

## Introduction to Transgender Identity and Issues

On Sunday, October 21, 2018, the U.S. public learned of a draft of a memo from the Trump administration's Department of Health and Human Services. The proposed memo argues for a narrow, strict definition of gender that is based on the physical characteristics someone is born with—not on their gender identity. Members of the transgender community and their allies worry that this is a way to take away rights from transgender people that cisgender people have and often take for granted—for example legal protections from violence and discrimination, the right to live openly and with dignity, and protections related to jobs, families, and healthcare. In reality, this is just one of many attacks on the rights of transgender people that has taken place throughout U.S. history.

### **What does it mean to be transgender?**

According to the National Center for Transgender Equality, a transgender person is a person whose gender identity is different from the gender they were assigned based on their sex at birth. When babies are born, doctors typically label them as male, female, or—less commonly—intersex, based on their genitalia. People who are labeled male or female at birth and maintain a gender identity that aligns with this are called “cisgender.” But, for transgender people, their gender identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth.

Today, an estimated 1.4 million Americans identify as transgender or gender non-conforming. Like all people, transgender people are all different and have complex identities that extend far beyond just their gender identities. Transgender people live throughout the United States and the world. They come from all racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds.

Today and throughout history, transgender people have fought for their rights, including rights related to marriage, family, and healthcare and the right to be protected from violence. Yet, transgender people are frequently affected by violence. According to the Human Rights Campaign, in 2017, at least twenty-nine transgender people were murdered in the United States. Data from 2018 suggests an even higher number of murders

of transgender people. In particular, transgender women of color are disproportionately the victims of fatal hate crimes.

**“Earlier today in Shreveport, a young transgender woman was murdered. She is sadly not the first transgender woman of color to be killed in Louisiana this year. Violence against trans people, particularly against trans women, is a plague that continues to affect our cities and communities.... Vontashia Bell must not die in vain. Her murder is a reminder of the current climate and national discourse on trans issues....”**

—Statement from Louisiana Trans Advocates on the Murder of Vontashia Bell, a transgender woman of color from Louisiana, August 30, 2018

### **How have transgender people and their allies responded to Trump administration policies?**

After learning about the proposal to narrowly define gender, many concerned Americans see this as the most recent attack in a long history of attacks on the rights of transgender people. They believe that the Trump administration is stripping away the legal protections for transgender people that had been established under the Obama administration. For instance, they point to Trump's attempts to ban transgender people from military service and his reversal of policies that allowed transgender students to use the bathrooms of their choice. Many also see the recent memo as an attempt to ignore the existence of transgender people.

**“What this feels like to transgender people is trying to make us invisible, trying to say that we don't exist, trying to say that we are nothing....”**

—Mara Keisling, executive director of the National Center for Transgender Equality, as quoted in the *New York Times*, October 22, 2018

The draft memo, from the Department of Health and Human Services, is concerned with

a federal law called Title IX. Title IX is a federal law that bans gender discrimination in education programs that the government provides funding for—for example, sports programs in public schools. Transgender people and their allies see this as a way for the government to erase transgender identity and people from the law, which they believe will lead to attacks on their ability to live safely and equally in the United States.

In response, protesters gathered on October 21, 2018 in New York City and in Washington, D.C on October 22, 2018. People also responded on social media, using hashtags such as “#WontBeErased”.

**“You saw such a massive response because this attack on the trans community is essentially trying to erase the trans community from the face of this country and we’re not going to stand for that...”**

—Sarah Kate Ellis, president of GLAAD, an LGBTQ advocacy group, quoted in the *New York Times*, October 22, 2018

Today, you will explore just some of these social media responses to the unreleased memo and how transgender people and their allies believe this is meant to erase them and take away their rights. In doing so, you will be asked to consider the experiences of transgender people in the United States today. It is important to be respectful as you read and learn. All people, even those with identities that you might not understand, deserve respect. Be sure to think before you speak, ask questions when you are unsure or confused, and keep an open mind.