/>

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