Tulane economist wins NSF award to study discrimination against LGBTQ+ people and marginalized communities

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Patrick Button, assistant professor of economics in Tulane University School of Liberal Arts, has been awarded a Faculty Early Career Development (CAREER) Program grant by the National Science Foundation. Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano.

The National Science Foundation (NSF) has awarded a $400,000 grant to Tulane University economist Patrick Button to study discrimination in access to mental

health care for LGBTQ+ people and marginalized communities and whether the problem has been exacerbated by the pandemic.

The [five-year funding award](#) is part of the [Faculty Early Career Development (CAREER) Program](#), the NSF's most prestigious awards supporting early-career faculty who have the potential to serve as academic role models in research and education and to lead advances in the mission of their department or organization.

Button's project will also explore discrimination against under-represented groups when applying for mortgages, develop new analytical tools for economics research using text data and establish a mentoring program for under-represented graduate and undergraduate students in economics.

"Economic studies of discrimination against LGBTQ+ people and racial and ethnic minorities have focused mostly on labor markets and rental markets. Yet there are several areas in which these groups face discrimination that are equally harmful to society as a whole," said Button, assistant professor of economics in the Tulane University School of Liberal Arts. "This research will inform policies that affect mental health care and mortgage markets. My entire research plan seeks to help LGBTQ+ people, especially transgender and nonbinary people, who face significant discrimination and stigma."

The first research project will quantify discrimination in access to therapy appointments against transgender, nonbinary, African Americans and Hispanic patients. In the study, prospective patients of different demographic backgrounds will email therapists seeking care. Button's team will measure discrimination by looking at which patient groups were offered appointments, and which were more likely to be overlooked or rejected. This project will explore where and why this discrimination occurs to inform policy and the economic theories of discrimination.

"This project is currently in the field, and our pilot study results suggest significant discrimination against transgender and nonbinary African-Americans and Hispanics," Button said.

The second project will use the data from Button's experiment on access to therapy appointments to determine how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected access to mental health care. "Mental health concerns have increased dramatically due to the pandemic and the recession, but it is unclear to what extent availability of therapy appointments has been able to increase to meet this demand," Button said.

The third research project will quantify discrimination by sexual orientation in mortgage applications by tracking emails and response rates from same-gender or different-gender couples asking about a potential loan.

The fourth project will use sentiment analysis, a form of natural language processing commonly applied to Twitter data, online reviews and customer inquiries, to scan email responses from mental health providers and mortgage loan originators in the other studies. Button's team will scan words to detect "subtle" discrimination in how individuals respond.

"We will determine if people use less polite or helpful language when responding to inquiries from minorities. Our goal is to develop new and better ways to detect subtle discrimination using sentiment analysis and to ultimately create a 'how to' guide for other researchers who want to use these tools in future studies," Button said.