

# Researchers study what motivates rural LGBTQ youths to take part in activism

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When the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that same-sex marriage was legal, it was a major victory for generations who fought to achieve equality. However, the decision was far from the end of oppression for the LGBTQ community, especially queer and transgender youths in rural areas. A University of Kansas researcher co-wrote a study to gauge what issues are most important to this population and what motivates them to take part in activism aimed at equality.

Marriage equality measures have primarily benefited white, gay, economically secure individuals. Young people still establishing themselves and those of other races or transgender individuals still face unique challenges. Megan Gandy-Guedes of West Virginia University

and Megan Paceley, assistant professor of social welfare at KU, surveyed 65 [young adults](#) ages 18-29 who lived in a rural, conservative southwestern state. Excessive use of police force, conversion therapy and pay inequality were the three main issues of concern, while respondents also noted equality for transgender individuals, water quality and wildlife preservation as important issues.

Approached by an organization that lobbies for LGBTQ youths in rural America, Gandy-Guedes created a survey, then approached Paceley for her expertise in working with the population to research factors that influence their well-being.

"They wanted to know what were the motivations for this young group to get active, so we did a survey to see what issues they cared about most," Gandy-Guedes said. "To find that out we asked them about what social, environmental and justice issues were most important to them. Second, we asked them what motivated them to take part in activism around those issues."

The findings were published in *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*.

The respondents listed several motivations:

Helping others and reducing discrimination for future generations were the top concerns. Many respondents indicated the issues they care about affected their friends, so they fought on their behalf as well. Others said they had lived or are still living through various forms of discrimination or harassment, and they want to ensure [future generations](#) of LGBTQ individuals do not face the same problems. Generativity, or working across generations, was a key issue. Some respondents indicated they had an older mentor who helped guide them through difficult times. Others did not and wanted to ensure they could act in that role for younger

individuals.

The authors also asked participants what types of activism they had taken part in or would consider. Examples included door-to-door canvassing, posting on social media, speaking with the media, contacting elected officials or getting arrested for civil disobedience. The researchers set scores for the most passive actions to the most personally risky, such as getting arrested. Lived equality for transgender individuals had the highest score of issues respondents will fight for.

Gandy-Guedes and Paceley approach the issue in terms of intersectionality. While certain factors such as race or gender influence a person's life experiences, many others, such as sexual orientation, income level and age, play a part. When taken together, or intersectionally, they can help outline people's experiences.

"Thinking about this post-marriage equality, and that issue being mostly white and mainstream, it doesn't focus on the needs of these young people," Paceley said. "We wanted to focus on intersectionality. I think the findings speak to the fact that issues like police brutality don't just affect queer populations, but queer populations of color especially. It's great that we have marriage equality, but there are many other forms of oppression still happening. I think these young people weren't just worried about what was happening to them but issues that affected others as well."

Because studies about LGBTQ activism have largely focused on adults in more urban settings, the researchers wanted to collect views from a population whose day-to-day experiences are very different.

"It was important to both of us to present challenges unique to people in [rural areas](#). If you look at any map of challenges for LGBTQ populations, the worst are always in the rural states," Gandy-Guedes said.

Young people will also be the ones who largely shape future activism. Understanding the work they're doing and what motivates them to take action will also help inform future research.

"This is the age group of current and future leaders, and understanding what can be done to engage with them will only help equip everyone for the work still to be done," Paceley said.

**More information:** Megan E. Gandy-Guedes et al. Activism in Southwestern Queer and Trans Young Adults After the Marriage Equality Era, *Affilia* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0886109919857699](https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109919857699)

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