

# Study investigates rural LGBTQ youth's motivations for participating in activism

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This is WVU Assistant Professor of Social Work Megan Gandy-Guedes. Credit: West Virginia University

While marriage equality continues to be a big win for the LGBTQ movement since its passage in the U.S. in 2015, many activists are concerned about what's next.

Researchers from West Virginia University and the University of Kansas have spent the intervening years studying [young adults](#) comprising the next generation of LGBTQ activists to understand their aspirations for the movement's future.

Working with a lobbying organization in the rural southwest, WVU Assistant Professor of Social Work Megan Gandy-Guedes and KU Assistant Professor of Social Welfare Megan Paceley sought to understand the social, economic and environmental issues important to LGBTQ young adults living in the rural U.S. and their motivations for engaging in activism and social justice efforts.

"Seeing the challenges of LGBTQ youth in states that are in the middle of the country or in more rural or more conservative areas—needing a voice in the younger generation really motivated us to do this research," Gandy-Guedes said.

They surveyed young adults ages 18 to 29 who attended the lobbying organization's annual leadership symposium to inform its future programming.

"The organization's leaders felt like they needed a better approach to reaching the younger generation of leaders, activists and advocates," Gandy-Guedes said. "They asked us to do a survey to find out the motivations of these young people and the things they are interested in being involved in."

Five issues resonated the most for the young adults surveyed: police use of force, [conversion therapy](#) (meant to change an individual's sexual orientation), pay inequality, lived equality for transgender individuals and preservation of land, water and wildlife.

"There are so many issues on the forefront of these young peoples'

minds," Gandy-Guedes said. "It really emphasizes that if organizers are going to engage these young people, they need to engage them with a multitude of issues in mind."

The young adults' motivations for getting involved in activism included a desire to help other LGBTQ individuals, experiences with or fears of isolation and victimization, and societal influence. The researchers noted that these concerns were shared by individuals who had experienced multiple levels of marginalization.

"Because of the way people talked about their interests in [social change](#) and activism, they weren't issues that just affected LGBTQ people. The issues affected LGBTQ people across different identities and people outside of the LGBTQ community," Paceley said. "It wasn't just LGBTQ marginalization. It was gender, sexuality, race, economic status or a combination of these things."

The organization Gandy-Guedes and Paceley partnered with has already hired a program director to focus on these issues.

"To engage with the next generation of activists, you have to approach social justice issues from a multitude of identities and come at it from a multitude of outcomes in mind," Gandy-Guedes said. "They already had an [executive director](#) and some staff, but a program director is an important way to engage young people."

To improve engagement with young adults, Gandy-Guedes and Paceley recommend that organizations continue to listen to their needs.

"Just ask them. That's what I love about the organization we worked with. They recognized a gap in what they were doing, and they reached out to us to help understand that gap," Paceley said. "They didn't just listen—they responded to it. Things change, even in just a short period

of time of a few years. Continually asking people who these issues affect, what they want to see done, how they want to do this work, what their motivations are and what they are afraid of is crucial for engaging them and continuing the work."

Provided by West Virginia University

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