

Transgender women of color are more likely to avoid social welfare services and experience discrimination



Social equity is important in how public services are provided. In new research, using survey data [Adam M. Butz](#) and [Tia Sherèe Gaynor](#) examine how transgender women of color engage with US social welfare. They find that, compared to other groups, transgender women of color are more likely to avoid seeking welfare services and face discrimination within social welfare offices. Considering these findings, they argue that policymakers and social welfare administrators must pay closer attention to intersectionality and social equity.

Alongside values like efficiency, economy, and effectiveness, the pursuit of social equity is a core pillar of public administration. This means that public servants working in policy and administrative spaces are obligated to eliminate barriers and pursue equitable treatment and outcomes for marginalized populations. In new [research](#), we add to a growing literature on social equity in public administration through an examination of how transgender women of color engage with US social welfare offices.

Our core argument is that persons with intersecting marginalized identities – identifying as both a transgender woman and a person of color – will be more likely to avoid seeking out social welfare benefits like cash and food assistance, and more likely to report experiencing discriminatory treatment when engaging with social welfare offices. Using data from the 2015 US Transgender Survey our analysis suggests that transgender women of color, relative to other transgender identifying respondents like white transgender women, are more likely to both avoid seeking welfare services and face discrimination within social welfare offices.

Intersectionality and Social Welfare

Numerous studies on social welfare provision in the US show that racial identity, especially Black identity, is associated with negative stereotypes of sluggish work ethic and un-deservingness of public assistance. For instance, Martin Gilens influential work, [Why Americans Hate Welfare](#), finds that welfare preferences are shaped more by racial stereotyping than rival determinants like political ideology or partisan identity. Similarly, transgender identity [has been found](#) to be associated with negative social constructions around deviance and criminality, which can matter to perceptions of belonging in society alongside shaping case manager interactions in the US social welfare system. Negative perceptions of transgender persons and persons of color are known to exist in social science literatures; however, much less is known about how intersecting marginalized identities shape social welfare experiences and outcomes at the street-level. We look at the intersection of transgender and racial identities, and how this complexity affects how individuals experience the US social welfare system, (including redistributive benefit programs like food and cash assistance), alongside Social Security related benefits.

Legal scholar [Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the theoretical concept of intersectionality](#), referring to the unique ways individuals with multiple marginalized identities experience systems of oppression in multiplicative ways. Crenshaw illustrated this through the experiences of how Black women must navigate racism and sexism, simultaneously in US political and social structures, and how US structures are not designed to recognize discrimination from a multiple identity lens. The application of an intersectional perspective, particularly in the context of policy design and implementation, allows for a more complete and critical analysis of the impact of policy actions on women of color.



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Transgender women of color are more likely to avoid benefits and report discrimination

Analyzing data from the 2015 US Transgender Survey we find evidence that transgender women of color are more likely to avoid seeking social welfare benefits, and more likely to report experiencing discrimination after engaging with social welfare offices. For example, after controlling for rival explanations of welfare outcomes, roughly 1 in 12 transgender women of color (WOC) are expected to report avoiding public assistance offices compared with 1 in 20 white transgender women. Figures 1 and 2 show the predicted probabilities of avoiding social welfare offices and experiencing unequal treatment.

Figure 1 – Predicted Probabilities of Avoiding Social Welfare Offices

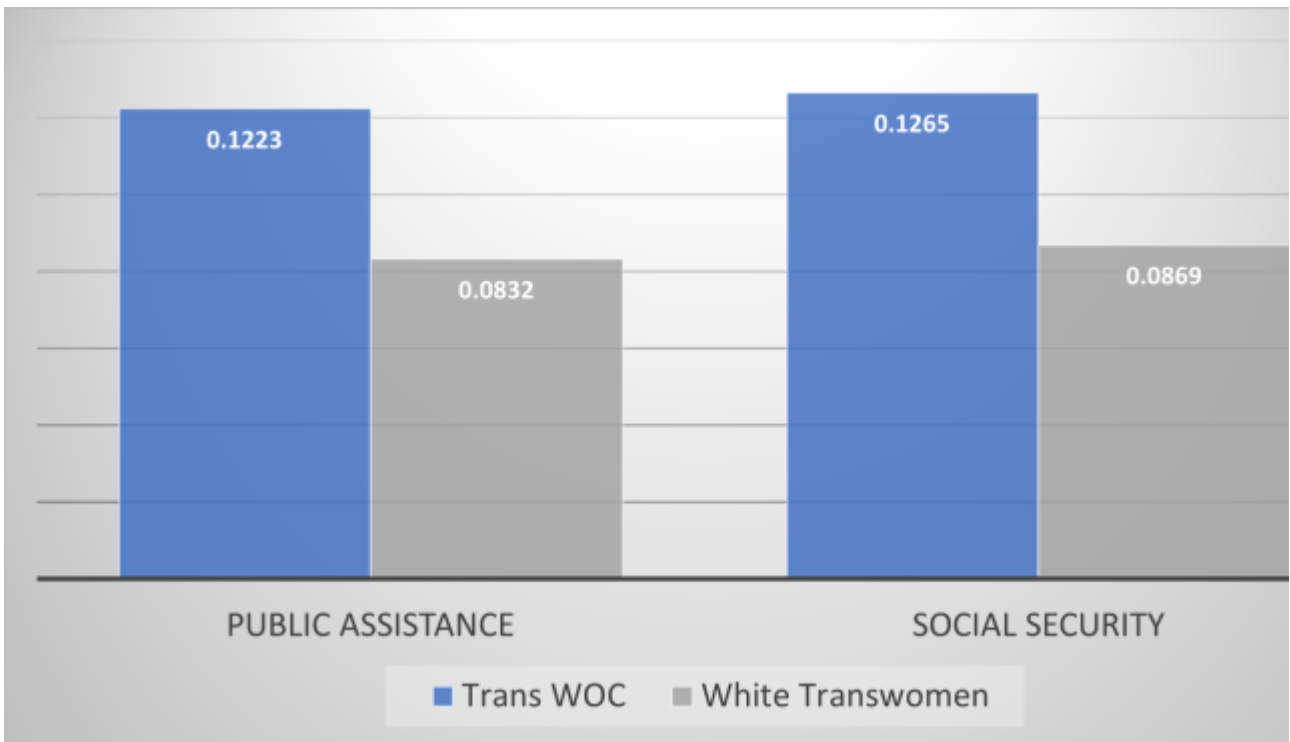
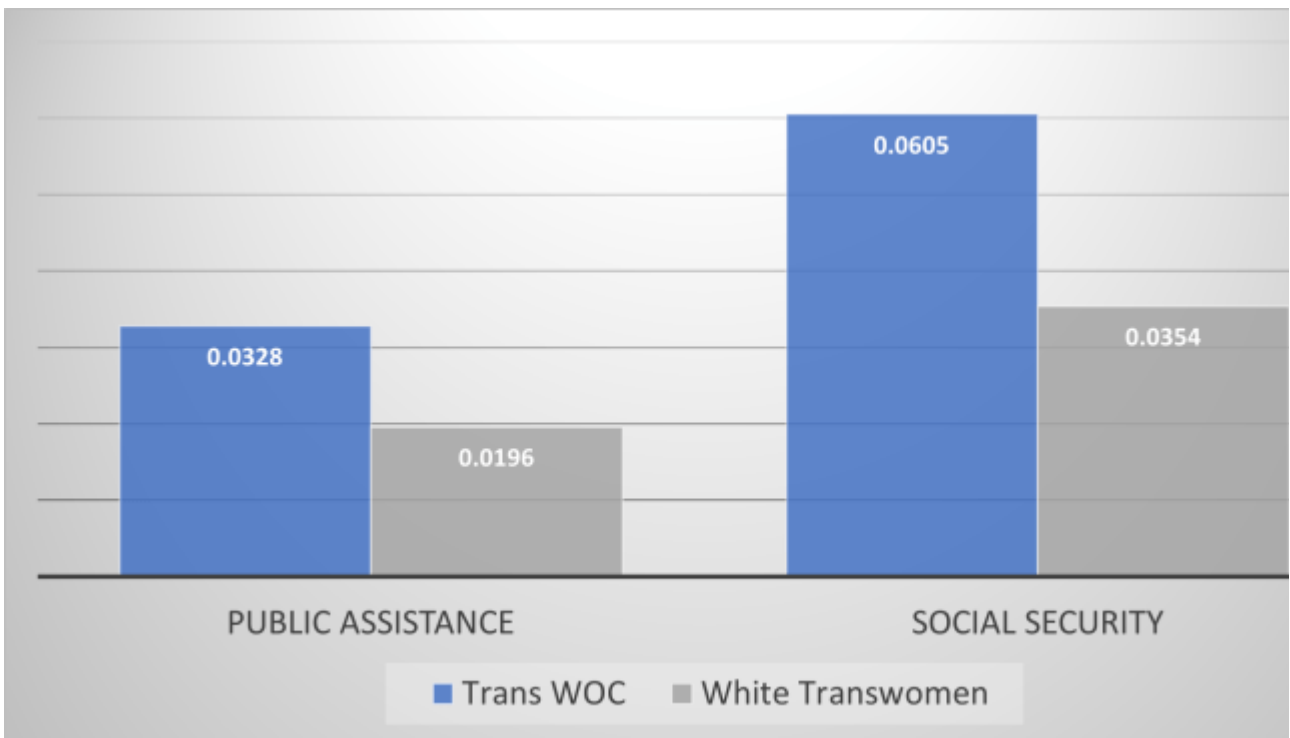


Figure 2 – Predicted Probabilities of Experiencing Unequal Treatment in Social Welfare Office



Social welfare practitioners need to play closer attention to intersectionality

The implications of our research for policymakers and social welfare administrators suggest that issues of intersectionality and social equity require more attention than is generally provided. Initially engaging with social welfare offices is critical to securing relief and reducing material hardship. Thus, finding disproportionate avoidance of social welfare offices among transgender women of color should give practitioners pause for reflection and opportunities for improvement. Policymakers, agency heads, and program managers should be devising ways to improve the inclusiveness of social welfare benefits for transgender women of color. This could take the form of inclusion centered social welfare campaigns or literature that includes images and testimonials from transgender women when promoting social welfare services. Additionally, targeted inclusion efforts could be pursued in local venues centering transgender identifying women of color. Social welfare offices could work to become inclusive physical spaces, such as having gender neutral restroom facilities on location. Agencies may also consider conducting internal assessments related to the organizational climate, staff biases, and knowledge gaps on equity, inclusion, and belonging as strategies to reduce discriminatory behaviors and outcomes.

Moreover, our research suggests potential value of e-government approaches to benefit determination and enrollment in social welfare services. Allowing for more touchless e-government engagement with social welfare offices could reduce the need for face-to-face meetings with case managers and other frontline personnel; potentially increasing the attractiveness of public benefits while reducing discriminatory street-level interactions. One potential benefit of the COVID-19 pandemic is that more social welfare services are moving online and less documentation (e.g., payroll stubs) and face-to-face contact with case managers is being required to access benefits and maintain eligibility.

Our research is a call to action among scholars and practitioners who claim to value pillars of social equity and justice in theory and practice. Future research should continue to explore issues of intersectionality, social equity, and compounded discrimination in other policy and administrative contexts, such as public education, health, and transportation. Furthermore, additional research efforts seeking to elevate the lived experiences of transgender women of color in their interactions with public

agencies is needed. Future research efforts should also seek to incorporate mixed methodologies including qualitative approaches, such as focus groups, open-ended interviews, story-telling opportunities, and other avenues to better illuminate the lived experiences of transgender women of color. In-depth interviews and focus groups highlighting lived experiences can offer additional insight into specific interactions with social welfare and other public agencies as well as the material consequences of such interactions for transgender women of color.

- *This article is based on the paper, [“Intersectionality and Social Welfare: Avoidance and Unequal Treatment among Transgender Women of Color”](#) in *Public Administration Review**
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