

From criminalization to erasure: Project 2025 and anti-trans legislation in the US

Crime Media Culture

1–19

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DOI: 10.1177/17416590241312149

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Abstract

The past two decades have largely been characterized by mainstream media as emancipatory for LGBTQ communities; indeed, queer and trans people have achieved many legal wins. But despite what has appeared to be a slow march to acceptance and inclusion, the post-marriage equality era has ushered in a virulent form of backlash wherein trans communities are demonized and criminalized through an abundance of anti-trans laws and policies, many of which target trans youth and access to healthcare, schools, and sports. After sketching the broader landscape of trans criminalization, this article moves to an analysis of the conservative initiative termed Project 2025 and their flagship text *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise* (2023). This comprehensive blueprint outlines a series of far-reaching policies targeting marginalized populations, with trans people at the very center. Drawing on queer criminology and trans theory, this article argues that Project 2025 and emerging anti-trans legislation pivot from punishment and criminalization of gender-diverse people to erasure and dehumanization of trans life in all its forms. Against the backdrop of broader trends of anti-trans politics and conservative agendas that seek to erode progress made in advancing trans rights and equality, this article is also a call to build upon queer criminology to establish a more robust body of work in trans criminology.

Keywords

Anti-trans legislation, criminalization, erasure, queer criminology, necropolitics, transgender, transphobia

“trans people are criminalized and discriminated against for simply being trans”

– *Prison Policy Initiative, cited in Herring and Widra (2022)*

“In the past, the word ‘gender’ was a polite alternative to the word ‘sex’ or term ‘biological sex.’ The Left has commandeered the term ‘gender,’ which used to mean either ‘male’ or ‘female,’ to include

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a spectrum of others who are seeking to alter biological and societal sexual norms. The promotion of gender radicalism is anathema to the traditional norms of many societies [. . .] and produces unnecessary consternation and confusion among and even outright bias against men."

– Max Primorac (2023), *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise* (p. 259)

Introduction

Trans kids seem to be getting all the attention. One can hardly avoid debates in the news about public bathrooms, school policies, sex-segregated sports, and puberty blockers. Trans youth also became a major talking point for conservatives in the 2024 United States presidential election, with President Donald Trump spouting baseless claims that teachers are secretly performing gender-affirming surgeries on children at school. And as the above epigraphs make clear, gender diversity has attracted legislative attention from conservative policymakers across the US, with trans youth becoming scapegoats for advancing a radical, Christian nationalist agenda centered on "traditional family values." And while the expansion of trans identities—and their consequent regulation and policing through anti-trans legislation—might seem to be new phenomena, on closer look it appears instead that, as trans historian Jules Gill-Peterson (2018) argues, the novelty of such transphobic policies "has much less to do with trans children being unprecedented than it does with a highly contemporary form of anti-trans backlash that has taken the convergence of trans visibility and vulnerability as an opportunity" (p. 196). This tension between visibility and vulnerability has created the perfect storm not only for criminalizing gender-affirming care and rescinding rights but also for surveilling and disciplining trans communities. Following Foucault, trans studies scholar Toby Beauchamp illustrates how even if visibility initiatives are often considered steps toward positive social change, they are not innocent or benign. Visibility is a trap, particularly as "one's visibility to surveillance mechanisms can allow those mechanisms to work more effectively" (Beauchamp, 2019: 16). Visibility is, hence, a double-edged sword: trans visibility and representation are correlated with heightened violence toward trans individuals (Currah, 2022; Fischer, 2019; Gossett et al., 2017; Stanley, 2017, 2021). This can include physical violence but also takes the form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1990) and administrative violence (Spade, 2015), which can manifest in legislative and policy-level measures that privilege cisnormativity and restrict trans livelihood.

Although LGBTQ communities had seen unprecedented change beginning in the 2000s and 2010s (e.g. marriage-equality legislation, anti-discrimination laws, gender recognition acts), we have now entered a critical turning point. Trans and gender-questioning children have been placed at the center of this cultural flashpoint marked by transphobia and trans misogyny. Despite the relatively small number of trans individuals (the population of trans kids in the US totals between 150,000 and 300,000, while trans adults are estimated at 1.3 million), anti-trans legislation has increased at an unprecedented pace, resulting in this minority group receiving disproportionate attention and ire from conservative lawmakers. And while trans people have long been victims of regulation and policing, this latest iteration of the culture wars is much more nefarious, dystopian, and wide-ranging than ever before.

This article zooms in on Project 2025, a US-based conservative initiative that would provide the next Republican president—President-elect Donald Trump—with a series of policy proposals that could be made official through executive order. Although Trump is not mentioned (he had not yet received the Republican nomination when it was launched), many of his allies are connected to Project 2025. And even though Trump distanced himself from this controversial initiative during his campaign, he has already nominated more than a half-dozen architects of Project 2025 to serve in his administration. Their 900+ page policy guide is a blueprint for making radical conservative agendas a reality; it is a playbook for implementing a series of wide-ranging policies that target marginalized populations, with trans people, as I will go on to show, at the very center. Referencing the overall tenor and aims of Project 2025, international affairs researcher Emma Shortis (2024: np) acknowledges that this is not business as usual: “Developing transition plans for a presidential candidate is normal practice in the US. What is not normal about Project 2025, with its intertwined domestic and international agenda, are the plans themselves [which] aim for nothing less than the total dismantling and restructure of both American life and the world as we know it.” Through an analysis of both Project 2025 and the abundance of anti-trans legislation in the US (a trend that has become global in scope), this article argues that this conservative agenda is marked by a ratcheting up of tactics that shift from punishing and criminalizing gender diversity and non-normativity to actively erasing and extinguishing trans life in all its nascent forms.

Built upon fear-mongering, deceptive tactics, and distrust of science, the contemporary conservative vision put forth by Project 2025 starts from the premise that “the American family is in crisis” (Roberts, 2023: 4). This trope is not especially new or unique—we have seen many versions of this before.¹ And while the Heritage Foundation has produced other conservative bibles in the leadup to presidential elections, this one is different, specifically for its laser focus on gender issues. Their overt and covert plan aims to target what they call “woke gender ideology” and to rescind structural support for trans people, racialized populations, and other minority groups. This would be done, in part, through the draconian criminalization of everyday acts and the elimination of gender-related initiatives, language, and policies. In this context, trans youth have become a pawn in politically and ideologically driven policies around which social and cultural anxieties about the future and the family have crystallized (Butler, 2024).

This article focuses on current legislation and policy precisely because they are the vehicles through which power is naturalized (Uhlman, 2024: 1083). After sketching the landscape of trans criminalization and erasure through recent US state laws and bills, I move to a close reading and analysis of Project 2025’s flagship text *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise* (2023). This comprehensive document portrays a far-reaching, socially dystopic conservative vision that includes the following steps for government intervention into trans lives: (1) define “gender” as sex assigned at birth and reverse interpretations of “sex” to no longer include gender identity or sexual orientation, (2) end the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) collection of data on gender identity, (3) ban gender-affirming care, (4) halt National Institutes of Health (NIH) research on gender identity (what they call “junk gender science”) but fund research on “negative effects of cross-sex interventions, including ‘affirmation’, puberty blockers, cross-sex hormones and surgeries” (Severino, 2023: 462), (5) outlaw the use of terms related to gender identity and sexuality, (6) restrict the scope of existing “sex discrimination” legislation to allow for discrimination against trans people, (7) rescind the use of non-binary gender markers, and (8) disallow children from using pronouns or names of their choice.

Taken together, these policy proposals and legislative changes actively cultivate what trans studies scholar Eric A. Stanley (2021) calls atmospheres of violence. Stanley juxtaposes so-called advances in LGBTQ rights with the rise of anti-trans/queer violence and backlash, arguing that this violence is, in fact, a fundamental structuring principle of our social worlds: “anti-trans/queer violence is foundational to, and not an aberration of, modernity” (Stanley, 2021: 5). Rather than viewing violence solely as isolated incidents or physical acts, it exists as a complex network of social, cultural, and political forces that create an environment in which violence is omnipresent and normalized. This framework lays bare the pervasive and interconnected nature of violence, including how trans identities, expressions, and embodiments are victims of legislative attempts to erase transness from public life. An analysis of structural inequalities, systemic discrimination, and symbolic violence that target marginalized communities, including trans and queer individuals and black, brown, and indigenous populations, also reveals how social norms and democratic institutions further perpetuate harm and oppression.

Queer theorist Lee Edelman (2004) reminds us that society’s obsession with the future, particularly through an emphasis on heterosexual reproduction and “protecting” children, has historically served as a mechanism of social control that excludes and marginalizes non-normative sexualities and genders. While academic scholarship has increasingly examined the ways that trans people are impacted by the criminal legal system, particularly in terms of incarceration and policing, less interdisciplinary scholarly attention has been paid to the backsliding of LGBTQ rights and the intensified criminalization of trans individuals, youth in particular. And while queer theory and trans studies have provided helpful frameworks for analyzing how the figure of the child has long been used in ideological battles and political discourses around reproductive futurity and social norms, the scholarship is only beginning to examine the ways in which trans kids are being scapegoated (Gill-Peterson, 2018; Meadow, 2018; Mitchell, 2023). Drawing on queer criminology and trans theory, this article argues that, through preemptive policymaking and legislation, Project 2025—alongside the broader moment of heightened anti-trans sentiment—not only poses threats to the health, well-being, and rights of trans individuals, but also actively undermines their dignity and autonomy. Project 2025 would be largely achieved through a combination of novel tactics and tested tools that are part and parcel of authoritarian regimes, which tend to use such anti-trans rhetoric and actions “to preserve, or entrench, existing social hierarchies through the production of an imagined threat from those with the least demonstrated power, demanding violence to put them down” (Gill-Peterson, 2024: 8). Although their policy document is freely accessible online, the media (aside from select critical journalism upon which I draw) largely ignored Project 2025 until late into the 2024 campaign season. The fact that trans people (who account for approximately 1% of the American population) have been placed at the center of a playbook to achieve authoritarian rule should frighten us all, regardless of gender or political alignment. Hidden in plain sight in these pages is a plan to comprehensively eradicate trans life.

Queer and trans criminology: The “transgender criminal legal nexus”

As both trans studies historians and queer criminologists have uncovered (Asquith et al., 2017; Awkward-Rich, 2022; Jenness & Rowland, 2024; Sears, 2014; Stryker, 2008; Uhlman, 2024;

Walker et al., 2022), gender-nonconformity and gender-transgressive expressions have historically been criminalized in the US. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, cross-dressing laws were, as Clare Sears (2014) has argued, part of a strategy of spatial governmentality that served to enforce gender norms and discipline marginalized communities. Laws forbidding cross-dressing also implemented a logic of “rehabilitation,” working to produce social identity as “fixed, legible, and categorizable” by removing gender-nonconforming presentations from the public (Awkward-Rich, 2022: 38). These sorts of gender-based regulations intersected with broader social anxieties about gender, sexuality, race, and class, effectively reinforcing hierarchical power structures and dominant notions of masculinity and femininity.

Queer criminology has, as “a theoretical and practical approach that seeks to highlight and draw attention to the stigmatization, the criminalization, and in many ways the rejection of the Queer community” (Buist and Lenning, 2016: 1), attempted to address equitable outcomes for and invisibility of LGBTQ people both in criminal legal settings and in academic research (Panfil, 2022: 270). Queer criminology’s privileging of sexuality may not, however, be best suited to communities who are targeted because of gender identity specifically. Indeed, trans and gender diverse people are often only sidenotes in queer criminology scholarship. And while Buist and Stone (2014) argue that queer criminology is needed in order to address and rectify challenges that trans people face in terms of “equal rights and protection under the law and within cultural norms” (p. 36), such approaches also tend to overlook a central paradox: legislative interventions aiming to address and curb violence may actually provoke further harm. For instance, legal inclusion strategies often create new forms of exclusion as they bolster violent structures (Spade, 2015). Further, because trans communities continue to have complicated relationships to policing (being simultaneously over-represented in the criminal-legal system and under-represented in both prevention measures and research studies), such unique life experiences warrant a different approach. This article also builds on Musto’s (2019) call that we “trans” criminology in order to “unsettle binary accounts of gender, harm, justice and punishment, and to reframe abolitionist praxis in innovative anti-carceral feminist directions” (p. 37). I do, however, take a somewhat different approach than Musto (2019) who reads trans as more of a *conceptual* point of departure that may lead to transforming the field of critical criminology (p. 50), in that I prioritize the *material* consequences and bio- and necropolitical impacts of anti-trans legislation on trans people’s lives. Acknowledging the pathbreaking work that queer criminology has done, this article is hence also a call to build upon this existing scholarship in order to develop a more robust trans criminology that accounts for how trans and gender diverse people are increasingly *made criminal*—and, by extension, *expendable*—within law and policy.

Indeed, trans people face many challenges that trap them within the criminal legal system, which Jenness and Rowland (2024) astutely illustrate through their articulation of the “transgender criminal legal nexus.” This concept describes the interconnected systems of law enforcement, criminal justice, and incarceration that intersect with trans lives. Highlighting how trans people are both directly and indirectly criminalized and are disproportionately impacted by the criminal legal system due to systemic injustices (e.g. discrimination, stigma, structural inequalities), the concept also illustrates how trans people (particularly trans people of color) are over-represented within the prison industrial complex. This nexus also underscores how inadequate access to gender-affirming healthcare, heightened risks of violence, and misgendering and mistreatment intersect to produce harmful outcomes for trans individuals.²

Trans kids as scapegoats

In April 2021, Arkansas made headlines by passing Act 626, dubbed the “Arkansas Save Adolescents From Experimentation (SAFE) Act,” and becoming the first state to prohibit gender-affirming care. While it was later deemed unconstitutional by a federal judge, it has gone on to have a prolific afterlife by kickstarting a swarm of similar legislation targeting access to healthcare and criminalizing medical professionals who provide care. This trend continues, with Florida going so far as to ban or restrict gender-affirming care for both children and adults in 2023. This legislative push is part of a broader pattern of escalating attacks on queer and trans rights that began in 2015—ironically just one year after *Time Magazine* infamously announced the arrival of the “Transgender Tipping Point,” an era that heralded the next step in equal rights for all genders. Initially focused on issues like public bathrooms and sports participation, recent legislative efforts have increasingly targeted trans youth and access to healthcare, schools, and athletics.

As Jenness and Rowland (2024) detail, the uptick in anti-trans bills has been achieved by demonizing gender nonconformity through advertising campaigns and divisive political rhetoric. Juxtaposed against a picture of white female fragility, these campaigns have portrayed trans individuals as sexually predatory, mentally unstable, deceitful, and socially disruptive. Emphasizing the longstanding social impacts of such messaging, trans philosopher Talia Mae Bettcher (2007) has shown how the stereotypical framing of trans people as deceptive reinforces the idea that their gender identity is somehow fraudulent or illegitimate, leading to further stigmatization and difficulties in accessing life-saving resources and human rights. Despite extensive research showing that neither do gender-inclusive bathrooms lead to increased crime nor do trans girls and women on puberty blockers or hormone replacement therapy have “unfair advantages,” anti-trans activists and policymakers continue to use these sorts of fear tactics to roll back trans-inclusive gender equality measures.

The focus on trans kids is, in a way, accidental. In “How a Campaign Against Transgender Rights Mobilized Conservatives,” *New York Times* investigative reporters Adam Nagourney and Jeremy W. Peters uncovered the story behind this intense policy focus. After the Supreme Court affirmed the constitutional right to same-sex marriage in 2015, conservatives found themselves without a key issue around which they could mobilize supporters and donors. After searching for a fresh cause capable of uniting their base and garnering national attention, the issue of trans identity, especially among children, gained significant traction. This legislative push started with a focus on what has since become a cause célèbre for conservative politicians: trans girls’ participation in youth sports. Against a backdrop of right-wing media that seemed obsessed with trans children (or rather the fear that children were being exposed to the instability of gender categories), they then turned their attention to fervently introducing state bills prohibiting access to gender-affirming care, including puberty blockers (Nagourney and Peters, 2023).

While it may have been an accident that this is the rallying cry around which Republicans have united, it is also the result of careful planning by conservative organizations “to harness the emotion around gender politics” (Nagourney and Peters, 2023). And as the results of the 2024 election have now demonstrated, it was a successful strategy that aided in Republican victories across the country. This shift has revitalized conservative networks and influenced agendas at local school boards and state legislatures. Matt Sharp, senior counsel with the Alliance Defending Freedom, which provides counsel to state lawmakers attempting to pass anti-trans legislation,

emphasized that current measures all return to the question “what can we do to protect the children?” (cited in Nagourney and Peters, 2023). While many conservatives claim that athletics bans emerge from a desire to protect children and secure parental rights, others recognize that trans kids are scapegoats. Nadine Smith, executive director of Equality Florida, affirms that this became a test case in messaging: “Once they opened that parents’ rights frame, they began to use it everywhere” (cited in Nagourney and Peters, 2023).

Even as social conservatives and religious groups may have not so long ago treated trans people with confusion or disinterest, they now use the power of the law to attack trans communities and anyone who might provide them with medical care. This systematic denial of rights to individuals who do not and cannot conform to legal and bureaucratic norms is, already, compulsively repeated through what Dean Spade (2015) calls “administrative violence,” or the systemic harm and deprivation of rights inflicted upon trans communities through everyday bureaucratic and administrative processes. Unlike overt physical violence, administrative violence operates through policies, regulations, and institutional practices that disproportionately target and oppress trans and gender-nonconforming individuals. Often embedded within purportedly objective and neutral systems such as law enforcement, immigration, healthcare, and social services, this form of violence is particularly insidious because it is often overlooked or normalized yet has profound consequences for the lives and well-being of trans individuals.

Efforts at curtailing the rights of—and even criminalizing—trans youth and adults is largely grouped around four topics: bathrooms, healthcare, sports, and language. North Carolina kicked off this conservative legislative agenda in 2016 when they introduced the nation’s first bill prohibiting trans individuals from using public bathrooms that align with their gender identity. At the time, this move sparked widespread backlash, and the law was ultimately repealed in 2017. So-called “bathroom bills” have, however, resurfaced with a vengeance across the country. Although many have not passed, approximately 100 measures have been introduced to restrict public restroom use for trans individuals since 2017. Political scientist Susan Gluck Mezey (2020) emphasizes the discriminatory consequences of such bills, including health problems faced by trans children who often avoid using bathrooms altogether when compelled to use facilities not aligning with their gender identity.

Legislation restricting access to gender-affirming care has risen dramatically, with 185 such bills introduced in 2023 (this totals more than the previous five years combined).³ Similar to the tactics seen in restrictions on abortion providers (e.g. TRAP laws), these bills often involve imposing penalties on healthcare providers, with punishments ranging from fines and medical license suspensions to felony sentences of up to 99 years in prison and accusations of child abuse. Park et al. (2021) warn that this broad political criminalization of trans healthcare could set a dangerous precedent for future politicized restrictions on care for various populations. Despite opposition from prominent civil liberties organizations and advocacy groups like the American Medical Association, these bills continue to emerge across various jurisdictions. At the federal level, the “Protecting Children from Experimentation Act” was also introduced to the US Senate, and, if passed, would establish a new federal criminal offense for healthcare professionals who provide gender-affirming care for minors: “A physical or mental health care professional who performs or provides a referral for a gender transition procedure on a minor is subject to criminal penalties—a fine, a prison term of up to five years, or both.”⁴

Regarding sports, Idaho became the first state to ban trans girls from competing in girls' and women's athletics in 2020, and since then at least 24 states have passed legislation that limits trans kids' participation (Strangio, 2024). While most of these bills focus on trans girls and women, five states have also extended these bans to trans boys. High schools have been the primary focus, but these regulations are increasingly being introduced at the collegiate and university level. These bans have also attempted to use intrusive measures, including requirements for a doctor's physical examination in cases of "disputed sex," as is the case in the initial versions of Ohio's athletic ban currently under legislative discussion.

Finally, in terms of policing language, nine states have recently enacted laws that broadly address gender-related terminology and language, including pronouns and names. In line with the state's infamous "Don't Say Gay" bills, Florida goes so far as to forbid teachers and students from discussing or sharing their personal pronouns. In Kentucky, teachers are not compelled to use pronouns for students that differ from their biological sex; meanwhile, Indiana and other states have introduced "parental rights" policies (which I will return to below), mandating that parents are notified when children request to use names or pronouns not seen to align with their sex assigned at birth. In Arizona, several anti-trans bills have also been introduced, including one requiring that both a guardian and teacher approve of a student's pronouns and another banning books that "promote gender fluidity or gender pronouns."⁵

The proliferation of these bills is astounding. Indeed, in 2024, 669 bills seeking to target trans communities are currently under consideration in 43 different state legislatures.⁶ This marks a significant rise, totaling more than any year on record. According to the Trans Legislation Tracker Project, 48 anti-trans bills had passed in 2024 at the time of writing, with 139 more under consideration. While approximately 482 bills have already failed, the sheer volume of anti-trans legislation being consistently introduced should be cause for alarm. Undoubtedly, this number will increase, particularly at the federal level given the Republican Party's 2024 victories in securing the presidency and a majority in both the Senate and the House of Representatives. As a case in point, in the month following the November 2024 election, three additional bills have passed and 14 more have been introduced.

Project 2025 and *The Conservative Promise*

Many of the above bills are written as test cases in preparation to be quickly implemented at the federal level through presidential executive order. If successful, the far-reaching conservative agenda termed the 2025 Presidential Transition Project—more commonly known as Project 2025—would dismantle any and all gains made in advancing trans rights, dignity, and acceptance. Project 2025 is an initiative of the Heritage Foundation, a far-right think-tank devoted to building and promoting conservative public policies. According to their website, the Project has four pillars: (1) a comprehensive policy agenda, (2) a 180-day playbook, which aims to "bring quick relief to Americans suffering from the Left's devastating policies,"⁷ (3) a Presidential Personnel Database containing resumes of vetted conservatives to be placed into historically non-partisan government roles, and (4) a Presidential Administration Academy to train future political appointees. Both the personnel database and the training program are linked to "Schedule F," a far-right plan to replace thousands of non-partisan federal employees with loyalists (forms of this plan were instituted by then-President Trump in 2018). This four-pronged approach would lay the

groundwork for the quick and seamless introduction and implementation of Project 2025's primary aims, likely taking many Americans by surprise.

Although all four pillars are integral to Project 2025's success, I primarily focus here on the policy component, which takes the form of *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise* (commonly referred to as *The Conservative Promise*), a 920-page document outlining a series of policy changes and legislative agendas that may be enacted by the next conservative US president. Montgomery (2024: np) describes this iteration of conservative planning as "a movement-level, ideological shift away from a libertarian mistrust of government power and toward an authoritarian view of government power being used ruthlessly—whether as a righteous force wielded to advance a 'biblical worldview' or turned against an 'administrative state' supposedly captured by a radical Marxist left." Edited by Paul Dans and Steven Groves, *The Conservative Promise* covers a number of key themes and social issues around which the right has devoted significant attention in recent years: rescinding of LGBTQ rights, dismantling of reproductive rights, climate denialism, border fortification, parental rights, and massive restructuring or elimination of federal departments (including the Department of Education). But at its center, Project 2025 takes aim at trans communities. Presented here is, as journalist Melissa Gira Grant (2023: np) outlines, a future wherein "married heterosexuality is the only valid form of sexual expression and identity; all pregnancies would be carried to term, even if that requires coercion or death; and transgender and gender-nonconforming people do not exist."

The first tenet around which the agenda is structured is a plan to "restore the family as the centerpiece of American life and protect our children" (Roberts, 2023: 3), which they aim to accomplish, in part, through the rescinding of legal protections for LGBTQ people. Like the state bills discussed above, the project seeks to enact laws and policies that criminalize or otherwise restrict trans rights in various aspects of life, including school policies, healthcare, athletics, and identity documents. "Transgender ideology" and "transgenderism" are held up as the principal threats to the nation and to the family, a construction built on long-standing framings of trans people as fraudulent, suspicious, and duplicitous. But, as Spade's concept of administrative violence illustrates, this is also a catch-22. Because trans people must navigate systems not designed for them, they are often preemptively portrayed as deceptive, a framing that becomes the very justification for punishment. Jenness and Rowland (2024) emphasize the "mutually reinforcing and cyclical nature of cultural criminalization and legal criminalization": not only do anti-trans laws exclude trans people and open them up to surveillance and harassment, they also cause greater numbers of trans people to come into more sustained contact with the criminal legal system, thereby "reinforcing the unsubstantiated, taken-for-granted meanings associated with what it means to be transgender and thus enable its criminalization" (p. 288).

In *The Conservative Promise*, social change around gender norms and the rise of trans identities are framed as a danger to the heteronormative, nuclear family. In the Introduction, Heritage Foundation President Kevin Roberts (2023) presents an alternate reality that many of us would be hard-pressed to identify. From his perspective, children live in a world where they "suffer the toxic normalization of transgenderism with drag queens and pornography invading their school libraries" (p. 1). This specter of trans demonization is immediately invoked as dangerous and harmful to their core ideological principles. Pornography, he writes:

[is] manifested today in the omnipresent propagation of transgender ideology and sexualization of children [. . .] It has no claim to First Amendment protection. Its purveyors are child predators and misogynistic exploiters of women. Their product is as addictive as any illicit drug and as psychologically destructive as any crime. Pornography should be outlawed (Roberts, 2023: 5).

This invocation of pornography is intentionally broad, vague, and amorphous. By equating trans issues (“transgenderism” and “transgender ideology”) with pornography, child abuse, and misogyny, this vision takes one step toward the outlawing of trans people altogether. Roberts (2023) goes on to detail the draconian and restrictive mechanisms necessary for eradicating pornography and all that comes with it: “The people who produce and distribute it should be imprisoned. Educators and public librarians who purvey it should be classed as registered sex offenders. And telecommunications and technology firms that facilitate its spread should be shuttered” (p. 5). Such extreme rhetoric signals a no-holds barred approach to regulating gender, sexuality, and privacy. Aware that more left-leaning states would be unlikely to arrest trans people on such counts, the document later details a wider plan through which the Department of Justice would intervene and prosecute any local officials not willing to bring criminal action against LGBTQ people (Hamilton, 2023: 553).

The Conservative Promise also outlines how both trans people and anyone who provides them with care, including therapists and doctors, should be criminalized. As journalist Bryan Tannehill (2023: np) warns in “The GOP Has a Master Plan to Criminalize Being Trans,” Project 2025 advocates for nationwide bans on gender-affirming care for trans youth, but also suggests “that people who are visibly trans in public are pornographic or obscene, because they might be seen by a minor.” These proposals put forth by Project 2025 do not simply regulate public spaces but are mechanisms of social control that reinforce dominant gender ideologies and criminalize those who deviate from them.

In line with the current rhetoric around athletics, Roberts also takes particular aim at what the right has largely called “biological males dominating women’s sports.” While the claim is baseless, this sort of language functions as a dog whistle for anti-trans politicians and civilians (including trans-exclusionary radical feminists) and, as the burgeoning legislative preoccupations indicate, a seemingly effective one. Despite their very small number, trans athletes have been victim to an outsized proportion of media interest, debate, and legislation. Often taken up as a fight to “protect” girls and women, this approach has been successful in rallying conservatives, many of whom have questionable records when it actually comes to advancing girls’ and women’s rights. Girls’ rights and gender parity, hence, become a convenient cover for anti-trans rhetoric and policies.

Protecting the children

The theme of “protecting children” is threaded throughout Project 2025’s work. This is not the first time that children (or symbolic children) have been used by anti-LGBTQ political campaigns to advance conservative agendas. Indeed, the figure of the child has been manipulated to appeal to voters for decades. One of the most successful campaigns took place in 1977 when American singer and anti-gay rights activist Anita Bryant became the face of the “Save Our Children” political coalition to fight against an ordinance in Florida that barred discrimination based on sexual

orientation. Just shy of one decade post-Stonewall, this campaign was a symptom of backlash toward what seemed to be the beginnings of growing social acceptance of LGBTQ people. Using the trope of “decency” and slogans like “There’s no human right to corrupt our children!,” the campaign proved effective and the electorate overwhelmingly voted down the anti-discrimination ordinance. Its success also ignited similar battles throughout the country, with several jurisdictions overturning previously passed anti-discrimination legislation.

Similar rhetoric recurs throughout the chapters of *The Conservative Promise*. In this current iteration of the ideological battle, however, children must be protected from “genital mutilation” (Severino, 2023: 495), “the new woke gender ideology” (Vought, 2023: 62), and “sex-change surgeries” (Vought, 2023: 62). Children are portrayed as entirely vulnerable and unable to make decisions for themselves, “a product not of their being children but rather of the historical infantilization they have been made to bear” (Gill-Peterson, 2018: 196–197). Girls are also singled out as particularly vulnerable to the “social contagion” of “transgenderism,” thereby building on long-standing cultural narratives that infantilize girls and women and remove any agency they may have.⁸ Roberts (2023) also writes that children are being corrupted by the “noxious tenets” of “gender ideology,” which “should be excised from curricula in every public school in the country” (p. 5). He goes on: “These theories poison our children, who are being taught [. . .] to deny the very creatureliness that inheres in being human and consists in accepting the givenness of our nature as men or women” (Roberts, 2023: 5). Instantiating Edelman’s (2004) insights into how the figure of the child has been manipulated in politics, this cultural narrative positions transness and trans kids as a threat to the symbolic order, precisely because they disrupt the traditional framework of gender norms.

Acknowledging the power of the symbolic (especially as exemplified through language), one of Project 2025’s main tools for rescinding legal protections for trans people is the explicit removal of language and terminology that acknowledges gender and diversity, which they claim “deprive Americans of their First Amendment rights”:

The next conservative President must make the institutions of American civil society hard targets for woke culture warriors. This starts with deleting the terms sexual orientation and gender identity (‘SOGI’), diversity, equity, and inclusion (‘DEI’), gender, gender equality, gender equity, gender awareness, gender-sensitive, abortion, reproductive health, reproductive rights, and any other term [. . .] out of every federal rule, agency regulation, contract, grant, regulation, and piece of legislation that exists. (Roberts, 2023: 4–5)

Words have power. And while it is naïve to assume that deleting the use of gender-related words will actually rid of us of our existence, we know that language shapes realities. Deleting or banning terms that reflect our identities will lead to diminished social and economic resources that improve the life chances of trans and gender diverse communities (Spade, 2015). Moreover, attempts to equate gender with biological sex assigned at birth and to argue that this is immutable and binary—and then build policy accordingly—are violent acts, “convenient displacements for naked political violence against trans life” (Gill-Peterson, 2018: 196). Research also tells us that self-affirmation and self-determination, including self-identification, are critical to health and well-being, not only for trans people but for people of all genders. But, we must ask, how is self-definition possible when the government outlaws the very support structures (including language and

naming) that sustain us and make our lives more livable? While deleting terminology like the above might seem a small move, it is another way in which trans individuals are subjected to systems of power that govern life and death. And while theories of transnormativity suggest that some trans people are marked for protection and futurity, others are clearly dispensable and even marked for death, particularly those who are marginalized due to race, class, or other intersecting identities. This is what Haritaworn and Snorton (2013) refer to as trans necropolitics, a concept that builds off Achille Mbembe's work to reveal the ways in which political value is extracted from the routinized deaths of trans people of color, thereby propping up imperialist projects and vitalizing anti-immigrant and homonationalist projects. Through Project 2025's linguistic erasures, trans people are framed as disposable and expendable, and life-saving resources will be revoked if these sorts of phrases are excised from policies and institutions, thereby extending trans necropolitics at the highest levels of government.

There are no trans people here

Despite Project 2025's fixation on gender diversity, trans *people* are hardly referenced.⁹ By contrast, words like "gender" and "sex" are all over the pages of *The Conservative Promise*. The authors invoke a boogeyman of "transgenderism" through the repetition of phrases like: "gender radicalism," "gender ideology," "radical racial and gender ideologies," "radical gender theory," "so-called gender identity," "left-wing race and gender ideology," "novel anti-discrimination theories (such as sexual orientation and gender identity theories)," and "the new woke gender ideology." This absence of trans people is significant in that it rehearses non-personhood. To acknowledge that trans people actually exist—to name trans people as people—is an act of bestowing humanity. By extension, this repudiation is directly linked to dehumanization and denial of legal personhood (and all that comes with it). Indeed, as preeminent trans studies scholar Susan Stryker articulates, the category of the human is neither universal nor ontologically given but has been used to *dehumanize*. She elaborates on how this is also a gendered dynamic:

it has been very difficult to think of the human without thinking of it through the binary gender schema. I think a lot of the violence and discrimination trans people face derives from a fundamental inability on the part of others to see us as fully human because we are considered improperly gendered, and thus lower on the animacy hierarchy, therefore closer to death and inanimacy, therefore more expendable and less valuable than humans. (Stryker and Dierkes-Thrun, 2014: np)

Project 2025's plan (1) to define gender as a biological, immutable characteristic that is solely determined by genitalia at birth and (2) to delete all gender-related terminology effectively invisibilizes, erases, and, as Stryker articulates, makes trans life "more expendable and less valuable than humans."¹⁰

Gill-Peterson (2018) writes that "the trans child continues to be a figure through which anti-trans forces can focus their efforts to undermine any future at all for trans people" (p. 196). Not only does Project 2025 erode opportunities for livable trans futures but it takes this even a step farther by denying that trans people even exist. In *The Conservative Promise*, trans erasure and dehumanization are actively encouraged in school-based settings. In the chapter on the

Department of Education (which is elsewhere in the document referred to as a “one-stop shop for the woke education cartel” (Dans and Groves, 2023: 285)), parental rights are invoked and used as a justification of this repudiation:

No public education employee or contractor shall use a name to address a student other than the name listed on a student’s birth certificate, without the written permission of a student’s parents or guardians. (Burke, 2023: 346)

No public education employee or contractor shall use a pronoun in addressing a student that is different from that student’s biological sex without the written permission of a student’s parents or guardians. (Burke, 2023: 346)

The language of “parental rights” becomes a tool to deny dignity and respect for trans and non-binary children (Even though parents’ rights are of paramount importance, they are quick to state that allowing parents to “‘reassign’ the sex of a minor is child abuse and must end” (Roberts, 2023: 5)). They also invoke outlandish scenarios about what the future could hold were Democrats to continue to hold the presidency, including that schools “could be required to assist a child with a social or medical gender transition without parental consent” (Burke, 2023: 344). This manipulation of facts suggests that schools actively advocate for or assist students transitioning; meanwhile the use of “could” is strategic and functions as a scare-tactic that parents will no longer have a say in their children’s education or upbringing. As Judith Butler (2024) details in *Who’s Afraid of Gender?*, these sorts of bizarre exaggerations and misleading claims about gender are not confined to the US but are being used by conservative forces worldwide.

Schools are already sites of violence in the US. One can hardly avoid news coverage of the epidemics of gun violence and bullying. While trans and queer youth have long been subject to violence from other kids, these policy changes would effectively make educational institutions—including teachers and administrators—perpetrators of violence. Forms of this approach are already happening, as is highlighted by the story of Nex Benedict, one of the few trans deaths to receive media coverage. Benedict was a non-binary teenager of Choctaw heritage who was bullied and assaulted, eventually being found dead on February 8, 2024, the day after they were concussed by a group of students. While the local coroner ruled Benedict’s death a suicide, the circumstances remain a mystery.¹¹ This is largely what Stanley (2021) means when they write of the layered forms of violence directed at trans youth, first through their routine dehumanization in being “habitually physically and emotionally terrorized in schools” and then through the absence of legal accountability for violence directed at them (p. 119). This dynamic was also likely exacerbated by Benedict’s indigenous status (a fact that was rarely mentioned in media coverage of their death). This is also trans necropolitics at work, with trans kids facing not only the threat of physical violence and murder but also the restriction of life-sustaining resources, including denial of access to gender-affirming healthcare, homelessness, and other forms of structural violence that exacerbate vulnerability and position trans people as dispensable.

Director of Lambda Legal’s Non-Binary and Transgender Rights Project, Sasha Buchert similarly asserts that the language used in Project 2025’s guidebook is dehumanizing and aligns with the political right’s broader approach. Rather than acknowledging queer and trans people as people, they are often portrayed as mere ideologies or “isms,” stripping away their humanity (in Pengelly,

2023). Buchert further cautions that even if Project 2025 does not succeed in its objectives, its existence, endorsement of severe measures, and dehumanization of trans individuals will likely fuel further anti-LGBTQ legislation (Pengelly, 2023). This, in turn, will reinforce a trans necropolitical climate in which gender-different people are forced into lives marked by secrecy in order to survive, perpetuating a cycle of discrimination, marginalization, and erasure (see also Francisco, 2021).

Conclusion

Many would be quick to point out that LGBTQ rights have come a long way in recent years and that queer and trans people have achieved many legal wins. Indeed, the past two decades have largely been characterized by mainstream media as emancipatory for LGBTQ communities, with gains like marriage equality, hate-crimes legislation, and anti-discrimination protections expanding. But despite what has appeared to be a slow march to acceptance and inclusion, the post-marriage equality era has ushered in a virulent backlash. This evolving landscape is reflected in the ubiquitous attempts to demonize and criminalize trans communities. And against the backdrop of already intensified atmospheres of violence, Project 2025 is, one can surmise, the first step in a larger plan. Painting a picture of a society that resembles *The Handmaid's Tale*, Grant (2024: np) emphasizes the broader implications and ideologies at play in Project 2025's authoritarian vision for the future: "gender and sexuality are not acknowledged as actually existing outside patriarchal, nuclear families. All that exists here is mothers and babies, children and families. Each family is meant to function as an extension of the state, dedicated to controlling and confining sex, gender, and sexuality, with all the coercive power and violence that would require." Project 2025, if successful, would take a monumental step in rolling back rights and dignity for trans and gender diverse people (among other populations, including cis women and people of color). By targeting trans communities through preemptive policymaking and legislation, this far-right initiative undermines autonomy and access to essential resources. It creates a climate of fear, uncertainty, and insecurity for trans communities, who will face even further risks of violence, discrimination, and legal persecution as a result.

While mainstream media attention to Project 2025 had been relatively scant, social media and citizen journalism began to fill this gap by sounding the alarm bells. Substack writer Andra Watkins summarizes the dire consequences in the blog "How Project 2025 Will Ruin Your Life," which I quote here at length:

- Any transgender person at any age could be denied gender-affirming healthcare. This would include hormone treatment for those who have already transitioned.
- People could be prosecuted as sexual predators for using a bathroom that differs from their assigned gender at birth.
- LGBTQIA+ people or their children could be turned away from schools, universities, businesses, pharmacies, and even hospitals because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Discrimination against LGBTQIA+ families in school settings.
- People could die.
- People could be prosecuted as sexual predators for performing in drag shows or for dressing in drag.
- Nationwide same-sex marriage protections could be repealed.
- People could be prosecuted as sexual predators or pornographers for being homosexual, bi sexual, non-binary, transgender, or other.

- LGBTQIA+ people could be arrested for public displays of affection.
- People could be forced into taxpayer-funded religious indoctrination to avoid jail time for such offenses.
- States could lose all federal funding for refusing to enforce federal anti-LGBTQIA+ laws.¹²

The groundwork for this conservative vision is being laid: embryonic stages of Project 2025 are already being implemented through the scores of anti-trans bills and policies being introduced at the state level every single day. The sheer quantity of new bills in front of state legislatures devastatingly illustrates “the endless ways our contemporary moments of empire are able to find new and ever more callous tactics to capture, imprison, and liquidate under the very name of democracy [. . .] [R]acialized anti-trans/queer violence is not antagonistic to the democratic state; it is among its foundations” (Stanley, 2021: 114). In effect, this suite of federal policy recommendations, as this article has argued, progresses on a continuum of violence by moving from punishment and erasure to criminalization and necropolitics.

The fields of trans studies and queer criminology reveal how broader social and political forces, including institutional practices, scientific research, and cultural representations, have shaped understandings of trans childhood. This article has also sought to make a contribution to the growing field of queer criminology by encouraging its expansion to a more sustained engagement with gender. Because the violence experienced by trans people is different from that directed toward queer communities, a more rigorous body of work in trans criminology would help uncover and reveal how gender non-conformity is caught in a web of stigmatization and criminalization, and one which eventually could lead to erasure and eradication. Reflecting from a queer criminological perspective, Copson and Boukli (2020) write that “questions of crime and justice cannot and should not be separated out from questions about how society as a whole is, or might be imagined. The real potential of queer theory lies in its capacity to translate abstract wishful thinking into concrete transformative politics” (p. 519). Although LGBTQ rights have long been a topic of academic analysis, they have taken on great urgency as these sorts of laws and policies have dismantled gains made by gender and sexual minorities at a startling pace. While queer criminology can indeed be a tool for translating “abstract wishful thinking into concrete transformative politics,” we must also further develop a specifically *trans* criminology (Musto, 2019). Queering—and transing—criminology means envisioning alternative forms of recognition and visibility wherein integrity and self-determination are prioritized. But it also means questioning and perhaps eschewing recognition and visibility altogether as pathways for trans freedom. Right now, we must imagine and enact new realities that value and celebrate transness in all its beauty and complexity. And we must fight back. This is a matter of life and death, and our survival depends on it.

Data availability

Not applicable.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human or animal participants.

Ethical considerations

Not applicable.

Consent to participate

Not applicable.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

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Notes

1. Similar arguments have been used throughout US history to police the boundaries of gender norms. Daniel Patrick Moynihan's (1965) *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (commonly referred to as "The Moynihan Report"), for instance, attempted to stigmatize and pathologize women of color and Black families and to distance them from white heterosexual "normativity." In the Introduction, Moynihan writes that "the fundamental problem . . . is that of family structure" (cited in Cohen, 1997: 455). This is just one example of the ways in which both gendered and racialized identities have long been policed and have repeatedly been sites onto which national anxieties about difference have been projected.
2. Although outside the scope of this article, it is worth briefly citing a few statistics on these systemic injustices. Utilizing data from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), Flores et al. (2021) revealed stark disparities in victimization rates between trans and cis individuals. Trans people reported experiencing personal victimization at a rate four times higher than cis individuals, with only about half of these incidents reported to law enforcement. Additionally, approximately 40% of trans individuals reported interactions with law enforcement in the past year, with a significant portion experiencing mistreatment or harassment ranging from misgendering to sexual assault. This dynamic has also led to reluctance on the part of trans people to seek police assistance. Moreover, the incarceration rate among trans individuals is notably higher than that of the general population, especially among those who are poor and racially marginalized (Coppola, 2023). These findings underscore the heightened risk of trans people becoming caught in the transgender criminal legal nexus and experiencing violence and discrimination within the legal system. Furthermore, the persistence of the "trans panic" defense strategy—which the LGBT Bar defines as "a legal strategy which asks a jury to find that a victim's sexual orientation or gender identity is to blame for the defendant's violent reaction, including murder" (Holden, 2019)—exacerbates the vulnerability of trans individuals to violence, highlighting the need to address systemic mistreatment and broader social and legal injustices.

3. <https://translegislation.com/>
4. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-bill/1597>
5. Arizona SB1700. Available at <https://www.azleg.gov/legtext/56leg/1r/bills/sb1700p.htm>
6. Included in this total are 274 bills that were carried over from 2023.
7. <https://www.project2025.org/playbook/>
8. This cooptation of girls and women is also reflected in conservatives' attempts to introduce a federal "Women's Bill of Rights," which would define sex assigned at birth as immutable and binary, thereby erasing any existing federal recognition of trans people.
9. There are only two references in the text to trans people as people. The first refers to sports ("undermine girls' sports and parents' rights to satisfy transgender extremists" (Roberts, 2023: 8)), while the second is regarding military inclusion ("Reverse policies that allow transgender individuals to serve in the military" (Miller, 2023: 104)).
10. This is in line with policies put in place in 2018, which was succinctly encapsulated by the *New York Times* front page headline: "Trump Administration Eyes Defining Transgender Out of Existence" (October 21, 2018).
11. President Joe Biden offered his condolences to Benedict's family, and in an official statement wrote that: "Every young person deserves to have the fundamental right and freedom to be who they are and feel safe and supported at school and in their communities. Nex Benedict, a kid who just wanted to be accepted, should still be here with us today . . . To LGBTQI+ young people across the country — you are loved exactly as you are" (Messman-Rucker, 2024).
12. <https://project2025istheocracy.substack.com/p/project-2025-where-the-only-genders>

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