

# TALKING ABOUT



## LGBT Equality With African Americans



Authors



Contributing Editors

## OVERVIEW

Over the past few years, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) advocates have had growing conversations about the best ways to reach undecided African Americans. Yet until now, there was relatively little research to guide these conversations.

From 2007-2009, Donna Victoria (Victoria Research & Consulting), Cornell Belcher (Brilliant Corners Research & Strategies) and the Arcus Foundation undertook a two-year research initiative that focused on listening—listening to how African Americans think and feel about LGBT people and issues, listening to areas of common ground, and listening to concerns about the ways some LGBT people compare and conflate their own experiences with those of African Americans. The research included a national telephone survey of African American voters focused solely on these topics, one-on-one interviews and focus groups around the country with African Americans, and an online survey of non-minority LGBT Americans.

## AVOIDING CIVIL RIGHTS COMPARISONS

**This research builds on prior research to conclude that using the term *civil rights* to describe LGBT equality hinders our conversations with many African Americans.**

A strong majority of African American respondents preferred the term *equal rights* to *civil rights* or *human rights* to describe the LGBT struggle. When a national survey conducted as part of the research initiative asked African Americans, “What is the best way to describe the struggle facing gays and lesbians?” 55% said *equal rights*, 18% said *human rights*, and only 7% said *civil rights*. It’s also worth noting that both a solid majority of African Americans and a solid majority of non-minority LGBT respondents felt exactly the same way.

Additionally, the national survey also showed that more than half of African American respondents opposed comparisons between African American civil rights and efforts to advance LGBT equality, with three out of five of those expressing strong opposition.

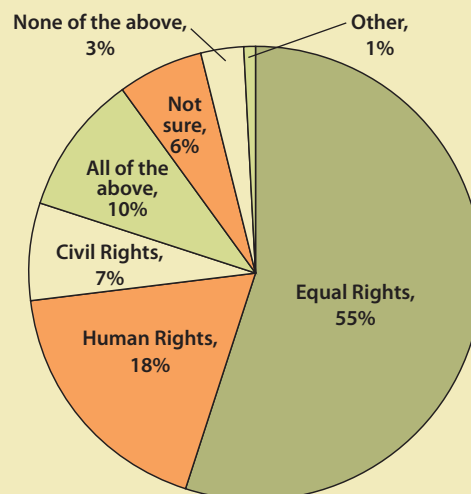
The research shows, however, that resistance to LGBT advocates using the term *civil rights* isn’t about being anti-gay, and it’s not about disputing the central tenet of fair and equal treatment for LGBT people. Rather, it’s about how African Americans uniquely understand and define civil rights.

## How African Americans Define Civil Rights

Most African Americans don’t broadly define *civil rights* as meaning the pursuit of equality under the law for all people. Instead, many apply the term quite literally to the

### “What is the best way to describe the struggle facing gays and lesbians?”

(African American respondents)



Civil Rights Movement and the specific rights dealt with in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. For example, in the interviews and focus groups, African American participants said, “[LGBT people] have the right to vote. So they’re not really being denied any, like, civil rights.” and “When you think of civil rights, you don’t think of nothing but the struggle.”

Participants also consistently spoke about the issues facing African Americans during the Civil Rights Movement, like segregation, being barred from restaurants and other public accommodations, or being denied the right to vote. **It’s important to note that while a majority of African American respondents view employment discrimination as an issue facing LGBT Americans, it is not generally framed in civil rights terms.**

When advocates for LGBT equality use the term *civil rights*, many African Americans tend to focus on the differences between African Americans and LGBT people rather than on common ground. Because the term *civil rights* evokes the Civil Rights Movement, when LGBT advocates use it, many African Americans immediately start focusing on differences between the movements. For example, one participant said, “Nowhere on the ballot does it say that if you are homosexual, you can’t vote.” African American respondents also started focusing on differences between race and sexual orientation—in particular, the idea that orientation can be “hidden,” whereas skin color cannot (e.g., “When a black gay man walks into a room, the first thing that people notice is that he’s black, not gay”).

The minority of African Americans who support LGBT advocates’ use of the term *civil rights* tend to already be strong allies. African Americans who are LGBT or already

fully supportive of marriage equality are more likely to accept a broader definition of civil rights. However, African Americans who are moveable on LGBT issues (i.e., not yet fully supportive) are likely to resist broader use of the term.

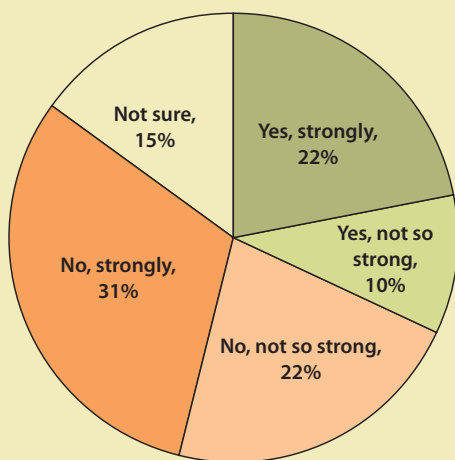
## Why Trying to “Connect the Dots” to Civil Rights Doesn’t Work

Many people incorrectly assume that the best way to persuade African Americans is to “connect the dots” between their struggle and the Civil Rights Movement. What’s the problem with this approach? Not only is it viewed as insensitive to African American history, it also inadvertently places other advocates in a position of unfavorably “comparing injustices” with African Americans.

Over half (53%) of African Americans surveyed disagreed with the idea that progress on LGBT equality “is a logical extension of the Civil Rights Movement,” and almost one third (31%) disagreed strongly. By contrast, only 32% agreed and 15% were unsure.

“Is progress on LGBT rights a logical extension of the Civil Rights Movement for African Americans or not?”

(African American respondents)



## A Fight Over Language That Doesn’t Move Us Forward

When LGBT advocates use the term *civil rights*, they don’t intend to offend; they often use it as a generic description of their fight for equality. **This would be reasonable if African Americans didn’t hold to a very specific definition of this term.**

Rather than spending time and energy trying to change the prevalent African American understanding of civil rights, we can adopt other, better ways to clearly describe the LGBT community’s pursuit of equality. In the sections that follow, we discuss approaches that resonate with African Americans.

**A fight over the use of the term *civil rights* is simply that—a fight over terminology. It takes away from the work needed to actually secure equality.** It also overshadows all the good news about African Americans’ views on LGBT equality and the common ground they share with LGBT people on issues of ending discrimination and inequality.

## CREATING EFFECTIVE DISCUSSIONS

Fortunately, there are a number of good ways to talk with African Americans about LGBT equality. A wide majority of African Americans agree that LGBT people should have equal rights—and they strongly support efforts to end housing and job discrimination, hate crimes and bullying.

**NOTE: The recommendations that follow are specific to conversations with African American communities and should not necessarily be applied to other communities.** Please consult the other documents in the *Talking About LGBT Issues Series* for additional information.

## Talking About Equal Rights

Most African American respondents embraced the idea of talking about *equal rights* when discussing LGBT people. The phrase *equal rights* evoked feelings of how we are all alike and the common ground we share. For example, talking about equal rights led people to say, “We are all created equal,” and that all people, including LGBT people, should have equal rights.

## Talking About Discrimination

An overwhelming majority of African American respondents strongly agree that LGBT Americans experience discrimination. When asked which groups suffer the most discrimination, their answer was clear: “African Americans and LGBT people.” While 96% said that African Americans face discrimination, with 60% saying they face “a lot,” the figure for “gays and lesbians” is nearly as high: 87% of African Americans said gay people face discrimination, and 52% said they face “a lot.”

**Discrimination is unifying language for African Americans and the LGBT community.** Unlike with the term *civil rights*, African Americans felt that *discrimination* was an appropriate term to describe the unequal treatment of African Americans and LGBT people. In particular, African American respondents focused on how discrimination leads to hate crimes, bullying in schools, and employment and housing discrimination. Hate crimes are immediately, viscerally understood as a problem for both African Americans and LGBT people; many participants noted that their first experience with a gay person was watching someone get bullied in school.

Be careful using the term *discrimination* with other communities, or when discussing marriage with African American audiences. Because research indicates that discussions about discrimination are generally ineffective with white audiences, only use this term when referencing non-discrimination laws or when talking with African Americans. Also, many African Americans do not extend the concept of discrimination to the denial of marriage to gay couples.

## ELEVATING ESSENTIAL VOICES

While using the right terminology is critical, it's also important to bring the right voices into the conversation. Unfortunately, African American voices and perspectives are often missing in discussions about LGBT issues, which can lead people to underestimate African Americans' support for LGBT equality. The following voices can be particularly important in discussions about LGBT equality.

### Civil Rights Leaders

The voices of Civil Rights leaders are invaluable in advancing LGBT equality. On issues of ending discrimination and inequality, their voices and support emphasize that Civil Rights leaders stand for and with the LGBT community. However, asking these leaders to direct their time and energies toward changing the prevalent African American understanding of civil rights is less productive than simply using language such as *equal rights*, which already resonates with a wide majority of African Americans.

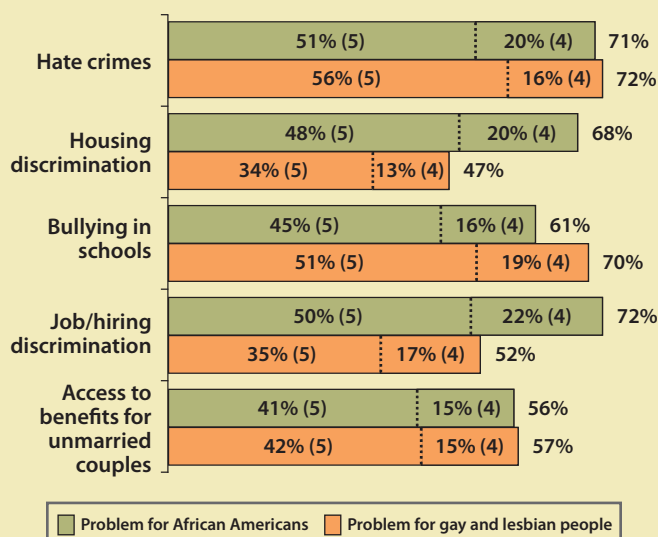
### African Americans Who Are LGBT

Elevating the voices of African Americans who are LGBT is critically important. Their stories and very existence bear witness for other African Americans of how the struggle for equality applies to their whole selves.

While LGBT African Americans must decide for themselves whether or not to challenge the prevalent understanding of civil rights, non-African American advocates shouldn't take up this call, even if they have an African American Civil Rights leader or an LGBT African American as part of their coalition. The speaker is part of the message; and if that speaker at any given time is not African American, use of the term *civil rights* is at best a distraction from the issues and, at worst, counter-productive.

### African American Opinion on Issues Faced by African Americans and Gay and Lesbian People

African American respondents were asked to rate several issues on a scale of "1" (not a current problem) to "5" (a very big problem). "5" and "4" ratings shown below.



### Talking With African American Audiences

#### TALK ABOUT:

- **equal rights**; how all people, including LGBT people, should have equal rights
- **discrimination**; the discrimination that LGBT people face (but avoid this term with other audiences)
- **common ground issues** like hate crimes, bullying, housing discrimination, and job discrimination

#### THINGS TO AVOID:

- Avoid using the term *civil rights* to refer to LGBT equality.
- Avoid trying to "connect the dots" between the Civil Rights Movement and the movement for LGBT equality.
- Avoid trying to change African Americans' understanding of civil rights.

#### ABOUT THIS SERIES

This is one in a series of documents on effectively talking about LGBT issues, also including: Overall Approaches, Marriage & Relationship Recognition, Inclusive Employment Protections, Inclusive Hate Crimes Laws, Adoption & Gay Parents, Ending Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Talking About LGBT Equality with Latinos, Suicide & LGBT Populations, an Ally's Guide to Talking About Transgender-Inclusive Non-Discrimination Laws, and an Ally's Guide to Terminology. For downloadable versions, visit [www.lgbtmap.org/talking-about-lgbt-issues-series](http://www.lgbtmap.org/talking-about-lgbt-issues-series) or [www.glaad.org/talkingabout](http://www.glaad.org/talkingabout). © 2009 Movement Advancement Project (MAP).