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Almost 30 percent of bi women, trans people live in poverty, report finds

By *Tim Fitzsimons*

5–6 minutes

A new report from the Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law found the relatively high rate of poverty in the LGBTQ community is not evenly distributed, with bisexual women and transgender people shouldering a disproportionate poverty burden.

When grouped together, almost 22 percent of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people reported earning less than the [federal poverty level](#) of \$12,490 per year for a single-person household. The cisgender straight community, on the other hand, reported a poverty rate of almost 16 percent.

When researchers separated the L, G, B and T, however, they found cisgender (or non-transgender) gay men and lesbians reported similar levels of poverty to their heterosexual counterparts, while bisexual women and transgender people (of all sexual orientations) had a poverty rate of almost 30 percent.

The study found gay men had the lowest rates of poverty at 12 percent, followed by cisgender lesbians at 18 percent. These percentages were statistically indistinguishable from the poverty rates of their heterosexual male and female counterparts at 13 and

18 percent respectively. Overall, for gay and straight people, women face higher rates of poverty than men. Bisexual men reported a poverty rate of almost 20 percent, significantly less than their bi women counterparts.

Bianca Wilson, one of the study's authors, said researchers have some hypotheses for why poverty levels are elevated in these communities, including that they could be due to "experiences of discrimination, maybe the impact of minority stress, the impact of mental health concerns that come from experiencing discrimination. However, how that explains the particularly high rate among bisexual women is not clear."

Robyn Ochs, a bisexual activist, said it doesn't surprise her that bisexual people report higher levels of poverty, because it's "pretty typical, historically, for bisexual people's experience to be lumped in with gay and lesbian experience."

"Bisexual people have a much harder time finding community and safe space," Ochs explained, "even when there's an established LGBTQ community, it's often not fully inclusive of bisexual-identified people."

During the Obama administration, Heron Greenesmith, a bisexual activist and researcher, participated in several White House summits devoted to issues specific to the bisexual community.

"The news is that we have been talking about this for years with empirical, peer reviewed data on national data sets, and nothing has increased the programs and services dedicated to alleviating poverty where it really matters in the LGBT community," Greenesmith said.

Ochs noted that a fraction of 1 percent of all funds designated for

the LGBTQ community is earmarked for bisexual issues specifically, according to [a report by Funders for LGBTQ Issues](#). Greenesmith said that this lack of funding results in “a lack of structure in bi communities, which produces a lack of leaders” that can advocate for community needs.

Overall, Greenesmith said she thinks biphobia is a major component of many disparities the report unearthed.

"It can have different names, you can call it bi erasure," Greenesmith said. "As I research the right as well, I am finding more and more data to show that sexual fluidity, as can be exemplified by the existence of bi folks, makes people really confused and nervous."

As for the high rate of poverty among the transgender community, Gillian Branstetter, media relations manager for the National Center for Transgender Equality, found the Williams Institute figures “deeply unsurprising.”

“It's quite simple: If you do not have stable access to housing, you are more likely to face violence. If you do not have gainful employment, you're more likely to face violence. And the prejudice and bias that denies so many people access to these opportunities leaves them exposed to any number of risk factors, including poor health and positive HIV status, as well as abusive situations like intimate partner violence,” Branstetter said.

“It shows the massive potential for harm posed by [the three Title VII cases before the Supreme Court](#) to allow employers to avoid any consequences for discriminating against transgender people,” Branstetter added. “It is not merely a philosophical, etymological matter of the definition of sex — it is literally the right of equal

economic opportunity for every member of society that's in front of the Supreme Court right now.”

The burden of LGBTQ poverty is also uneven across location, according to the report. While straight people face poverty in urban and rural areas at roughly the same rate (approximately 15 percent), rural LGBTQ people have a poverty rate of 26 percent compared to their urban peers at 21 percent.

Study author Bianca Wilson says that with so many unknowns presented by the data, her next project at UCLA's Williams Institute will be a qualitative study that will interview subjects and attempt to answer why certain groups within the LGBTQ community are so disproportionately impacted by poverty.

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