

## TRANSGENDERISM: SEMANTIC CONTAGION OR BIOLOGICAL FACT?

---

From education specialists to publicly funded medical clinics to a growing body of academic work and activism, the transgender industry has exploded.

---

February 16, 2018 Anne Hendershott Analysis, Features 35Print

---



Photo by Sharon McCutcheon on Unsplash

While there has been a dearth of reliable data on the surge in numbers of transgender children and adults in the United States, data from Sweden, Australia, and the United Kingdom indicates an explosion in demand for gender-identity treatment. **According to the Guardian**, the UK's 14 gender identity clinics have seen referral increases of up to 100 percent in the past year. At London's Charing Cross—the oldest and largest adult clinic—the number of referrals has more than tripled in 10 years, from 498 in 2006 to 1,892 in 2016, while a clinic in Nottingham reported a 28-fold increase in referrals in eight years, and a clinic in Exeter saw a 20-fold increase in a decade.

The increases are even more alarming for the UK's clinic for children and adolescents, where there have been increases of 50 percent a year since 2011. In 2016, it had an unexpected and unprecedented increase of 100 percent, going from 697 to 1,398 referrals of children and adults. Similar increases were seen at the Sandyford clinic in Glasgow, which doubled its referrals in a year—from 90 to 178—in 2015; **in Australia**, there were 200 referrals to the gender clinic run by Melbourne's Royal Children's Hospital—up from 18 referrals in 2012. **In Sweden**, the Astrid Lindgren Children's Hospital witnessed a 100 percent increase in numbers each year for the past several years, with a total of 197 children seeking treatment for transitioning in 2016.

We are experiencing a similar surge in the United States. UCLA's Williams Institute, a think tank dedicated to conducting research on sexual orientation and gender identity law and public policy, **has revealed** that the best estimate of the percentage of adults who identify as transgender in the United States is double that of the estimate produced in 2011, with 1.4 million adults identifying as transgender. Study authors suggest that "a perceived

increase in visibility and social acceptance of transgender people may increase the number of individuals willing to identify as transgender.”

Perhaps, but it is also possible that there may be a different cause—a cultural cause. Nearly two decades ago, an *Atlantic Monthly* article titled “A New Way to be Mad,” by bioethicist Carl Elliott, predicted all of this when he wrote: “once transsexual and gender-identity disorder and sex reassignment surgery became common linguistic currency, more people began conceptualizing and interpreting their experience in these terms. They began to make sense of their lives in a way that hadn’t been available to them before, and to some degree they actually became the kinds of people described by these terms.”

Elliott was suggesting that it is possible that our culture is not just revealing transgender individuals, it is creating them. If so, we can expect tremendous growth, as an entire industry is emerging to meet the growing need. From education specialists designing “safe schools” for transgender children, to transgender practitioners, publicly funded medical clinics, reimbursement schedules, and a growing body of academic work and activism, the transgender industry has exploded. Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking uses the term “semantic contagion” in his book *Rewriting the Soul* to describe the way in which publicly identifying and describing a condition like transgenderism creates the means by which that condition spreads.

One clue that social scientists interested in determining whether the cause is cultural is to look closely at whether the condition is evenly spread throughout the United States. If it were truly a biological fact, it would be equally distributed throughout the population. But it isn’t. Williams Institute data reveals that the highest percentage of transgender-identified adults live in Washington, DC, Hawaii, California, New Mexico, Georgia, and Texas. Washington, DC has nearly double the number of transgender individuals as the next highest state (Hawaii). The Williams study’s authors dismissed this finding for Washington, DC as an “outlier due to its unique geographic and demographic profile.” But why? The percentage of individuals living in the District of Columbia who identify as transgender is 2.8 percent—more than triple the percentage of those living in the next highest states of Hawaii or California (.78 percent and .76 percent respectively). And, the percentage of transgender individuals in the District of Columbia is more than nine times greater than the .3 percent living in North Dakota or .31 percent in Iowa. Hardly an equal distribution.

The data on the District of Columbia are revealing—but we are not quite sure how DC has come to lead the country in the number of individuals who identify as transgender. Previous research has indicated that transgender individuals have been more likely to emerge from racial and ethnic minority populations—with black and Latino individuals overrepresented among the transgender. But, there are several states with large percentages of minority populations, **yet comparatively lower percentages** of individuals who identify as transgender. It is much more likely to be cultural. As far back as 2013, the *New York Times* pronounced Washington, DC the “**gayest place in America**,” with a thriving transgender population. There is an annual “**DC High Heel Drag Race**” in held DuPont Circle.

The biological “born transgender” opinion may be ascendant now, but it contradicts one of the main findings of a meta-analysis of other studies published in *The New Atlantis* by Dr. Lawrence Mayer and Dr. Paul McHugh, who found that “the hypothesis that gender identity is an innate, fixed property of human beings that is independent of biological sex—that a person might be a ‘man trapped in a woman’s body’ or a ‘woman trapped in a man’s body’ is not supported by scientific evidence.”

Catholic teachings have long rejected the postmodern conceptualization of gender as a moveable point along a spectrum that is fluid and changeable. In a speech to the Pontifical Academy for Life last October, **Pope Francis denounced** the ways in which new technologies are making it easier for people to “change” their genders, saying this “utopia of the neutral” jeopardizes the creation of new life. This more recent statement continues the Holy

Father's earlier condemnations of gender theory as "denying the order of creation," published in *Pope Francis: This Economy Kills* by Andrea Torielli and Giacomo Galeazzi.

Likewise, in a speech at the Vatican on December 23, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI **directly addressed** the destructive influence of gender theory, saying:

What is often expressed and understood by the term "gender" ultimately ends up being man's attempt at self-emancipation from creation and the Creator. Man wants to be his own master, and alone – always and exclusively – to determine everything that concerns him. Yet in this way he lives in opposition to the truth, in opposition to the Creator Spirit.

And four years later, In December, 2012, **Pope Benedict reiterated** this message when he decried attempts to ignore or destroy the natural "duality" of male-female created by God. Man, he said, now "calls his nature into question. From now on he is merely spirit and will. The manipulation of nature, which we deplore today where our environment is concerned, now becomes man's fundamental choice where he himself is concerned."

For Pope Benedict, attempting to manipulate the nature of the human being leads to a "self-emancipation of man from creation and the Creator," and likewise, for Pope Francis, **gender theory does not recognize the order of creation**: "With this attitude man commits a new sin, that against God the Creator. The true custody of creation does not have anything to do with the ideologies that consider man like an accident, like a problem to eliminate.... The design of the Creator is written in nature."

There is simply no scientific evidence for biological causes for the tremendous growth in transgender identity. The social construction of "transgender identity" is counter to science and to Catholic teachings. And although there is some evidence that severe gender confusion can be acquired from traumatic experiences in childhood or beyond, it is more likely that as individuals look for a reason for their intractable unhappiness, they seek a cure in what is becoming a cult of transgenderism.

#### ***About Anne Hendershott 79 Articles***

***Anne Hendershott is professor of sociology and director of the Veritas Center for Ethics in Public Life at Franciscan University of Steubenville. She is the co-author of *Renewal: How a New Generation of Priests and Bishops are Revitalizing the Church (Encounter Books)*.***