

Anti-LGBT bills led to more suicides in Poland, research finds

February 12 2024, by Dan Armstrong



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Analysis led by Chad Meyerhoefer shows harmful effects regardless of whether laws passed, with potential parallels to current U.S. "bathroom bills."

A coordinated political effort against LGBT rights in Poland over the past several years has resulted in little substantive policy but substantial negative mental health outcomes for the country's population, according to a study led by Chad Meyerhoefer, the Arthur F. Searing Professor and chair of the department of economics in the College of Business.

The National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) [working paper](#) finds that annual suicide attempts increased by 16% after the enactment of anti-LGBT statutes. In addition, suicides increased among middle-aged men and in areas that considered but did not enact anti-LGBT policies.

"Our findings suggest that stigmatization of minority groups leads to declines in population mental health," said Meyerhoefer, who is also a research associate with NBER's Economics of Health Program. "These types of discriminatory actions lead to stress, feelings of isolation, and hostility. For those already suffering from mental health problems, which are more prevalent among LGBT individuals, the [social stigma](#) associated with the laws can lead to suicide attempts."

Anti-LGBT sentiment in politics

The anti-LGBT movement in Poland accompanied the political ascendance of the country's Law and Justice party, also known as PiS, which Meyerhoefer described as representing a brand of "right-wing" populism. The party gained a Parliamentary majority in 2015 and held power until voters elected a more moderate majority in December 2023.

During that time, Meyerhoefer said, the party used cultural wedge issues,

including LGBT rights, as part of its political strategy. National party leaders codified the "promotion of family values," a platform that included anti-LGBT rhetoric.

However, at the national level, relatively little substantive policy was enacted regarding the issue of LGBT rights. Rather, this anti-LGBT sentiment gained more political traction at the local level, particularly in areas that had populations that were more politically conservative and with lower levels of socioeconomic status.

Most anti-LGBT legislation was implemented at the powiat (county) or gmina (municipal) level, and by 2019, a total of 91 powiats, gminas, and provinces had enacted some form of the legislation. These areas covered about a third of both the country's land area and population, Meyerhoefer said.

Sub-national legislation typically declared official opposition to the ideology associated with the LGBT rights movement and denounced homosexuality and sex education in schools. Some laws also asserted parental control over extra-curricular school activities and appointed a "family ombudsman" tasked with protecting family rights. Many proponents couched their proposals as aiming to create "LGBT-free zones."

"Rather than articulating specific restrictions on LGBT individuals, these actions provide official sanction to generalized discrimination against LGBT individuals in a variety of societal domains," said Meyerhoefer, whose broad-based research in health economics has focused on the effects of public policies on health outcomes, health care access and economic measures.

Anti-LGBT bills led to more suicides

To study the impact of these official actions on the population's mental health, Meyerhoefer's team analyzed county-level data on suicides and suicide attempts using difference-in-differences (DID) models to compare changes in suicide attempts, suicides and overall mortality in areas that adopted anti-LGBT laws to changes in these outcomes in areas along the county's border that did not pass laws.

The working paper, "Implications of the Decline in LGBT Rights for Population Mental Health: Evidence from Polish 'LGBT-free Zones,'" is co-authored with Bingjin Xue '18G '23 Ph.D., assistant professor of economics at the Paul College Economics at the University of New Hampshire, and Anna Poznańska, a researcher at the Polish National Institute of Public Health.

Xue, who earned her master's degree in financial engineering and Ph.D. in economics from Lehigh, is a health economist whose research focuses on the effects of health information technology and the impact of public policies on population mental health and well-being.

The researchers found that suicide attempts increased by 16%, or five attempts per 100,000 people, after the enactment of anti-LGBT statutes. This rise in suicide attempts was concentrated among men, and was associated with 11 additional suicides per 100,000 individuals aged 30–49.

These results track with minority stress theory, which posits that stigma, prejudice and discrimination against individuals in the minority create a stressful social environment that leads to physical and mental health problems.

But what was more surprising to researchers was their finding that areas that deliberated adopting but ultimately rejected laws also experienced a substantial increase in suicide attempts.

"We were surprised how large the effect of the deliberation of anti-LGBT resolutions was on suicide attempts," Meyerhoefer said. "Since the areas that enacted and deliberated anti-LGBT statutes have different characteristics, it is challenging to make direct comparisons, but the effect of deliberating resolutions on suicide attempts is at least as large as the effect of enacting statutes."

The study also noted that poor access to pharmacological treatment of mental health conditions and reduced resources for troubled youth may exacerbate negative outcomes.

Anticipating the effects of 'bathroom bills' in the US

The findings provide lessons that can apply to other countries in which sexuality is a contested political issue.

The study discusses several countries that have enacted laws that criminalize same-sex sexual acts with sentences up to the death penalty. These countries include Uganda, Brunei, Iran, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Northern Nigeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Qatar, Somalia and the United Arab Emirates.

Poland's European neighbor, Hungary, attracted international attention for a slate of anti-LGBT laws passed in 2021 that included a ban on disseminating information considered to "promote homosexuality or gender reassignment" by any means, including through the media or in schools.

Such anti-LGBT political efforts stand in contrast to the more predominant movement for increased LGBT rights gaining traction globally. The study cites a [Human Rights Campaign report](#) that tallies 35 countries that have legalized same-sex marriage, in addition to many more countries that have introduced protections for joint adoption and

prohibitions against employment discrimination based on sexual orientation.

"Despite evidence that [same-sex marriage](#) laws and similar non-discrimination policies increased the well-being of LGBT people and created economic wealth, there is a growing backlash from conservative political groups against the expansion of LGBT rights," Meyerhoefer said.

In the United States, Meyerhoefer sees parallels with "bathroom bills" currently under debate in several states. These laws generally seek to restrict the use of public restrooms by individuals based on their gender identity.

While relatively few bills have become law in the United States, Poland's example suggests that the intense public debate around the bills is causing significant stress and harm to members of the LGBT population.

"Although laws in the U.S. tend to focus on the school environment (either depictions of LGBT individuals in literature, or bathroom access), they still generate social conflict over the right of LGBT individuals to freely express their gender identity," he said. "As a result, anti-LGBT laws in the U.S. or elsewhere can lead to stigma and stress for LGBT individuals."

The future in Poland

Even prior to the ouster of PiS, many of the local laws that had passed in gminas have been overturned through court rulings or repealed voluntarily. Meyerhoefer said he expects that the movement to repeal these acts will continue to accelerate under the more moderate national government.

Still, it may not be enough to counteract the negative effects of the prior bills.

"Even when anti-LGBT laws do not directly restrict the rights of LGBT individuals, or only affect some individuals, they have broader negative consequences for population [mental health](#)," Meyerhoefer said. "The effects of law repeals is certainly something we are interested in studying."

More information: Chad Meyerhoefer et al, Implications of the Decline in LGBT Rights for Population Mental Health: Evidence from Polish "LGBT-free zones" (2023). [DOI: 10.3386/w31702](https://doi.org/10.3386/w31702)

Provided by Lehigh University

Citation: Anti-LGBT bills led to more suicides in Poland, research finds (2024, February 12) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-02-anti-lgbt-bills-suicides-poland.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--