

# SILENCING SUPPORTERS OF LGBTQ PEOPLE

OCTOBER 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](http://www.mapresearch.org).

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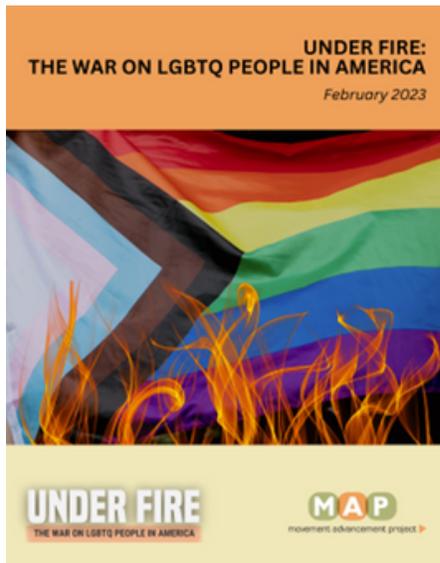
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**THIS IS THE SIXTH REPORT  
IN THE *UNDER FIRE* SERIES  
FROM THE MOVEMENT  
ADVANCEMENT PROJECT  
(MAP).**

**THE ENTIRE SERIES IS  
AVAILABLE [HERE](#).**

## WHAT MAKES THIS MOMENT DIFFERENT: A FIRESTORM

LGBTQ people in America are under attack like never before. Some of what is happening across the country is appearing in the media. 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 will settle for nothing less than eliminating 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 series 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.
- **Banning medical care and legal recognition for transgender people.** 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 people 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 who 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.

**This report, the sixth and final in the *Under Fire* series, focuses on efforts silence, sue, fine, and penalize parents, teachers, doctors, companies, and others who support LGBTQ people.** All the reports in this series are available [here](#), including MAP’s overview report released in February 2023.

## OPPONENTS' GOAL: ERASE TRANSGENDER PEOPLE FROM SOCIETY

Opponents of LGBTQ people and equality know that the majority of Americans do not share their beliefs or support their efforts. That's why opponents of LGBTQ equality seek to silence and punish parents, teachers, doctors, companies, and virtually anyone who supports LGBTQ people. Silencing supporters allows those opponents to promote the false idea that their anti-LGBTQ beliefs are widely held and that their discriminatory policies are well-supported. This in turn can lead the many millions of supporters of LGBTQ people to feel—incorrectly—that they are powerless, in the minority, or that fighting back against these cruel attacks would make no difference.

More broadly, this dynamic fuels a political and cultural climate that emboldens and enables opponents to spread fear and misinformation and to attack LGBTQ people and rights in increasingly shocking and far-reaching ways, with little standing in their way. This is why efforts to silence the majority of Americans who support LGBTQ people—as well as the direct attacks on LGBTQ people themselves—must be recognized, named, and stopped.

## OPPONENTS' TACTICS: HOW THEY ARE ACCOMPLISHING THEIR GOALS

Throughout this *Under Fire* research series, we've detailed how opponents are pushing harmful policies, contributing to an escalating climate of violence and harassment, and ultimately seeking to push LGBTQ people out of schools, public places, and public life itself. Part of what has allowed these efforts to advance is the creation of a false narrative that most people support these actions, when the truth is that the [majority of Americans](#) care about LGBTQ people and support LGBTQ people being treated fairly.

To create the perception that their actions are popular, anti-LGBTQ opponents have engaged in aggressive and widespread tactics designed to silence and punish those who support LGBTQ people.

### OPPONENTS' GOAL: SILENCE SUPPORTERS OF LGBTQ PEOPLE

**Tactic #1:** Creating Criminal & Professional Penalties for Supporting LGBTQ People

**Tactic #2:** Attacking Companies That Support LGBTQ People & Voice Opposition to Anti-LGBTQ Policies

**Tactic #3:** Stoking Violence & Harassment Against People & Institutions





## TACTIC #1: CREATING CRIMINAL & PROFESSIONAL PENALTIES FOR SUPPORTING LGBTQ PEOPLE

Opponents of LGBTQ equality are using many strategies—including legislation, regulatory or agency policy, executive orders, shameless government over-reaching, and more—to create criminal and professional penalties for those who support LGBTQ people. Whether targeting parents, teachers, healthcare providers, or even lawmakers themselves who support LGBTQ people, these new penalties are intended to make the risks too great to bear to continue supporting LGBTQ people or voicing opposition to harmful, discriminatory laws.

In recent years, most of these efforts have especially targeted those who support transgender people, and particularly transgender youth. These efforts include:

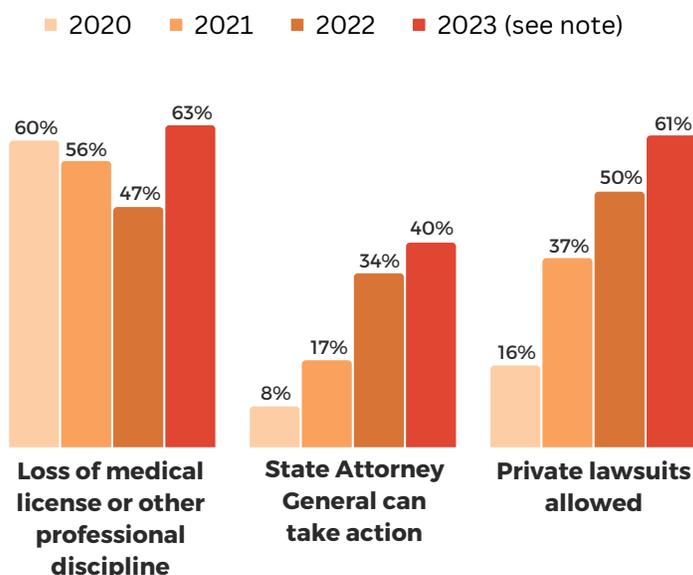
- Creating financial, civil, and professional punishments for medical providers of best practice medicine for transgender youth.** The recent avalanche of bills attacking transgender youth’s access to medical care primarily targets medical providers by creating significant fines, allowing lawsuits against these medical providers, and often revoking or suspending a doctor’s medical license. Analysis of bills introduced between 2020 and April 2023 found that the most common punishment is the loss of a medical provider’s medical license or another form of professional discipline by a state licensing board, as shown in *Figure 1*. Additionally, provisions allowing medical providers to be sued became dramatically more common in recent years: in 2020, only 16% of these bills included such a provision, compared to 61% of bills introduced in 2023. Similarly, provisions allowing states’ attorneys general to take independent action—such as [directly suing or investigating providers of transgender health care](#)—are also becoming more common over time.
- Banning teachers and school staff—under threat of suspension or job loss—from using a child’s pronouns or name that matches their gender** rather than their

sex or name assigned at birth. In 2023 alone, [nearly half of states](#) considered bills that would regulate students’ pronoun use at school, including bills that would make it difficult, if not illegal, for teachers and other school staff to use accurate pronouns and names for transgender students.

Opponents have pushed even farther in some places, establishing (or attempting to establish) criminal penalties for people who support LGBTQ people, especially transgender youth. These include:

- Criminal charges for healthcare providers who provide necessary, best practice care for transgender youth.** Currently, five states—Alabama, Florida, Idaho, North Dakota, and Oklahoma—make it a [felony to provide best practice medical care to transgender youth](#).

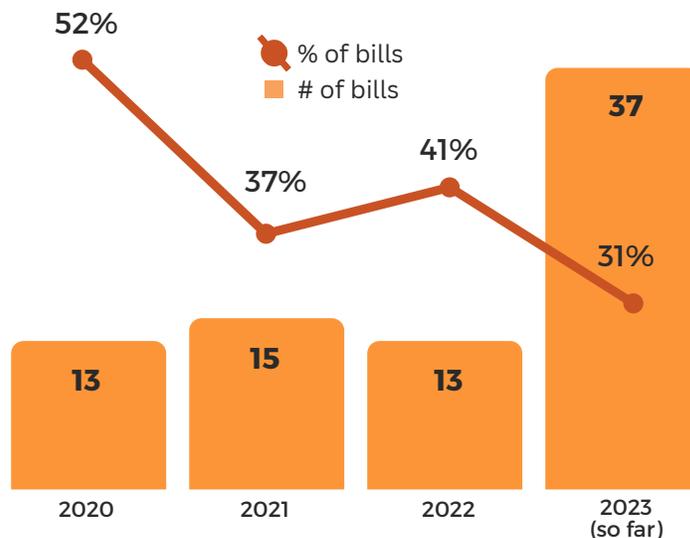
**Figure 1. Share of Bills Each Year with Each Type of Punishment or Penalty**



Note: Bills can have multiple types of penalties or punishments. Source: MAP original analysis. Data for 2023 reflects bills introduced through April 1, 2023.

- Potential criminal charges for parents of transgender youth who seek such care for their children, as well as potential charges for teachers or even friends and neighbors.** From 2020 through 2023, more than a third of all bills introduced in states targeted someone other than, or in addition to, medical providers, as shown in *Figure 2*. For example, a [bill introduced in Alabama](#) in 2020 said that “no person”—defined to include “any individual”—shall provide, counsel, or even make a referral for best practice medical care to transgender youth, making violations a felony crime. School staff were also explicitly targeted with misdemeanor charges if they failed to out a transgender student to their parent(s), irrespective of the potential risk to the child.
- Child abuse investigations of parents who support their transgender children.** In Texas, for example, the state legislature failed to pass a ban on healthcare for transgender children in 2021,<sup>1</sup> and so in 2022, the state’s attorney general and governor announced that best practice medical care for transgender children amounted to criminal child abuse and directed the state’s Department of Family Protective Services to enforce their opinion. These efforts did not change state law, and courts later ruled these actions beyond the power of the governor. However, the efforts nonetheless resulted in numerous investigations into families with transgender children, and in the 2023 legislative session, Texas enacted a new legislative ban on best practice medical care for transgender people. In Florida, [a law passed in 2023](#) allows the state to take custody of children “at risk of being subjected to” best practice care for transgender youth, or even to take custody of children if they have a transgender sibling or parent. Even families that do not live in the state but that are visiting for work or perhaps to visit family or Disney World could have their children seized by the state. The law also allows the state to void, ignore, or change child custody agreements issued by courts in other states if Florida believes the child in question is “at risk” of receiving medically necessary transgender-related care.

**Figure 2. Many Medical Care Ban Bills Target Not Only Doctors, But Also Parents, Teachers, Even “Any Person”**



Note: Many of these bills apply to both medical providers and other individuals, such as parents. These are minimum estimates, as many bills are vaguely written and could potentially be used to target even more people than explicitly identified in the bill. Source: MAP original analysis. Data as of April 1, 2023.

- Fines and potential imprisonment for teachers who refuse to censor LGBTQ content or for librarians who refuse to purge LGBTQ books.** In an effort to control the types of books that are available in schools and even public libraries, [several states](#) have passed laws that establish fines and potential prison sentences for school employees and public librarians “disseminating obscene matter.” In Missouri, for example, a [new law established penalties](#) for librarians, teachers, administrators, and others of a year in jail or up to \$2,000 in fines. And because opponents view nearly any book that makes mention of LGBTQ characters as obscene, such laws put librarians in a difficult situation of offering diverse, curated collections of materials to their communities or face criminal penalties.

In Louisiana, the [attorney general encouraged residents](#) to call a tip line to report librarians and others who provide children with materials with “extremely graphic sexual content.”

However, this movement to penalize and criminalize people isn't just in the context of health care for transgender youth, but more broadly for supporting LGBTQ youth and LGBTQ people. For example:

- **Punishing legislators who support LGBTQ people and who speak out against harmful legislation.** In [Montana](#), [Oklahoma](#), and [Nebraska](#), lawmakers, some but not all of whom are LGBTQ themselves, were censured, not permitted on the floor, or had ethics investigations launched all for speaking out against harmful legislation.
- **Slashing funding for public libraries that refuse to remove LGBTQ books from the shelves.** As efforts to ban books have moved from schools to public libraries, opponents have sought to threaten the very existence of libraries through efforts to defund public libraries as well as creating penalties for librarians who oppose book bans. In Missouri, a battle over a law focused on removing books from libraries escalated with [legislators proposing to slash the budget](#) of public libraries in the state.



**TACTIC #2: ATTACKING COMPANIES THAT SUPPORT LGBTQ PEOPLE & VOICE OPPOSITION TO ANTI-LGBTQ POLICIES**

Beyond penalizing individuals who support LGBTQ people and youth in their professional work or personal lives, anti-LGBTQ opponents are working to reshape how even private companies and businesses do their work. They have passed laws making it more difficult for businesses to advance inclusion within their workplaces through trainings and programs. They have also sought to penalize, shame, and boycott companies that dare to voice either support for LGBTQ people or opposition to harmful laws. These efforts to limit the free speech of businesses – in how they foster a sense of belonging among their staff, the types of customers they seek to engage, and how they participate in public debates about legislation – are further evidence of

**AS SILENCING EFFORTS AND PENALTIES MOUNT, BEST-IN-CLASS PROFESSIONALS MOVE ELSEWHERE AT THE COST OF ALL COMMUNITIES**

While this report focuses on allies and supporters of LGBTQ people and the ways that they are being attacked for speaking up, these attacks also have very real impacts on LGBTQ themselves. As detailed throughout this *Under Fire* series, this current moment has significant impacts on LGBTQ people themselves, including LGBTQ youth, and those who love them. These impacts include their mental health, fearing for their very safety when attending LGBTQ community events or visiting businesses, even forcing them to move to a different community or consider leaving their current homes, and more.

When LGBTQ people are targeted, harassed, and have their livelihoods jeopardized by these efforts, they aren't the only ones affected. Communities lose valued teachers, physicians, parents, and leaders. Many LGBTQ people are making the decision to leave the communities they seek to serve to live and work elsewhere. [One recent survey](#) found that one in four LGBTQ workers had moved to a more inclusive place following the passage of anti-LGBTQ legislation.

In Louisiana, after the passage of several anti-LGBTQ bills, [a pediatric cardiologist and his husband made the difficult decision](#) to leave the state, moving to New York. This leaves the state with just two pediatric cardiologists, which will affect care for all families and children throughout Louisiana. In Kentucky, [a gay teacher who was awarded 2022 Teacher of the Year](#) decided to leave the teaching profession entirely after being targeted by anti-LGBTQ individuals as a "groomer." [He shared](#), "I have put up with these problems over the years because the benefits outweighed the cons... But I've now reached a stage where I'm starting to see that the toll on [my] mental health is going to be such that my students are not going to be seeing a successful LGBTQ person in front of them. **They're seeing someone who is stressed out and unhappy.**"

the fact that opponents wish to silence supporters of LGBTQ people.

Notably, however, many of these efforts are also part of broader efforts to erode important work focused on advancing racial equity, eliminating discrimination, and promoting an inclusive society. For example, the efforts to limit diversity trainings also target these programs for their conversations about how race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and class may show up in the workplace. These efforts include:

- **Passing laws limiting how companies can advance inclusion among their employees.** Despite many businesses deeply understanding that a diverse workforce is good for business and doing work to advance inclusion in their workplaces, lawmakers have overreached and intervened to make it illegal in some states for private businesses to require employees to attend inclusion, diversity, and belonging programs. [Florida passed such a law in 2022.](#)
- **Limiting the ability of public colleges and universities to teach about, facilitate discussions about, and promote inclusion and diversity on campus.** In May 2023, for example, [Florida passed a law](#) banning public colleges and universities from spending money on diversity, equity, and inclusion programs as well as limiting course content that teaches about the history of race and its role in shaping the country. A Texas law bans offices focused on diversity on college campuses. [A University of Houston LGBTQ office and diversity office](#) both closed following the law's passage.
- **Boycotting companies that support LGBTQ people, have inclusive product lines, or use diverse advertising.** The summer of 2023 saw viral social media campaigns, which turned into coordinated broad efforts to penalize businesses that had product lines for LGBTQ Pride Month and had transgender influencers in their advertising efforts. For example, a video of one man destroying a Pride display at a Target resulted in a viral campaign against these displays. While Target admitted to moving displays to be less

prominent in just a few stores, the narrative about backlash to LGBTQ-inclusive product lines and how businesses should (or should not) respond to vandalism and backlash escalated, leading to further silencing among companies that have otherwise historically supported LGBTQ people and visibility.

- **Stripping preferential status from certain businesses that speak out against harmful legislation.** In Florida, lawmakers who were upset about the ways in which Disney spoke out about the school curriculum censorship (also known as “Don’t Say Gay”) legislation, took aim at Disney itself. Those lawmakers [passed legislation](#) repealing Disney’s preferential status that gave it economic advantages and allowed it to largely govern itself.



## TACTIC #3: STOKING VIOLENCE & HARASSMENT AGAINST PEOPLE & INSTITUTIONS

Beyond laws creating formal penalties for people and institutions that support LGBTQ communities, the current moment has also been deeply concerning for its inflammatory rhetoric, which has resulted in further violence and harassment of both people and institutions. This broader climate can have a chilling effect on those who may disagree with the legal and political efforts of anti-LGBTQ opponents but who now may fear for their physical or emotional safety.

- **Dangerous rhetoric about supporters of LGBTQ people.** People who support LGBTQ people, refuse to remove LGBTQ books from shelves, and who speak out against anti-LGBTQ efforts are called “groomers”, reflecting a revival of a decades-old tactic used against LGBTQ people. In Louisiana, [a local parish library director](#) was called a “groomer” on social media for her defense of keeping diverse books, including some with LGBTQ content, on the shelves.
- **Acts of violence against allies.** Dangerous rhetoric about people who support LGBTQ people has tipped

over into stoking actual violence, especially when paired with guns. In a shocking recent example, a small [business owner in California was murdered](#) in August 2023 after the shooter took issue with her flying pride flags outside her store.

- **Vandalism and threats to LGBTQ institutions and those that serve LGBTQ people.** Accompanying these legislative attacks, the broader extremist movements behind them have stoked [violence, vandalism, and harassment](#) against LGBTQ people and community institutions like LGBTQ community centers, LGBTQ bars, and Pride events and drag shows. In a 2022 survey of LGBTQ community centers, more than [seven in ten](#) indicated they'd received threats or other forms of harassment. And in Missouri, where over 50 anti-LGBTQ bills were introduced in 2023 alone, [at least three different LGBTQ bars in the St. Louis](#) area received bomb and shooting threats.

states were directly targeted by coordinated online harassment campaigns, often led by prominent anti-transgender extremists such as “Libs of TikTok.” These online harassment campaigns often lead to in-person protests or threats of violence, including at healthcare providers not explicitly targeted by these online campaigns. For example, and as reported by *Time Magazine*, a clinic in Seattle reported anonymous hate mail as well as multiple instances of protestors on-site, noting the negative impact on the patients and families who were forced to pass the protestors on their way in to receive care. In Ohio, billboards placed near a children’s hospital spew disinformation about medically necessary care for transgender youth. Boston Children’s Hospital—a provider of care for transgender youth in the area, and one explicitly targeted by Libs of TikTok—has since received multiple bomb threats, leading to temporary evacuations or closures of the hospital. This disrupts access to health care not only for transgender people, but also for anyone else in the broader community working at or seeking care at Boston Children’s Hospital—or any of the other hospitals and healthcare providers similarly targeted across the country.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

As outlined throughout the entire [Under Fire series](#), the current moment warrants attention and action. LGBTQ people are valued members of communities across the country and the attacks on them are out of step with the values held by the majority of Americans.

It is critical that we see beyond individual bills or even categories of bills and understand the broader scope of what is occurring; there is a coordinated, organized effort to erase LGBTQ people from public life and to make it impossible for LGBTQ people to live their lives. These bills, and the rhetoric fueling them, are incredibly harmful to LGBTQ people and their families. Opponents seek to erode support for LGBTQ people, making it easier for them to accomplish their goals.

**We at MAP will continue to track these efforts on our LGBTQ Equality Maps. You can see the entire *Under Fire* series, all of which are available [here](#).**



In addition to the professional and criminal penalties discussed on pages 3 and 4 for healthcare providers who serve transgender children, the political rhetoric about care for transgender children has resulted in many providers experiencing protests, harassment, and even threats of violence and death. As of a December 2022 report, at least 24 different hospitals and providers across at least 21