

In states with laws targeting LGBTQ issues, school hate crimes quadrupled

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School hate crimes targeting LGBTQ+ people have sharply risen in recent years, climbing fastest in states that have passed laws restricting LGBTQ student rights and education, a Washington Post analysis of FBI data finds.

In states with restrictive laws, the number of hate crimes on K-12 campuses has more than quadrupled since the onset of a divisive culture war that has often centered on the rights of LGBTQ+ youth.

At the same time, calls to LGBTQ+ youth crisis hotlines have exploded, with some advocates drawing a connection between the spike in bullying and hate crimes, and the political climate.

LGBTQ+ students have long dealt with bullying and harassment at school, but some students are feeling particularly vulnerable due to the wave of legislation. They are also on edge following the death of Nex Benedict, a nonbinary teenager who died after a fight in their Oklahoma public school bathroom.

That's the case for Carden, a transgender 17-year-old. He argues that politicians' anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric has shaped the views of adults in the conservative Virginia county where he lives.

“Kids parrot these ideas in their head, it’s like, ‘Oh, my parents think ...,’” said Carden, whose parents asked that his last name be withheld for fear of further bullying. “Then it translates to being mean to other people their age.”

Twice this fall, a group of freshmen boys at Carden’s school harassed him for his gender identity — once calling him “queer” in a nasty tone, he said. The second time, after telling him a Pride flag he had tucked into his backpack was “pitiful,” one of the boys suggested Carden should “just go die already.”

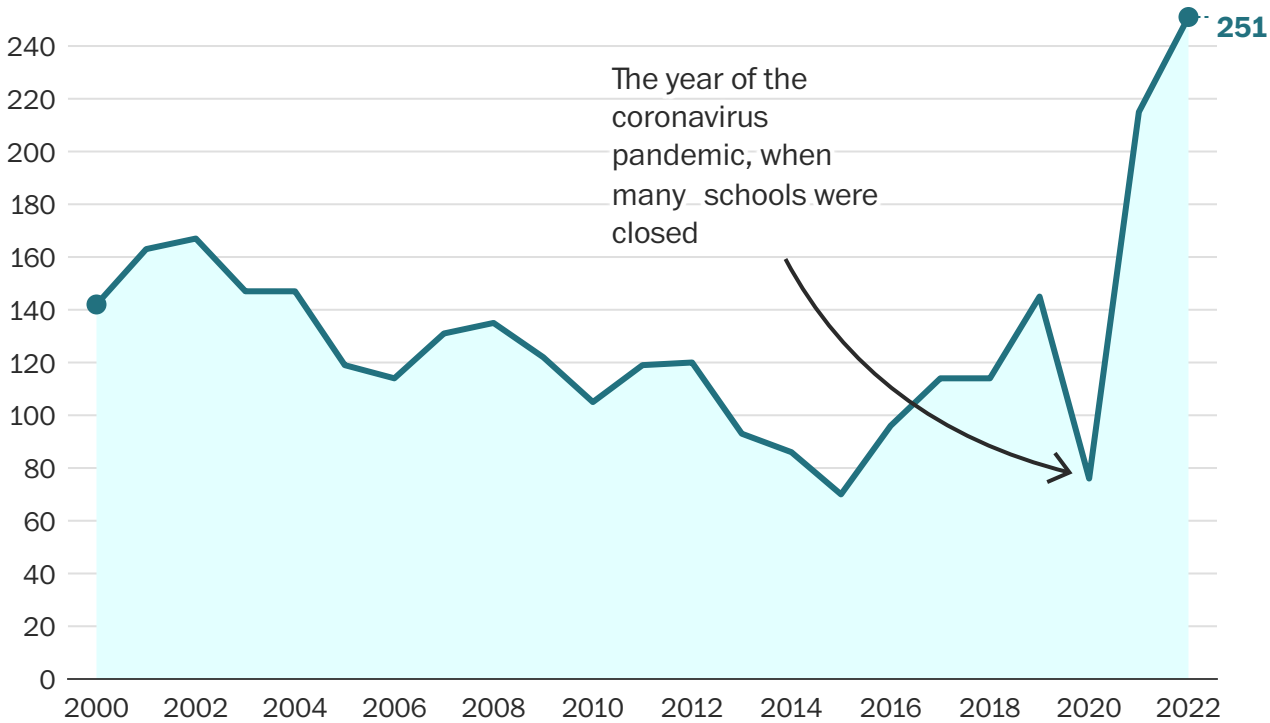
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Since his election in 2021, Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin (R) has encouraged schools to require that students use facilities matching their biological sex and has signed a law requiring schools to alert parents of “sexually explicit” lessons, alarming LGBTQ+ advocacy groups who predicted it would be used to limit education on sexual orientation and gender identity. Other GOP governors have advanced similar policies through executive action and legislation.

The Post analysis found that the number of anti-LGBTQ+ school hate crimes serious enough to be reported to local police more than doubled nationwide between 2015-2019 and 2021-2022. The rise is steeper in the 28 states that have passed laws curbing the rights of transgender students at school and restricting how teachers can talk about issues of gender and sexuality.

In more-liberal states that have not enacted restrictive school LGBTQ+ laws, The Post found that the rise in FBI hate crimes was lower — though the absolute number of crimes was higher. Analysts said that may be because people in those states are more likely to report incidents.

Number of anti-LGBTQ school hate crimes reported to FBI



The data include anti-LGBTQ hate crimes on both K-12 and college campuses.

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation

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Advocacy groups have also seen a rising number of young people in distress.

Calls have spiked to the Trevor Project, which provides support to LGBTQ+ youth aimed at suicide prevention and crisis intervention. In the fiscal year ending in July 2022, the group fielded about 230,000 crisis contacts, including phone calls, texts and online chats. The following year, it was more than 500,000.

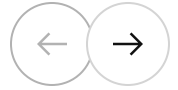
Similarly, the [Rainbow Youth Project](#), a nonprofit that offers crisis response and counseling to at-risk LGBTQ+ youth, saw calls to its hotline rise from an average of about 1,000 per month in 2022 to just over 1,400 per month last year. The top reason cited by callers in 2023 was anti-LGBTQ+ “political rhetoric,” such as debate over laws and policies limiting rights at school.

Young people will say, “`My government hates me,’ ‘My school hates me,’ `They don’t want me to exist,’” said Lance Preston, the group’s founder and executive director. “That ... is absolutely unacceptable. That is shocking.”

How The Post reported on anti-LGBTQ hate at school

An analysis by The Washington Post of federal data shows a sharp rise in reported school hate crimes targeting LGBTQ people over the past two years. We also interviewed students and families nationwide who experienced anti-LGBTQ

bullying at school. (If you have a story of anti-LGBTQ school bullying to share, please let us know [here](#).)



In the weeks after Nex's death, the Rainbow Youth Project saw a crush of calls from Oklahoma, rising from 321 in January to nearly 1,100 in February, though the surge may have been driven at least in part by news coverage of the group's work.

Nex, who used they/them pronouns, died on Feb. 8, a day after [a confrontation](#) in the bathroom of their school in a Tulsa suburb. School officials sent the students home, but Nex's grandmother took Nex to the hospital later that day and called police.

In a statement to an officer, Nex and their grandmother said three girls had been bullying Nex and a friend because of how they dress. In the bathroom that day, these girls were making comments Nex found offensive, and Nex poured water on them. Then "all three of them came at me," Nex said. A fight ensued.

Nex was discharged from the hospital but rushed back the next day, when they died. A final autopsy report has not been released, and police are still investigating. But the case has drawn national attention as LGBTQ+ advocates argue that Nex was bullied and that their death is a hate crime related to their gender identity. The Office for Civil Rights at the Department of Education this month [opened an investigation](#) into the school's actions.

Since 2020, Oklahoma has adopted several laws restricting transgender rights. The state prohibits students from using bathrooms that do not align with the sex assigned at their birth and bars minors from receiving transition-related care. The legislature is considering [additional measures](#) this year, [including a ban](#) on changing one's gender on birth certificates and requiring that schools teach that "a person's sex is an immutable biological trait" that cannot be changed.

Many of these bills have been championed by the state's schools superintendent, Ryan Walters, who said in an interview that Nex's death was a heartbreaking tragedy, but that those who are connecting it to bullying or gender identity are pushing a "left-wing agenda" and "politicizing the death of a student."

Walters said he will continue to push for legislation to counter what he called "radical gender theory," which he defines as the notion that one's gender can differ from biological sex.

"There's two genders. That's the way God created us," Walters said. Some young people are confused, he said, but, "your job as an adult is to help kids, not lie to them."

He added that he opposes bullying but wholly rejects the idea that the political environment is encouraging it.

"Because you share a belief or an opinion does not mean it's connected to violence," he said.

Subjects broached in calls to Rainbow Youth Project crisis line

2023

Anti-LGBTQ Laws, Rhetoric			
	Bullying		5
	Religious/Church Groups		47.5
	Moms for Liberty		46.7
	Libs of Tik Tok	8.3	
	Gays Against Groomers	5.4	
	Evictions	0.8	

The data for 2022 stretches from March 31, 2022 — the date the Rainbow Youth Project launched its crisis hotline — to the Some callers broached multiple subjects.

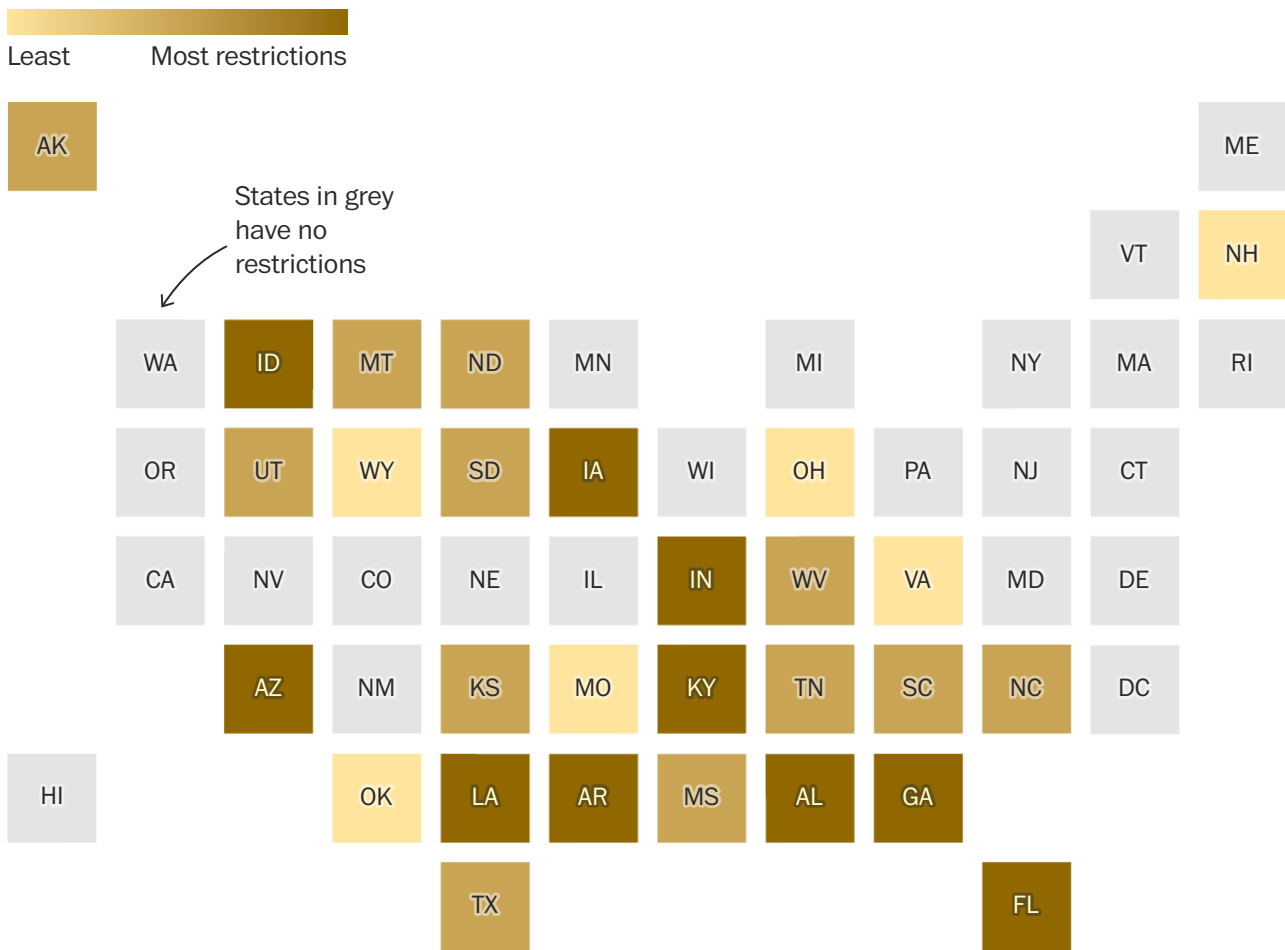
Hate crimes on the rise

The FBI data show serious incidents against LGBTQ+ people are on the rise, particularly in the more than two dozen states that have passed laws targeting LGBTQ+ students or education. Some of these laws, like those enacted in Oklahoma, bar students from competing on sports teams or using school bathrooms that do not conform with their sex assigned at birth. Others circumscribe what teachers can teach about gender identity or sexual orientation or bar instruction on these subjects entirely.

Overall, there were an average of 108 anti-LGBTQ+ hate crimes at schools reported to the FBI per year from 2015 to 2019 on both college and K-12 campuses. In 2021 and 2022, the most recent for which data were available, the average more than doubled to 232. (The number of reported hate crimes overall dropped in 2020, when the covid-19 pandemic shut down many school campuses, forcing learning online.)

The rise was even steeper in states that have enacted laws or policies which restrict LGBTQ+ students' education or rights at school — tripling from an average of about 28 per year from 2015-2019 to an average of about 90 per year in 2021-22. There was also an upsurge in the states without these laws, from about 79 reported hate crimes per year to 140.

State-by-state restrictions on LGBTQ education, trans students' access to school facilities



Source: [The Movement Advancement Project](#); [Trans Legislation Tracker](#); [Washington Post analysis of state legislative databases](#)

HANNAH DORMIDO / THE NEW YORK TIMES

When the data is limited to K-12 campuses, the increase is even more marked. In states that have enacted restrictive laws, there were more than four times the number of anti-LGBTQ+ hate crimes on average, per year, in 2021-22 compared with the years 2015-2019 across elementary, middle and high schools.

“Policy sets the tone for real-world experiences [and] discriminatory policy just creates a hostile environment,” said Amy McGehee, a doctoral student at Oklahoma State University who researches LGBTQ health and well-being.

FBI data indicate the most common crimes associated with reported hate crimes at schools include simple assault, intimidation and vandalism.

McGehee added that LGBTQ students were reporting feeling unsafe on both college and K-12 campuses even before states began passing waves of policies restricting their rights at school. A sweeping [Washington Post-KFF poll](#) last year found that school is among the greatest stressors for transgender children in particular. Forty-five percent of trans adults said they felt generally unsafe at school as a child or teenager, compared to 10 percent of cisgender adults.

The Post's analysis of FBI data found that the per capita hate crime rates on K-12 and college campuses were higher in the more liberal states that have not enacted laws limiting transgender rights. Although the finding may seem counterintuitive, it actually makes sense, said Stephen Russell, a University of Texas at Austin professor who studies LGBTQ youth. He said LGBTQ youth and families living in those 22 states were probably more likely to report violence and harassment in the first place.

Many of these states have adopted laws and school policies specifically prohibiting bullying of or discrimination against LGBTQ students, he said. In some places, he said, that includes required annual notifications alerting students and parents to their rights and spelling out how they can and should report bad behavior.

Average yearly anti-LGBTQ hate crimes on K-12 campuses

	2015-2019	2021-2022	% INCREASE
States without laws	42	86	104.5%
States with restrictive sports, curriculum, facilities laws	13	61	
All states	55	147	166.4%

The Post left out the year 2020 because many schools remained closed that year due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation

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“It creates a context where they see themselves, they stand up for themselves, they believe there is a place for them in their schools,” Russell said of LGBTQ children.

In addition, it's possible more kids are public about their identities in more liberal states, creating more targets for bullies, said Lanae Erickson, a senior vice president at Third Way, a centrist Democratic think tank, who studies social policy and politics.

Both Erickson and Russell were unsurprised to learn that the number of hate crimes had risen faster in states with conservative laws.

“The data you have is the thing I've been worrying about, and here it is,” said Russell.

‘They don't want us to exist’

The upsurge in restrictive laws and in school bullying has left some LGBTQ+ students feeling under attack.

Last year, classmates regularly harassed a transgender teenager in Mississippi for his short hair and for wearing boy's clothing and chest binders, his mother said in an interview. Throughout that year, her son often woke up in the middle of the night vomiting due to stress. He wound up missing about three weeks of school due to bullying-induced breakdowns, recalled the mother, who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation from family members who do not support her son's gender identity.

She said her son has been suicidal at times, at one point keeping a journal in which he detailed plans to kill himself. She said he also cut himself. "He feels shamed," she said. "It's hard for him to find friends."

In 2021, Mississippi enacted a law barring transgender students from playing on sports teams that match their gender identity. Partly citing that state policy, the mother said she feels like everything is just getting worse.

"I'm really worried that my child is getting irreparable mental damage from all of this," she said. "I also just get worried that, what if he gets suicidal again? I don't want to lose my son."

Studies show that LGBTQ+ youth are at particular risk for bullying and mental health problems. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's 2021 Youth Risk Behavior survey, for instance, found that more than 1 in 3 gay, lesbian and bisexual students were bullied either on school property or online in the previous year. For about 1 in 4 the bullying was at school. Among straight students, those rates were about half as high.

When Max Ibarra was a sophomore in high school in the Chino Valley, Calif., east of Los Angeles, they endured what Max thinks of as everyday bullying from other students.

Max, who identifies as trans and nonbinary, recalled hearing snickering behind their back. In one class, they said, another student regularly threw erasers and wads of paper thrown at them in class. In the hallway once, someone purposefully stuck out a shoulder to shove Max into the brick wall.

But what really bothers Max, now 17, is what the Chino Valley Unified School District school board did. In July 2023, the board approved a policy requiring the school to notify parents if a student asked to use a name that differed from official records, or if they asked to use pronouns or school facilities that do not align with sex listed on the student's birth certificate.

At the school board meeting where the policy was approved, 4-1, Max shouted objections into the microphone during the public comment period. They said that many trans students feel safe at school but not at home, and that the policy "shoves them in the closet."

“I am tired of the idea that all parents love and support their children unconditionally. That is not true,” they yelled into the microphone. “There are evil people in this world, and some of them have children. Shocking, I know! Some prefer a dead child to a trans child.”

A spokesperson for the district declined to respond directly to Max’s assertions but said the schools have systems in place to report and respond to bullying and to address the needs of LGBTQ+ students. The district, she said, is “committed to upholding an educational setting that encourages, emboldens, and motivates scholars to become the global citizens they are meant to be.”

The policy was later put on hold by a court, and Thursday, the school board rolled back most of it. Still, Max said in an interview that the tone set by the school board remains.

“This culture of hostility and division has been festering, especially for the last three years, and its ramped up more and more each year,” Max said. “The school board has made it very clear we’re not welcome here. It’s very clear they don’t want us to exist.”