

CONVERSION THERAPY:

The problem, the effects, and the solution.

by Emily Palermo | PLCY 220

WHAT IS CONVERSION THERAPY?

Conversion therapy, sometimes referred to as "sexual orientation change efforts", is a form of psychological "treatment" often used to **change the sexual orientation or gender identity** of homosexuals or bisexuals and transgender individuals respectively (Mallory et al., 2018).

History of Conversion Therapy:

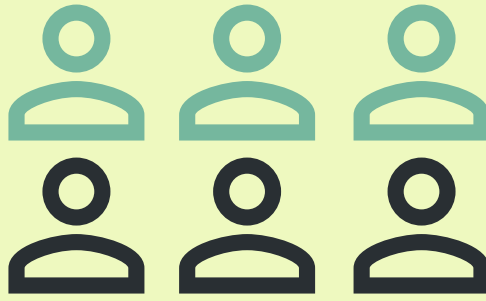
In the early 20th century, homosexuality was viewed as a **medical problem that required medical assistance** to "cure" the individual. In the 1960s, physically invasive procedures like **electroshock therapy** were utilized to facilitate change in an individual's sexual orientation. **Talk therapy** joined these practices as homosexuality began to be categorized as a mental disorder and sexual deviation (Graham, 2019). There had been no legislation prohibiting and limiting this practice until 2012.

Effects:

Studies have shown that parent-initiated sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE) are strongly associated with negative mental health implications. Those who had undergone conversion therapy proposed by a parent were shown more likely to experience **depression, attempt suicide, and engage in unprotected sex** (Ryan, Toomey, Diaz & Russell, 2020). Religiosity and upholding conservative values were some of the main parental motivators for SOCE, even though many approaches to conversion therapy may be non-religious (Grace, 2008). Conversion therapy can cause serious mental harm and has shown **little to no evidence of efficacy** (Pan American Health Organization, 2012).

698,000

adults (18-59) have received conversion therapy in the United States.



350,000

of those adults received treatment as adolescents.

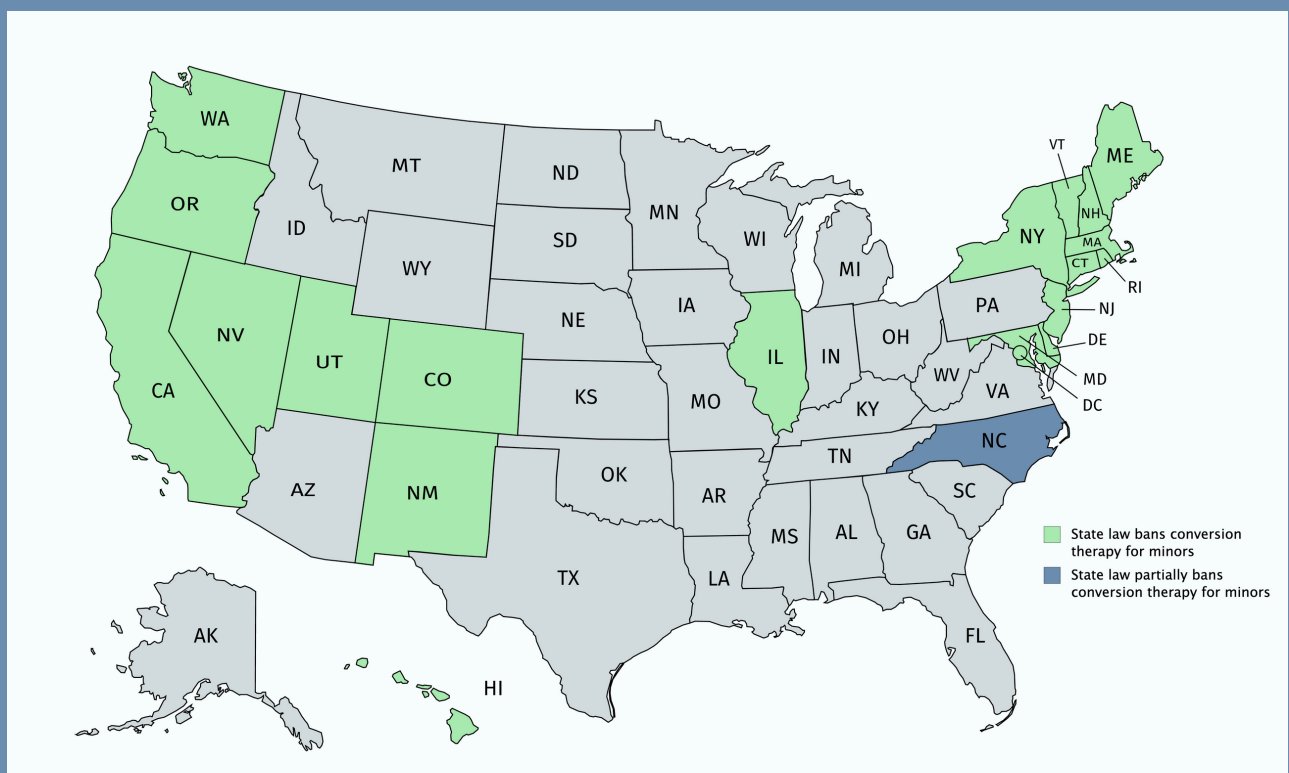
16,000

LGBT youth will receive conversion therapy by the time they are 18 in states that do not ban the practice

Source: Williams Institute, 2018

WHERE IS THERE POLICY THAT PROHIBITS CONVERSION THERAPY?

In 2012, **California** was the first state to pass concrete legislation banning conversion therapy. Many states have partial bans on the practice (Victor, 2014). For example, North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper recently enacted an executive order banning state funding of conversion therapy, **but did not outrightly prohibit the practice** (Ehrlich, 2019).



Source: (Conversion Therapy Laws, 2020).

Why is there a lack of policy?

One thing that is precluding the creation of legislation banning conversion therapy is the **presence of religious values** in the practice (Moss, 2014). The majority of conversion therapy practices are openly religious and are **not held accountable by state departments of health** or licensing boards (Grace, 2008). It is a concern of many that a state ban on conversion therapy would infringe on the constitutional right to **freedom of religion**. However, there is substantive evidence that this unethical practice is non-religious in many situations. There is little consensus across various religions on whether conversion therapy is an “appropriate response” to homosexuality (Moss, 2014).

There have also been problems with California's precedent legislation. Some scholars say that California's approach **essentializes** sexual identity and is open to First Amendment challenges (Victor, 2014).

Essentialism

boils down the identity of a group to stereotypical characteristics that promote inaccurate interpretations of individual differences within that group (Victor, 2014).

Policy Solutions:

Outrightly banning conversion therapy with federal or state **legislation** or instating sanctions on companies that encourage conversion therapy



Implementing more **affirmative therapy** with LGBT patients, making no attempts to change their sexual orientation (Cramer et al. 2008).

The American Psychological Association has issued a resolution encouraging guardians and parents to **refrain from sexual orientation change efforts** that portray homosexuality as a mental disorder (Mallory et al., 2018).



Expand curriculum on sexual health and mental health, especially for the LGBTQ+ community in schools. Forming a **community of support and solidarity** is key to eliminating conversion therapy and helping those who have been adversely affected by it (Pan American Health Organization, 2012).

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