



# Understanding the Transgender Community

Filed under: [Transgender](#), [Transgender Children & Youth](#)

Transgender people come from all walks of life. We are dads and moms, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters. We are your coworkers, and your neighbors. We are 7-year-old children and 70-year-old grandparents. We are a diverse community, representing all racial and ethnic backgrounds, as well as faith backgrounds.

The word “transgender” – or trans – is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity is different from the sex assigned to us at birth. Although the word “transgender” and our modern definition of it only came into use in the late 20th century, people who would fit under this definition have existed in every culture throughout recorded history.

Despite the increased visibility of transgender celebrities like actress Laverne Cox or writer Janet Mock, many Americans still don’t personally know anyone who is transgender – but the number who do is growing rapidly. According to a 2016 [survey](#) by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, commissioned by the Human Rights Campaign, 35 percent of likely voters in the United States “personally know or work with someone who is transgender.” That’s more than double the 17 percent who answered yes when asked the same question in 2014.

Other [research suggests](#) that there are at least 700,000 transgender people in the United States, about 0.3 percent of the total population and about 3.5 percent of the LGBTQ community; but these estimates are likely conservative because of the limited amount of studies that have attempted to measure the transgender population.

## What does it mean to be transgender?

The transgender community is incredibly diverse. Some transgender people identify as male or female, and some identify as genderqueer, nonbinary, agender, or somewhere else on or outside of the spectrum of what we understand gender to be. Some of us take hormones and have surgery as part of our transition, and some don’t. Some choose to openly identify as transgender, while others simply identify as men or women. For more information on questions you may have about transgender people, check out our [Transgender FAQ](#).

In the [HRC Foundation’s 2012 survey](#) of LGBTQ youth, about 10 percent of respondents identified themselves either as “transgender” or as “other gender,” and wrote in identities like “genderqueer,” “gender-fluid” or “androgynous.” This suggests that a larger portion of this generation’s youth are identifying somewhere on the broad transgender spectrum.

In many ways, transgender people are just like cisgender (non-transgender) people; but because of the social stigma surrounding our transgender identity, our community faces a unique set of challenges.

### **What challenges do transgender people face?**

While the visibility of transgender people is increasing in popular culture and daily life, we still face severe discrimination, stigma and systemic inequality. Some of the specific issues facing the transgender community are:

- **Lack of legal protection**– While the federal government's Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and the Department of Education have recently taken steps to include transgender people under existing non-discrimination protections, there is still no comprehensive non-discrimination law that includes gender identity. According to the Human Rights Campaign's [2014 State Equality Index](#), only 18 states and the District of Columbia prohibit employment and housing discrimination based on gender identity; only 17 states and the District of Columbia prohibit discrimination based on gender identity in public accommodations; and only 15 states and the District of Columbia prohibit discrimination based on gender identity in education. Moreover, state legislatures across the country are debating – and in some cases passing – legislation specifically designed to prohibit transgender people from accessing public bathrooms that correspond with our gender identity, or creating exemptions based on religious beliefs that would allow discrimination against LGBTQ people.
- **Poverty**– In too many cases, this lack of legal protection translates into unemployment for transgender people. [The National Transgender Discrimination Survey](#) (NTDS) found that 15 percent of respondents were living in severe poverty (making less than \$10,000/year). For transgender people of color, those rates were even higher, with 34 percent of Black and 28 percent of Latina/o respondents reporting a household income of less than \$10,000 a year. As anyone who has experienced poverty or unemployment understands, being unable to afford basic living necessities can result in homelessness or lead people to engage in underground economies like drug sales or survival sex work, which can put people at increased risk for violence and arrest.
- **Harassment and stigma**– The LGBTQ community still faces considerable stigma based on over a century of being characterized as mentally ill, socially deviant and sexually predatory. While these flawed views have faded in recent years for lesbians and gay men, transgender people are still often met with ridicule from a society that does not understand us. This stigma plays out in a variety of contexts – leaving us vulnerable to lawmakers who attempt to leverage anti-transgender stigma to score cheap political points; to family, friends or coworkers who reject transgender people upon learning about our transgender identities; and to people who harass, bully and commit serious violence against transgender people.
- **Anti-transgender violence**– At least 13 transgender women were murdered in 2014, and 2015 is on track to see even higher numbers. These women were stabbed, shot, strangled, burned; killed violently by intimate partners or strangers. According to the 2013 [National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs](#) (NCAVP) report on hate violence against lesbian, bisexual, transgender,

queer and HIV-affected (LGBTQH) communities, 72 percent of the victims of LGBTQ or HIV-motivated hate violence homicides in 2013 were transgender women, and 67 percent were transgender women of color. Transgender people have few options for protecting ourselves from violence or seeking justice. The NTDS found that 22 percent of transgender people who had interacted with police experienced bias-based harassment from police, with transgender people of color reporting much higher rates. Six percent reported physical assault; 2 percent reported sexual assault by police; and 20 percent reported having been denied equal service by law enforcement. Nearly half of the transgender people surveyed in the study said that they were uncomfortable turning to police for help.

- **Barriers to healthcare**— Data collection on health disparities among transgender people is very limited, but the data we do have reveal a healthcare system that is not meeting the needs of the transgender community. In a 2012 needs assessment by the Washington D.C. Trans Coalition, 44 percent of those who identified health as one of their top priorities said that access to transgender-sensitive healthcare was their most significant need. Beyond facing barriers to obtaining medically-necessary health services and encountering medical professionals who lacked transgender health care competency, the NTDS found that almost 20 percent of respondents had been refused medical care outright because of bias.
- **Identity Documents** – The widespread lack of accurate identity documents among transgender people can have an impact on every area of their lives, including access to emergency housing or other public services. To be clear, without identification, one cannot travel, register for school or access many services that are essential to function in society. Many states require evidence of medical transition – which can be prohibitively expensive and is not something that all transgender people want – as well as fees for processing new identity documents, which may make them unaffordable for some members of the transgender community. The NTDS found that among those respondents who have already transitioned, 33 percent had not been able to update any of their identity documents to match their affirmed gender.

While advocates continue working to remedy these disparities, change cannot come too soon for transgender people. Visibility – especially positive images of transgender people in the media and society – continues to make a critical difference for us; but visibility is not enough and comes with real risks to our safety, especially for those of us who are part of other marginalized communities. That is why the Human Rights Campaign is committed to continuing to support and advocate for the transgender community, so that the transgender Americans who are and will become your friends, neighbors, coworkers and family members have an equal chance to succeed and thrive.