

UNDER FIRE: THE WAR ON LGBTQ PEOPLE IN AMERICA

February 2023



UNDER FIRE

THE WAR ON LGBTQ PEOPLE IN AMERICA



movement advancement project ►

This report was authored by:

Movement Advancement Project

MAP's mission is to provide independent and rigorous research, insight, and communications that help speed equality and opportunity for all people. MAP works to ensure that all people have a fair chance to pursue health and happiness, earn a living, take care of the ones they love, be safe in their communities, and participate in civic life. For more information, visit www.mapresearch.org.

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**MAP IS VERY GRATEFUL TO
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FUNDERS, WHOSE GENEROUS
SUPPORT MAKES IT POSSIBLE
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WHAT MAKES THIS MOMENT DIFFERENT: A FIRESTORM

As thousands of LGBTQ people and advocates gathered on the White House lawn to celebrate the historic signing of the Respect for Marriage Act in December 2022, it could be easy to think that LGBTQ people are continuing to move toward acceptance and equality. In fact, the opposite is true. LGBTQ people in America are under attack like never before.

Some of what is happening across the country is appearing in the media. Certainly, there has been increased attention to so-called “Don’t Say Gay or Trans” bills and efforts to censor school curricula, ban books, ban transgender youth from playing sports, and ban transition-related care for transgender youth.

However, seeing each of these issues individually is like focusing on a single skirmish without understanding that they are part of a larger war against LGBTQ people in America. Anti-LGBTQ forces want nothing less than to eliminate openly LGBTQ people from the fabric of society. They are launching fast, furious, and coordinated attacks that are astonishing in their breadth, cruelty, and flagrant disregard for personal freedoms.

In this new series launching from the Movement Advancement Project, and outlined in more detail below, opponents of LGBTQ people are pursuing their goals through policies that:

- **Erase LGBTQ people from schools and public life.** They want to make it impossible for LGBTQ youth to be themselves in schools—banning or fining teachers and schools for even talking about LGBTQ people or issues, pulling books off library shelves, and banning teachers from supporting LGBTQ students. In short, they want LGBTQ youth to be treated like they don’t exist, and those who disagree will be fired, fined, or even imprisoned.
- **Criminalize and ban transition so transgender people can’t be themselves.** Opponents want to make it impossible for transgender people to be themselves by banning transition-related care and criminalizing supportive parents and doctors. They are also

prohibiting transgender and nonbinary people from updating their identity documents like birth certificates, driver’s licenses, and ID cards. They are passing policies requiring governments, schools, and teachers to only recognize sex assigned at birth or inaccurate pronouns.

- **Enshrine inequality.** They want to enshrine legal inequality so that LGBTQ people and their families will be poorer, less secure, and face more obstacles. This includes repealing or fighting nondiscrimination protections so that LGBTQ can be fired or not hired, refused housing, denied service in public places, even denied medical care, and more.
- **Erect systemic and structural barriers to make change harder.** By rolling back voting rights, doubling down on gerrymandering, insulating lawmakers from accountability, and much more, these opponents have made it even harder than ever before for individuals to make change, or to elect leaders that reflect the values held by the majority of Americans, including support for LGBTQ people.
- **Silence supporters.** Anti-LGBTQ opponents also want to silence, sue, fine and penalize parents, teachers, doctors, companies and others who are LGBTQ allies.

In all these efforts, opponents are using increasingly dangerous and inflammatory rhetoric to vilify LGBTQ people. Anti-LGBTQ activists paint LGBTQ people as predators and foment violence against them. The resurgence of the “groomer” narrative—that LGBTQ people are explicitly sexualizing and abusing children—is particularly troubling and dangerous. These harmful narratives seek to push LGBTQ people to the corners of society and have them fear for their lives.

It is a mistake to see 2023 as a moment of progress with a few setbacks. In reality, it is clear this is a war against LGBTQ people in America and their very right and ability to openly exist.

FAST, FURIOUS & COORDINATED ATTACKS ON ALL FRONTS

Opponents of LGBTQ equality have become more coordinated, more emboldened, and far more willing to use creative and cruel levers of power to harm LGBTQ people and those who care about them. Several key features mark this moment as different from the past:



Quantity & Speed of Attacks. We've seen record numbers of bad bills introduced and in far more states.



Breadth, Creativity & Boldness of Attacks. The variety of attacks, including on transgender youth and their families, LGBTQ youth in schools, transgender adults, and LGBTQ people more broadly, is staggering.



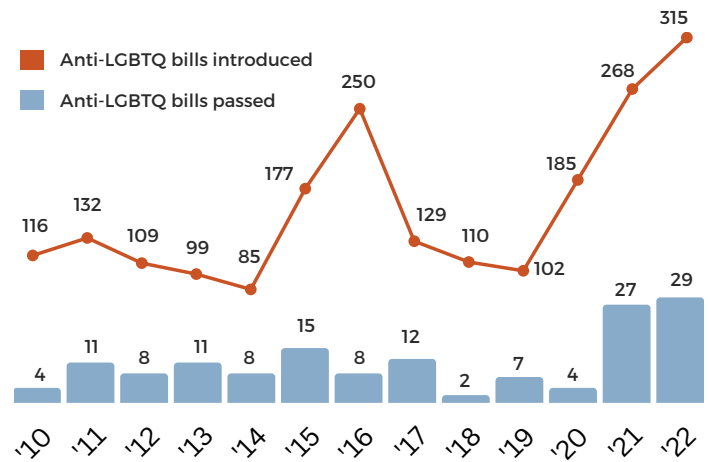
Hostility, Vitriol & Violence. These escalating attacks are both fueling and fueled by the growing resurgence of the anti-LGBTQ "groomer" narrative, targeted threats and harassment, violence against hospitals, and even shootings.



QUANTITY & SPEED OF ATTACKS

While LGBTQ people's lives and their safety have been attacked for decades, the sheer volume of anti-LGBTQ attacks over the past two years is unprecedented. For example, 2021 set a record for the number of anti-LGBTQ bills introduced and the number of states introducing them—but then 2022 broke that record. According to an [analysis by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation and the Equality Federation](#), 315 anti-LGBTQ bills were introduced in state legislatures in the United States in 2022. This is the greatest number of bad bills introduced, and passed, in at least 10 years, as shown in *Figure 1*.

Figure 1. Rapid Increase in the Number of Anti-LGBTQ Bills Introduced & Passed from 2020 to 2022



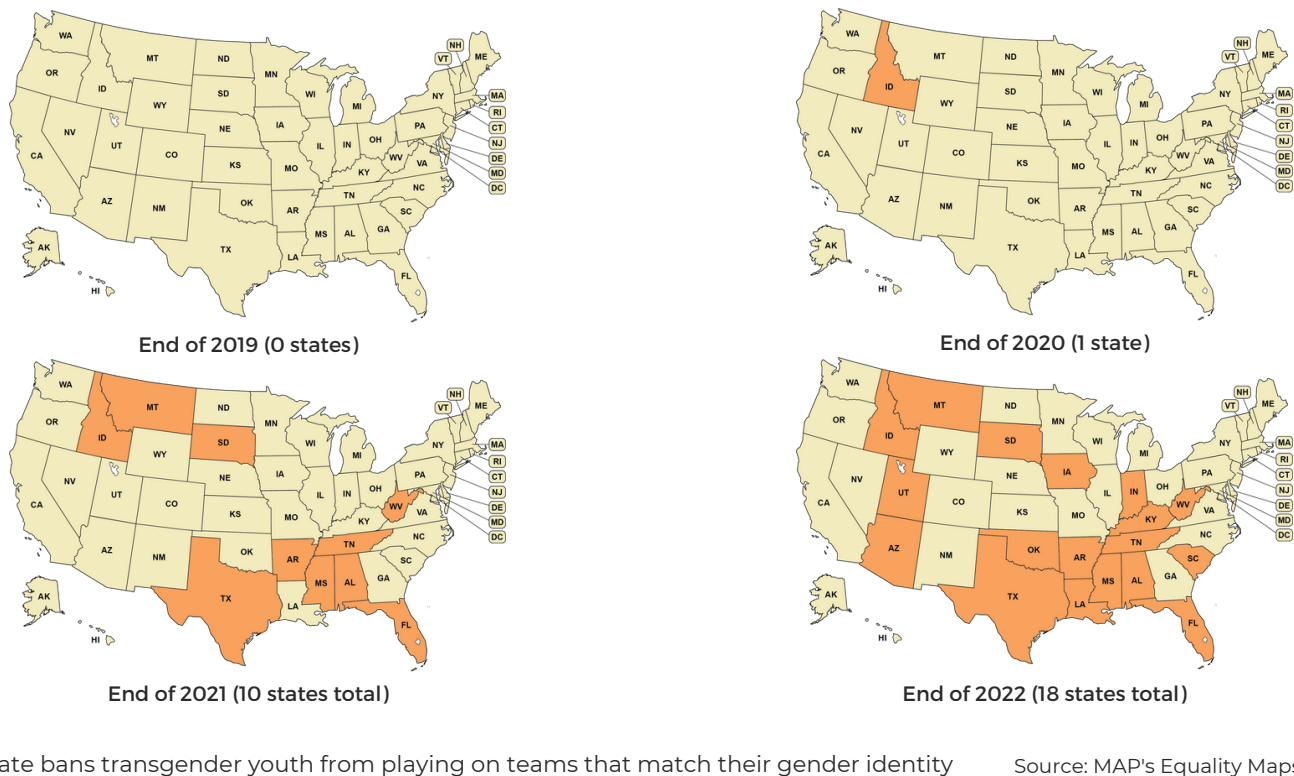
Source: data adapted from Human Rights Campaign and the Equality Federation's [State Equality Index](#) (2022).

But it's not just the number of attacks that has increased. The speed of the attacks has increased as well, speaking to the extent to which these efforts are coordinated and well-funded. For example, as shown in *Figure 2* on the next page, in 2019, not a single state had a law banning transgender youth from participating on sports teams with their peers. In 2020, Idaho became the first state to pass such a law, and in 2021, another nine states followed suit. Now, in early 2023, [there are a total of 18 states](#) that have passed laws banning youth from playing sports consistent with their gender identity.

315 anti-LGBTQ bills were introduced in state legislatures in the United States in 2022.

Of those bills, 29 were signed into law.

Figure 2. Explosion of Bans on Transgender Youth Playing Sports, 2020 to 2023



BREADTH, CREATIVITY & BOLDNESS OF ATTACKS

For many years, anti-LGBTQ efforts were relatively targeted, such as fighting against the legal right to marry or opposing open military service. Today, we're seeing an increasing and breathtaking breadth of anti-LGBTQ attacks. In fact, anti-LGBTQ attacks have broadened into nearly every area of everyday life, including: criminalizing parents, doctors, and teachers who support transgender children; stripping transgender children of their ability to play school sports with their friends or to have a safe, supportive school environment; banning books with LGBTQ content from schools and public libraries; banning discussions of LGBTQ people and history as well as discussions of race and the civil rights movement from classrooms; banning diversity trainings in workplaces and creating tax penalties for companies who speak out in support of LGBTQ people; preventing people from updating the gender marker on their IDs; carving holes into marriage recognition; and so much more.

Not only are these attacks increasing in breadth, but they are also increasing in their cruel creativity and boldness. Consider that in the past three years alone, we've seen:

- The *first* legislative ban on transgender youth playing sports in accordance with their gender identity.
- The *first* legislative bans on best practice medical care for transgender youth.
- The *first* state ban on the use of X as a gender marker on identity documents.
- The *first* so-called "Don't Say Gay" law passed in 20 years.

Additionally, elected officials are becoming creative in circumventing legislatures and undermining the democratic process to pursue their unpopular, extremist agendas. For example, in Florida, when the legislature tried but failed to ban best practice medical care for transgender youth, the governor instead appointed hand-picked operatives to the state medical board, which then voted on a draft policy to

unilaterally redefine national medical standards and instead ban doctors from providing medically necessary care to transgender youth. This vote came despite that fact that every professional medical association supports and affirms this medical care, which is proven hugely beneficial to transgender youth's physical, mental, and emotional health.

Similarly, when the Texas legislature failed to pass a ban on medical care for transgender youth, the state attorney general and governor attempted to unilaterally rewrite state law to classify supportive care for transgender youth as criminal child abuse. This state's child welfare system then

launched investigations into parents and families of transgender children. Perhaps even more alarming, the Texas attorney general recently sought to create a list of anyone in the state who had changed the gender marker on their driver's license in recent years—an Orwellian effort that targets transgender adults in addition to ongoing efforts targeting transgender youth in the state.

There are several different ways in which anti-LGBTQ activists are attacking LGBTQ people and their right to exist. The goal of these activists is to eliminate LGBTQ people from society by:



ERASING LGBTQ PEOPLE FROM SCHOOLS & PUBLIC LIFE



*CRIMINALIZING & BANNING TRANSITION SO
TRANSGENDER PEOPLE CAN'T BE THEMSELVES*



ENSHRINING INEQUALITY

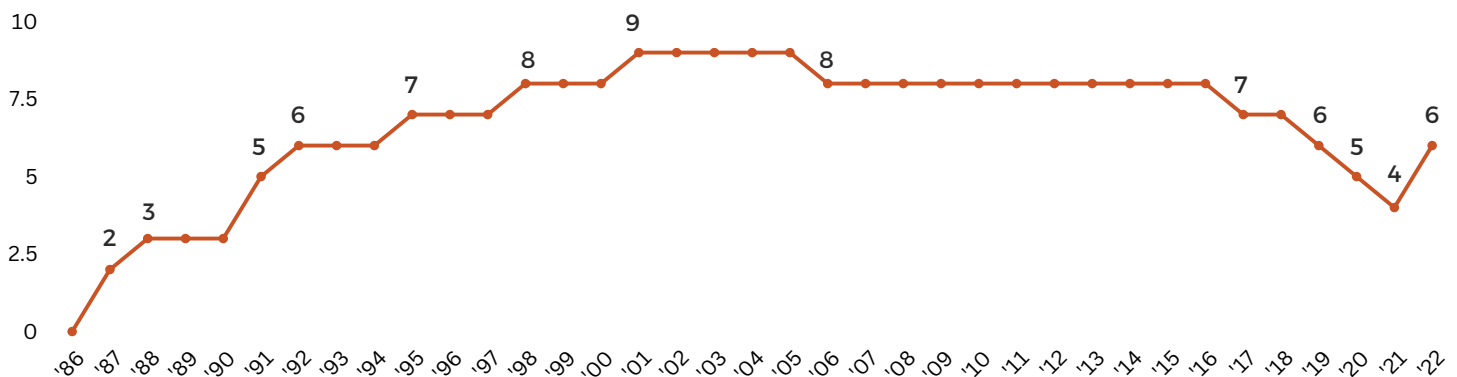


*ERECTING SYSTEMIC & STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO MAKE
CHANGE HARDER*



SILENCING ALLIES & SUPPORTERS OF LGBTQ PEOPLE

Figure 3. Previous Decline in States with “Don’t Say Gay” Laws Has Been Reversed



Source: original Movement Advancement Project analysis (2023).



ERASING LGBTQ PEOPLE FROM SCHOOLS & PUBLIC LIFE

Anti-LGBTQ activists are making a concerted effort to erase LGBTQ people, and especially LGBTQ youth, from public life—including making it illegal to talk about or support LGBTQ students and pulling all LGBTQ content from school libraries and books. These bills reflect a coordinated effort on behalf of well-financed, far-right lobbyists, and when a bill makes progress in one state, we quickly see copy-cat language and bills across many other states, and even federally. These key initiatives include the following:

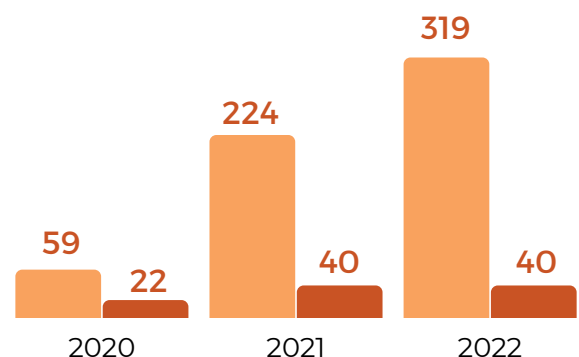
So-called “Don’t Say Gay or Trans” curriculum censorship and book bans. States and local school communities are censoring discussions about LGBTQ people in schools. In 2022, a growing number of states passed school curriculum and school censorship bills. These bills censor or restrict inclusive curricula, including about race, ethnicity, LGBTQ people, and more. For example, in Florida, the state passed censorship laws and has since banned more than 50 math textbooks and rejected an Advanced Placement (AP) course on African American Studies. What’s more, some of these bills limit discussions in the classroom by teachers and school staff.

While these so-called “Don’t Say Gay or Trans” laws have existed for decades, there had actually been a trend over the past few years to rescind such bans, as shown in *Figure 3*. But 2022 marked a resurgence in efforts to limit discussions of LGBTQ issues in schools.

Figure 4 shows the growth in curriculum censorship and hostile school climate bills in both the number of bills introduced, which grew from 57 in 2020 to 280 in 2022 and in the number of states where such legislation was introduced, from 22 states in 2020 to 39 in 2022.

Figure 4. More Curriculum Censorship & Hostile Climate Bills Have Been Introduced – and in More States

- # of bills introduced by year
- # of states introducing bills by year



Source: original MAP analysis, with bill identification support from the Equality Federation, Freedom for All Americans, and other partners (2022).

School policies that prevent transgender youth from being themselves and equally accessing school spaces and activities. These include:

- Bathroom bans. Currently, [three states have laws that ban transgender students from using school facilities that match their gender identity](#): Alabama, Oklahoma, and Tennessee. [Research shows that banning transgender students from bathrooms results not only in emotional harms but can mean that students suffer physical discomfort and infections.](#)
- Bans on transgender youth playing on sports teams. As shown in Figure 2 above on page 3, perhaps the fastest moving of all anti-LGBTQ legislation in recent memory have been laws banning transgender youth from playing on sports teams in accordance with their gender identity. In 2019, not a single state had such a law. In 2020, Idaho became the first state to pass such a law. As of January 2023, [18 states now have laws banning transgender youth from playing sports on teams that match their gender identity](#), as shown in Figure 2.

Removing anti-bullying and harassment protections for LGBTQ students. Some states are ignoring and pushing back against federal anti-bullying and nondiscrimination protections for LGBTQ students. This ultimately leads to bullying, harassment, and exclusion and leaves them less safe and less likely to attend school. In guidance to states, [the U.S. Department of Education has made clear that students must be protected from bullying, discrimination, and unequal access to educational benefits.](#) Yet, states continue to ignore the law and even openly flout it. For example, in July 2022, [the Florida Education Commissioner sent a letter to schools](#) urging them to ignore federal protections and that “The Department will not stand idly by as federal agencies attempt to impose a sexual ideology on Florida schools that risk the health, safety, and welfare of Florida students.” Similarly, following Florida’s passage of a school censorship law, [the state board of education sent notices](#) to 10 school districts notifying them that their district policies, including nondiscrimination provisions, “may not comport with Florida law.”

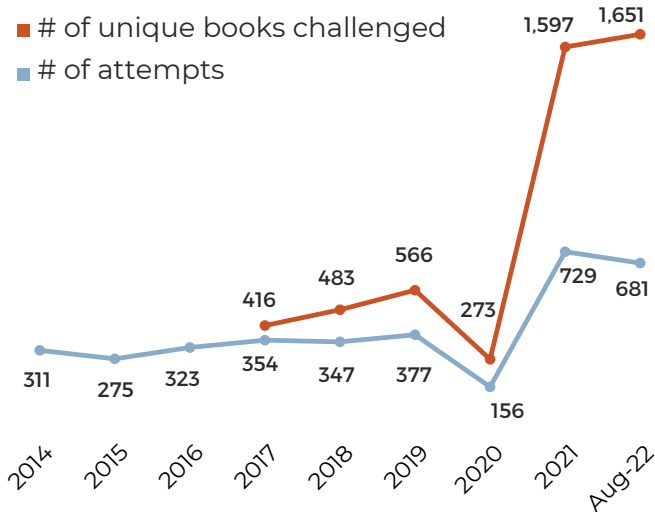
Firing, suing and even criminalizing school staff who support LGBTQ students. In some state curriculum bans, [school staff can be held personally liable if they violate the law.](#) There have also been instances where [teachers were forced to take down LGBTQ safe space signs.](#) In early 2023, outside of Philadelphia, [a librarian was told to take down a quote](#) from Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel.

Rewards for anti-LGBTQ teachers and academics. Recently teachers and professors who do not want to use a student’s correct pronouns have found recourse through employers and the courts. For example, in April 2022 a [small public university in Ohio settled a lawsuit](#) with a professor for \$400,000 after he refused to use a transgender student’s correct pronouns. While the case doesn’t set precedent, it is a harbinger of cases to come.

Pulling out of longstanding survey efforts that include LGBTQ questions, including the [Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System \(YRBSS\)](#), which includes questions about sexual orientation and gender identity. These surveys have been critical in understanding the needs and experiences of all students, including the importance of inclusive school climates for LGBTQ students. By refusing to allow students to be counted as LGBTQ, [states and districts are further trying to erase LGBTQ youth.](#) If they aren’t counted in the surveys, their experiences—including potential harm from discriminatory policies—cannot be identified, and they literally do not exist in the data.

Going beyond schools to purge public libraries. The efforts to deny the existence of LGBTQ youth has moved beyond just schools. Public libraries across the country have found themselves targets of campaigns to ban books that feature LGBTQ youth. Opponents somehow believe that if such books are not available, then LGBTQ youth won’t exist. The number of documented attempts to ban books from libraries [documented by the American Library Association from January to August 2022](#) broke the previous record set—in 2021 for the entire calendar year, as shown in Figure 5 on the next page. Half of top 10 most challenged books in 2021 were targeted because of LGBTQ content, [according to the American Library Association.](#)

Figure 5. Drastic Increase in the Number of Books Challenged from 2021 to 2022



Sources: American Library Association (ALA) Preliminary Data on Book Bans (2022) and ALA's State of America's Libraries Reports (2014-2021).



*CRIMINALIZING & BANNING
TRANSITION SO TRANSGENDER
PEOPLE CAN'T BE THEMSELVES*

In recent years, anti-LGBTQ activists have ramped up coordinated efforts to block transgender people from living their lives as the gender they know they are. This in effect makes it difficult or impossible for transgender people to be themselves and contributes to the opponent goal of erasing transgender people from society.

Criminalizing and banning transition-related care for transgender youth. Most recent anti-LGBTQ efforts have explicitly targeted transgender youth. This includes 37 states that have considered bans since 2020. Currently, four states ban best practice medical care for transgender youth, including hormones. Alabama, for example, has made it a felony to provide or even make a referral for best practice medical care for transgender youth.

Importantly, supporting transgender children mostly includes mental health supports for families and children

as part of a “social transition.” As a child ages, physicians, may prescribe puberty blockers, which can pause the onset of puberty and “buy time” for transgender children. As they move towards adulthood, some transgender youth may begin taking hormones to assist in their transition.

Rarely do youth under the age of 18 have surgeries, which are more common among transgender adults during transition. Yet, these bans treat all care the same and cut off transgender youth from important medical care that has been shown to be critical for their physical and mental wellbeing.

States are also seeking ways to ban social transition for youth. Efforts have been made to pass laws preventing parents and schools from supporting social transition in youth, which can include name and pronoun changes and clothing changes. For example, the attorney general of Texas initiated child abuse investigations of families of transgender youth that supported their child’s social transition, treating social transition itself as child abuse.

Criminalizing and banning transition-related care for transgender adults. While many of these bills initially focused on minors, anti-LGBTQ forces ultimately seek to ban all forms of transition care, regardless of age. For example, in 2023, a bill in South Carolina would prohibit such care for individuals 25 or younger.

Banning gender-affirming care within state health insurance plans and Medicaid. Similarly, several states have sought to ban coverage for gender-affirming care in state health insurance plans, including Medicaid. This is in direct conflict with the healthcare protections in the federal Affordable Care Act, but both Arkansas and Florida have banned coverage for youth, while Florida’s ban also includes adults on Medicaid.

Banning transgender people from accessing accurate identity documents. Finally, some states are working to roll back important avenues for transgender and nonbinary people to obtain accurate identity documents. Oklahoma became the first state in the nation to explicitly ban the availability of gender-neutral “X” markers on birth

certificates. [Montana recently issued a rule](#) making it impossible for transgender people to update their birth certificates. Notably, birth certificates are often necessary documentation to obtain other ID documents. This is particularly problematic because having an outdated ID that does not reflect someone's name and gender identity can put them at increased risk of violence and harassment.



ENSHRINING INEQUALITY

The legal landscape for LGBTQ people at both the federal level and in the states remains a patchwork. There are improved federal protections against discrimination resulting from a 2020 U.S. Supreme Court case and subsequent protections articulated by the Biden administration in key areas of life including employment, housing, education, and health care. Yet, opponents are both trying to rollback protections as well as carve immense holes into existing laws at every level of government. For example, they are:

Attacking nondiscrimination laws. This includes flatly repealing existing protections in some cases, as well as capitalizing on a conservative U.S. Supreme Court to carve holes in existing nondiscrimination laws so that LGBTQ can be fired or not hired, refused housing, denied service in public places, and more.

Attacking marriage and parental recognition. Opponents want to make it possible for any person or entity to refuse to recognize the legal marriages of same-sex couples. They want to allow business owners, hospitals, service providers and employers to refuse service to LGBTQ people and parents. There have been efforts for years in some states to limit the recognition of same-sex couples' marriages, including by taxpayer-funded child welfare agencies who wish to turn away otherwise qualified families. They also seek to allow anyone to refuse to recognize a married same-sex couple for any reason, including for social services, issuance of marriage licenses themselves, and in public places like bakeries. A few states have introduced

THE IMPOSSIBLE CHOICES FOR TRANSGENDER YOUTH AND THEIR FAMILIES IN STATES WITH HEALTHCARE BANS

States that are seeking to ban health care for transgender youth are doing far more than simply banning a particular type of medication or procedure. Parents who support their transgender children are being investigated by state child welfare staff, physicians are being threatened with losing their licenses or even criminal penalties.

All of this creates a chilling effect for families, children, and those who care for them. Families are forced to choose between supporting their child, with care that has been shown to reduce suicidal ideation and results in long-term social and emotional positive developments, and being sent to jail or having their children taken away. Families may also worry about being reported by teachers, other families, or healthcare providers who learn their children are transgender and are receiving affirming care.

In states like Texas, forced to choose between supporting their children and threats by the state, parents of transgender children who can are moving out of the state. But many others remain. For example, [Anya Phenix told USA Today](#) that as a single parent she couldn't afford to move with her 17-year-old transgender son. She's launched a GoFundMe page to try to raise the money to relocate. "All our friends are here," Phenix told *USA Today*:



We really don't want to have to leave... I have moments of fear every day.

We're wondering what's going to happen to us, whether we're going to have enough money to support our needs—and how we're going to stay safe."

bills that would create alternative marriage contracts that would only be available to different-sex couples. While not restricting marriage licenses, a [bill introduced in 2023 in South Carolina](#) would require that licenses list “Bride” and “Groom” on the signature lines, rather than continuing to be inclusive for all couples.

Under Florida’s so-called “Don’t Say Gay” law, any discussion of LGBTQ families could be censored, leaving many LGBTQ families worried about their children. In [a survey of LGBTQ families in the state](#), 88% said they were worried about the effects of the bill on their children, including whether their children would be stopped from talking freely about their families at school or treated unfairly. Half of families said they’d considered moving out of the state because of the law.

Denial of health care. Other states have worked to make it possible for healthcare providers to not only refuse to provide certain types of care, but to [refuse to care for certain patients](#). Additionally, several recent court cases brought by businesses have created a landscape where employers can not only [refuse to offer contraception to employees and their dependents](#) through health insurance, but [also medications like PrEP](#), which prevents HIV transmission.



ERECTING SYSTEMIC & STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO MAKE CHANGE HARDER

[Opponents are also working to change the rules and control our systems of government](#) so that the cards are permanently stacked against those who would disagree

with their vision for the country. By rolling back voting rights, doubling down on gerrymandering, insulating lawmakers from accountability, and much more, these opponents have made it even harder than ever before for individuals to make change, or to elect leaders who reflect the values held by the majority of Americans. And, after decades of reshaping the federal judiciary and judicial ideology, these strategically placed actors have the power to effectively neutralize any sense of checks and balances, or other routes through which LGBTQ people and their allies have historically made change. The bottom line is that, despite broad public support for LGBTQ people, in many parts of the country, voters stand little chance of spurring action by lawmakers to pass laws to support LGBTQ people and their families.



SILENCING SUPPORTERS & ALLIES

As noted above, some states are passing laws that criminalize or threaten teachers, school administrators, librarians, and healthcare providers who support LGBTQ people. But opponents have gone even further in attempting to silence supporters and allies. In Florida, the governor and state legislature went after Disney for its public opposition to the “Don’t Say Gay or Trans” law, including passing a [law banning companies from doing diversity trainings](#) and attempting to [strip Disney of its favorable business protections in the state](#). These efforts to limit the free speech of businesses show the extent to which opponents wish to silence supporters of LGBTQ people. They are also passing an innovative array of financial and legal penalties across various types of legislation, including silencing

Figure 6. Nearly Nine in 10 LGBTQ Parents in Florida Are Concerned About Their Children and The Impact of “Don’t Say Gay” Law



Source: Williams Institute's report, [Impact of HB 1557 \(Florida's Don't Say Gay Bill\) on LGBTQ+ Parents in Florida](#) (2023).

teachers and schools with lawsuit provisions; categorizing support of a trans child as child abuse and encouraging child services to investigate; felony charges for doctors; and stoking such high suspicion and contempt for people who are about LGBTQ people, especially transgender youth, that bomb threats have shut down hospitals that offer care to children.

BOTTOM LINE. The breadth, creativity, and boldness of the attacks on LGBTQ people is striking and distinguishes this moment from the past. Efforts are underway to erase LGBTQ people and youth from schools and public places, to criminalize and ban transition transgender people cease to exist, to enshrine inequity and discrimination into our laws, to change the structures of government to make change harder, and to silence supporters and allies of LGBTQ people.

These efforts are coordinated and supported by far-right groups. This means that anti-LGBTQ legislation in one state is quickly introduced in another state. While many LGBTQ policy issues—both anti- and pro-LGBTQ policies—have remained in the states, the federal courts, Congress, and the executive branch have all engaged on LGBTQ topics ranging from marriage equality to nondiscrimination and more. Concerningly, as Republicans now have control of the U.S. House of Representatives, it is anticipated that many of the new types of attacks in the states—such as those that seek to limit access to health care for transgender youth, ban discussion of certain topics in schools, and bans on funding for important programs—will make their way into Congress. And certainly, the shifting federal judiciary and its openness to overturning decades’ old precedent and to limiting nondiscrimination protections and protections for privacy and related rights presents a clear and concerning threat.



HOSTILITY, VITRIOL, & VIOLENCE

Opponents of LGBTQ people are not simply working to oppose nondiscrimination protections. Rather, they have broad and disturbing goals. Many of these goals fit into broader social narratives about taking the country back”

The breadth, creativity, and boldness of the attacks on LGBTQ people is striking and distinguishes this moment from the past.

which were advanced by former president Donald Trump and his allies, and which advocate for an era where people of color, LGBTQ people, and women were relegated to the margins of society. Among the goals that opponents have articulated include:

Resurgence of the “groomer narrative.” [QAnon has held at its core](#) the belief that powerful people who control the country are engaged in child abuse. In 2021, conservative pundits and an anti-LGBTQ Twitter account started [circulating baseless accusations that LGBTQ people were “grooming” children](#). In spring 2022, these conspiracy theories and narratives like the “groomer” narrative became increasingly visible in mainstream media and rhetoric, including among politicians who use this language to degrade anyone they don’t agree with. In March 2022 following the passage of the so-called “Don’t Say Gay” bill in Florida, a [staff person working for the governor suggested](#) that the bill should be called an “Anti-Grooming Bill.” Subsequently, following their support of then Supreme Court nominee Ketanji Brown Jackson, [U.S. Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene called three U.S. senators “pre-pedophile.”](#)

In state legislatures across the country, 2023 has seen efforts to classify drag shows as adult content and to even criminalize parents who take their children to drag story times hosted by restaurants or libraries.

This harmful and bigoted narrative has been used in the past, including in the 1970s to attempt to ban gay teachers from the classrooms, but had largely fallen away over time as more people came to know and better understand LGBTQ people. But the resurgence of this narrative by far-right extremists is seizing, in large part, on the public’s

remaining lack of familiarity around transgender people.

Physical violence and threats. Efforts to dehumanize LGBTQ people have real consequences, which are evident in increasing slurs and anti-LGBTQ commentary on social media, protests, and threats of violence at LGBTQ events such as drag events, and actual incidents of hate violence.

Increasingly hate-filled conversations about LGBTQ people, including those that draw on historical fears and tropes, have fueled a resurgence in anti-LGBTQ threats, harassment, and even violence nationwide. In a [survey of online hate and harassment by the Anti-Defamation League](#), LGBTQ people were more likely than any other group to say they've been harassed online (66% of LGBTQ people compared to 38% of non-LGBTQ people). A plot to attack a pride event in Idaho was thwarted by law enforcement. [Bomb threats have been called into children's hospitals](#) that offer affirming care to transgender youth, and doctors who

offer such care have been personally threatened. Armed white nationalists and far-right extremists increasingly protest drag events, and numerous reports of vandalism at LGBTQ spaces. As of December 2022, [tracking by GLAAD and Equality Texas](#) found more than 141 anti-LGBTQ protests and threats targeting drag events, occurring in all but three states. MAP's [2022 survey of LGBTQ community centers](#) showed that 71% of LGBTQ centers experienced anti-LGBTQ threats or harassment in the past two years alone. In November 2022, a shooter killed five people at Club Q, an LGBTQ bar and community space in Colorado Springs.

In November 2022, the [U.S. Department of Homeland Security issued a National Terrorism Advisory System Bulletin](#) highlighting the risks of domestic terrorism against LGBTQ community members, in addition to racial and religious minorities by domestic violent extremists.

THE COSTS & IMPACTS

The current moment for LGBTQ people in the United States is one filled with uncertainty, fear, real risks of violence, and precariousness. The impacts on LGBTQ people and those who love them are real and tangible—and in many instances, these efforts to erase LGBTQ people from the public come with threats that go beyond LGBTQ people themselves. They include:

OUR FREEDOMS

Many of the efforts by anti-LGBTQ activists are designed to restrict individual freedoms. They are willing to throw treasured American freedoms—of speech, bodily autonomy, parental decision making, association—under the bus to advance their agenda. We are seeing censorship of books, curriculum, and free speech. We are seeing them using their government powers and act in authoritarian ways to target those who disagree with them. We are seeing threats of jail for doctors who are adhering to best practice care for their patients. We are seeing them try to restrict the freedom of parents to make the right choices for their kids—and even for adults to make their own medical decisions.

PHYSICAL SAFETY

LGBTQ people have long experienced high rates of physical violence and harassment because of who they are, as evidenced in both community-based and law enforcement data about hate crimes. For example, [analysis of data from the National Crime Victimization Survey by the Williams Institute](#) showed that transgender people were more than four times more likely to be the victim of violent crimes. And, 2022 was a record-setting year for violence against LGBTQ people.

MENTAL HEALTH

No matter the level of government, political rhetoric does not exist in a vacuum. Reports from the Trevor Project and other organizations that provide direct service and support to LGBTQ people, including youth, consistently report that when negative legislation is proposed, LGBTQ topics are discussed by national politicians, and anti-LGBTQ proposals are advanced, [the number of calls to these lines substantially increases](#). Academic research similarly shows that even when anti-LGBTQ legislation or efforts fail, they still harm LGBTQ people's mental and emotional health. For example, in a [survey of youth in November 2022](#), 86% of transgender and nonbinary youth said that the debates about anti-transgender bills had negatively impacted their mental health, while 75% of LGBTQ youth said that the threats of violence against LGBTQ spaces like community centers, pride events, drag shows, and hospitals often give them stress or anxiety.



Source: The Trevor Project and Morning Consult poll, [issues Impacting LGBTQ Youth](#) (2023).

ECONOMIC TOLL

While there may be workarounds to mitigate the harms of anti-LGBTQ laws and policies, these are often prohibitively expensive or difficult. For example, if state law allows insurers to deny coverage of PrEP or gender-affirming care, then even individuals with health insurance may be forced to pay out-of-pocket. Some people may be able to afford this, but not all will. Similarly, LGBTQ parents and parents of LGBTQ youth living in states with school curriculum bans may turn to private schools or moving out of state—assuming they can afford to do so.

However, LGBTQ people—and especially LGBTQ people of color, transgender people, and LGBTQ parents—are all more likely to live in poverty, and so these options may simply not be possible. In other words, the people who are most significantly impacted by these laws are also those who are least able to afford potential workarounds or alternatives. And of course, nobody should have to choose between the place they call home and their rights to access quality healthcare or education for their children.

CONVERGENCE OF CONSERVATIVE ANTI-LGBTQ OPPONENTS AND FAR RIGHT WHITE SUPREMACISTS

The years of the Trump presidency saw increasing connection, collaboration, and integration of far-right white supremacist theories, rhetoric, and goals with conservative organizations that have been anti-LGBTQ for decades. For example, the Heritage Foundation has long opposed LGBTQ equality, including marriage equality, nondiscrimination protections, and protection against bullying of LGBTQ youth. However, over the past five years, they have increasingly adopted language that had been seen more in far right white supremacist websites and articles including the idea of working against so-called “gender ideology,” which they see as any effort to advance efforts to support feminism and reproductive health and rights, LGBTQ people and especially transgender people, or to disrupt their vision of the traditional family. That organizations such as the Heritage Foundation, the Family Policy Alliance, the Alliance Defending Freedom, the Federalist Society, and the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC)—all well-established, long-time players in mainstream conservatism and politics—are now frequently utilizing narratives and arguments that originated among white supremacists is a very concerning development. It signals the extent to which these arguments have become more acceptable and that the broader goals of white supremacists are more integrated into the broader aims of the Republican party or at least leading members of the party.

For example, in February 2021, three of these groups worked collaboratively to develop The Promise to America’s Children, a policy platform centered on banning comprehensive sex education, banning LGBTQ topics from classrooms, discrimination against LGBTQ students and teachers, bans on sport participation and health care for transgender youth, discrimination by child welfare organizations, and more.

STAY TUNED FOR MORE

The sheer number of fronts on which LGBTQ people are experiencing attacks, alongside the breadth, speed, cruel creativity, and so much more, is what makes this current moment so challenging both for LGBTQ people and their families, and for LGBTQ advocates and their allies.

Despite the actions by state legislatures, the rhetoric in the media, and the fear about LGBTQ people that is being stoked to gain political points, polls consistently show a majority of people support LGBTQ people and protections that ensure they can take care of their families, be treated fairly at work and more. That’s why it is imperative that the public understands not only what is happening in state legislatures around the country, but the broader goals that these lawmakers and anti-LGBTQ activists have. By working together alongside LGBTQ people, it is possible to counter these harmful efforts.

Over the coming weeks, as part of this series, MAP will dive deeper into each of these attacks, how opponents are executing these attacks, and how these attacks are impacting LGBTQ people.