

New research challenges claim that youth identify as transgender due to ‘social contagion’

The number of openly transgender youth declined between 2017 and 2019, according to a paper published Wednesday in the journal Pediatrics.

by Brooke Migdon

- A paper published Wednesday in the journal Pediatrics disproves popular theories used mostly by conservative politicians and those in the medical field seeking to restrict access to gender-affirming health care for transgender youth.
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- Transgender adolescents do not identify as transgender because they are influenced by external factors like social media or their peers, according to the paper, and cisgender youth do not identify as transgender to flee the stigma of being gay or lesbian.
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- The paper’s lead author told Changing America that he hopes his and his colleague’s research will be used to eradicate the use of unfounded theories in political discourse and policy making.
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Gender dysphoria is not driven by “social contagion” and transgender youth do not identify as transgender to escape stigma related to their sexual orientation, new research suggests — directly rebuking two popular theories embraced by conservative politicians and a small percentage of the medical community seeking to restrict access to gender-affirming health care for transgender young people.

In a [paper published Wednesday](#) in the journal Pediatrics, researchers found that the percentage of adolescents who openly identified as transgender declined between 2017 and 2019, which challenges a theory that the number of transgender youth in the U.S. is climbing due to the influence of things like social media and peer pressure.

In April, Missouri Rep. Suzie Pollock, a Republican who [sponsored legislation this year](#) that would have stripped doctors that provide gender-affirming care to minors of their medical licenses, said the “root cause” of gender dysphoria is abuse, mental disorders and [“social contagion.”](#)

Rep. Gary Click (R), the sponsor of a similar measure in Ohio, said while testifying that he believed young people who identify as transgender are often influenced to do so by social media or a “desire to fit into a group or escape an adverse experience.”

“Sadly, work in this area has become highly politicized,” Jack Turban, an incoming assistant professor in child and adolescent psychiatry at the University of California San Francisco and the paper’s lead author, told Changing America on Wednesday.

“This is difficult to watch for those of us who have dedicated our careers to supporting the mental health of young people,” he said. “We regularly see young trans patients who become more anxious and depressed as they watch politicians stigmatize them on large national platforms.”

In states like Florida and Alabama, where legislation targeting transgender young people has become

law, “things are even worse,” Turban said.

In the study published Wednesday, Turban and his colleagues analyzed data collected by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) Youth Risk Behavior Survey — a biennial survey distributed to high school students across the country.

While the CDC survey does not require states to collect or report information on adolescents’ gender identity (questions about sexual orientation have only been administered since 2015), 16 states opted to do so in both 2017 and 2019, culminating in a sample of roughly 100,000 young people per year.

Using that dataset, researchers found that most transgender youth between 2017 and 2019 were assigned male at birth — a discovery that challenges another fringe theory that adolescents assigned female at birth are more likely to identify as transgender because of social media, peer pressure and other external influences.

From 2017 to 2019, the percent of transgender youth assigned female at birth fell from 1.9 percent to 1.4 percent of the transgender population, the study found.

The paper disproves the “social contagion” hypothesis that stems from a [2018 study of online parent forums](#). According to that study’s findings, children are more likely to experience “rapid onset gender dysphoria” when they spend more time using the internet or have friends who are transgender.

That theory has been disproved by multiple studies published in peer-reviewed journals including [The Journal of Pediatrics](#) and [The Sociological Review](#).

Joerg Heber, then-editor-in-chief of the journal PLOS ONE, which published the original study, [issued an apology](#) shortly after it was released for “oversights that occurred during the original assessment of the study.”

Researchers on Wednesday also found that data did not support a theory that there is a national trend of cisgender youth identifying as transgender to flee the stigma of being gay or lesbian.

Comparing rates of bullying victimization among transgender adolescents and cisgender sexual minority adolescents, researchers found that rates of victimization were much higher among transgender young people.

According to Turban, experts working in transgender health care have never given much credence to the idea that lesbian, gay or bisexual youth identify as transgender to escape judgement or torment from their peers.

“That simply isn’t what we generally see in clinical practice,” he said.