

T R A N S
Y O U T H



Transgender Law Center

Making Authentic Lives Possible

**A RESOURCE FOR MEDIA PROFESSIONALS
REPORTING ON TRANSGENDER AND GENDER
NON-CONFORMING YOUTH**

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INTRODUCTION

Caitlyn Jenner's interview with Diane Sawyer and debut on the cover of *Vanity Fair* in spring 2015 raised transgender issues to a new level of public awareness. Just a year earlier, TIME Magazine had declared a "transgender tipping point," with a cover story featuring Laverne Cox of *Orange is the New Black*. In 2011, a well-known woman and editor at People.com, Janet Mock, famously came out as transgender, just a couple of years after the journey of Chaz Bono, son of Cher, was chronicled on *Entertainment Tonight*. These women and men, building on decades of work by transgender activists, leveraged their fame to help educate the public about what it means to be trans in America.

All of these were major media moments, but despite the steady growth in visibility for transgender people, harmful stereotypes and false narratives about the community persist. These stereotypes continue to impact transgender people daily, as shown by the disproportionately high rates of unemployment, homelessness, violence, incarceration, suicide, and poverty faced by transgender people, particularly transgender people of color.

At the center of many of these statistics and conversations are young people, who are coming out at younger ages and challenging their schools' and communities' understanding of gender. At a moment when transgender people face both unprecedented visibility and daunting levels of discrimination and violence, it is especially important that reporters cover transgender issues and treat transgender youth respectfully and responsibly. There are so many fascinating, inspiring, and challenging stories concerning transgender and gender non-conforming youth to explore, and those stories are best when they reflect the nuances of the community's experience.

This toolkit is intended to support media professionals who want to write about transgender and gender non-conforming youth – and who want to get it right.

DEFINITIONS FOR COMMONLY USED PHRASES

Language is ever evolving and while there are dozens, maybe even hundreds of words used to describe transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) experiences and identities, we are only going to list a few here – the ones most commonly used throughout this toolkit. For a more comprehensive list of terms and for additional guidelines on covering trans stories, visit [GLAAD' Media Reference Guide](#).

TRANSGENDER – Refers to a person whose sex at birth is different than who they know they are on the inside.

GENDER IDENTITY - One's internal, deeply held sense of one's gender. For transgender people, their own internal gender identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth.

GENDER EXPRESSION – Refers to the ways in which people externally communicate their gender identity to others through behavior, clothing, haircut, voice, and other forms of presentation. Gender expression also works the other direction as people assign gender to others based on their appearance, mannerisms, and other characteristics being assigned a gender.

GENDER EXPANSIVE or GENDER CREATIVE– These terms are used to describe people, oftentimes youth, whose gender identity and/or expression go beyond the rigid norms and expectations our society puts on gender, e.g., blue is for boys, pink is for girls.

THE GENDER BINARY – This is a very common system of thought, referring to certain ideas many people hold about gender and sex. The gender binary presumes that everyone is either male or female and relies on three principles:

1. There are two sexes: man and woman.
2. Every human is either a boy/man or girl/woman.
3. Humans born with XY chromosomes, penises, testicles, etc. are always men; humans born with XX chromosomes, vaginas, ovaries, etc. are always women.

GENDERQUEER – An umbrella term for people whose gender identity is outside of, not included within, or beyond the binary of female and male.

THEY – When talking about people in general, we will use the pronoun they. Increasingly, people who do not identify with society's rigid gender norms are identifying with the pronoun they. Therefore, they does not necessarily mean more than one person.

COMING OUT – In reference to trans people, coming out can have two separate meanings:

1. For a person who has not started their transition, coming out can mean telling someone or several people that you are trans and that your true and authentic gender is not the one you were assigned at birth.
2. For a transitioned person coming out can mean disclosing to someone that you transitioned at some point in the past, and were assigned a different sex at birth than the one in which you currently live.

TODAY'S LANDSCAPE: FACTS, STATS & THE LAW

According to UCLA's Williams Institute, there are an estimated 700,000 people in the United States. Whether you're working on a big picture piece or a personal profile, including broader context about the transgender community is key. The following statistics and facts can help ground or inspire your coverage of transgender and gender non-conforming youth issues.

EDUCATION, HOMELESSNESS & CRIMINALIZATION

The facts: Transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) youth, particularly TGNC youth of color, face tremendous barriers to getting an education, from unsafe school environments and discriminatory discipline policies to broader issues of underfunded schools and heavy police presence on campus. As a result, TGNC youth students face a higher risk of being pushed out of school and into the juvenile justice system.

The stats:

- Youth who expressed a transgender or gender non-conforming identity in grades K-12 reported alarming rates of harassment (78%), physical assault (35%), and sexual violence (12%) according to a 2011 National Center for Transgender Equality study
- Harassment was so severe that it pushed nearly one-sixth of TGNC youth surveyed out of school
- 31% of TGNC students reported harassment by teachers or staff
- 6% of respondents in the 2011 NCTE study were expelled in grades K-12 for their gender identity/expression
- For those who had to leave school for harassment, nearly half (48%) reported having experienced homelessness
- More than half of respondents to the 2011 NCTE study who experienced harassment at school because of their gender identity/expression reported having attempted suicide
- 42% of transgender students surveyed in a GLSEN 2013 report were prevented from using their preferred name at school
- Almost 60% of transgender students in a GLSEN 2013 report had been prohibited from using a school bathroom or locker room that corresponded to their gender identity
- 32% of transgender students in a GLSEN 2013 survey had been prevented from wearing clothes consistent with their gender identity, as they were considered inappropriate based on their legal sex
- LGBTQ and gender non-conforming youth, particularly gender non-conforming girls, are up to three times more likely to experience harsh disciplinary treatment by school administrators than their heterosexual counterparts, according to a 2010 *Pediatrics* study
- According to the Center for American Progress, 26 percent of LGBTQ and gender non-conforming report leaving their homes at some point. Many leave of their own accord to escape conflict and abuse, but more often they are pushed out and into the juvenile justice system by their families
- Transgender youth have significantly lower participation rates in sports due to policy restrictions that prevent them from participating in a manner consistent with their gender identity

Sources: [Injustice at Every Turn](#), [GLSEN 2013 National School Climate Survey](#), [Center for American Progress: The Unfair Criminalization of Gay and Transgender Youth](#)

The law:

- Title IX's sex discrimination prohibition requires that all schools in receipt of federal funding take appropriate steps to protect transgender students from harassment and bullying. Title IX also

mandates that transgender students be treated consistent with their gender identity for all purposes in schools, including in the use of facilities, programs, and activities.

- A growing number of states, including California, Colorado, Iowa, Minnesota, Massachusetts, and Washington, have nondiscrimination laws explicitly protecting transgender youth in schools from bullying and harassment as well as requiring that they be treated consistent with their gender identity for all purposes. Many school districts also have policies prohibiting discrimination based on gender identity or gender expression.
- An increasing number of national sports associations, such as US Soccer Federation and USA Swimming, state athletic associations, and high school athletic associations, including in California, Connecticut, Florida, Maryland, and Nevada, have adopted transgender-inclusive athletic policies allowing transgender athletes to participate on sports teams corresponding to their gender identity and to use facilities consistent with their gender identity.

INTERVIEWING TRANSGENDER YOUTH

Nothing better illustrates the issues facing transgender and gender non-conforming youth than the personal stories, experiences, and voices of young people themselves. When working on a story about issues impacting TGNC youth, incorporating young people's perspectives is key. Below is some general guidance for interviewing transgender and gender non-conforming youth in a respectful, responsible, and effective way.

Remember: a transgender young person is still a young person.

Sometimes, in trying to understand what it means to be transgender, a reporter will ask invasive questions about genitalia or private medical decisions that are not safe or appropriate to ask of a young person, or of anyone publicly. Consider when forming your questions: would you feel comfortable asking this of a child or person who wasn't transgender or gender non-conforming?

Often, these types of questions come from a sense, as a reporter, that you need your subject to "prove" they are truly transgender. A person is transgender if they identify as a gender different from the sex they were assigned at birth – period. Some transgender people choose to transition medically, for example taking hormones or having surgery, and some transgender people do not. Their decision does not make them any more or less authentically transgender and is seldom relevant to the story. There should be no assumption that personal medical decisions are appropriate or relevant to a story simply because the story is about someone who is transgender.

Explore new narratives.

Every transgender and gender non-conforming person has a different journey. There is no single story, experience, or even way of defining identity that all TGNC people share. A lot of reporters become fixated on narratives they have already heard about transgender youth, causing youth to close up or feel they must conform to someone else's narrative.

When it comes to gender in particular, more open-ended questions are key. Some transgender youth do not identify as male *or* female, and while that is a more complicated story to tell, it is the true story for those youth. Moreover, a complicated analysis of a young person's gender is often unnecessary in telling a powerful and compelling story about transgender and gender non-conforming youth's lives, experiences, and emotions.

While family rejection, bullying, and suicidal ideation are issues that impact transgender and gender non-conforming youth, do not assume that any of these are issues that the young person you're interviewing has experienced. Many transgender youth have the support of friends and family, and those stories deserve to be told, too. When possible, consider including supportive friends and family in your pieces about transgender youth.

If the person you are interviewing does have experience with suicide *and* proactively shares that they want to discuss it, please refer to the resource [*Talking about Suicide & LGBT Populations*](#).

Be open to anonymity.

Speaking out can be a vulnerable experience for anyone, and for TGNC youth it can even be dangerous if the young person is outed to family or community members. Youth voices are critical to stories impacting youth lives, but a TGNC young person might not always be able to safely share their story publicly. Anonymity rules at outlets can be strict – and with good reason – but be aware that a young person might require a level of anonymity for their own safety.

AVOIDING COMMON PITFALLS

There are some common issues and mistakes that come up in media coverage of transgender youth. For more, please visit GLAAD's [In Focus: Covering the Transgender Community](#)

Ask for pronouns

Always ask what pronouns someone uses to ensure that your coverage is accurate and respectful. Being misgendered publicly, in a story that might be shared widely, can be incredibly harmful and damaging for a transgender person.

Many TGNC youth use “they/them” pronouns because they do not identify as male or female. Using “they/them” to refer to a singular person, despite common belief, has a long history in the English language and is [grammatically correct](#). If you are concerned about confusion, you can simply state early in the story that the young person uses “they/them” pronouns. If your editor still will not allow the use of the young person’s preferred pronoun, you can refer to the young person using their name alone. Never use a pronoun for someone that does not align with their identity.

Check headlines and captions

You likely aren’t the one crafting the headlines and photo captions for your stories. Unfortunately, with stories about transgender youth, this means that the best-reported articles can be marred by misgendering, offensive, or inaccurate headlines and captions. For stories concerning transgender youth, it is worth checking in with your editor about these details before a story goes live.

Referring to someone pre-transition

A lot of reporters want to illustrate a transgender youth’s journey by including their former name or pictures of them before they transitioned. While well-meaning, these questions and this approach actually undermine the young person’s identity and reinforce the myth that transgender people are pretending to be something they are not. A transgender person has not gone on a journey from starting out as one gender to becoming another; they have gone on a journey towards understanding and accepting their authentic self, the person they have been all along.

RESOURCES

For questions or to connect with young people, families, and experts who can comment on transgender and gender non-conforming youth issues, contact:

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