

# Insider spent 18 months investigating 175 killings of transgender people. Here's what we found.

Insider Investigations Team  
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A wave of hatred crashed down on transgender communities over the past five years, as anti-trans rhetoric and legislation began to dominate the cultural conversation. During that same period, murders of transgender people spiked, doubling from 2019 to 2021.

Prompted by this growing crisis, and building on previous reporting, Insider filed hundreds of public-records requests and sent reporters around the US to gather information on homicides targeting transgender and gender-nonconforming, nonbinary, and two-spirit people across the US and Puerto Rico from 2017 through 2021.

The FBI doesn't track crimes by gender identity. So we sifted through 175 cases to fill in the gaps. Among our unique findings: Most victims were Black women; most victims knew their killers; most killers and suspects were young men in their teens and 20s; and only 16% of cases led to murder convictions.

## Only one killing was successfully prosecuted as a hate crime

Nikki Kuhnhausen was killed at age 17 while on a date in Vancouver, Washington, by a man who called transgender people "disturbing" and "disgusting" and used a [Russian anti-gay slur](#).

"I was born here, but my culture, my roots, and everything it's for me it's even disturbing when I'm around like a gay person or somebody bi or transsexual or something," David Bogdanov told an officer. "So for me it's just very disturbing and disgusting when people are like this."

Bogdanov was convicted of murder in Nikki's death — and was the only killer of a transgender person over the past five years convicted of a hate crime. Hate-crime charges were filed in only two other cases, that of Layla Pelaez Sánchez and Serena Angelique Velázquez Ramos, which are still pending.

## Intimate-partner violence dominated killings of transgender women

When Desmond Harris agreed to be Jaylow McGlory's "official" boyfriend in June 2017, her joy, on social media at least, was incandescent. The next day, she posted a picture of Harris and commented,

"daddy my king."

Soon, however, Harris' texts to McGlory turned threatening. The two moved in together, but there were fights — and death threats. The night Jaylow was killed, she dialed her brother Jimmie McGlory, distraught and sobbing, begging him to drive over to pick her up.

But police officers and prosecutors alike refused to acknowledge Jaylow was a woman or recognize that the pair were in a domestic relationship. Harris successfully argued self-defense at trial, claiming she had tried to rape him.

Catherine Shugrue dos Santos of New York City's Anti-Violence Project told Insider that for transgender people, escaping domestic violence is especially difficult, because many shelters don't serve transgender people — and because many transgender people have experienced bias, harassment, or even violence from the police.

## **Sex workers were particularly vulnerable**

For transgender women of color, discrimination often means working in marginal economies like sex work. But it puts them at high risk for violence.

Zoe Spears and Ashanti Carmon were sex workers who frequented Eastern Avenue, a well-known stroll near Washington, DC. In the early-morning hours of March 30, 2019, according to a witness account, the two were on a date when a man in a white car pulled up. After threatening Carmon, he shot her in front of Spears.

A few months later, Spears met with the police to recount her version of what happened that night. Just weeks after her police interview, she, too, was fatally shot — after telling the police she feared for her life and requesting protection orders against two men she said had harassed her in the wake of Carmon's killing. The police continue to deny a connection between the two killings, something community members have trouble believing.

## **No criminal charges were filed in any of the police killings we tracked**

Sean Hake, Jayne Thompson, and Scout Schultz all had knives during their fatal encounters with law enforcement — and all were in the midst of a mental-health crisis. But in each case, officers failed to try less-lethal force or deescalate the crisis situation they walked into before opening fire.

Kiwi Herring was also shot by police officers who responded to a call for assistance. In that case, the identity of the officers involved had been shielded from the public; Insider was able to identify them by filing public-records requests.

No officers involved in any of these cases were criminally charged.

## **More than a third of cases remain unsolved**

Jaheim "Bella" Pugh, 19, was tough to miss the night she was shot at a crowded party, dressed in a shiny rainbow jumpsuit, glittery eyeshadow, and a long, curly wig. Two years later, no one has been arrested in connection to Pugh's killing.

The police arrested one suspect, but prosecutors let him go. Another suspect was killed before an arrest could be made. A third man was identified as suspicious by someone who knew him. Many in the area heard the rumors about that night, but most of those who know the truth remain silent.

Like more than a third of all killings targeting transgender people over the past five years, Pugh's case remains unsolved. Her chosen sister Ja'Koya Dowdell; her cousin, Carmen Dowdell; and their friend Jasmine Johnson all told Insider they were traumatized by Pugh's death.

## **The police have a long, troubled history with transgender communities**

The New York City Police Department, and police departments across the US, used to routinely arrest queer and transgender people for cross-dressing under archaic "masquerade" bans. Participants recall that the Stonewall uprising in 1969 was sparked by one such incident, when the police tried to haul away Stormé DeLarverie.

Since then, police departments across the country sought to mend the distrust by appointing LGBTQ liaisons. But for many of them, the work was simply piled on top of their already-heavy caseload. And despite new sensitivity guidance at many police departments, problems persist: When Insider examined 175 homicides of transgender people from 2017 to 2021, nearly two-thirds of victims were misgendered or misnamed by the police.

## **Missteps and bias were frequent in the legal system**

One April night in 2017, Kenne McFadden was hanging out in her favorite place with someone she knew: Mark Daniel Lewis, 19. Surveillance video captured the two standing close together and sharing a cigarette. A park police officer saw them hugging. At some point, police records indicate, they kissed.

Later that night, Lewis approached the park officer, according to a police report. "Do you know the guy I was with on the River Walk?" Lewis said, misgendering McFadden. "Well, I kind of pushed him in the river." Her body was discovered by a tourist the next day.

A prosecutor didn't think a jury would sympathize with McFadden, who wasn't, in his words, "born a woman." And a judge accepted Lewis' claim of self-defense. Lewis was never held responsible in her death.

The criminologist Rayna Momen told Insider that from judges to attorneys to jurors, key players in the criminal legal system "do not value trans lives, do not care to understand them, do not have any interest in humanizing these individuals as victims, and instead often really view them as blameworthy."

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Insider investigated 175 recent homicides of transgender people. Insider

- Killings of trans people in the US doubled from 2019 to 2021, as anti-trans laws and rhetoric rose.
- Many of the victims were killed by spouses, partners, boyfriends, housemates, dates, or clients.
- Only 28 in 175 cases Insider examined led to murder convictions; one led to a hate-crime conviction.

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Read more about each of those stories below.

## Insider compiled a comprehensive account of the rising fatal violence targeting transgender people

### Deaths in the family: Investigating 175 transgender homicides over 5 years

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### **'Love us in private and kill us in public': How transphobia turns young men into killers**

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## **Intimate-partner violence dominated killings of transgender women**

While Jaylow McGlory's Facebook page remained aglow with adoring posts about Desmond Harris and their new love, Harris' private texts to her turned threatening. Facebook image obtained by the Alexandria Police Department

When Desmond Harris agreed to be Jaylow McGlory's "official" boyfriend in June 2017, her joy, on social media at least, was incandescent. The next day, she posted a picture of Harris and commented, "daddy my king."

Soon, however, Harris' texts to McGlory turned threatening. The two moved in together, but there were fights — and death threats. The night Jaylow was killed, she dialed her brother Jimmie McGlory, distraught and sobbing, begging him to drive over to pick her up.

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## **Sex workers were particularly vulnerable**

Charmaine Eccles met Ashanti Carmon when she was a teenager, and referred to her as her "daughter." Amanda Andrade-Rhoades for Insider

### **The unsolved murders of Eastern Avenue**

For transgender women of color, discrimination often means working in marginal economies like sex work. But it puts them at high risk for violence.

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## **No criminal charges were filed in any of the police killings we tracked**

An expert report prepared for Sean Hake's family by the criminologist Paul McCauley described the conduct of the officers who shot him as "reckless." Paul McCauley

### **They called 911 for assistance. Then police used lethal force.**

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## **More than a third of cases remain unsolved**

Ja'Koya Dowdell with a photograph she saved of her and Jaheim "Bella" Pugh, her chosen sister.  
Breahna Crosslin for Insider

### **A gender-nonconforming teen was killed at a party in small-town Alabama. Why haven't the police solved the case?**

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## **The police have a long, troubled history with transgender communities**

A crowd of protesters confronting the police outside the Stonewall Inn on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village on June 28, 1969. NY Daily News Archive/Getty Images

### **53 years after Stonewall, police dealings with transgender people are still poisoned by abuse and disrespect**

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## **Missteps and bias were frequent in the legal system**

San Antonio's River Walk, where Kenne McFadden was pushed into the river by her date in April 2017 and drowned. Kaylee Greenlee Beal for Insider

### **The judge called Kenne McFadden a 'nuisance' — and let the man accused of killing her walk free**

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Later that night, Lewis approached the park officer, according to a police report. "Do you know the guy I was with on the River Walk?" Lewis said, misgendering McFadden. "Well, I kind of pushed him in the river." Her body was discovered by a tourist the next day.

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## **Colorado Springs was a center for anti-trans vitriol long before the deadly Club Q attack**

Leia-jhene Seals mourning the Club Q dead at a November 20 vigil at All Souls Unitarian Church in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Seals was performing at Club Q when the shooter entered the nightclub. RJ Sangosti/MediaNews Group/The Denver Post via Getty Images

### **Preached at, spat on, threatened, Colorado Springs' transgender community grapples with the Club Q attack**

Colorado Springs, Colorado, has been a center of anti-LGBTQ vitriol since the early 1990s, when it became home to a growing number of Christian-right ministries, including Focus on the Family. That ministry now reinforces anti-transgender messaging to millions of followers nationwide.

One expert in extremism told Insider that those stoking anti-trans bias were "essentially creating a boogeyman and then unleashing forces on that boogeyman." Then they deny any responsibility.

Many media reports said the Club Q attacker's [motives were unknown](#). But Insider found that the suspect in the shooting often deployed a common anti-gay slur and was steeped in extremist culture. A friend said the suspect ran an extremist website, which Insider reviewed; it was populated with racist and homophobic memes calling for violence.

Experts call the killings that result from participation in online extremism stochastic, or "scripted," violence, because perpetrators are acting in response to demonizing rhetoric rather than to the command structure of a radical armed group or extremist cell.

"The shooting was a tragedy, but it strengthened their enemy," Erin, a local transgender woman, told Insider. "We still want to come together — come together despite adversity."