

# Data gaps inhibit understanding of trans people's experiences, researchers say

March 29 2024, by Michael Sanders, Vanessa Hirneis

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The influential book "Invisible Women" articulates some of the countless ways in which women are missing from the data we use to understand the world, including the testing of many drugs, consideration

of how best to support refugees, and others. The book is powerful, because it shines a light into how, by missing women out, we (unintentionally) do harm.

This trans visibility day, we've been thinking about whether a similar book could be written for [trans people](#), and have had to conclude that it could not. Trans people and their experiences are so missing from the [datasets](#) that shape social science that we cannot even begin to fully understand the extent of their absence, and how this affects their lives.

Trans identities are missing from our datasets, meaning that their experiences in a number of domains cannot be studied quantitatively. The way in which many of our datasets are constructed reinforces a cis-normative understanding of the world, where people are pushed into the false binary of describing themselves as either male or female.

Even less desirably, their gender is often assumed by the person administering the dataset, or worse, lumped into the amorphous category of "other"—literally othering survey respondents with a trans or non-binary identity.

We believe it is right that people who identify as male, female, or non-binary should be able to be counted as such in surveys, regardless of their gender assigned at birth. Nonetheless, a failure to count trans people in much of quantitative social science research means a failure to understand the trans experience and consequently a form of erasure from important narratives about our world and what might be done to improve it.

This is a challenge that we at the Policy Institute are increasingly attempting to address through our work. In our recent studies on student [mental health](#) and the well-being of LGBTQAI+ students, we were fortunate to work with data that has routinely collected a rich picture of

people's [gender identity](#).

This data paints a stark picture, showing that trans and non-binary people have both [lower well-being](#), and significantly [higher incidence of mental health struggles](#), than their cisgendered peers, and that these levels are worse than for almost any other group. This is just one small example, but we have to hope that the 2021 census, which collected data on [people's gender identity](#) for the very first time, can help us to bring the trans experience into the light.

Another key feature of this is, of course, around the acceptance of trans individuals. The rates of people declaring that they identify as trans or non-binary varies dramatically between datasets, seemingly in part because people feel differentially comfortable in sharing their identity. This means that despite the ONS' best efforts, their data probably underestimates, potentially quite substantially, the number of trans people in society.

A part of the road to better data is a more tolerant society. Forthcoming research that we've conducted for Unbound Philanthropy shows that the vast majority of people are supportive of trans rights, even when the effects of social desirability bias are stripped out of the surveys—but there is still some way to go.

Groundbreaking research by Josh Kalla and David Broockman in the US found that a conversation with a trans person [meaningfully shifted people's attitudes](#) to trans rights, giving us hope that we can scientifically tackle the question of how to reduce anti-trans sentiment.

Provided by King's College London

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