



Poverty in the LGBT Community

The expansion of civil rights and protections for all lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people will promote not only social equality, but economic prosperity as well.

By Nico Sifra Quintana

Every day the LGBT community seems to be experiencing a new expansion of civil rights. President Barack Obama signed on June 17 a Presidential Memorandum on Federal Benefits and Non-Discrimination that grants non-discrimination protections and some same-sex partner benefits for LGBT federal employees. On May 6, Maine Governor John Baldacci (D-ME) signed into law a bill legalizing same-sex marriage, making Maine the fifth state—along with Massachusetts, Connecticut, Vermont, and Iowa—to allow same-sex marriage. And the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act, which, if passed by the Senate and signed by the president, would expand protections under the federal hate crimes law to LGBT people.

Recent data has found that denying LGBT people equal access to the institution of marriage, protection from employment discrimination, and other civil rights and family benefits may be contributing to higher poverty rates in the LGBT community than in the general population overall. Despite recent advances, LGBT civil rights are rarely addressed in policy debates surrounding poverty. This issue brief examines the latest data on poverty in the LGBT community and outlines how the continued expansion of civil rights will help to reduce it.

Poverty among lesbian, gay, and bisexual singles and families

A new report published by The Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law titled “[Poverty in the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community](#)” examines for the first time poverty rates within the LGB community and finds that lesbian, gay, and bisexual same-sex couples are at least as likely—and at times more likely—to be poor than married heterosexual couples.¹

Gay men are sometimes poorer and sometimes less poor than heterosexual men, but stunning findings show that lesbian women across data sets are consistently poorer than their heterosexual counterparts. The National Survey of Family Growth found that, 24 percent of lesbian and bisexual women between the ages of 18-44 are living in poverty in contrast to only 19 percent of heterosexual women.² Yet NSFG data shows that gay and heterosexual men have relatively equal poverty rates: fifteen and 13 percent, respectively.³

The researchers also specifically examined poverty rates among those living in family units. The Williams Institute used data from the 2000 Census to calculate poverty statistics for LGB same-sex couples that live together and identify themselves as unmarried partners.⁴ The study found that 6.9 percent of lesbian couples, 4.0 percent of gay male couples, and 5.4 percent of married heterosexual couples are living below the federal poverty line.⁵ The poverty rate for families with children is 9.4 percent for lesbian families, 5.5 percent for gay male families, and 6.7 percent for heterosexual married families.⁶ The poverty rate for lesbian couples 65 years of age and older is particularly high, with 9.1 percent living below the poverty line compared to 4.9 percent for gay male couples 65 or older and 4.6 percent for heterosexual married couples 65 and older.⁷

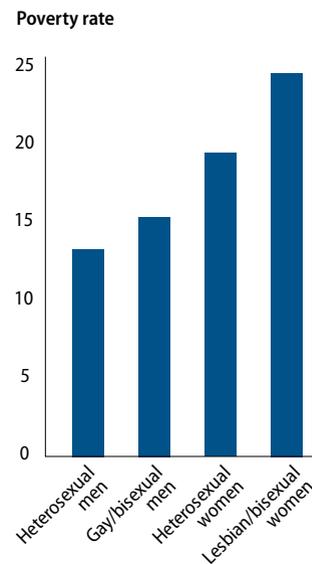
The study also examined the important question of whether same-sex couples are more or less likely to experience poverty after controlling for characteristics that increase vulnerability to poverty in the United States. After adjusting for certain characteristics such as being nonwhite or Hispanic, being unemployed or out of the labor force, not having a college degree, being younger than 50, and having children, the study found that lesbian couples were significantly more likely—and gay male couples slightly more likely—to be in poverty than heterosexual married couples with the same characteristics.⁸

The report relied on multiple data sources to calculate its poverty rates. Each had its own limitations, largely reflecting inadequacies with government data-collection-efforts that fail to appropriately count and consider LGBT individuals and families. For example, the final conclusions of the report do not account for all LGBT people in the United States and only look at poverty rates among some LGB adults and LGB same-sex couples, excluding LGB youth under 18 and all transgender people.

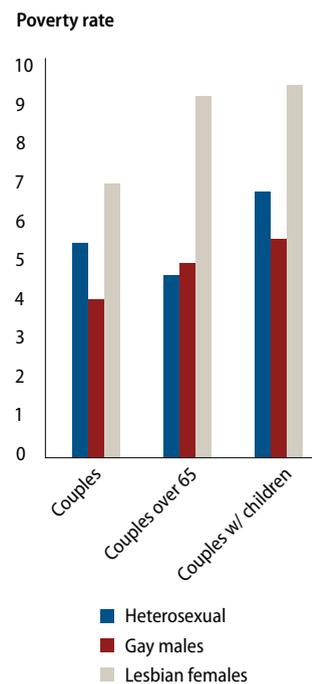
High poverty rates in the transgender community

The National Health and Social Life Survey, the General Social Survey, and the U.S. Census Bureau do not ask questions about gender identity, so national data on the current state of poverty among transgender Americans is extremely limited. However, a 2007 Williams Institute report titled “[Bias in the Workplace: Consistent Evidence of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Discrimination](#)” finds that transgender people report high unemployment rates and low earnings: In sample surveys, 22 to 64 percent of transgender people reported earning less than \$25,000 per year.⁹

Comparing poverty rates based on sexual orientation



Poverty amongst couples and families



“[State of Transgender California](#),” a 2009 Transgender Law Center report also found that transgender Californians are twice as likely to be below the federal poverty line than the general population.¹⁰ What’s more, one-in-five survey respondents reported being homeless since first identifying as transgender.¹¹

Reducing poverty in the LGBT community through the expansion of equal rights

The future implementation of progressive equal rights initiatives could have a sweeping effect on the reduction of poverty in the LGBT community. The Williams Institute [notes](#) that limits on marriage and the lack of federal protection from employment discrimination hinders LGB couples’ ability to achieve economic equality.¹² Its report also suggests that structural discrimination based on race, gender, and ethnicity boosts LGB poverty rates since women and people of color earn lower average incomes than couples of white men. Lesbian couples are more likely to be poor than their white male counterparts, but lesbian couples of color are at an even higher risk of poverty.¹³ Education level, geographic location, and employment status also affect poverty trends.¹⁴

Ending employment discrimination

Equal rights and protections under federal law would provide LGBT Americans with increased employment security and help protect them from falling below the federal poverty level. According to the [Williams Institute](#), separate surveys have revealed that 16 to 68 percent of LGB people report experiencing employment discrimination.¹⁵ And the Transgender Law Center found that [70 percent](#) of transgender people surveyed in California experienced workplace harassment related to their gender identity.¹⁶ Approximately half of survey respondents also reported experiencing some loss of employment either as a direct or possible result of their gender identity.¹⁷ Nevertheless, no federal laws currently exist protecting all LGBT workers from employment discrimination.

Equal access to the institution of marriage

Marriage provides legal and economic security for many heterosexual couples. These benefits include access to partner health insurance, tax subsidies, [Social Security](#) benefits, and other economic safety nets. A 2009 Williams Institute report, “[Tax Implications for Same-Sex Couples](#),” finds that same-sex couples often pay more in taxes than heterosexual couples because the federal government does not recognize same-sex marriage.¹⁸ The report shows that the economic impact of marriage discrimination is significant: Same-sex couples are not able to file federal joint tax returns, cannot transfer property tax to their

partners freely, and are not eligible for Social Security survival benefits.¹⁹ Ending marriage discrimination by expanding equal access to the legal status of marriage would increase LGBT families' economic stability and help reduce poverty in the LGBT community.

Reducing the LGBT wage gap

It is well documented that women in the United States still earn only 78 cents on the dollar compared to men, but the 2007 report "Bias in the Workplace: Consistent Evidence of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Discrimination" also finds that gay men earn 10 to 32 percent less than similarly qualified heterosexual men.²⁰ Equal pay for equal work for all would help decrease poverty in LGBT communities across the United States.

Improving government research

Poverty among LGBT Americans is not being adequately tracked and documented. The U.S. Census will newly begin to count same-sex married couples—reversing a previous decision by the George W. Bush administration—but the U.S. Census Bureau and other government agencies should continue to review their methods of data collection to ensure the best possible poverty data for the LGBT community.

Special concerns about equality in the transgender community

The National Center for Transgender Equality reports that the transgender community faces immense discrimination: transgender individuals experience high hate-crime rates, health care, and job discrimination, as well as other forms of institutional oppression.²¹ Discrimination affects the employment status and economic security of transgender people; action must be taken to secure equal rights and civil protections for all transgender people and their families.

Conclusion

Violence, discrimination, and prejudice affect the lives, economic status, and poverty rates of LGBT individuals. Securing equal rights for all would ensure that bigotry and ignorance do not perpetuate poverty in the LGBT community.

Endnotes

- 1 Randy Albelda and others, "Poverty in the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community," The Williams Institute, March 2009, available at <http://www.law.ucla.edu/williamsinstitute/pdf/LGBPovertyReport.pdf> (last accessed June 2009).
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 M.V. Lee Badgett and others, "Bias in the Workplace: Consistent Evidence of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Discrimination," The Williams Institute, available at [http://www.law.ucla.edu/williamsinstitute/publications/Bias in the Workplace.pdf](http://www.law.ucla.edu/williamsinstitute/publications/Bias%20in%20the%20Workplace.pdf) (last accessed June 2009).
- 10 Transgender Law Center, "State of Transgender California," March 2009, available at <http://www.transgenderlawcenter.org/pdf/StateofTransCAFINAL.pdf> (last accessed June 2009).
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Albelda and others, "Poverty in the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community."
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Badgett and others, "Bias in the Workplace: Consistent Evidence of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Discrimination."
- 16 Transgender Law Center, "State of Transgender California."
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Naomi G. Goldberg and M.V. Lee Badgett, "Tax Implications for Same-Sex Couples," The Williams Institute, April 2009, available at http://www.law.ucla.edu/williamsinstitute/pdf/Website_TaxPiece.pdf (last accessed June 2009).
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Badgett and others, "Bias in the Workplace: Consistent Evidence of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Discrimination."
- 21 National Center for Transgender Equality, "Discrimination," available at <http://www.nctequality.org/issues/discrimination.html> (last accessed June 2009).