

# Legislation can curb discrimination against gays and lesbians in employment situations

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Antidiscrimination laws can have a significant positive impact on how gays and lesbians are treated in employment situations, according to new research from Rice University. The study on public awareness of sexual-orientation employment-antidiscrimination laws is one of the first to provide empirical evidence for the likely impact of pending antidiscrimination legislation.

"In many U.S. states and localities (including much of Texas), gays and lesbians remain unprotected from employment discrimination," said Laura Barron, a 2008 Rice alumna and now personnel research psychologist for the U.S. Air Force and the study's lead author. "And in the debate over national antidiscrimination legislation, some lawmakers have sought to justify opposition to ENDA (the Employment Non-Discrimination Act) by suggesting that antidiscrimination legislation would not effectively reduce discrimination if enacted. Our [research findings](#) directly dispute this claim."

The study revealed that:

- Public awareness and support of sexual-orientation laws is heightened in communities with (versus without) antidiscrimination legislation.
- Gay and lesbian job applicants experience significantly less interpersonal discrimination in areas with (versus without) this protective legislation, even when statistically controlling for

religious and [political views](#).

- Training that informs interviewers that sexual-orientation employment discrimination is legal or illegal in their community directly affects their treatment of gay and lesbian applicants.

Mikki Hebl, professor of psychology at Rice and the study's co-author, said these findings have important implications for the current [national debate](#) on gay rights.

"Given the absence of conclusive evidence on the effectiveness of antidiscrimination laws, many elected officials have been hesitant to support ENDA and similar legislation," she said. "However, with these new findings, we believe that some lawmakers may feel compelled to reconsider their views on this topic."

The study was conducted in three parts.

In the first study, the researchers documented public awareness of sexual-orientation employment-antidiscrimination laws by contacting 111 households by phone in five cities in a major metropolitan area in the southwestern U.S. Two of these cities have citywide sexual-orientation antidiscrimination laws and three do not.

In the second study, study participants (recruited from Rice psychology classes) applied for 295 retail jobs in cities with and without legal protection within the same metropolitan area. The participants were instructed to wear hats that read "Texan and Proud" or "Gay and Proud," but they did not know which hat they were assigned to wear. The participants then entered businesses to inquire about employment opportunities and covertly audio-recorded their conversations with prospective employers. The interactions were evaluated on the basis of perceived friendliness, helpfulness and hostility by the study's participants and independent raters who later reviewed the audio

recordings.

In the third study, the researchers conducted a lab experiment to determine if the effects of the second study were the same in a controlled setting free of outside influences. As part of a longer training on interviewing skills, 229 participants were told that employers could or could not legally discriminate based on [sexual orientation](#). The participants then interviewed "applicants" (Rice students) whose resumes listed experience with a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender student organization and receipt of a gay and lesbian student award. The conversations were recorded and evaluated on the same criteria as the second study.

The researchers hope their findings will inform the legislative debate on gay rights by providing [empirical evidence](#) on the potential impact of national antidiscrimination legislation.

"This piece of research clearly demonstrates that regardless of your beliefs on gay rights, antidiscrimination legislation can be very effective in reducing interpersonal discrimination," Hebl said.

**More information:** "THE FORCE OF LAW: The Effects of Sexual Orientation Antidiscrimination Legislation on Interpersonal Discrimination in Employment" will appear in an upcoming edition of *Psychology, Public Policy and Law* and is available online at [psycnet.apa.org/psycinfo/2012-13791-001](http://psycnet.apa.org/psycinfo/2012-13791-001)

Provided by Rice University

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