



# The State of Gay and Transgender Communities of Color in 2012

The economic, educational, and health insecurities these communities are struggling with and how we can help them

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Three years after the Great Recession, the United States is seeing a recovering economy and a growing job market. Congress has passed Wall Street reforms, and affordable health insurance is benefiting millions of Americans. Despite this progress, however, communities of color throughout the United States still face economic challenges and fewer opportunities than their white counterparts. Americans of color are less likely to be homeowners, to hold steady employment, or to have health insurance. Even as the economy recovers, these communities are still being left behind.

These issues are exacerbated for gay and transgender people of color, who bear the brunt of the disparities experienced by both the gay community and communities of color.<sup>1</sup> For example, a recent report by CAP's FIRE Initiative found that the combined exposure to antigay and/or antitransgender policies, along with institutionalized racial discrimination, derails black gay and transgender Americans' financial stability, creates barriers to accessing quality health care, and erodes safeguards for gay and transgender families. This is also true for other gay and transgender communities of color.

Consequently, gay and transgender people of color face high rates of unemployment or underemployment, overall lower rates of pay, higher rates of poverty, and a greater likelihood of being uninsured. The youth in these communities also experience lower educational attainment and higher rates of homelessness than their peers.

Unwelcoming school climates, employment discrimination, and outdated family policies—which bar gay and transgender parents from having legal relationships to their children and limit their access to safety net programs, family tax credits, and health insurance—perpetuate these negative outcomes.

Federal policies that address these problems and that level the playing field for gay and transgender Americans will help tackle these disparities and eliminate the systemic anti-gay bias that thwarts the ability of gay and transgender communities of color to thrive.

We summarize some of these policies at the end of this brief, but first we examine in detail the challenges and disparities these communities face.

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## Low educational attainment

Gay and transgender communities of color have lower levels of educational attainment than their white gay and transgender and heterosexual peers due in part to unwelcoming school climates that disrupt their learning experience. In its 2009 “Shared Differences” report, the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network found that 80 percent of gay and transgender students of color were verbally harassed in the past year because of their sexual orientation. More than half of Native American students and one-third of African American students experienced physical violence in school because of their sexual orientation.

Fear of harassment and physical violence keeps many gay and transgender students of color at home instead of in the classroom. About a quarter of all gay and transgender African American and Asian Pacific Islander students reported missing class at least once a month for fear of being bullied or harassed. More than one-third of Latino, Native American, and multiracial gay and transgender students reported doing the same.

What’s more, less than half of gay and transgender students of color told a teacher or administrator about the harassment they faced because they worried that either nothing would be done or the situation would get worse. These students are right: Less than half of the students who reported the bullying felt the situation was effectively handled.

These missed days of school contribute to a significant achievement gap for gay and transgender students of color, including lower grade-point averages, lower rates of high school graduation, and less college education. Census data reveal that only one-quarter of all Hispanic gay and lesbian couples reported having completed some high school as their highest level of education. Among black same-sex couples that do report finishing high school, only 40 percent also report having completed some level of postsecondary education, compared to 67 percent of white same-sex couples.

The Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network also found a grade gap that could make all the difference in graduation rates and college applications: Gay and transgender students of color who experienced high amounts of harassment based on both their sexual orientation and their race/ethnicity had grade-point averages a half (.5) point lower than students who did not experience harassment in school.

Research suggests that school climate is the top predictor of educational outcomes for gay and transgender youth. A first step, then, in addressing the low educational attainment we see among gay and transgender youth of color is to create safe spaces and

welcoming school climates for all students through comprehensive student nondiscrimination and safe schools policies.

Under the current patchwork of state laws and regulations, a student's level of protection at school depends on where he or she resides—a circumstance most likely beyond his or her control. Federal legislation would ensure that geographic location does not determine the right of an adolescent to a safe school environment.

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## Economic insecurity

### Employment discrimination

Gay and transgender communities of color are also among the most economically insecure in our society, despite the stereotype perpetuated by mainstream media images mostly of white, middle-class, gay and transgender people—suggesting that gay people are more affluent than the general population. In reality, though, they earn lower wages and have higher rates of poverty than both their white gay counterparts and straight people of color.

This suggests that these communities face significant discrimination in the workplace due to their sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. It is still perfectly legal to fire someone for no other reason than their being gay or transgender in a majority of states. In fact only 21 states and the District of Columbia have laws barring employment discrimination based on sexual orientation. Just 16 states and the District of Columbia have laws that explicitly ban employment discrimination on the basis of gender identity.

This job insecurity often results in insufficient income, sporadic health care coverage, and inadequate or unsafe housing, among other issues. Nondiscrimination laws that protect all gay and transgender workers on the local, state, and federal levels are therefore essential to boosting the economic security of gay and transgender communities of color.

### Wages and poverty

Once employed, gay and transgender people of color still earn less than their heterosexual and white gay and transgender counterparts. The average Latina/Hispanic lesbian couple earns \$3,000 less than Latino/Hispanic opposite-sex couples. Although black same-sex male couples earn an average income on par with black opposite-sex couples, it is still more than \$20,000 less than white same-sex

male couples. Black lesbian couples face an even greater economic disparity, earning \$10,000 less than black same-sex male couples.

Further, families headed by gay and transgender people of color are more likely to live in poverty than any other demographic. For example, black lesbian couples have a poverty rate of 21.1 percent, Hispanic lesbian couples have a poverty rate of 19.1 percent, Native American lesbian couples have a poverty rate of 13.7 percent, and Asian Pacific Islander lesbian couples have a poverty rate of 11.8 percent. This is all in contrast to white lesbian couples, which have poverty rates of only 4.3 percent.

Although gay male couples have overall lower levels of poverty than their lesbian counterparts, they still experience poverty at a much higher rate than other heterosexual couples of the same race. Black gay male couples have poverty rates of 14.4 percent, and Native American gay male couples have a poverty rate of an astonishing 19.1 percent.

Transgender people of color fair much worse. One study found that 26 percent of black transgender Americans, 18 percent of Latino transgender Americans, and 17 percent of multiracial transgender Americans are unemployed. This is compounded with the fact that transgender Americans in general are already twice as likely than the general population to make less than \$10,000 per year. Latino transgender people have a poverty rate of 28 percent, which is double the rate of all transgender people (15 percent) and five times the rate of the general Latino population.

The economic insecurity these communities face also impacts the youth population and manifests itself in high levels of homelessness among gay and transgender youth of color. Although only 5 percent to 7 percent of all youth are gay or transgender, they comprise nearly 40 percent of all homeless youth. Of this population, 44 percent of homeless gay youth were black and 26 percent were Hispanic; among homeless transgender youth 62 percent were black and 22 percent were Hispanic. It is critical that federal policies to address homelessness also address the needs of these youth.

Outdated family policies and the narrow definition of “family” in federal law further undermine the economic security of gay- and transgender-headed families of color by denying them access to safety net programs, family tax credits, and health insurance simply because they do not fit into expected norms. Antiquated laws also leave the children in these families vulnerable by denying them the security and protection of having a legal connection to both parents who care for them.

Gay- and transgender-headed families of color need federal relationship recognition and equal access to government-based safety net programs. Barring discrimination in employment, adoption, custody and visitation, housing, and credit will go a long way toward bridging the economic disparities they experience.

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## Health disparities

One of the most devastating results of discrimination is that gay and transgender communities of color face tremendous health disparities when compared to their white, straight, and nontransgender counterparts. Yet these issues often go untreated due to the lower rates of health care coverage and these communities' hesitancy to seek treatment due to lack of culturally competent health care.

## Health disparities

Gay and transgender communities of color are at increased risk for several health concerns and often have trouble finding culturally competent treatment. For example, black gay adults are the demographic most likely to have diabetes, and gay Asian Pacific Islander adults are the demographic most likely to suffer from psychological distress.

Furthermore, black lesbians are the most likely demographic to be obese, which results in higher rates of other health problems that are related to their weight. On the other hand, Latino men are the most likely demographic to have an eating disorder—they were diagnosed with having subclinical bulimia at twice the rate of the general gay male population and at four times the rate of the heterosexual population.

One of the other notable health disparities is in the rates of sexually transmitted infections. According to the Center for Disease Control, as of 2009 black men who have sex with men represented an estimated 73 percent of new HIV infections among all black men and 37 percent among all men who sleep with men. More new HIV infections occurred among this population than any other age and racial group. That same year Latino gay and bisexual men accounted for 81 percent of all new male Latino cases of HIV infection. Gay Asian Americans are nearly six times more likely to be infected with HIV than their straight Asian American counterparts.

Lesbian and transgender women face their own unique health issues. Studies show that black lesbians have higher rates of depression and higher blood pressure levels than their white lesbian or straight black peers. Asian American lesbians are more likely than their straight Asian American counterparts to have experienced a one-year depressive episode. Transgender women of color face not only elevated stress levels and increased risk of sexual transmitted infections, but are at risk of serious health complications from taking black market hormone and silicone injections.

Because of the barriers these women face to culturally competent health care, they are at risk of serious health consequences that their nontransgender and white transgender peers do not contend with.

The stress of dealing with stigma and bias also manifests in high rates of substance abuse among gay and transgender people of color. A study by the Center for American Progress found that 43 percent of black gay respondents, 33 percent of Latino gay respondents, and 21 percent of Asian American gay respondents reported abusing alcohol—all rates much higher than their straight counterparts. Gay and transgender people of color are also more likely to smoke cigarettes than their straight or white peers. Further, unemployed transgender people of color abuse drugs and alcohol at twice the rate of employed gay and transgender people.

## Health care coverage

Despite all of these risk factors, gay and transgender people of color are less likely to visit the doctor for regular check-ups than other populations. Research also shows that they are dramatically uninsured and underinsured due to discrimination in relationship recognition, employment, and health insurance industry practices such as the use of pre-existing condition exclusions to deny coverage.

As a whole, gay and transgender males of color are twice as likely to be uninsured as straight men of color or white gay and transgender men. According to regional studies 15 percent of gay and transgender people of color are uninsured, compared to just 10 percent of the general gay and transgender population. At a national level gay and transgender workers of color often fall into the ranks of the uninsured because they are unemployed or underemployed. They are ostensibly in double jeopardy: They cannot get health insurance because they are unemployed, yet their unemployment may be due to discrimination based on their race, sexual orientation, or gender identity—obstacles often beyond their control.

Many gay and transgender people of color also chose to delay or not seek medical attention for fear of discrimination. A study conducted by the Gay Men's Health Crisis found that 75 percent of lesbians delay seeking health care for any reason, versus only 54 percent of heterosexual women. In communities of color, this fact is seen all too often. Among black lesbians, only 35 percent had a mammogram in the past two years, compared to 60 percent of white lesbians and bisexual women. Gay male Latinos were more likely to delay seeking medical care after being diagnosed with HIV than their straight counterparts.

According to a study by the National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce, 34 percent of black transgender people reported having postponed care when sick or injured due to a fear of discrimination—and this fear is not unfounded. Twenty-one percent of the same respondents reported having been refused medical care due to bias.

The Affordable Care Act signed into law by President Barack Obama in 2010 is working broadly to bridge the gaps in health care coverage and culturally competent services. But a long-term policy framework for addressing health disparities that arise at the

intersections of race, sexual orientation, and gender identity is needed to address the health and wellness gaps that we see.

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## Policy recommendations

Gay and transgender communities of color are systematically discriminated against by unequal and antigay policies. The first step in bridging the gaps noted above is to institute federal policies that ensure these communities have the same access and opportunities as all other Americans.

### School safety policies

A comprehensive federal law that would require schools to take steps to prevent antigay and antitransgender bullying and harassment from happening in schools would help improve school climates that derail educational attainment for gay and transgender communities of color. Three laws have been proposed in Congress that would achieve this through varying approaches.

The Safe Schools Improvement Act would amend the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to require public schools receiving federal funding to adopt antibullying policies that explicitly include gay and transgender students.

The Student Nondiscrimination Act is modeled after Title IX and requires public schools that receive federal funds to expand protections against harassment and bullying based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Finally, the [Tyler Clementi Higher Education Anti-Harassment Act](#) provides similar protections for college and university students by requiring higher education institutions receiving federal student aid dollars to adopt policies that prohibit discrimination and specifically include gay and transgender students.

### Employment nondiscrimination laws

Gay and transgender people in most states and on the federal level have no legal recourse against employment discrimination and can still lose their jobs in most states simply because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. Nondiscrimination laws that protect all gay and transgender workers on the local, state, and federal levels are essential to boosting the economic security of gay and transgender families of color. The Employment Nondiscrimination Act introduced in Congress would provide these federal protections. In addition, the president should issue an

executive order that bans federal contractors from discriminating on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, which would also protect gay and transgender workers.

## Family policies

We know that families headed by gay and transgender couples of color are among the poorest in our society. In fact, these families are more likely to rely on assistance programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Medicaid, and Social Security.

But these government safety net programs and laws intended to support and protect children of color fail to provide equal protections for those who do not live with a married mother and father—which includes many children with gay and transgender parents. So broadening public assistance programs to include couples headed by same-sex families, as well as strengthening those benefits for all recipients, will go a long way to supporting struggling gay and transgender families of color.

Every child deserves to have a legal relationship with both of his or her parents. But under current federal law, and most state laws, they cannot. Laws and policies that would ensure that all gay couples can legally adopt children—and that these children have the same legal ties to both of their parents that children of different-sex parents have—would help address this problem.

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## Conclusion

Three years after the Great Recession, the American economy is on the upswing. But while many Americans find more opportunities everyday, gay and transgender communities of color still face economic challenges and fewer opportunities than their white counterparts. Gay and transgender communities of color have overall lower educational attainment, higher rates of poverty, and increased barriers to health care. Policy changes are needed to prevent employment discrimination that keeps gay and transgender workers of color out of the workplace, and family policy is needed to safeguard these families. These are important steps to take to ensure gay and transgender communities of color can share in the benefits of the recovery and regain some of the economic security they have lost.

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## Endnotes

1 In this column, the term “gay” is used as an umbrella term for people who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.