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Trans People Are Avoiding Whole U.S. States to Stay Safe

“I wouldn’t even try to get a motel in rural America right now,” one trans woman told VICE News.



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May 24, 2023, 4:00am



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IMAGE SOURCE/GETTY IMAGES

Shortly after Rynn Willgohs started transitioning, she took a road trip from her home state of North Dakota to Kentucky. But before she headed out, the trans activist mapped out where to stop and get gas, what bathrooms to use on the way, and which states would provide safer pit stops.

Willgohs wanted to avoid spots where she feared discrimination—or worse. It's happened before: In March 2021, shortly after she had started her transition, Willgohs was traveling across North Dakota for work. Part way through the journey, she stopped at a public bathroom. A man followed her inside and pushed her up against a wall. “I thought he was going to choke me to death,” she told VICE News earlier this year. Today, she mostly feels safe in Fargo, but she's

careful in rural areas. And when she leaves the state, she makes sure to plan ahead.

“I wouldn’t even try to get a motel in rural America right now,” Willgohs said, expressing concern about open transphobia in public growing as GOP politicians and rightwing media have stoked suspicion, fear, and hatred against LGBTQ people. This year alone, GOP politicians have introduced more than 500 anti-trans bills, including gender-affirming care bans, drag show bans, and bathrooms bills that prohibit trans people from using washrooms that correspond to their gender. The bills are based on myth, not science, but that hasn’t stopped their supporters from inciting a moral panic against trans people. This has had real life consequences on trans people, and some experts have equated this push to genocide.

“There are a ton of people nervous about travel,” transgender activist and researcher Erin Reed told VICE News. “I myself am concerned.”

Reed added that she primarily sticks to cities, as opposed to rural areas, and is not traveling to any state with a bathroom ban. She’s also advising trans travelers to stick to places and businesses known for having gender neutral bathrooms, like Starbucks.

The situation has gotten so bad that last month, LGBTQ civil rights group Equality Florida issued a travel advisory urging trans people to avoid the state altogether. Florida is one of the most politically hostile states towards trans people in the country: Republican lawmakers have introduced an onslaught of anti-trans bills. The state also just passed Senate Bill 254, one of the most severe pieces of legislation yet, that allows the state to forcibly take trans children who

are receiving gender affirming care away from their parents; criminalizes healthcare providers who provide gender-affirming care and revoke their healthcare licenses; and bans the use of certain public funds for gender-affirming care for people of all ages.

“Florida was never an ideal place to be trans, like, before all of this started happening, so having it get worse every year is why I left,” said B.F., a trans woman whose name is being withheld for privacy reasons. BF left the state and moved with her family to the West Coast last year. “It's good that Equality Florida is taking that seriously now, but it might just be that their power is pretty limited.”

In April, B.F. went back to Florida for the first time, and said the anti-trans climate in the state was a main topic of conversation with friends and family.

“I caught up with old friends and that’s what we talked about. I visited my parents and that’s also what we talked about,” B.F. said. “It was definitely the right choice to move away.”

Earlier this month, celebrities Dwyane Wade and Gabrielle Union revealed that they relocated from Florida to California in order to raise their 15-year-old daughter, Zaya, who is trans, in a safer environment.

“The last couple of years, the laws, the politics, you know, has really become this big conversation, right? It’s unsafe conversation, and it’s unsafe for my daughter, it’s unsafe for the young kids and the youth and adults, the elders in the trans community,” Wade said about the climate in Miami, Florida. “For us, as much as I love that city, as much as I’m always going to be a part of it, for the safety of my

family, that's what it was. I couldn't move back.”

The anti-trans push in the U.S. is undoubtedly made worse by right wing pundits like the *Daily Wire*'s Matt Walsh and ousted Fox News anchor Tucker Carlson who stoke hate by spreading hateful myths about what it means to be trans. Walsh has called drag queens “creeps” and “degenerates,” while claiming that children who are part of the culture are “exploited,” “groomed,” and “conditioned.” The same people have accused LGBTQ-inclusive teachers of “grooming” children, while claiming doctors “mutilate” and “sterilize” minors when referencing gender-affirming care—despite the fact that gender-affirming surgeries are rarely ever performed on people under 18.

The result is an unrelenting attack on trans people that's being replicated from state to state—and online. Things have turned violent as well: Drag queen shows have been swarmed by hate groups, hospitals that offer gender-affirming care have faced bomb threats, and viral videos of public anti-trans hate circulate on social media.

The current situation has Jessica Taylor, a trans content creator and DJ, exercising more caution when traveling for her jobs. “I actually was booked in Florida a few months ago, but thankfully it fell through,” Taylor told VICE News.

The 30-year-old lives in “middle of nowhere” Tennessee, but she travels about twice a month. She doesn't do much to prepare ahead of travel, but the risks associated with it still cross her mind. “I just hope that whenever I go somewhere nothing bad happens to me—that's something that's always on my mind,” Taylor said. “Whenever I go places, I'm just like, ‘Okay, well, I really hope that nobody notices that I'm trans if something really crazy happens.’”

For the most part, Taylor said she'll travel anywhere, but she's had to be more cautious as anti-trans hate rises. Last month, the traveling DJ had a gig at an anime convention, and she said she was scared to go.

"I was just more aware, if that makes sense," Taylor said. "Aware of my surroundings and like, who's around me and what I'm doing and everything because you never really know."

Trans people have also been forced to find workarounds. One thing that's helped Willgohs is an app that lists safe washrooms in a given area. "The bathroom thing goes beyond bathroom usage; this is general safety from public violence," Willgohs said.

B.F. hopes trans people can stay safe by building a supportive community, especially since the point of the anti-trans bills is to isolate trans people from others and "push people back into the closet."

"When I was less passable I used a buddy system with a cis friend who would advocate for me," she said, adding that "today, I'm at the point where I don't want to live stealth or anything because it's its own suffocating madness and it can help others to see thriving peers who are a couple years ahead of you."

While some trans people are exercising more caution while moving around the country, Taylor said she refuses to be intimidated out of leading a public life.

"Trans people are very resilient and very strong, and we've been here since pretty much the beginning of time. We're not going anywhere," Taylor said. "Do your best to live your life to the fullest and try not to let anything anyone says or

does to get to you.”

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