

Tracking Anti-Transgender Rhetoric Online, Offline, and In Our Legislative Chambers

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INTRODUCTION

Our online and offline lives have fluid boundaries. What happens online doesn't stay there.

Today, those spouting hateful anti-transgender rhetoric online are creating an ecosystem where shared ideas, themes, and language echoes. This hateful rhetoric goes from fringe to mainstream— and boomerangs between online and offline speech — in part because of social media's immense power, amplification of “engaging” content, and sophisticated recommendation algorithms. The impact of anti-transgender online speech is becoming concrete as lawmakers introduce and enact legislation targeting transgender people, especially youth, using language mirroring that which we see online. This brief is a collaboration of ADL's Policy division and Center on Extremism to follow the tracks of anti-transgender rhetoric online, offline, and into our lawmaking process.

Anti-transgender content reverberates across the internet, onto our television screens, into our legislatures, and back again. It is impossible to trace the origins of the feedback loop that normalizes anti-transgender hate. What is very possible, however, is drawing the connection between the negative impact of anti-

transgender [language](#) and [discriminatory legislation](#). This negative impact can be countered by learning [how to be an ally](#) to transgender people and advocating for the [Equality Act](#).

ONLINE HATE AND HARASSMENT

ADL's 2021 [Online Hate and Harassment report](#) found that 64% of LGBTQ+ respondents reported being targets of online harassment. This is the third year in a row that LGBTQ+ respondents reported higher rates of overall harassment as compared to respondents representing other demographics.

In the survey, LGBTQ+ respondents who reported experiencing harassment were asked whether they had undergone any part of a process to change their gender. Of those that answered "yes," 79% reported that they had experienced online harassment, and 77% reported that they had experienced severe online harassment (physical threats, sustained harassment, stalking, sexual harassment, doxing, or swatting). By comparison, of those that answered "no," 52% of them reported that they experience online harassment and 36% reported experiencing severe harassment (comprising of sexual harassment, stalking, physical threats, swatting, doxing and sustained harassment).

LEGISLATION AND IMPACT

People who embrace hateful anti-transgender rhetoric often operate within echo chambers, where ideas, themes and even language go from extreme to mainstream. At a certain point it becomes impossible to tell who inspires whom in this ecosystem of hate but it's impossible to ignore the parallels between language on social media and language that influences policy. Too many policymakers are using hate-fueled language to normalize bigotry and justify passing laws that harm marginalized communities.

No person should be subject to discrimination because of who they are, including their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. Yet between January and June 2021 alone, [legislation](#) targeting transgender people—especially youth—has been introduced in more than 35 states.

The overwhelming majority of these bills target transgender youth by preventing them from participating in athletics or making it illegal for them to access gender-affirming medical care. Other bills would make it difficult or impossible to change one's sex designation on a birth certificate; require schools to inform parents and guardians of students' gender identities; or require businesses to post signs if they allow people of any gender to use any restroom.

[Alabama](#), [Arkansas](#), [Florida](#), [Idaho \(in 2020\)](#), [Mississippi](#), [Montana](#), [Tennessee](#), and [West Virginia](#) have already enacted bills into law that would ban transgender youth from participating in sports in accordance with their gender identity. The class grades they apply to vary, and some of these bills apply to all youth while others target transgender girls and women specifically. South Dakota governor Kristi Noem has signed two [executive orders](#) banning transgender girls from participating in sports according to their gender. [Tennessee](#) and [Arkansas](#) have also enacted laws that prohibit physicians from providing gender-affirming medical care to transgender youth. The [Equality Act](#), which would add “sexual orientation and gender identity” to anti-discrimination laws, would protect against some but not all of these laws.

Whether or not these bills become law, and whether or not they survive legal challenges, these bills send the [clear and dangerous message](#) that those in power are invested in policing and enforcing a gender binary rooted in inaccurate and outdated stereotypes. This is particularly problematic because anti-transgender hate and bias remain commonplace and transgender and nonbinary people—especially transgender and nonbinary people of color—are all too often the targets of [police](#) and [civilian](#) violence. The [American Psychiatric Association](#) has found a direct connection between the discrimination that transgender and nonbinary

people face (including their lack of equitable civil rights) and the harmful impact these realities have on their mental health.

This wave of anti-transgender bills is particularly dangerous because it takes aim at an especially vulnerable population: young transgender people. The Trevor Project's [2020 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health](#) found that 21% of transgender and nonbinary youth have attempted suicide, and 52% have seriously considered it. Studies also show that suicidal ideation and behavior among transgender youth decrease when the people in their lives [consistently use](#) their chosen names and when young people have [access](#) to gender-affirming hormone therapy.

Meanwhile, evidence [suggests](#) that inclusion of transgender athletes has not had any impact limiting sports participation by cisgender athletes or cisgender women's athletic achievements. To the contrary, [data](#) from states that already have transgender-inclusive policies suggests that girls' sports participation may even increase in correlation with inclusive policies.

Notably, despite what current legislative efforts seem to suggest, even those who support these bills have acknowledged that there is not a widespread issue of transgender athletes threatening women's and girls' sports. [When asked](#), only a [small handful](#) of lawmakers sponsoring anti-transgender sports bills said that they actually knew of any transgender athletes competing in their states. "Right now, we really don't have a great problem of biological males trying to compete in women's sports," Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson admitted in March, "but the fear is what's going to change in the coming years."

THEMES

Transphobic Rhetoric on Social Media

Social media has become a toxic ground for hosting, amplifying, and recommending corrosive content. Polarizing and bigoted language can become

viral overnight. The presence of hateful, racist, and transphobic content on social media thrusts bigoted ideas into the mainstream and normalize otherwise extreme concepts and language.

In February 2021, a transphobic social media trend became viral when a male, cisgender TikTok creator claimed to be tired of receiving criticism because he said he would not date transgender women. In a TikTok video, he coined the term “super straight,” calling it a “new sexuality” and exclaiming, “[Y]ou can't say I'm transphobic now because that is just my sexuality.” The video received over a million views and the phrase went quickly from TikTok to Reddit to 4chan (a platform that often hosts far-right and extremist content).

In addition to re-posting the TikTok video, many people created [visual memes and infographics](#) and posted them across social media. According to at least one [article](#), the subreddit r/superstraight had nearly 30,000 subscribers before it was taken down for violating the platform's policy against “promoting hate towards a marginalized or vulnerable group.” One 4chan board discussed using the super straight meme to “drive a wedge” within LGBTQ+ communities. According to [reports](#) of deleted Twitter threads, far-right social media users wanted to “use the left's tactics against themselves, call them bigots for not accepting super straights.”

In addition to organic content, Facebook has [profited](#) from hosting anti-transgender [advertisements](#). In 2020, Facebook hosted paid political posts relating to anti-transgender legislation. This paid content was spreading rhetoric meant to invalidate transgender individuals' existence. After LGBTQ+ rights groups condemned anti-transgender ads, [Facebook said it would no longer host misleading and inaccurate advertisements](#) against transgender individuals' participation in high school sports. Facebook noted it would still host unpaid versions of the content and only apply a fact-checking label in those instances. Notably, months later, similar political [advertisement](#) on Facebook urged voters to

help prevent transgender women from competing in women's sports, referring to transgender women as “biological boys.”

The increased use of terms like “biological male” is apparent in online spaces beyond Facebook. Data from Google Trends, which evaluates the relative popularity of Google search terms over time, reflects the increased interest in searches for “biological males” in recent months, with peak popularity coming in late January 2021 according to statistics dating back to 2004.

On Twitter, posts containing “biological male(s),” “biological boy(s),” “biological female(s)” or “biological girl(s)” have been shared and liked hundreds of thousands of times in recent months. A review conducted by ADL of the nearly 200 most popular tweets containing these terms between January 2021 and late June 2021—defined, for the purposes of this review, as tweets that received at least 1,000 retweets or likes—indicated that the vast majority used the terms in a derogatory manner, and only a small number contained counter speech in support of trans rights.

And these terms certainly have a presence on more fringe and extreme digital social spaces, such as 4chan. According to data collected by Flashpoint, a digital platform which archives content from various online sources, these phrases have appeared in at least 800 4chan posts per month since the start of 2021. 4chan users published over 1,100 posts containing at least one of these phrases in March 2021 alone—the highest number of such posts for any individual month in Flashpoint’s corpus of available data from the past three years.

Language Undermining the Legitimacy of Gender Identity Used by Legislators

The anti-transgender bills and the related public discourse have helped reinforce certain transphobic or discriminatory language in fringe and mainstream spaces. In advocating for anti-transgender legislation, some lawmakers have used harmful anti-transgender rhetoric similar to that which is being used online.

Phrases like “biological males” or “biological boys,” for example, intentionally misgender transgender women and girls and attempt to eliminate the distinction between gender identity and biological sex. The phrases’ repeated use in discussions about anti-transgender legislation serves to erase the identity and existence of transgender and nonbinary people. The mainstreaming of this language is evident in the proposed legislation itself, as well as the rhetoric of lawmakers, news media personalities, and social media users.

Many of the proposed bills explicitly use this terminology in their titles, such as legislation introduced in Maine (“Ban Biological Males from Participating in Women’s Sports”), Kansas (“Creating the fairness in women's sports act to require that female student athletic teams only include members who are biologically female”), and Michigan (“Education: athletics; requirement that only biological males may compete for a position on and compete on a boys' high school team in an interscholastic activity and only biological females may compete for a position on and compete on a girls' high school team in an interscholastic activity”).

These exclusionary phrases have also been coupled with other language that further minimizes or dismisses the experience of transgender and nonbinary individuals. During an appearance on Fox News on March 31, for example, Sen. John Kennedy (R-LA) referenced “biological males” and told host Tucker Carlson that “sex is not a spectrum. It’s binary, you're either male or female...It’s very easy to tell a boy from a girl. A boy has a penis, a girl has a vagina. Those are physical characteristics and it’s all about reproduction.”

In February 2021, Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) targeted Rep. Marie Newman (D-IL), who has a transgender daughter, by placing a [sign outside her office](#) in Washington, D.C. that read “There are TWO genders: MALE & FEMALE. ‘Trust The Science!’” and telling Newman on social media that “your biological son does NOT belong in my daughters’ bathrooms, locker rooms, and sports teams.”



Marjorie Taylor Greene  
@mtgreenee

...

As mothers, we all love and support our children.

But your biological son does NOT belong in my daughters' bathrooms, locker rooms, and sports teams.



Congresswoman Marie Newman  @RepMarieNewman · Feb 23

Without the Equality Act, millions of Americans like my daughter can be denied housing, education, and more simply because they identify as transgender.

I'm voting to pass the Equality Act for my daughter - the strongest, bravest person I know.



3:02 PM · Feb 24, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

2,247 Retweets 660 Quote Tweets 9,924 Likes

Transgender and Nonbinary people as Threatening or Dangerous

The proposed bills targeting both youth sports and gender-affirming medical care reinforce harmful stereotypes that transgender people are threatening or dangerous. These bills are often messaged as “protecting” children, which suggests that transgender or nonbinary people are inherently dangerous or threatening. Devoid of context, the titles and descriptions of these bills promote

positive values – like fairness, equality, protection, and compassion – while in practice, they negatively impact transgender youth.

Legislation targeting youth sports

Proposed legislation which prevents transgender girls from competing in youth sports according to their gender identity frames the issue as a widespread attack supposedly threatening the existence of girls' sports and the safety of women and girls. Ohio and South Carolina have both proposed a "Save Women's Sports Act," while Georgia has proposed a "Save Girls Sports Act." Arkansas passed the "Fairness In Women's Sports Act," while a "Fairness In Women's Sports Act" is still being considered in Kansas. Florida has proposed a bill "Promoting Equality of Athletic Opportunity." In Utah, lawmakers have proposed a "Preserving Sports for Female Students" act.

Rep. Dan Crenshaw (R-TX) justified his opposition to the Equality Act by claiming that the legislation would "obliterate" women's sports. Rep. Lauren Boebert (R-CO) commented that "biological males are competing in and destroying women's sports."



Kristen Waggoner of Alliance Defending Freedom, a prominent conservative advocacy group which supports banning transgender athletes from women's and girls' sports, criticized South Dakota Governor Kristi Noem after she initially

vetoed proposed legislation on the matter. Waggoner claimed that Noem “has gutted protections for collegiate and K through 12 girls and women...We need real leadership because we’re losing our freedoms and endangering our daughters.”

Several right-leaning news media outlets have published similar claims, presenting the proposed legislation as protecting women and girls against hypothetical attacks perpetrated by transgender youth allowed into spaces that should be reserved for “biological females.” A Revolver News article stated that the South Dakota legislation “would have completely banned transsexuals from invading women’s sports.” An article from The Gateway Pundit referred to “transgender crap” and claimed that “women and girl’s [sic] sports have been under attack recently, with the Equality Act being the most blatant move to destroy female only spaces.”

Newt Gingrich, former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives and current Fox News contributor, described the Equality Act as “essentially the gay and transexual supremacy act.” He added, “You had the president sign an executive order that allows transexual males to compete as though they’re females which we know guarantees the end of women’s sports.”

Gingrich continued, “I think we are seeing a tremendous assault on the whole notion of whether there are males and females...We’re in a period where the weirdest people—and I’ll get in trouble for saying it, but I’m old enough that I grew up in a different world...This is a madness.” Fox and Friends co-host Brian Kilmeade concurred with this sentiment, similarly framing transgender rights as a threat: “it’s coming from America and it’s infecting the world—it’s usually the opposite—and I’m embarrassed by it.”

Legislation targeting gender-affirming medical care

Bills targeting gender-affirming medical care for transgender youth also utilize language which attempts to frame the legislation as protecting children. Some of these bills include Montana’s “Provide for Youth Health Protection,” the

“Vulnerable Child Compassion and Protection Act” in Alabama, the “Relating to the Protection of Children” in Texas, and Arkansas’ “Save Adolescents From Experimentation (S.A.F.E.) Act.”

Harmful, hyperbolic language used by supporters of these bills presents gender-affirming medical care as tantamount to child abuse. Rep. Greene stated in April that “any ‘Republican’ that supports pediatric transgender hormone treatment or surgery is supporting child abuse.” An article in the National Review said of the Equality Act: “we are talking about mutilating children...When we glamorize transitioning and encourage children to do so, we are talking child abuse.”

Fox News’ Tucker Carlson got into a [heated exchange](#) with Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson on Carlson’s primetime television show in April, after Hutchinson vetoed a proposed bill in his state related to gender-affirming medical care. “You’ve come out publicly as pro-choice on the question of chemical castration of children...If you stop puberty and suppress the sex hormones, you’re chemically castrating someone...You vetoed a bill that would have protected children,” Carlson stated.