
Am I The Only One? Online Polling, Advocacy, and The Least of Us

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Article

Recently the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) announced their effort to collect data on “discrimination against transgender people in housing, employment, public accommodation, health care, education, family life and criminal justice.”

Mara Keisling said of this effort:

“This is an absolutely critical national effort. We urge all transgender and gender non-conforming people to take the survey to help guide us in making better laws and policies that will improve the quality of life for all transgender people. We need everyone’s voice in this, everyone’s participation.”

One of the glaring holes in this effort is that it comes in the form of an online survey. Looking at this Transgender Day of Remembrance site, I wonder how many of these people had internet access? How many of these people were connected into online transgender networks?

The recent transgender hearings in Congress have been called historic by some, and in many ways they are. But many of the same questions of privilege and race remain. There’s an amazing disconnect that the hearings were held in a city that has had one of the highest transgender murder rates of African Americans (and a population that is 56% African American), and some of the most desperate conditions for transgender African Americans. Yet the people that spoke before Congress were people of privilege. Diane Schroer (a retired Colonel), Rep. Tammy Baldwin (a lesbian US Representative); Rep. Barney Frank (a gay US Representative); William H. Hendrix III (a PHD from Dow Chemical), Sabrina Marcus Tarabotti (a former NASA engineer), Shannon Minter (a lawyer), Rep. Robert Andrews (a US Representative), are all white people that have a certain amount of racial and economic privilege. The only person of color on the panel was Diego Sanchez. Sanchez is the Director of Public Relations & External Affairs, AIDS Action Committee. He’s worked for Starwood Hotels, ITT Sheraton, Coca-Cola, Holiday Inn, Burson-Marsteller/NY and Ketchum/Atlanta. Sanchez is a Rhodes Scholar candidate and a UMass/Boston Emerging Leaders Senior Fellow and holds a B.A. in Journalism from the University of Georgia with a major in Public Relations. While he is a person of color, he hardly represents the average transgender person of color. He’s a person of economic privilege. But it’s Tarabotti’s testimony that sticks out in my mind, especially when she said:

Personally I have lost my wife, most of my assets, and my home in divorce. I have been abandoned by half of my family and friends. At the same time, I had to find the \$70-90,000 of funding and endure the extreme pain of electrolysis, and the various other surgeries required to complete the transition from male to female.

Contrast that to the Washington Transgender Needs Assessment Survey (which was NOT an online survey) done in 2000:

Participants range in age from 13 to 61, with nearly 80% 36 years and under. Seventy-five percent report being born anatomically male, 24% female and 1% intersexed. Over 94% are of color, with nearly 70% African-American and 22% Latino/a. Eighty-four percent are U.S. citizens, and 20% have immigrated to the U.S., mostly from Latin American countries. The majority of the participants self-report their sexual orientation as Gay (65%), their gender identity as Transgender (69%) and their relationship status as single (69%).

Forty percent have not finished high school, and only 58% are employed in paid positions.

Twenty-nine percent report no source of income, and another 31% report annual incomes under \$10,000. Fifteen percent report losing a job due to discrimination from being transgendered.

Forty-three percent of the participants have been a victim of violence or crime, with 75% attributing a motive of either transphobia or homophobia to it.

Neither the Congressional hearings or this online survey even begin to cut into the abject poverty and discrimination that most transgender people experience. If the statistics are to be believed, the number of transgender people that live at or below the poverty level is fairly substantial. Where is the outreach to those of us that have the least? Those of us that are suffering the worst from discrimination in employment, housing, and medical care? Where are people that Earline Budd and the folks over at the Tyra Hunter's Drop-In Center serve?

If you are online and you give money to these organizations, odds are you probably aren't suffering the worst discrimination. This survey seems more like an effort to poll donors of the sponsoring organizations, than a picture of the state of transgender people in the United States.

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