

Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity

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Online First Publication, November 10, 2025. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000888>

CITATION

Tan, K., Fernandez, C. C., Byrne, J. L., & Veale, J. F. (2025). Push and pull factors for transgender migration to Aotearoa/New Zealand. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*. Advance online publication. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000888>

BRIEF REPORT

Push and Pull Factors for Transgender Migration to Aotearoa/New Zealand

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Current research has primarily drawn on the push–pull theory to explain factors and circumstances that influence global human migration. Within Aotearoa/New Zealand however, the push–pull factors that influence transgender and nonbinary people’s migration are still poorly understood. Drawing on this gap, we employed the 2022 Counting Ourselves survey data to examine overseas-born transgender people’s migration intentions to Aotearoa, stratified by demographic differences including country of origin, length of stay, and immigration status. A sample of 576 overseas-born transgender people aged 14 and above were included in the survey ($M = 29.58$, $SD = 12.23$). Participants from the Global South, recent migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, and those with a temporary visa or newly secured residency described greater acceptance of their trans identities and promising socioeconomic opportunities as primary pull factors for migrating to Aotearoa, while citing threats to their safety as push factors for leaving their home countries. Situating these findings within the current context of Aotearoa/New Zealand—specifically persistent concerns related to migrant welfare, exploitation, and racism—we emphasize the need for more culturally responsive policies and support systems to protect trans migrants who relocate to Aotearoa with hopes of a better, safer future.

Public Significance Statement

Trans participants who independently chose to migrate were drawn by the country’s reputation for embracing trans identities and offering greater openness around gender. Furthermore, escalating threats in their home countries acted as a push factor. Participants who migrated to Aotearoa for trans-related reasons were more likely to be from a Global South country, hold a temporary visa, or be newly arrived. Our findings challenge the migrant paradox hypothesis and call for greater culturally safe consideration in health care, employment, and government policies for trans migrants who call Aotearoa home.

Keywords: transgender, migration, immigration, push–pull, Aotearoa/New Zealand


Supplemental materials: <https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000888.supp>

The push–pull theory has been widely used in migration research to delineate economic, cultural, or environmental drivers for individuals leaving or avoiding certain locations (push) or remaining in or relocating to alternative destinations (pull; E. S. Lee, 1966). For transgender

and nonbinary people (hereafter, referred to as “trans”), there remains a paucity of research exploring migration as a social determinant of health (J. J. Lee et al., 2019) and the push and pull factors influencing their decision to move to another country.

Jae A. Puckett served as action editor.

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This work is supported by the Rutherford Discovery Fellowship awarded to Jaimie F. Veale. The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare. The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to ethics/privacy restrictions.

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Kyle Tan served as lead for conceptualization, formal analysis, writing—original draft, and writing—review and editing. Calvin C. Fernandez served in a supporting role for writing—original draft and writing—review and editing. Jack L. Byrne served in a supporting role for conceptualization and writing—review and editing. Jaimie F. Veale served as lead for funding acquisition and project administration and served in a supporting role for conceptualization and writing—review and editing.

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The 2023 Census found that 0.7% of adults (aged 15 and above) in Aotearoa/New Zealand self-identify as trans (Statistics New Zealand, 2024). Although there is no available estimate of the proportion of trans migrants, approximately 30% of the general Aotearoa population were born overseas. Migrants are a heterogeneous population encompassing diverse nationalities, social backgrounds, and socioeconomic statuses who migrate at different life stages—either at a young age with their parents, or later in life as independent adults or with their own families. For trans migrants, particularly from countries with punitive laws, policies, or practices targeting gender nonconformity, moving overseas including to Aotearoa, may offer the prospect of a safer, more accepting social environment and enhanced livelihood opportunities (Quah & Tang, 2022). In the United States, a study found that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) individuals and those in households with an LGBTQ+ member are more inclined to relocate to states offering greater protections for queer rights (e.g., inclusive school curricula, legal recognition of same-sex marriage, and laws prohibiting employment discrimination; Baumle et al., 2023).

For decades, research in Aotearoa has also sought to debunk the migrant paradox, which assumes that migrants achieve better social, health, and socioeconomic outcomes in Aotearoa compared to their country of nationality (Di Cosmo et al., 2011). This paradox may, in part, be attributed to migration policies that have historically been selective in admitting highly skilled individuals who meet acceptable health standards, and/or possess substantial financial resources to invest in the nation's economy (Ferns et al., 2022; New Zealand Parliament, 2008). However, the experiences of many migrants—including those on temporary visas, refugees, asylum seekers, and queer and trans individuals fleeing violence—reveal a far more complex reality (E. O. J. Lee et al., 2023; Re: News, 2021).

Drawing on data from Counting Ourselves—the largest survey of trans people in Aotearoa New Zealand, this study therefore examines the reasons for migration among overseas-born trans participants. Herein, we explore group differences in trans people's push and pull factors for leaving their countries of origin for Aotearoa, comparing three key migration-related variables: country of origin, length of time since migration, and immigration status. By studying these factors, we can identify preliminary gaps in migration and trans policies that may prevent fair treatment of migrants.

Method

Wave 2 of the Counting Ourselves survey recruited a subsample of 576 overseas-born trans participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 29.58$, $SD = 12.23$). Participants aged 14 and above were recruited using snowball sampling via online social media platforms and queer and trans community groups. The media campaign featured images and quotes from community leaders to appeal directly to these underrepresented communities including migrants. The anonymous survey was administered in English via Qualtrics between September and December 2022. Ethical approval was granted by the Health and Disability Ethics Committee (Reference: 2022 FULL 12683). Further details about the survey can be read from this published report (Yee et al., 2025).

Participants' countries of birth were categorized as either Global North and Global South, with the former representing wealthier, more developed countries with generally greater legal protections and social acceptance for queer and trans people (E. O. J. Lee et al., 2023).¹ The majority of participants originated from a Global North country (78.7%). On average, participants had lived

in Aotearoa for 15.86 years ($SD = 10.46$). Those who had lived in Aotearoa for less than 10 years were classified as new migrants. Three fifths (60.9%) held New Zealand citizenship, one third had residency status (34.7%), and 4.4% were on temporary visas such as student or work visas. Only 13 participants (2.3%) reported refugee or asylum seeker status while completing the survey. When asked to categorize themselves into one of three gender categories, more than half of the participants (58.5%) identified as nonbinary, followed by 21.6% as trans women and 19.9% as trans men.

Participants were asked, "What were your reason(s) for coming to live in Aotearoa New Zealand? Select all that apply." The corresponding response options are outlined in Table 1.

Data Analysis

Data analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS V30. Chi-square goodness-of-fit tests were performed to examine demographic differences in specific reasons for migration, but only for response options with more than 30 affirmative responses to ensure sufficient statistical power to detect true differences. Participants whose families decided on their migration to Aotearoa were excluded from the chi-square analysis denominator to focus on self-initiated migration decisions.² Cells with standardized adjusted residual values exceeding ± 2 were bolded in the tables to indicate a statistically significant difference between the observed and expected counts under the null hypothesis at approximately the 5% level (Sharpe, 2015). We reported findings only for groups that were more or less likely to meaningfully contribute to the chi-square statistic. Bonferroni correction was applied to adjust for p values.

Results

Two thirds ($n = 384$) of overseas-born participants reported that their families made the decision to migrate to Aotearoa. Participants who selected "other reasons" reported migrating to Aotearoa for reasons unrelated to being trans, such as to live with a partner ($n = 40$), pursue employment ($n = 26$), undertake study ($n = 25$), experience life in Aotearoa ($n = 25$), or to join family ($n = 18$).

¹ We are mindful that the Global North–South distinction was originally conceptualized through the Brandt Line, which classified nations predominantly according to their levels of economic and political development (Martins, 2020). While this classification framework does not directly translate into a measure of friendliness toward trans people, historical patterns show that more Global North countries have introduced queer and trans-inclusive policies to signal political progressiveness and attract global tourism (E. O. J. Lee et al., 2023). In contrast, Global South countries (shaped by enduring inequities due to colonization and the erasure of queer and trans acceptance) continue to battle for depathologization and decriminalization of LGBTQ+ identities. Moreover, many Global North countries have historically maintained gatekeeping migrant selection processes; for example, Aotearoa implemented racist legislation targeting Asian immigrants during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The strategic use of the Global North–South distinction therefore enables us to examine and critique this dichotomous system and the structural inequities it produces for trans migrants.

² There was a relatively similar proportion of participants originating from a Global North country among those who self-initiated their migration decision (78.3%) and in the overall sample (78.7%). Compared to the overall sample, participants who chose to come to Aotearoa had spent less time in the country ($M = 11.08$ years, $SD = 10.68$) and were less likely to hold New Zealand citizenship (39.3%).

Table 1*Reasons for Migration to Aotearoa Among Overseas-Born Trans Participants (n = 576)*

Reasons for migration	n (%)
My family made the decision to come here to live	384 (66.6)
I came to live in Aotearoa for other reasons	155 (27.1)
To move to where I could be more open about my gender identity or expression (e.g., at work, school, or in public spaces)	52 (9.0)
To leave a country where it was unsafe for me for other reasons (e.g., my political opinion, my race, or I was fleeing war or conflict)	47 (8.1)
I thought Aotearoa New Zealand would be more accepting of trans and nonbinary people	43 (7.5)
To leave a country where trans and nonbinary people experienced discrimination	37 (6.5)
To leave a country where it was unsafe for me to be trans or nonbinary	32 (5.5)
To leave a country where my family did not support me being open about my gender identity or expression, my sexual orientation, or about being intersex	32 (5.5)
To leave a country where it was unsafe to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer (LGBQ+), or an intersex person	31 (5.4)
To be in a country where trans and nonbinary people can access more opportunities (e.g., for work or study)	30 (5.2)
So I could be open about my current (or any future) partner and I could legally marry a person of any gender	27 (4.7)
To be in a new country where people do not know who I was before I transitioned	26 (4.5)
To explore gender affirming health care options	22 (3.8)
To leave an abusive partner or family member	20 (3.5)
To get away from my religious background	15 (2.6)
To move to a country where I can freely express my religious beliefs	11 (1.9)

Note. LGBQ+ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer.

Among participants who self-initiated their migration to Aotearoa (33.4%, $n = 193$), over one fifth of participants cited Aotearoa's reputation for being accepting of trans people and their identities as a major pull factor. Specifically, being in Aotearoa allowed them to be more open about their genders, while escaping their home countries that were increasingly becoming unsafe (a push factor). Citing other pull factors for self-initiated migration among trans people to Aotearoa, over one tenth of participants also described wanting to access better work and study opportunities, explore legal marriage recognitions with current or future partners, or explore gender-affirming health care options. For refugees and asylum seekers, the most commonly cited pull factor was Aotearoa's perceived acceptance of trans identities, whereas the dominant push factor was lack of safety and a sense of insecurity in their home countries (see Table S1 in the online supplemental materials).

Tables 2 and 3 display the comparative findings for country of origin and for immigration status combined with new versus established migrant status, respectively. Compared to their countries of origin, participants from the Global South viewed Aotearoa as offering significantly more pull factors, such as identity acceptance, safety, and opportunity, and described their home countries as presenting more push factors, including discrimination and low family support.

New Zealand citizens and settled migrants (those who had lived in Aotearoa for 10 years or more) were significantly less likely to report migration driven by trans-related push and pull factors. In contrast, (a) new migrants with residency and (b) temporary visa holders were significantly more likely to have moved to Aotearoa seeking acceptance and improved prospects less available in their home countries. Gender differences were observed in perceptions of Aotearoa's acceptance of trans people, with trans women more likely and nonbinary participants less likely to perceive Aotearoa as accepting (see Table S2 in the online supplemental materials).

Discussion

Compared to previous studies that often treat migrants as a monolithic group, our findings from a large sample of trans migrants in Aotearoa revealed a better understanding of the association between their push and pull factors for migration and their country of origin, immigration status, and length of migration. We found that participants from the Global South, recent migrants, and those with temporary visas were more likely to have chosen Aotearoa as a migration destination due to pull factors related to their trans identity, including the pursuit of a safe environment for identity affirmation and improved future prospects. These groups were more likely to report unsafe conditions and experiences of discrimination in their countries of origin, which prompted their migration to Aotearoa. Our findings call for future research to integrate migration-related factors to better capture the complex ways trans migrants experience minority stress, cultivate resilience, and sustain health and well-being following migration.

Less than half of the participants from the Global South reported migrating to Aotearoa in search of acceptance for their gender identity and expression. This relatively low endorsement of trans identity acceptance as a pull factor for migration suggests that not all trans migrants from the Global South are equally impacted by trans-related oppression. Specifically, other more pressing concerns such as escaping political instability and socioeconomic inequities may influence trans people's migration to Aotearoa from the Global South. Although Global South participants were significantly more likely to endorse trans-specific push and pull factors for migration, a smaller subset of Global North participants were also affected by these factors. However, this migration trend may shift in response to policy changes abroad. For example, the rise in laws, policies, and practices targeting trans people and migrants in the United States has prompted trans people there to consider relocating overseas, including to Aotearoa (Ng et al., 2025; Rainbow Path NZ, 2025a).

Table 2
Reasons for Migration to Aotearoa by Country of Origin

Reasons for migration	Global North (<i>n</i> = 147)	Global South (<i>n</i> = 41)	Chi-square statistics
To move to where I could be more open about my gender identity or expression (e.g., at work, school, or in public spaces)	26 (17.7)	19 (46.3)	$\chi^2(1) = 13.11$, $p < .001$
To leave a country where it was unsafe for me for other reasons (e.g., my political opinion, my race, or I was fleeing war or conflict)	14 (9.5)	16 (39.0)	$\chi^2(1) = 18.66$, $p < .001$
I thought Aotearoa New Zealand would be more accepting of trans and nonbinary people	25 (17.0)	14 (34.1)	$\chi^2(1) = 4.73$, $p = .030$
To leave a country where trans and nonbinary people experienced discrimination	21 (14.3)	14 (34.1)	$\chi^2(1) = 7.09$, $p = .008$
To leave a country where it was unsafe for me to be trans or nonbinary	15 (10.2)	13 (31.7)	$\chi^2(1) = 10.06$, $p = .002$
To leave a country where my family did not support me being open about my gender identity or expression, my sexual orientation, or about being intersex	17 (11.6)	12 (29.3)	$\chi^2(1) = 6.41$, $p = .011$
To leave a country where it was unsafe to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer (LGBQ+), or an intersex person	14 (9.5)	11 (26.8)	$\chi^2(1) = 6.99$, $p = .008$
To be in a country where trans and nonbinary people can access more opportunities (e.g., for work or study)	11 (7.5)	16 (39.0)	$\chi^2(1) = 23.43$, $p < .001$

Note. Bolded cells indicate standardized adjusted residual values exceeding ± 2 . A continuity correction was applied to prevent the overestimation of statistical significance when the degrees of freedom equaled 1. LGBQ+ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer.

Like many Global North countries, the current immigration systems in Aotearoa mostly attract high-skilled migrants who can address the workforce gap. For example, in 2022, the New Zealand Government introduced the Green List, which outlines various roles that are in high demand and are therefore eligible for a residence visa either immediately or after 2 years of working in the

country (Ministry of Business, Innovation, and Employment, 2025). It is possible that our participants possess socioeconomic capital that enabled them to pursue migration opportunities that are typically less accessible for others (Suen & Chan, 2021). Since our survey was conducted entirely in English, it is likely that migrants with limited English proficiency were underrepresented

Table 3
Reasons for Migration to Aotearoa by Immigration Status and Length of Migration

Reasons for migration	Settled New Zealand citizens (<i>n</i> = 54)	Newly arrived New Zealand citizens (<i>n</i> = 20)	Settled New Zealand residents (<i>n</i> = 22)	Newly arrived New Zealand residents (<i>n</i> = 69)	Newly arrived temporary visa holders (<i>n</i> = 24)	Chi-square statistics
To move to where I could be more open about my gender identity or expression (e.g., at work, school, or in public spaces)	6 (11.3)	5 (25.0)	1 (4.5)	22 (31.9)	11 (45.8)	$\chi^2(4) = 17.90$, $p < .001$
To leave a country where it was unsafe for me for other reasons (e.g., my political opinion, my race, or I was fleeing war or conflict)	10 (18.9)	2 (10.0)	1 (4.5)	13 (18.8)	6 (25.0)	$\chi^2(4) = 4.49$, $p = .343$
I thought Aotearoa New Zealand would be more accepting of trans and nonbinary people	5 (9.4)	5 (25.0)	0	20 (29.0)	9 (37.5)	$\chi^2(4) = 17.05$, $p = .002$
To leave a country where trans and nonbinary people experienced discrimination	6 (11.1)	2 (10.0)	0	20 (29.0)	7 (29.2)	$\chi^2(4) = 14.53$, $p = .006$
To leave a country where it was unsafe for me to be trans or nonbinary	4 (7.4)	3 (15.0)	0	14 (20.3)	5 (20.8)	$\chi^2(4) = 8.71$, $p = .069$
To leave a country where my family did not support me being open about my gender identity or expression, my sexual orientation, or about being intersex	4 (7.5)	4 (20.0)	0	13 (18.8)	8 (33.3)	$\chi^2(4) = 13.37$, $p = .010$
To leave a country where it was unsafe to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer (LGBQ+), or an intersex person	3 (5.7)	1 (5.0)	1 (4.5)	17 (24.6)	3 (12.5)	$\chi^2(4) = 13.05$, $p = .011$
To be in a country where trans and nonbinary people can access more opportunities (e.g., for work or study)	2 (3.8)	3 (15.0)	0	16 (23.2)	6 (25.0)	$\chi^2(4) = 15.11$, $p = .004$

Note. Bolded cells indicate standardized adjusted residual values exceeding ± 2 . LGBQ+ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer.

in our sample, despite the research team's extensive efforts to engage with diverse migrant communities. Furthermore, we encourage future research to examine additional demographic variables that may explain migration intentions among trans people, for example, prior access to gender-affirming care, socioeconomic status, and relationship status.

Our findings should be interpreted with cultural sensitivity to avoid reinforcing colonial narratives that position the “West” (including Aotearoa New Zealand) as inherently superior in social, economic, or health domains. Research using the same data set shows that trans people in Aotearoa face high rates of discrimination, with additional layers of prejudice affecting those from minoritized backgrounds, such as migrants and Asians, because of their ethnicity and accents (Yee et al., 2025). Herein, we also acknowledge that Indigenous Māori in Aotearoa continue to have minimal influence on migration policies (Kukutai & Rata, 2017), amid ongoing concerns about migrants' welfare, exploitation, and exposure to institutional and interpersonal racism (Tan et al., 2024). Situating our findings within these contexts and echoing other research that highlighted barriers faced by other LGBTQ+ migrants (Quah & Tang, 2022), we advocate for greater policy attention and the development of culturally safe systems across education, health care, and community settings for trans migrants (Rainbow Path NZ, 2025b). By recognizing the trauma and residual effects of hardship experienced in migrants' home countries, and actively working to dismantle systemic barriers, support systems can play a pivotal role in fostering a genuine sense of belonging and safety for migrants calling Aotearoa their home (Campanella, 2023; Tan et al., 2024).

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Received May 23, 2025

Revision received September 25, 2025

Accepted October 1, 2025 ■