



Coltan Schoenike



Markell Jurek



Amanda E. Barnett

Transgender Discrimination and Poverty: Barriers to Human Rights

Coltan Schoenike and Markell Jurek, undergraduate students, and Amanda E. Barnett, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, barnetta@uwstout.edu, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, University of Wisconsin–Stout

In Brief

- The past decade has seen major victories and setbacks in LGBTQIA+ communities.
- Most victories benefit a limited segment of those communities, leaving transgender rights, especially for those who are people of color or living in poverty, deficient.
- Transgender discrimination exacerbates conditions of poverty through workplace, education, and health-care discrimination.
- Eliminating discrimination would make a major difference in poverty among transgender people.

With historic victories for the LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual/aromantic) community in the past decade, including the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision on June 26, 2015, to lift the ban on same-sex marriage in the United States, it is no surprise that there is a general feeling of progress. However, less than a year after that landmark victory, on June 11, 2016, it became quite evident to the nation that there is still work to do. On that day, a gunman opened fire on a queer nightclub in Orlando, Florida, that was celebrating Pride Month with a “Latin Night” event featuring several transgender entertainers. While this was a major setback in the fight for human rights, more subtle defeats continue to further oppress the LGBTQIA+ community, despite recent victories. Most victories have particularly benefited gay and lesbian men and women, especially affluent, cisgender (non-transgender), and white members of those groups,

leaving transgender rights, especially for those who are people of color or living in poverty, extremely deficient.

Transgender Discrimination and Poverty

Jaime M. Grant and colleagues have pointed to a significant problem with the way transgender people—those whose assigned sex at birth does not match the gender identity they feel inside—are treated in our society, as well as the number of basic rights to which they are denied access. In a cumulative look at all of the different forms of discrimination that their sample of trans individuals faced, 63% had experienced a serious act of discrimination in their lives, where “serious” was defined as causing a massive change to the individual’s quality of life or ability to provide for oneself both financially and emotionally. Some of these events included loss of a job, eviction or homelessness, withdrawal from school or college because of harassment, physical or sexual assault, denial of medical treatment, and incarceration—all because these people identified as transgender. The findings in this report go on to show that 23% of that group experienced a “catastrophic level of discrimination,” explained as having experienced more than two of the aforementioned experiences of discrimination.

As a result of the number of resources that transgender and gender-expansive people are being denied because of their identities, Grant and colleagues also found that there was an astounding level of poverty among study participants; they were four times more likely than their cisgender (non-transgender) peers to have household income of less than \$10,000 a year. This income placed them below the poverty line set by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services in 2015 for a single person

living alone, but when participants reported others living in their household, their income was even more limiting. It is clear that issues of discrimination and poverty are prevalent, and when the conversation turns toward the intrinsic cycle of poverty and discrimination that is especially part of the transgender experience, it becomes obvious that something must be done. If we can address the areas of discrimination faced by people who are transgender, especially in areas of workplace, education, and health care, there is a chance that we can drastically reduce the vastly disproportionate levels of poverty experienced by the transgender population.

Workplace Discrimination

One of the most obvious areas of discrimination that can lead to poverty is that which occurs in the workplace. A person who is unable to work is quite likely to struggle to earn enough income to stay above the poverty line. The report *Transgender Inclusion in the Workplace*, by Samir Luther for the Human Rights Campaign, highlights the multitude of problems that transgender and gender-expansive people face in their workplaces every day, assuming they could even get into the workplace as out trans people. The report pointed out that, at the beginning of 2008, only 12 states protected trans workers and prohibited employment discrimination based on gender identity. Most up-to-date versions of that map show only a 50% increase, from 12 to 18 states, which is still only a small number of states offering basic protections to their citizens. In states that do not have these protections, it is legal to fire employees or deny them raises or promotions because they are openly out or even perceived as transgender. The report goes on to highlight that the U.S. is actually quite behind in terms of protecting

Discrimination continued on page 15

Discrimination continued from page 14

its transgender workforce; other developed countries, like South Africa and Australia, have made such discrimination illegal, and since the 1990s the European Union has offered legal protections to employees who have had sex-reassignment surgery. Transgender discrimination in the workplace is more prevalent than one might think. The report's findings showed that between 1996 and 2006, between 20% and 57% of transgender workers were fired, not given a deserved promotion, or harassed to the point of quitting. Even if today transgender employees are not blatantly discriminated against at the office in the form of termination or denial of a promotion, they could be made uncomfortable in the workplace and harassed, causing them to leave.

Education Discrimination

While not being able to access employment can directly cause someone to fall below the poverty line, not having access to education can also harshly limit an individual's employment opportunities and income. In February 2015, Maurice N. Gattis and Sara L. McKinnon released *School Experiences of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Students in Wisconsin*. Their findings were alarming. To start, Gattis and McKinnon found that transgender students were more than three times as likely to be placed, often incorrectly, in special education courses. Additionally, transgender students were three times more likely than cisgender students to have been pushed or shoved by a peer, and twice as likely to get into a physical altercation. With this harassment, it is no surprise that transgender students' truancy rates were double those of their peers, they were more than five times more likely to bring a weapon to school, and they reported four times more often than cisgender students that they did not have any other adults besides their parents or guardians to rely on for social support at school. These findings illustrate how much harder it is for a transgender or gender-expansive person to access and complete a quality education.

Health-Care Discrimination

Health-care discrimination might seem to have a less direct relationship to poverty, but there are some plausible connections. Shanna Kattari and Leslie Hasche have highlighted some of the different ways that trans people can be discriminated against in

the realm of health care, including insurance providers denying specific trans-related health care and medication and/or denying a trans individual insurance coverage altogether, and transphobic doctors and other health-care providers refusing to treat trans patients, even in life-or-death situations where they are in desperate need of medical attention. Transgender patients younger than age 35 reported the highest incidence of discrimination and harassment, followed by trans people age 65 and older. In the younger group, 26% reported experiencing discrimination or harassment. More specifically, 27% of younger transgender people reported being discriminated against by doctors and hospitals, 20% in emergency rooms, 14% when trying to receive mental health care, and 8% when dealing with ambulances and EMTs—when the circumstances can be especially dire. Health-care discrimination can impoverish transgender people and contribute to risks of poverty in several unique ways. When they are denied insurance coverage, they must pay out of pocket for even the most simple hospital visits, and that's not counting the frequent visits for procedures such as affirming hormones and needed surgery. When trans people are sick and cannot afford or access medication or treatment because of discrimination by insurance companies or doctors, other aspects of their lives, like work performance, tend to suffer, which can further harm already questionable job security and financial comfort.

Finding Solutions and Removing Barriers

Most discrimination experienced by transgender and gender-expansive people is not only legal; it is reinforced and validated by the systems of oppression in our society. This legally sanctioned discrimination contributes to disproportionate poverty among transgender individuals and their families. It is imperative that family policy advocates promote all-encompassing, across-the-board change to current nondiscrimination laws and policies as well as new protections from discrimination based on gender identity and expression. Family Scientists can work to create a safer society for trans people by conducting research that informs policy change. More comprehensive research is needed on all variations of transgender discrimination

and how discrimination affects individuals' social, emotional, physical, psychological, and financial health and well-being across the life course. Research that illuminates the resilience and strength of transgender and gender-expansive people is also needed to more accurately depict the realities of navigating a heteronormative society. Family practitioners can provide individuals, families, and communities with the necessary tools to be allies and advocates for transgender individuals and their families. With transgender people being supported and able to access basic human rights of employment, education, and health care just like their cisgender peers, we can hope that the societal attitudes of negativity and hostility quickly cease to exist. Perhaps legal protections for transgender and gender-expansive people, with the help of changes in policy, can be the next major victory for the LGBTQIA+ community. ✨

Sources

- Gattis, M. N., & McKinnon, S. L. (2015). *School experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming students in Wisconsin*. Madison, WI: GSAFE.
- Grant, J. M., Mottet, L. A., Tanis, J., Harrison, J., Herman, J. L., & Keisling, M. (2011). *Injustice at every turn: A report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*. Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay & Lesbian Taskforce.
- Kattari, S. K., & Hasche, L. (2016). Differences across age groups in transgender and gender non-conforming people's experiences of health care discrimination, harassment, and victimization. *Journal of Aging and Health, 28*, 285–306.
- Luther, S. (2008). *Transgender inclusion in the workplace* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: Human Rights Campaign.