

National Center for Transgender Equality, DC, USA

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In 2018, We Must Look Beyond Numbers to Stop Anti-Trans Violence

by Harper Jean Tobin and Cerys Beckwith

Christa Leigh Steele-Knudslie was a beloved activist in the New England transgender community. She helped launch the first New England Trans Pride event years ago, and later helped create the Miss Trans New England Pageant and produce other pageants.

She also became the first known transgender person to be murdered in the United States in 2018. [Her husband has been charged with murder](#), drawing attention to the grave problem of [intimate partner violence](#) affecting LGBTQ communities.

Thus begins the grim business of trying to count the dead for yet another year. The federal government data on deaths and crime does not count victims based on gender identity, so all we can do is try to count the deaths we know of.

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At the end of 2017, the violence against transgender people caught the attention of both the media and the general public. NCTE is aware of 28 known killings of transgender people last year (almost surely an underestimate of homicides, not to mention countless non-fatal attacks). The victims were disproportionately trans people of color, pointing to the [compounded effects](#) that the intersections of race and gender can have on the lives of people in our communities.

While more and more trans people are finding support in their families, friends and communities, standing up for their rights, and even being elected to public office, the violence facing trans communities is a barometer of society's failure to address stigma and discrimination.

In the 2015 [U.S. Transgender Survey](#) (USTS), nearly one in 10 respondents (9%) reported being physically assaulted in the last year because they were trans. Transgender people experience so much discrimination and bias-driven violence that the specter of hate arises anytime a trans person is killed. This—together with the frequent misgendering of victims by police and the press—is part of why news of another trans murder anywhere is traumatizing for trans communities across the country.

Trans people and their families often feel dismissed when authorities are quick to say a crime couldn't have involved bias because the perpetrator was an intimate partner, a family member, a date, or the client of a sex worker, or because it involved a sexual assault. In fact,

it can. Perpetrators may retaliate against a transgender victim when they discover their transgender status, or that the person is coming out or transitioning; they may also feel they can get away with harming someone with a stigmatized identity.

Overall, 42% of all USTS respondents reported experiencing some form of intimate partner violence involving physical or threats over their lifetime. Nearly half (47%) of USTS respondents reported having being sexually assaulted in their lifetime, including 10% in the last year. (If you or someone close to you has been affected by hate violence and/or intimate partner violence, visit the [National Center for Anti-Violence Projects](#) to find support near you.)

Three of the trans people killed in 2017 were shot by police. While the circumstances varied and some cases are still under investigation, we know that [far too many](#) people in the United States die at the hands of law enforcement officers—just one sad indication of the need for police reform and greater accountability to communities.

Majorities of USTS respondents reported that they would be uncomfortable seeking help from police (57%) and, among those who interacted with police who perceived them as trans, that they had been mistreated by police (58%)—with even bigger majorities among trans people of color. We will not stop the violence against trans people until we change how Americans are policed.

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However imperfect, NCTE will have to keep that grim count again in 2018. But we must not stop with counting. The increasing recognition that widespread violence against transgender people is a real and grave problem represents [hard-won progress](#), but it is far from enough. A general societal attitude of passive empathy is not enough. Vigils and memorials, while necessary, are not enough. We cannot prosecute or incarcerate our way out of this problem.

We need to recognize that stigma is deadly.

We need to teach our families and communities to [love and support](#) the trans people in their lives.

We need to push for comprehensive police reforms, and for more and better data on violence against trans people.

We need to protect trans people from discrimination and ensure they're not pushed into poverty or homelessness.

We need to invest in strategies to address domestic and sexual violence and ensure they are inclusive.

We need to [build communities](#) of resilience and resistance.

And we need to fight back against the [rhetoric and policies](#) of intolerance at the highest levels

of our government.

This is the work that Christa Leigh was a part of. It's the work we all need to do this year, more than ever.

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<https://medium.com/transequalitynow/in-2018-we-must-look-beyond-numbers-to-stop-anti-trans-violence-2ccad87a3098>

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