

# 8

## First Do No Harm

### Tips for Addressing Violence Against Transgender and Gender Non-Binary People



PHOTO BY KERRI CECIL

**Loree Cook-Daniels**  
*Policy and Program Director*

**michael munson**  
*Executive Director*

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# Thank you

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**I**F ONE WERE SO BOLD AS TO SUM UP THE PRIMARY GOAL OF a whole group of people, in the case of transgender<sup>1</sup> and gender non-binary people it would likely be something like this:

**“See, acknowledge, and respect me as I truly am.”**

Achieving this goal is a lifetime challenge, one that is all too frequently met with violence. That reality makes talking about violence against transgender and gender non-binary people a multifaceted minefield, with plenty of potential for doing more damage than good.

To support those who have stepped up to try to address the epidemic of violence<sup>2</sup> against trans and gender non-binary people — victim service providers, anti-violence advocates, crime victim policy-makers, LGBTQ organizations, concerned media, therapists and mental health providers, campus communities and organizations, and those within the trans community who are working to reduce violence and harm — FORGE has prepared this guidance about how to communicate about trauma and violence against trans people in ways that promote healing and avoid causing more pain and revictimization.

**A few words about language...**

1 Throughout this document, we will use fluid language of “trans,” “transgender,” and “gender non-binary.” We honor and recognize the complexity and multiplicity of gender identities. We use these words in their broadest meanings, inclusive of those whose identities lie outside of these often limiting terms.

2 This paper uses a variety of terms to refer to violence and those who experience it (such as “victim” and “survivor”). FORGE believes that the best term to use in any given situation is the one that matches how the individual being spoken of or to describes their experience. Since this paper addresses victim/survivors in general, we have used a variety of terms. Please feel free to substitute terms that feel more comfortable to you.

## 1

# Address Multiple Forms of Violence

**ERASURE IS ONE OF THE BIGGEST THEMES** in many trans people's lives: those around them refuse (or refused) to see and acknowledge them, their identities, and their experiences. Due to these experiences of erasure, trans people may be particularly sensitive to whether or not their experiences are going to be heard and respected.

At the end of 2015, awareness of murders of transwomen of color was at an all-time high. For many both within and outside of the trans community, "violence" has become synonymous with death and with transwomen of color. While it is vital to stop the murders of transwomen, those murders are but a very small percentage of all the violence trans people — of all gender vectors and races — are experiencing.

The chart on the next page is one estimate of the number of American transgender people whose lives have been impacted by the common types of violent crimes: childhood sexual abuse, adult sexual assault, dating violence, domestic violence, stalking, hate violence, and other forms of violence not in the other categories.

The estimated prevalence rates are derived from a 2011 FORGE study (IRB approved by the Morehouse School of Medicine, n=1005);<sup>i</sup> many studies have found even higher prevalence rates for each of these types of victimization. The chart calculates how many transgender victims are in the U.S. (based on a total U.S. population of 300,000,000) using both a relatively high estimate of the transgender population (1%, derived from Conway)<sup>ii</sup> and a low estimate (.03%, from the Williams Institute).<sup>iii</sup>

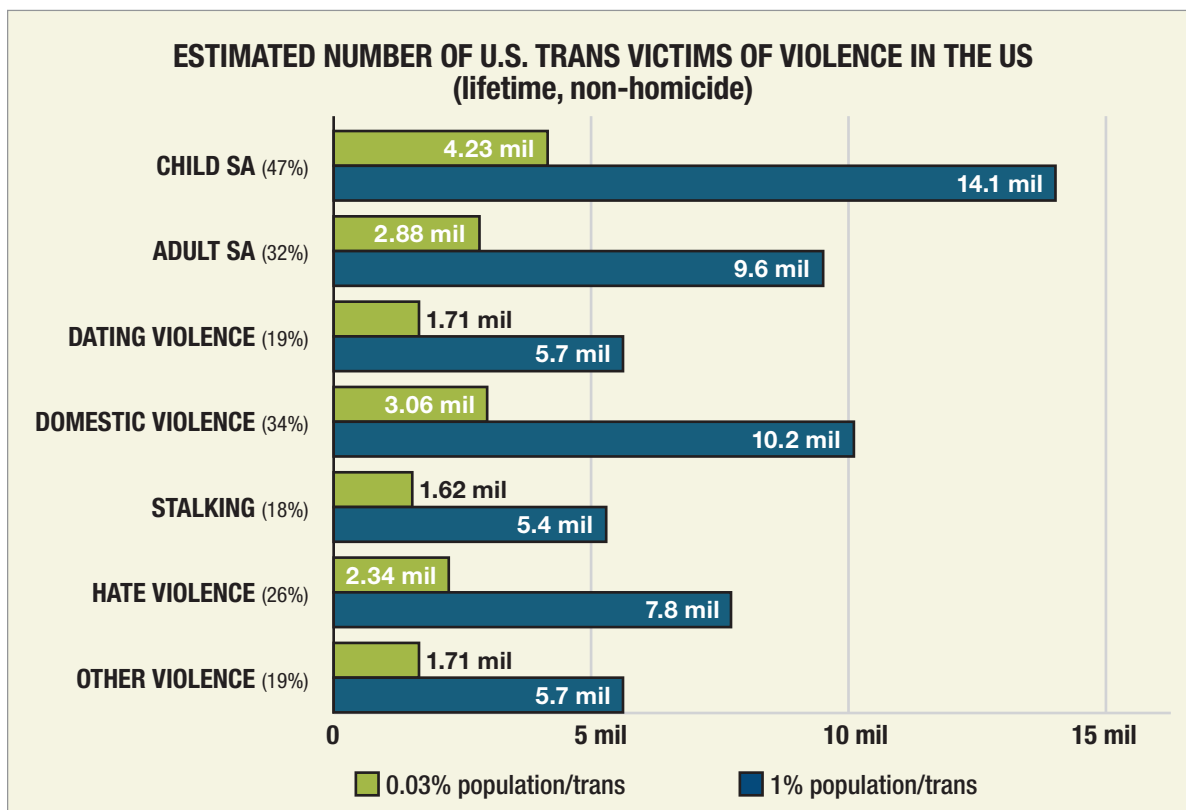
In addition to the murders representing only a very small segment of the transgender violence problem, some of the ways the murders are being focused on have led both directly and indirectly to people feeling unable to disclose or talk about the trauma of other types of victimization. [Note: This silencing has even shifted how loved ones, family members and friends — as well as professionals, organizations, and the media —

talk about the murders, causing them to sometimes exclude information that indicates intimate partner or dating violence was a central force behind many murders.]

This feeling of being silenced about other types of victimization seems to be particularly acute for trans-masculine individuals:

**“Trans men want to be seen. Trans folks are already so immensely oppressed, and suicide rates indicate that this oppression does touch trans men too. There is nothing more dangerous in our own communities than to feel invisible.”<sup>iv</sup>**

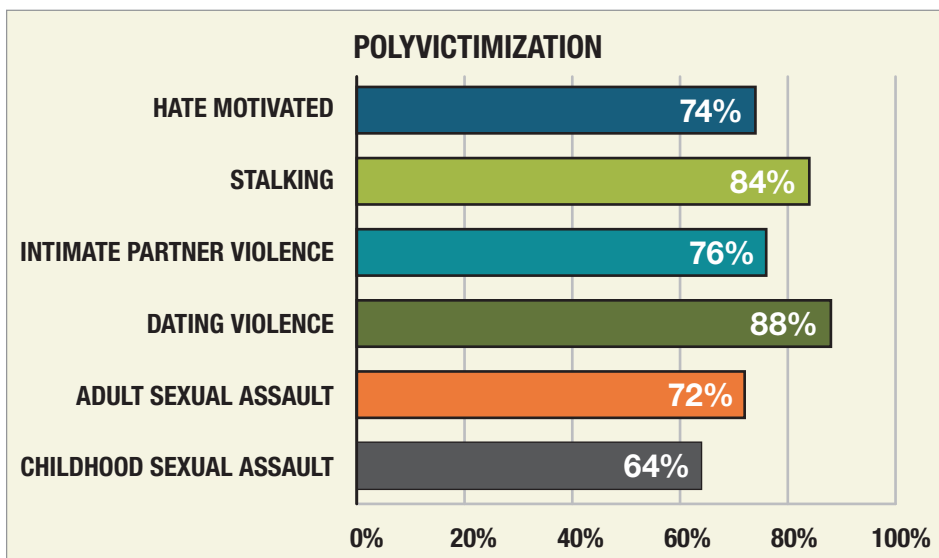
This does not mean that it is problematic to concentrate on just one type of violence or one sub-segment of the trans/gender non-binary population; specialization can deepen expertise and effectiveness. It does mean that care needs to be taken to not imply that murder is the only form of violence trans people are trying to survive, or that only one segment of the trans population is experiencing violence. The message needs to include the idea that *all victims* deserve care and resources.



For example, hate violence against transgender and gender non-binary people is clearly a terrible problem. Not only does it sometimes result in fatalities, but its existence can lead to people being afraid to leave their homes, distort how people live their lives, and cause both emotional and physical scars that can last a lifetime.

Other types of violence also cause these pervasive and serious effects and damage to mind, body and spirit. Data about trans people is still limited, but multiple sources

indicate that more than half of transgender people have experienced sexual violence,<sup>v vi vii</sup> and another third (at least) have experienced intimate partner violence,<sup>viii ix x</sup> to name just two more of the most common types of violence transgender Americans live with.<sup>3</sup> All types of violence can and often do have long-lasting negative effects on survivors' lives.



The ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences) Study, done with members of the general public, has firmly established that early experiences of violence lead to not just mental health but also physical health problems and even premature death decades later.<sup>xi</sup>

When conversations focus solely on one type of violence, survivors of one (or many) of the other types sometimes feel like there is no room for them to speak about what happened to them. Being able to talk about or acknowledge that violence happened is a

prerequisite to accessing help and moving towards healing. Hearing other people's stories is also a common way in which survivors who have been denying or suppressing their own experiences are finally able to acknowledge what happened to them. In 2015, at a time when social media within the trans community was focused almost solely on murders of transwomen, FORGE published an article in the *Advocate* about other types of violence trans people experience.<sup>xii</sup> Several commenters were thrilled. One said:

**“Oh my God. You have no idea what this piece means to me as a trans man and a survivor of childhood and adult violence. For way too long we have been silenced because things aren't “as bad” for us. Well, they are, and it's splitting hairs anyway. The transgender community needs to come together and help to protect and make lives better for all of its members.”<sup>xiii</sup>**

It is also critical to remember that the majority of transgender victims of violence have experienced *multiple* types of violence. In its 2011 survey “Transgender Individuals' Knowledge of and Willingness to Use Sexual Assault Programs” with 1,005 respondents, FORGE found that the vast majority of those who had experienced one type of violence had also experienced one or more other types (also known as polyvictimization).<sup>xiv</sup> For example, 74% of those who had experienced hate violence had *also* experienced stalking, intimate partner violence, dating violence, or sexual assault as an adult or a child.

In summary, even when focusing on responding to only one type of violence, acknowledging other types of violence and including resources for those addressing other types of violence is important so that all trans victims/survivors feel acknowledged and have a place to start if they want to get help.

<sup>3</sup> Transgender youth are often bullied in school, stalked as young people and adults, and experience many other forms of harassment, and physical and emotional victimization throughout the age span.



PHOTO BY KERRI CECIL

# 2

## Acknowledge That Violence Affects All Parts of The Trans Community

**ALTHOUGH SOME PEOPLE ARGUE** that certain segments of the trans community are far more impacted by violence than other segments, the best available data shows that no “type” of trans person is immune to violence. For example, in 2011, FORGE conducted a national, IRB-approved study (n= 1,005) that asked in just one demographics question how many respondents had ever experienced childhood sexual abuse (child SA), adult sexual assault (adult SA), dating violence, domestic violence (DV), stalking or hate-motivated violence. Both trans-masculine and trans-feminine persons reported significant levels of each type of violence, ranging from a high of 50% of the trans-masculine respondents experiencing sexual abuse to a “low” of 6% of the trans-feminine respondents experiencing dating violence.

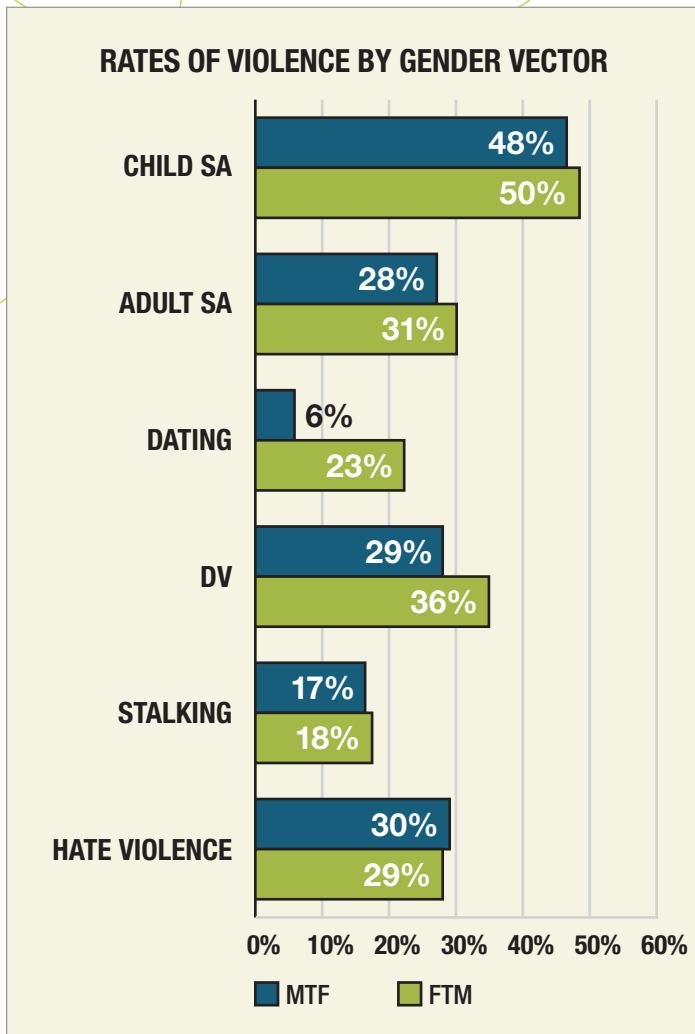
These prevalence rates are in line with many other studies.<sup>xv</sup> Although researchers often emphasize the higher rates of some sub-populations, the “lower” rates can be substantial. For example, the 2011 *National Transgender Discrimination Study* found that American Indian and Latinx transgender students were more likely to leave school due to harassment than other races of trans kids (28% for these two racial groups, compared to 15% of the overall sample), but 10% of even the “least affected” group — in this case, Asian trans students — were forced out. Neither the higher nor the lower rates are acceptable!<sup>xvi</sup>

.....

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Because of the current high visibility of murders of transwomen and because there is a widespread (albeit unsupported) belief within the U.S. that women are more often victimized than are men,<sup>4</sup> transmen often feel silenced. Here's how one survivor put it:



**“There is a dangerous invisibility that comes with being a trans man that people are not speaking about: Trans men are not considered plausible ‘victims’ once they transition to male. I find the assumption that our gender instantly makes us invulnerable or always protects us from violence when others learn of our trans status to be violent in and of itself.**

**Why? Because it makes me feel as if I cannot speak openly about my pain, about my struggles, about the dangers I face in daily life. I feel that I cannot get media coverage that wouldn’t trivialize my struggles because of some apparent all-encompassing privilege that many people assume I and most trans men have gained. And I can say for sure that I’m not the only trans man to feel this way.”<sup>xvii</sup>**

Another trans-masculine person, addressing the same pressures to not discuss violence against transmen, added:

**“There’s been growing hostility towards trans men, too, based on the notion that trans men somehow ‘have it better.’ ”<sup>xviii</sup>**

Even more invisible are gender non-conforming and gender non-binary individuals; few studies on violence give these respondents their own category, making it difficult to say anything about their experiences or prevalence rates with specific forms of violence. They may therefore feel even more invisible and erased than many of the other sub-populations under the transgender umbrella.

<sup>4</sup> For example, men are more than 350 times as likely to be murdered in the U.S. as are women (in 2013, 9,523 men and 2,707 women were murdered) and are slightly more likely to experience violent crime (1.2% of U.S. men and 1.1% of U.S. women experienced “violent crime” in 2014). Murder data from FBI Uniform Crime Reports, “Crime in the U.S., 2013”, Expanded homicide data, table 1, retrieved from [https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s./2013/crime-in-the-u.s.-2013/offenses-known-to-law-enforcement/expanded-homicide/expanded\\_homicide\\_data\\_table\\_1\\_murder\\_victims\\_by\\_race\\_and\\_sex\\_2013.xls](https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s./2013/crime-in-the-u.s.-2013/offenses-known-to-law-enforcement/expanded-homicide/expanded_homicide_data_table_1_murder_victims_by_race_and_sex_2013.xls). Violent crime data from Truman, JT and Langton, L. “Criminal Victimization 2014,” (September 29, 2015), Bureau of Justice Statistics, retrieved from <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cv14.pdf>





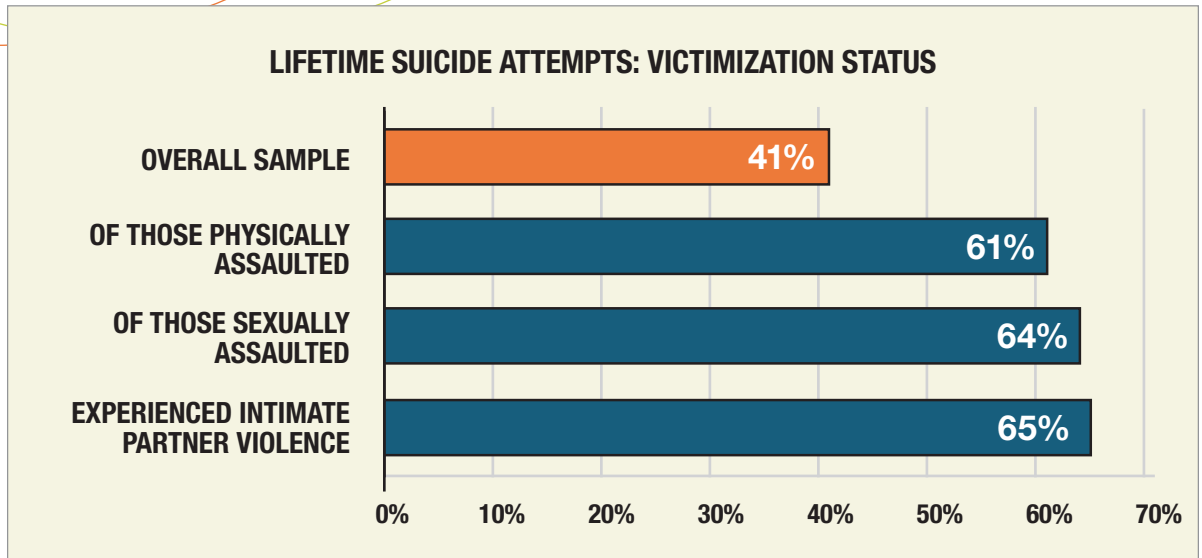
# Consider Trans Suicidality When Strategizing and Communicating

**SUICIDE IS NOT USUALLY PART OF THE VIOLENCE DISCUSSION, BUT IT SHOULD BE.** Violence and suicide are definitely related.

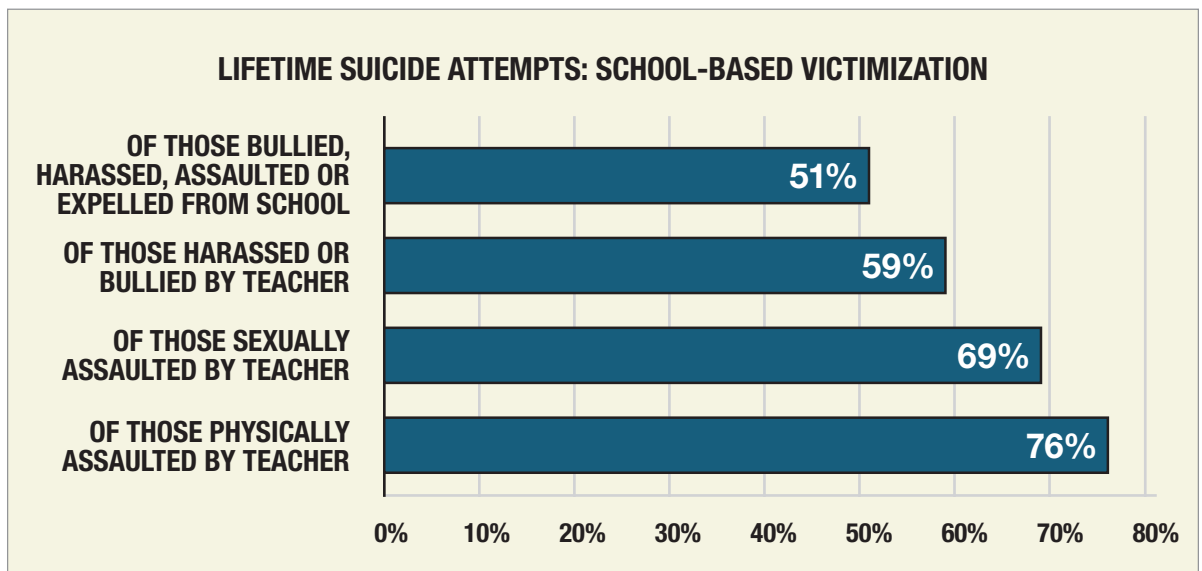
Just as there is no comprehensive national system for identifying murder victims who are transgender, there is no system for identifying suicides among transgender people. However, in the few places where the media is watching, the problem is frighteningly huge. For example: San Diego, CA (metro population of 1.4 million) saw four trans teen suicides between March and October, 2015.<sup>xix</sup> William Horlick High School in Racine, WI, with 2,000 students, had two trans teens kill themselves in 2014 and 2015.<sup>xx</sup> (That's in addition to at least six other publicly known adult trans suicides in Wisconsin in those two years.) In one of the largest surveys of transgender and gender non-conforming people (n=6450), the *National Transgender Discrimination Survey* discovered that 41%<sup>xxi</sup> of transgender respondents have attempted suicide (compared to 4.6% of the general U.S. population<sup>xxii</sup>). The suicide attempt rate increases for trans people who have also experienced physical violence, sexual assault, and family violence (a fact that is also true of survivors of these crimes who are not transgender).



The two charts below show how experiences of violence and/or school-based harassment or assault increased suicide attempts among respondents to the 2011 National Transgender Discrimination Study.



Particularly affected are trans people who experienced harassment or worse by teachers or other adults in their school:



In September 2010, author Dan Savage created the It Gets Better Project in response to a substantially high number of LGBTQ youth who were ending their own lives after being bullied in school. This popular campaign helped raise attention to the connection between violence and suicidal feelings and actions.

<http://www.itgetsbetter.org>

These facts need to be kept in mind as responses to violence against trans people are crafted: it is critical to not contribute to trans victims feeling hopeless, helpless, and silenced because those feelings may in turn lead to suicidal feelings. In the recent *Advocate* series of articles on violence against trans masculine individuals — Boys Do Cry — many spoke of the how victimization, suicide, and silencing are related for them. One commentator explained:

**“Trans and LGBT communities set a dangerous precedent when we dismiss or hush trans male survivors. New victims observe and learn that they cannot speak openly about their experiences. I know from trans men who have confided in me that this is at times a situation that has led to suicide attempts. And I know because I’ve been there myself.**

**I know of trans men who have been raped. I know of trans men who have been physically attacked and beaten up by groups of heterosexual, cisgender dudes. I know trans men who have been beaten by their fathers because they are trans, then thrown onto the streets to become homeless.**

**And the aftermath of their stories all had one detail in common: The men did not feel free to speak openly of their experiences in trans or LGBT spaces.**


**Why? Because these men felt that the only narrative being told about them was that they were always “privileged” and protected because they were male. They felt that in such a context, their true experiences of facing transphobic violence would not be taken seriously, perhaps even dismissed as mere complaining or a tactic to take attention away from the undeniably important topic of violence against trans women.**

**I know that feeling well. At one point I reached a place where I felt so invisible to my community — so invisible as a complex human — that I contemplated just not living anymore.”<sup>xxiii</sup>**



PHOTO BY KERRI CECIL

## 4



# Promote Hope for the Future

**IT CERTAINLY IS NOT THE SAME AS A MURDER**, but publicizing a low “life expectancy” rate for transwomen of color is another way to steal away their future, a “crime” that has been committed repeatedly by trans, LGBTQ, and mainstream press.<sup>xxiv</sup> Think about the people you know or have heard of who have been diagnosed with a fatal illness and given a short time to live: how many of them have enrolled in college, undertaken lengthy training for a new occupation, had a new child, or tried to establish a new non-profit? A few do, certainly, but many more focus on their bucket list, arrange for their good-byes, or simply give up entirely, essentially relinquishing whatever time they have left to depression and regrets. When we tell transwomen of color they cannot expect to live very long, we rob them of hope. We rob them of any motivation to invest in themselves, their relationships, and their communities. We rob them, in short, of their lives even while they are still living.<sup>5</sup>

One trans woman of color was trying to come to grips with an estimated lifespan figure more than ten years shorter than the one that has been published most often.<sup>6</sup> Faced with the report of yet another attack on another trans woman, she wrote:

<sup>5</sup> This statement in no way negates the need to systemically work to improve and increase the life expectancy of trans people through working to end transphobia, racism, poverty, pervasive violence, and health and healthcare inequities, and more.

<sup>6</sup> We are not repeating any of the (incorrect) estimated lifetime figures that are circulating, to avoid even inadvertent reinforcement.

**These days, I look at the latest reports of stabbed, shot, beaten trans women, search myself for tears, and I cannot find a thing. I want to mourn and rage. I want to honor all of our sisters — the hundreds each year who are ripped, namelessly and without fanfare, from this life — who are taken so young before their time. But the grief and anger — even empathy — do not come. I don't feel anything but numbness and fatigue, and somewhere far below that, fear.<sup>xxv</sup>**

The terrible irony of the life expectancy “fact” is that it is based on an impossibility. The only ways to determine a given population’s life expectancy are to: examine decades or more of death certificates or census data containing the information being studied, or follow a specific set of individuals for around 100 years and record every single death. There is not and never has been a census of transgender people. Our death certificates do not mark us as transgender. There has been no 100-year-long study of a representative group of trans people. So where are the estimated lifespan figures coming from?

FORGE tracked the most commonly-cited figure back to what was most likely the 2014 Philadelphia Transgender Health Conference, where a workshop presenter gave the figure and explained she had calculated it by averaging the age of death for all of those listed on the Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDOR) website. This means the figure is actually the average age of those trans people who were both murdered and came to the attention of someone who added them to the TDOR list. Interestingly, this average is very close to the average age of everyone who is murdered in the U.S., according to the U.S. Department of Justice statistics.<sup>xxvi</sup>

*But not everyone is murdered.*

Despite how many there may appear to be, only a tiny, tiny fraction of transpeople are killed by other people. Most of us, transwomen of color included, live average lifespans and die of the most common U.S. killers — heart disease, cancer, chronic lower respiratory disease, and unintentional injuries (accidents).<sup>xxvii</sup>

Please don't add to fear and hopelessness by spreading inaccurate and profoundly disempowering data.

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PHOTO BY DUSTI CUNNINGHAM



# Be Careful About Language

**AS ADDRESSED ABOVE, TRANS-MASCULINE AND GENDER NON-BINARY SURVIVORS OF VIOLENCE ARE CURRENTLY PARTICULARLY APT TO FEEL SILENCED AND ERASED** when the focus is only on fatal violence. Also problematic are some of the larger umbrella terms such as “violence against women” and “gender-based violence.” “Violence against women” tends to tell trans-masculine and gender non-binary survivors that they are unwelcome at services and/or that what happened to them is somehow less significant or harmful than what happens to women. Although some service providers feel that “gender-based violence” is less female-focused, it can also be a barrier. When FORGE asked trans survivors of sexual violence if they thought they had been targeted because of their gender identity, only 42% said yes.<sup>xxviii</sup> The rest knew they had been targeted for another reason (for example, the perpetrator abused all the children in the family, or the attacker didn’t realize the victim was transgender until her clothes were torn), or they were unsure what motivated their perpetrator. Having a gender-related label placed on what happened to them when they do not feel that that label fits may therefore scare off trans-feminine, trans-masculine, and gender non-binary survivors alike, particularly if they feel unable or unwilling to confront service providers’ inaccurate assumptions about their experience.

A more subtle problem is created when there is an over-reliance in materials or presentations on concepts like “oppression” and “privilege.” In some parts of the trans community there are painful rifts based on sex and/or race, including arguments over whether “privilege” or “oppression” requires prioritizing some survivors’ needs and voices over others. Use of these terms by service providers and advocates may therefore lead some trans survivors to feel that they will be discounted or even mistreated if they ask for services, thereby again constructing a barrier to help. We urge those who address violence against transgender people to be inclusive of all survivors by using open-ended language that suggests to victims that their own particular story of victimization is valid and important whether that story “fits” current violence causation theories or not, and whether the survivor “fits” certain demographics or not.





PHOTO BY LEIGH HOUGHTALING



# Encourage People to Connect

**ONE TRANS WOMAN OF COLOR, WRITING ABOUT HOW THE MURDERS ARE IMPACTING HER LIFE**, approvingly quoted and then elaborated upon what sociologist Kai Erickson said:

**“Collective trauma is ‘a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together [...] so that “I” continue to exist, though damaged, and “you” continue to exist, though distant and hard to relate to. But “we” no longer exist as linked cells in a communal body.’**

**Simply put, if a group of people is traumatized – terrorized – enough, they will cease to feel connected to one another. This disconnection is a defensive response, an attempt to shut off the pain of being associated with the group. As a result, we become withdrawn, isolated inside the story that we are alone and without hope.”** <sup>xxix</sup>

Because trauma and terror break the bonds between people, addressing violence effectively requires paying careful attention to re-building caring interpersonal links. This is not necessarily a high-intensity project. A trans leader based in a city that has been particularly hard-hit by anti-trans violence responded to yet another crime by widely publicizing on social media that he would be camped out at a particular coffee house at a particular time that night, available to anyone who wanted to come and talk or just sit silently with someone else who understood. Those who saw his offer did not have to take him up on it to feel the sense of connection and hope brought by knowing that someone cared enough to make himself available to others who were grieving and frightened.



PHOTO BY LEIGH HOUGHTALING

# Encourage Taking Action

**SOME OF THE HALLMARKS OF BEING VICTIMIZED** include feeling helpless, hopeless, and unconnected from caring people. If we are not careful, we run the risk of making these feelings worse when we focus solely on reporting more victimization. A seemingly endless repetition of names of victims (sometimes including details of how they died), as is currently taking place on social media and by organizations issuing news releases whenever a new murder of a transgender person is reported, can feel devastating. Repeated exposure to traumatic events, even the simple repeated listing of victims' names, can be traumatizing and create paralyzing fear within individuals and entire communities.

Channyn Lynn Parker, intake coordinator at Chicago House's Trans Life Center, said in March 2015, when the year's tally of murders was still in the single digits, that:

**A lot of transwomen have gone back to presenting as male, as a form of protection. And that within itself is causing mental health concerns, a lot of depression, some suicide ideation — things like that.**<sup>xxx</sup>

The sad irony is that there were no Chicago murders of transwomen in 2014, but there *were* 420 murders of Black and Hispanic males in Chicago that year; it's entirely possible that those transwomen of color put themselves at *more* risk of being murdered by being perceived in public as a man of color.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Debilitating hopelessness and helplessness are nearly inevitable when people are repeatedly told that because of who they are, they are at all times subject to being murdered. To ensure that trans readers or viewers — who likely are violence survivors themselves — are not simply revictimized by every effort to report the news or address the problem, it is critical to balance discussions of victimization with assurances that there are things people can do to address the problem, honor those who have been lost, and improve their own safety.





# Provide Hope and Resources

6

**THERE HAS NEVER BEEN** a stigmatized minority in U.S. history that has achieved as many legal advances and experienced as much improvement in public attitudes as quickly as the transgender community has. In the face of seemingly endless reminders that violence against us still exists, this remarkable achievement is often forgotten. It is also true that nearly all of us have been traumatized and still bear emotional and physical scars as a result of what we have lived through. Balancing the resulting imperatives — to heal ourselves and each other, prevent more death and injury, begin to enjoy the benefits of what we have earned, and continue to make communal progress — requires sensitivity and care. [See the back page for how you can connect with FORGE and how we can support you.]

## In Conclusion

Preventing violence, helping heal those it has already hurt, and supporting cultural progress and individual thriving in an imperfect, prejudiced, and violent society requires careful thought and great sensitivity. But balancing all those needs is not only possible, it is required. We can do it all.

**Examples of materials FORGE has issued that provide trans-specific self-care, safety tips, and action possibilities include these:**

- **Ending Trans Domestic Violence Murders:**  
<http://forge-forward.org/wp-content/docs/2015-03-Ending-Trans-Domestic-Violence-Murders.pdf>
- **30 Days of Action to Reduce Violence Against Transgender and Gender Non-Binary People:**  
<http://forge-forward.org/anti-violence/30-days-of-action>
- **Safe Dating Tips:** <http://forge-forward.org/wp-content/docs/Safe-Dating-Tips-FINAL.pdf>
- **Safety Planning Tool:** <http://forge-forward.org/wp-content/docs/safety-planning-tool.pdf>
- **We Are All Responsible: 101 Things You Can Do:**  
<http://forge-forward.org/wp-content/docs/we-are-all-responsible1.pdf>
- **Keeping Yourself Safe: Anti-Trans Violence Awareness and Protection:**  
<http://forge-forward.org/wp-content/docs/KeepingYourselfSafe.pdf>

# Citations



PHOTO BY LEIGH HOUGHTALING

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Getting transgender people and victim service providers connected to FORGE is one way of providing ongoing hope and notice of new resources as they are developed. FORGE is a two-decade-old national transgender organization headquartered in Milwaukee that is funded by the Office on Violence Against Women to provide support and resources to transgender survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence, and stalking. We also provide training and technical assistance nationwide to service providers who address these four crimes. We actively update and engage with survivors and service providers on the following platforms:

Resources for survivors currently include two self-help guides (more are in press):

■ **A Self Help Guide to Healing and Understanding:**

[www.forge-forward.org/sv-selfhelp-guide](http://www.forge-forward.org/sv-selfhelp-guide)

■ **Let's Talk About It! A Transgender Survivor's Guide to Accessing Therapy:**

[www.forge-forward.org/therapy-guide](http://www.forge-forward.org/therapy-guide)

Training and technical assistance that service providers can access includes:

■ **More than 50 hours of free, on-demand training webinars:**

<http://forge-forward.org/trainings-events/recorded-webinars/>

■ **Dozens of free, downloadable publications:**

<http://forge-forward.org/publications-resources/anti-violence-publications/>

■ **Individualized technical assistance, accessed by:**

Email: [AskFORGE@FORGE-forward.org](mailto:AskFORGE@FORGE-forward.org) ■ Phone: 414-559-2123

**FORGE**

[www.forge-forward.org](http://www.forge-forward.org)

[AskFORGE@FORGE-forward.org](mailto:AskFORGE@FORGE-forward.org)

**414.559.2123**



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