

Transgender Day of Remembrance: When Violence Turns Deadly

www.forge-forward.org
PO Box 1272, Milwaukee, WI 53201
AskFORGE@forge-forward.org



History

In 1998, two deaths of transgender people caught author and activist Gwen Smith's attention. One was the murder of Rita Hester, and the other was the wrongful death of Tyra Hunter (who died in 1995). Gwen's concern was that if we did not start to record and remember our deaths, we would be doomed to see more and more of them. She therefore created the Remembering our Dead website (www.rememberingourdead.org), where she captured the history and memory of those who died -- honoring their lives, and making public the injustice of their deaths.

This is not an easy task since many deaths are never covered by the press. When there is media coverage, it is often disparaging.

In 1999 and in every year since, communities across the world have joined together on November 20 to honor those who have died as a result of anti-transgender violence and fear. The website, International Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDOR) -- www.transgenderdor.org -- tracks and maintains lists of those who have died each year, and offers support and information for communities who wish to organize or attend TDOR events.

Rates of Violence

The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs collects data from their 40+ member organizations on all forms of violence against LGBTQ individuals. In 2011, there were 30 LGBT murders reported to NCAVP. (The actual number of LGBT murders is much higher, but these are the ones reported and tracked.)



There is a disproportionate number of transgender people being murdered, since transgender people represent the smallest segment of the LGBT community, but are 43% of the murder victims.

MESSAGE CRIMES

Anti-transgender murder is a message crime in the most extreme. The 2010 report "Why It Matters" (The National Center for Victims of Crime and the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs), best captures the meaning of a message crime: "Hate violence against LGBTQ people are crimes motivated by the offender's bias against the actual or perceived sexual orientation and/or gender identity of the victim. Hate-motivated violence is rooted in cultural bias. An attack against an individual that clearly reflects bias motivation is also an attack against a community and may simultaneously incite community-wide fear and panic as well as frustration and anger. Such attacks send the message that a community and anyone associated with it is not safe, raising anxiety and fear for members of the community who may not even have known the victim."

Intersections

Of the deaths reported by NCAVP in 2011, 87% were people of color and approximately 20% were engaged in sex work when they were killed. The vast majority of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals who are murdered are on the trans-feminine vector. It is also common for anti-trans-based murders to also include components such as sexual assault, genital mutilation (or disfigurement of breasts, face, or other gendered body parts), and the use of extreme force (especially with blunt objects, often with multiple strikes).

Perpetrators

Frequently, anti-trans murders have more than one perpetrator, which results in victims being literally outnumbered and overpowered. Perpetrators may be known to the victim (a partner, former partner, acquaintance, or neighbor), a customer in a sex trade negotiation, or a stranger unknown to the trans person or loved one.

It can happen to anyone

Although data trends indicate higher rates of deadly violence against transwomen of color, it is critical to remember that extreme violence can and does happen to people of all identities, ages, races, and other demographic variables. Anti-transgender violence and fear is acted out against both trans people themselves, and SOFFAs (Significant Others, Friends, Family and Allies). Both loved ones (people who directly know the trans person) and sometimes those who are "unrelated" (bystanders) may also be murdered due to anti-transgender bias.

Secondary survivors

When violence ends in death, the surviving loved ones will need services and support. Sometimes family members may be struggling with their loved one's gender identity and then are forced to confront their death and the possible implications of how their gender played a role in someone's action to kill them. Partners may be overcome with grief and feel they have nowhere to go for support. Often partners may be left with no legal rights, as well, due to relationships that cannot be sanctioned through marriage or other recognized ways.

In addition, entire communities are grieving, angry, fearful and left without support or guidance. Communities may feel powerless and hopeless. As service providers and community members, it is critical to acknowledge that communities as a whole are harmed by violence. If we respond to the damage caused to the whole community, we can likely help prevent additional violence and harm, as well as help heal both the individuals and community who have survived the violent act that resulted in a community member's death.