

# Guide for Reporting on Anti-Trans Violence



No matter the color of our skin, how we make money, or our genders, we all deserve to be represented fairly and accurately in the media. But right-wing politicians and news personalities are working diligently to mobilize their base by increasing fear and anger toward transgender people. They exploit lack of familiarity with trans people to co-opt the media narrative, peddling dangerous falsehoods about our communities. Together, we must reject their falsehoods and vitriol and take back control over the media narrative by telling fuller, more humanizing stories about trans lives.

Journalists play a critical role in shaping public opinion. While we're often taught that the role of journalists is to remain unbiased, the reality is that what's perceived as unbiased within a fundamentally anti-trans, white supremacist culture is actually just that which maintains the status quo. Responsible journalism helps advance the public's understanding of critical issue areas within our society today. Journalism on anti-trans violence<sup>1</sup> should increase readers' understanding of such violence, and in doing so, guide them toward the solutions to ending it.

# 01

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SHIFTING OUR FRAMING

### Remove narratives that reinforce victim-blaming

Journalists should approach anti-trans violence with sensitivity and empathy, challenging harmful framings<sup>2</sup> that suggest victims of violence contributed to their own attacks.

Victim-blaming occurs when the blame for a crime or harm is placed on the victim rather than the perpetrator or underlying societal factors. Recognize that victim-blaming narratives not only perpetuate harm<sup>3</sup> but also reinforce biases and stigmatization against marginalized communities, particularly transgender individuals.

Suggestions for shifting the frame include:

#### Avoiding:

- ❌ Deadnaming<sup>4</sup> (calling a trans person by a name they no longer use) and misgendering<sup>5</sup> (using incorrect pronouns)
- ❌ Playing into dehumanizing “trans panic”<sup>6</sup> narratives
- ❌ Stigmatizing sex work<sup>7</sup>, drug addiction, homelessness, and mental illness
- ❌ Perpetuating anti-trans stereotypes or reinforcing harmful biases<sup>8</sup>

#### Highlighting:

- ✅ Need for social change<sup>9</sup> to eliminate violence and discrimination
- ✅ Resilience<sup>10</sup>, strength, and humanity of trans community
- ✅ If reporting on people in sex work<sup>11</sup> or facing drug addiction, add social economic and cultural factors that contribute to these circumstances

Center trans peoples’ voices and experiences, allowing us to share our stories in a respectful and empowering manner. This approach helps to counteract victim-blaming narratives and fosters empathy and understanding. Despite overwhelming violence, trans people are brilliant, creative people, achieving incredible feats across industries.

## Reduce unhelpful framings, i.e. “Deadliest Year Ever”

Responsible reporting<sup>12</sup> on anti-trans violence requires journalists to avoid unproductive framings that sensationalize and distract from the urgent issues at hand, such as the use of “deadliest year ever”<sup>13</sup> messaging and focusing solely on victim counts. By adopting a more informative and solutions-oriented approach, journalists can effectively guide their audience towards understanding and addressing the systemic violence faced by transgender individuals.



### Positive headline and framing alternatives include:

- ✳ Implementing headlines that emphasize<sup>14</sup> the need for systemic change<sup>15</sup>
- ✳ Highlighting actions being taken<sup>16</sup> to address anti-trans violence
- ✳ Guiding your reporting towards solutions<sup>17</sup> and initiatives
- ✳ Spotlighting the efforts of community organizations, advocacy groups, and policymakers that are working to create safer environments for trans individuals

While it is important to acknowledge the seriousness of anti-trans violence, providing context and analysis is equally crucial<sup>18</sup>. This approach helps your audience understand the root causes and encourages them to engage in meaningful conversations and actions.

## Highlight systemic violence instead of interpersonal violence

When reporting on incidents of anti-transgender violence, it is crucial for journalists to highlight the systemic factors that contribute to these acts, rather than solely focusing on individual or interpersonal dynamics.

# 02 **SHIFT BLAME TOWARD SYSTEMS**

In 2021 alone, a trans person died by violent means or suicide on average every 4.5 days. These incidents do not exist in isolation from one another, but rather as parts of a whole, resulting from harmful systems that place us at risk for violence. Systems claiming to offer support or resources at best neglect or exclude transgender people; at worst, as with policing, they directly perpetuate violence against our communities.

Put plainly: anti-trans violence is an epidemic. And as with every epidemic, the solutions lie not in analyzing specific incidents, but rather in understanding and addressing its root causes.

Without exception, the overwhelming majority of victims of fatal anti-trans violence are Black trans feminine people—65% of all victims since 2015, per Transgender Law Center’s own tracking research.

This is not a coincidence. Black transgender women live at the intersection of anti-Blackness<sup>19</sup>, misogyny, and transphobia—referred to as transmisogynoir<sup>20</sup>. We know that until we dismantle and replace each and every unjust system that harms transgender people, violence against us will not end—no matter how many individual perpetrators enter the criminal punishment system or how many hate crime laws<sup>21</sup> are put in place.

**“Anti-trans violence is an epidemic [...] and the solutions lie not in analyzing specific incidents, but rather in understanding and addressing its root causes.”**

We also know that transgender people can be impacted by every form of oppression—because transgender people, like all people, hold multiple identities at one time. Transgender people can also be disabled, sex workers, migrants, Black, Indigenous, mentally ill, and so much more.

Journalists must explore the intersections of gender identity with other forms of oppression to provide a more nuanced understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by the trans individuals, acknowledging that we are not a monolith. This approach helps dismantle single-issue narratives and fosters a more inclusive and intersectional<sup>22</sup> analysis of anti-trans violence.

By prioritizing the discussion of systemic violence, journalists can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how various institutions intersect in such a way to create the conditions for this violence, including education, employment, healthcare, housing, and government agencies like ICE<sup>23</sup>.

Reporting that ignores the role of these systems is not only incomplete—it is inaccurate.

## HOW TO SHIFT BLAME TOWARDS SYSTEMS



### DON'T

Encourage folks to contact police



### DO

Include messaging about how law enforcement perpetuates cycles of violence<sup>24</sup> against transgender people, particularly Black transgender women<sup>25</sup> and femmes



### DON'T

Describe sex work, drug use, or mental illness as being innately risky



### DO

Discuss how criminalization of sex work, drug use, and mental illness<sup>26</sup> exacerbates violence



### DON'T

Treat an incident of anti-trans violence as existing independently from external forces



### DO

✱ Describe systemic barriers to safe and secure housing and temporary shelter<sup>27</sup> for transgender people

✱ Examine the connection<sup>28</sup> between anti-trans vitriol<sup>29</sup>, anti-trans legislation, and anti-trans violence and its role in a particular incident

✱ Underscore the role of anti-Black racism, transmisogyny, transmisgynoir, ableism, classism<sup>30</sup>, and all other forms of oppression

# 03 **SHIFTING SOLUTIONS TOWARD COMMUNITIES**

## **Speak with trans leaders and experts instead of looking outside the community**

When seeking knowledge and guidance on anti-trans violence, reach out to trans leaders<sup>31</sup> and community members; we hold the solutions to violence and we know how to talk about it. Prioritize interviewing trans leaders, activists, and experts<sup>32</sup> who possess lived experiences and expertise in advocating for trans rights and safety. Ensure that their voices are prominently featured in your reporting to provide an accurate and nuanced perspective on challenges and solutions.

## **Center community-led solutions**

When reporting on anti-trans violence, it is essential to highlight community-led solutions that don't rely on state intervention. Some examples include trans-led initiatives, grassroots organizations, and projects that are actively working towards addressing violence against trans individuals. By centering these solutions, you can empower communities to be seen as agents of change and reduce reliance on carceral measures.

## **Emphasize abolitionist approaches to addressing violence**

When addressing remedies to transphobic violence, journalists must challenge the prevailing narratives that solely focus on punishment and retribution through law enforcement. Responsible reporting should incorporate perspectives from activists, scholars, and community members who champion abolitionist approaches that seek to transform society rather than carceral measures enforced by systems and agencies designed to perpetuate the oppression of BIPOC, trans, immigrant, and disabled communities<sup>33</sup>. Abolitionist frameworks encourage investing in resources such as mental health support<sup>34</sup>, education<sup>35</sup>, and housing<sup>36</sup> to address the root causes of violence and create safer environments.

## **Hire trans journalists and diversify newsrooms**

Newsrooms play a crucial role in shaping public discourse and understanding of current events. By actively hiring trans journalists, they can foster a more nuanced, diverse, and reflective media landscape across beats and coverage areas. Trans journalists bring unique perspectives and life experiences that enrich news coverage, ensuring stories resonate with a broader range of communities. Their presence helps debunk stereotypes and biases, providing a more accurate portrayal of the diverse populace they serve. Additionally, trans journalists can offer a deeper understanding of issues related to gender identity and LGBTQ+ rights, promoting greater accuracy, empathy, and sensitivity in reporting. Embracing trans voices in newsrooms is not just an act of inclusivity; it is a strategic imperative for news organizations to achieve comprehensive and authentic storytelling that represents the full tapestry of society.

# 04

## GOING BEYOND BREAKING NEWS

Since 2015, nearly 70% of all victims of fatal anti-trans violence have been deadnamed or misgendered by police and consequently by news reports.

Even while actively misgendering a victim, police reports, witnesses, and families will often hint at a victim's trans identity. Learning to identify common context clues that a victim may have been trans is critical. While not enough on their own to verify a victim's gender identity, the presence of these clues signals it's necessary to take steps to do so prior to publishing their gender and name.

### Context clues might include:

- ✱ Phrases such as "female attire" or "dressed in women's clothing"
- ✱ More than one set of pronouns used to refer to an individual, either within one source or across multiple
- ✱ A photo of the victim being visibly at odds with their listed gender
- ✱ Discrepancy between name and pronouns listed in police reports and those listed on a victim's social media, or by their family or community
- ✱ Vague references to a victim being targeted for their "lifestyle," "how they look" or "presentation" with or without expounding
- ✱ Mentioning the potential pursuance of hate crime charges, with or without clearly indicating the basis of these charges

As a journalist, it's important to prioritize accuracy while still meeting deadlines. A good general rule to avoid replicating mis- or disinformation<sup>37</sup> is by only publishing details your own newsroom has verified. At times, this may require you to publish partial information, particularly in breaking news stories, then update it once you've verified an individual's gender identity. This applies whether or not you're knowingly reporting on a transgender person.

## Learning about the victim's life

In addition to often being inaccurate, police reports primarily emphasize the details of a person's death—with little to no information about who they were in life. When journalists rely on law enforcement as the sole or primary source of information, reporting tends to replicate this disparity.

When gathering information, take time to consider who is a reliable source of information about a victim's life. Be sure to reach out to people who affirmed a victim's transgender identity, such as supportive family members, friends, colleagues, queer and trans-led community organizations, and community members. Absent the ability of the deceased to self-identify their gender, identifying and speaking with individuals the victim trusted is the most accurate way to confirm this information.

Treat each individual as unique, taking the time to learn and understand who they were in life, and in doing so help our communities honor and celebrate them as the complex human being they were.

## Cover Anti-Trans Violence Beyond Breaking News

Anti-trans violence exists beyond breaking news cycles. Transphobia is woven into the very fabric of our society.

This goes beyond deaths, or even physical violence. State-sanctioned campaigns of hatred have taken over legislative sessions. Transgender people routinely endure transphobic vitriol through bullying, harassment, and other forms of emotional and psychological violence. 1 in 2 transgender people experience some form of sexual violence within their lifetimes.<sup>38</sup>

To fully and accurately contextualize anti-trans violence to your readers, it's critical to cover the myriad ways in which it manifests—not just instances of fatal anti-trans violence.



# 05

## RESEARCH BEYOND THIS GUIDE

This guide provides a foundational understanding of how to more sensitively and accurately report on anti-trans violence. However, needs and solutions vary between communities, and thus it's critical to explore beyond this guide when reporting on incidents of violence.

Reporting must be grounded in the knowledge that Black trans leaders<sup>39</sup> hold the solutions to end anti-trans violence in their communities; therefore, theirs are the most critical insights and perspectives to pursue when reporting on anti-trans violence within a particular community.



### Additional explorations on anti-trans violence include:

- ✦ [Roots of Anti-Trans Violence Reports](#), Transgender Law Center
- ✦ [More Than a Number: Shifting the Media Narrative on Transgender Homicides](#), GLAAD
- ✦ [Unerased](#), Mic
- ✦ [Guidance for Improving Trans Coverage](#), Trans Journalists Association
- ✦ [Insider spent 18 months investigating 175 killings of transgender people. Here's what we found.](#)

Include state and local trans leadership in your reporting. Your [local ACLU affiliate](#), [Equality Federation member](#), and Transgender Law Center may be helpful in connecting you with trans-led organizations.

## RESOURCES

- 1 [Stylebook and Coverage Guide – Transgender Journalists Association](#)
- 2 [TLC \(PDF\) Resource- See Us As People](#)
- 3 [“Domestic Drama,” “Love Killing,” or “Murder”: Does the Framing of Femicides Affect Readers’ Emotional and Cognitive Responses to the Crime? – Sage Journals](#)
- 4 [Deadnamed – ProPublica](#)
- 5 [Misgendering: What it is and why it matters – Harvard Health Publishing](#)
- 6 [The Trans Panic Defense Revisited – American Criminal Law Review](#)
- 7 [LANGUAGE MATTERS : TALKING ABOUT SEX WORK – by Stella in collaboration with allies \(PDF\)](#)
- 8 [Trans people deserve better journalism – Culture](#)
- 9 [Roots of Anti-Trans Violence Regional Reports – TLC Resource](#)
- 10 [Trans People Are a Part of Nature | With Captions and ASL – Youtube \(TLC\)](#)
- 11 [Freedom to Thrive – TLC Resource](#)
- 12 [The complexities and nuances of transgender coverage – Columbia Journalism Review](#)
- 13 [More a Than Number: Shifting the Media Narrative on Anti-Trans Violence– PDF resource](#)
- 14 [How anti-trans hate speech online leads to real-world violence – Market Place](#)
- 15 [Transphobic Violence Doesn’t Happen in a Vacuum – In These Times](#)
- 16 [As anti-trans violence surges, advocates demand policy reform – NBC News](#)
- 17 [Ending violence against trans people starts with respecting them in everyday life – Daily Dot](#)
- 18 [Lack of trust in law enforcement hinders reporting of LBGTQ crimes – Public Integrity](#)
- 19 [Anti-Black Violence Has Long Been the Most Common American Hate Crime – And We Still Don’t Know the Full Extent – Time](#)
- 20 [The Anatomy of Transmisogynoir – Bazaar](#)
- 21 [We Keep Us Safe: Interrogating Hate Crime Legislation – TLC Resource](#)
- 22 [Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later – Columbia Law School](#)
- 23 [ICE Raids: Know Your Rights as a TGNC Immigrant – TLC Resource](#)

## RESOURCES

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- 24 [Transgender sex workers are mistreated by the institutions that are supposed to help them](#)
- 25 [Black, Trans Sex Workers Face Police Violence – Georgia Voice](#)
- 26 [Defining Ourselves – TLC Resource](#)
- 27 [Housing & Homelessness – National Center for Transgender Equality](#)
- 28 [How 2022 Became the Year Trans Hate Went Mainstream – Vice](#)
- 29 [Anti-Trans Violence and Rhetoric Reached Record Highs Across America in 2021 – Time](#)
- 30 [PAYING AN UNFAIR PRICE – \(PDF\) Resource](#)
- 31 [100 Organizations Supporting Trans People in All 50 States – Them](#)
- 32 [These Black transgender activists are fighting to ‘simply be’ – National Geographic](#)
- 33 [We can’t stop transphobia without fighting for abolition – PRISM](#)
- 34 [Radical community care – Trans Lifeline](#)
- 35 [Guidelines to Support Transgender and Gender Expansive Students – NYC Public Schools](#)
- 36 [How Three Black, Trans-led Organizations Are Transforming Housing for the Transgender Community – House Beautiful](#)
- 37 [Trans People Face Rhetoric and Disinformation After Shooting – NBC Philadelphia](#)
- 38 [Responding to Transgender Victims of Sexual Assault – OVC](#)
- 39 [Black Trans Women and Black Trans Femmes: Leading & Living Fiercely – TLC Resource](#)