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**Uncovering Policy Frames that Uphold Cisgender Dominance in the  
Southeastern United States: A Critical Discourse Analysis**

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## Abstract

**Objective:** There is a long history of anti-transgender bias in the United States, including in proposed legislation, and recently there has been a surge of anti-transgender state bills, particularly in the Southeast region. There is value in studying the way that policy discourse continues to uphold cisgender dominance and harm transgender and nonbinary populations. This study analyzes the language of proposed anti-transgender state bills in the Southeast United States from 2023 and how such discourse legitimizes and reinforces cisgender dominance.

**Method:** Two legislation tracker tools (one transgender-specific and the other general) were used to identify relevant bills introduced in 2023 across 10 states in the Southeast. After removing duplicate or near-duplicate bills, 127 bills were identified for analysis. The language of these bills was analyzed using critical discourse analysis to identify themes. **Results:** Three overarching themes are identified within this policy discourse: (1) attempts to prohibit, stigmatize, and erase identities that counter cisgender normativity; (2) creation of a narrative of cisgender people as “victims” who are under attack; and (3) emerging efforts to undermine regulatory bodies. **Conclusions:** Anti-transgender policy frames are forwarding specific messages about gender that normalize cisgender identity and attempt to control, surveil, and punish people who veer from these norms. Social work has an opportunity to create counternarrative policy frames that challenge cisgender dominance and affirm gender diversity.

*Keywords:* transgender persons, legislation, cisgender dominance, critical discourse analysis, critical feminist post-structuralism

## **Uncovering Policy Frames that Uphold Cisgender Dominance in the Southeastern United States: A Critical Discourse Analysis**

In recent years, there has been exponential growth in the introduction of state bills in the United States (U.S.) that stigmatize and harm transgender and nonbinary (TNB) communities, particularly in the Southeastern U.S. (Kline et al., 2023). These bills extend across the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of interaction and multiple spheres of life, from censoring public education to limiting access to gender-affirming medical care to restricting the actions of public employees who wish to affirm TNB youth. Recent research has found that the passage of anti-transgender state bills is associated with an increase in past-year suicide attempts among TNB young people aged 13-24 living in those states in the years following such policy change (Lee et al., 2024). There is value in studying the discourse of these bills and how they uphold the dominance of cisgender (non-transgender) people so that social workers might better understand the implications of policy framing and strategize about how to counter such efforts and address the fallout (e.g., supporting the person who cannot access healthcare, launching advocacy campaigns, creating affirming spaces, implementing protective policies). This study uses critical discourse analysis to scrutinize the language of anti-trans state bills of the Southeastern U.S. from 2023 and how they uphold the systemic dominance of cisgender people.

I will begin with an overview of this study's conceptual framework as well as previous research on anti-transgender political discourse. I will then detail gaps in the knowledge base and the research question of interest before detailing the project's methods. I conclude with a detailed summary of findings and their relevance to social work practice and education.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Conceptual Framework**

This paper focuses on the ways in which political discourse is manipulated to advance a particular ideology and reinforce the power structures that govern our everyday lives. For this project, I use a critical feminist post-structuralist approach. Feminist post-structuralism is focused on deconstructing language and how it is used as a method of power, specifically how language is strategically deployed by those in power to uphold certain gendered norms and to influence the actions we take as resistance to these norms (Fowler & Mountz, 2023). Within post-structuralism, language is “where reality is created, and also the place where reality may be deconstructed and challenged” (Leotti et al., 2022, p. 262). Critical post-structuralism thus intervenes in such attempts to diminish critical consciousness and manufacture our consent by challenging the assumed truths built into the language being used (Leotti et al., 2022). The “feminist” part of this framework centers the analytic lens on gender and challenges binary thinking about sex and gender and the supposed need for alignment between the two (Fowler & Mountz, 2022). The critical feminist lens also emphasizes the agency and potential for resistance among those who are oppressed by power structures (Willey-Sthapit et al., 2022).

My conceptual framework is also informed by structural cisgenderism. Structural cisgenderism is the “cultural and systemic ideology that denies, denigrates, or pathologizes self-identified gender identities that do not align with assigned [sex] at birth” (Lennon & Mistler, 2014, p. 63). This ideology is not inborn but is instead the byproduct of the intentional manipulation of public consciousness in service of the interests of those in power. In this way, structural cisgenderism holds what Gramsci (1971) deems hegemonic power in its ability to convince the public that the social control, discrimination, violence, invisibility, and punishment of TNB people is not only appropriate, but just. Structural cisgenderism is inherently interwoven with and reliant upon other anchors of racial capitalism, including white supremacy and

heteropatriarchy, together constituting a superstructure that perpetuates division between everyday people and protects against our ability to identify common cause. Looking at the interstices of these anchors of oppression, trans thinkers and activists have routinely been “at the forefront of pointing out the links between anti-trans legislation and anti-Black, anti-immigrant, and anti-reproductive rights agendas” (Fischer, 2023, pp. 402-403).

### **History of Anti-Trans Legislative Efforts in the U.S.**

There is a long history of animosity towards TNB people in the U.S., from pathologization and criminalization to discrimination, sexual assault, and murder (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2024; Kunzel, 2024; Lombardi et al., 2001). These realities are intertwined with the political violence maintained by government officials, rooted not only in transphobia and cisgender normativity but also, as Lenning and colleagues (2021) argue, in white supremacy. This includes the use of rhetoric that constructs threats of trans people (primarily trans women) of color and contributes to the violence targeting them, mirroring patterns of violent ideology, violent policies, and violent actions (such as lynching) targeting Black people. Scholars and activists have noted the exponential growth of anti-trans legislative efforts in recent years, with 2023 as the fourth consecutive year with a record-breaking number of anti-trans bills. In 2023, there were 600 bills introduced, 87 of which passed, compared to 174 (26 passed) in 2022 and 143 (18 passed) in 2021 (Trans Legislation Tracker, n.d.). The most common focus of these bills was healthcare (Trans Legislation Tracker), typically attempting to outlaw gender-affirming care and penalizing or criminalizing those who assist TNB patients with accessing such care (Kant & Boskey, 2023). From 2017-2021, most trans exclusionary bills in the U.S. were concentrated in the Southeast, South Central, and Mountain West (Kline et al., 2023).

The growth of anti-trans legislation is part of an intentional, coordinated effort among advocacy groups on the religious right, including the Heritage Foundation (also behind Project 2025) and several associations that have been designated as hate groups by the Southern Poverty Law Center (Alstott et al., 2024). Some have explicitly said that they want to create laws that will realize right-wing Christian ideology, including rejecting the existence of trans people (Alstott et al.); others have said they wish to eliminate all gender-affirming care to people of all ages (Pauly, 2023). Members of these groups have drafted sample anti-trans bills that have been distributed to legislators as model bills (Pauly, 2023), influencing the political landscape. As noted earlier, there are very real consequences to the passage of such bills, with quasi-experimental research documenting increases in TNB youth suicide attempts in the affected states in the years following bill passage (Lee et al., 2024).

### **The Importance of Policy Framing and Examples of Anti-Trans Political Discourse**

Policy framing – how language is used to discuss legislation and the problem it is trying to address – is critical to the policy making process. Policy frames guide how we define a social problem (Stone, 2019) and reflect power relations and how normativity is being reproduced (Fowler & Mountz, 2023). Framing is a key part of motivating blocs of voters and convincing people to support a specific side of an issue (Turnbull-Dugarte & McMillan, 2022). A typical strategy is to create a frame connecting to common values—such as liberty or equality—as people often base their stances on their values (Desjardins et al., 2022; Martin & Rahilly, 2023).

Numerous scholars have studied policy frames and discourse related to TNB populations, particularly legislation focused on bathroom access and sports bills (e.g., Atwood et al., 2023; Desjardins et al., 2022; Fischer, 2023; Lenning et al., 2021; Martin & Rahilly, 2023). Proponents of anti-trans bills rarely use the words “transgender” or “cisgender” in their framing, instead

using evasive phrasing—such as “men playing women’s sports” or “impersonators” (Martin & Rahilly, 2023, p. 741). In fact, Liberty Council’s Richard Mast has guided groups pushing for anti-trans bills to avoid using terms such as transgender, nonbinary, or cisgender, saying that, “If the other side’s language frames the debate, we lose” (Pauly, 2023, para. 18).

Past scholarship has identified several common themes in anti-trans policy framing to successfully rile up support. One common theme is constructing TNB people as pathological, immoral, dangerous, and a “threat” to children. There is a long and substantial history of the pathologization of gender expansiveness in the U.S. (Kunzel, 2024), and as Kant and Boskey (2023) note, TNB identities are still largely pathologized in social discourse. While having the availability of a psychiatric diagnosis (gender dysphoria) has helped to increase awareness of some TNB people’s need for gender-affirming medical care, this still represents a normalizing of cisgender identity and the maintenance of gatekeeping and discursive powers within psychiatry and medicine (Kunzel, 2024). TNB identities are commonly framed as deviance (Stone, 2019) and therefore undesirable; anti-trans advocates use unfounded beliefs of “social contagion” to thereby suggest a danger in having children exposed to TNB people (Alstott et al., 2024). Others (Edelman, 2004) have written about the important symbolism of “the Child” in discourse – who wouldn’t want to protect an innocent child? —as part of maintaining heteronormativity and ensuring its future by keeping a child away from queerness and symbolic “death.” When highlighting the need to protect children, anti-trans discourse uses “stranger danger” frames that emphasize the potential harms of children spending time in a public space with strangers without parental supervision (Stone, 2019). Usually, the implied child in need of protection is a young, small white girl (sometimes white boys), mirroring frames used in the past in opposition to the Civil Rights Movement that presented messages of protecting white children (Stone, 2019).

Others have linked such frames to the discourse that had been used to justify the lynching of Black people, especially Black men, typically framed as being linked to fears of Black men sexually assaulting white women (Lenning et al., 2021).

Another common theme in anti-trans political discourse is an emphasis on parents' rights. Florida's recent "Parental Rights in Education Act" claims to focus on parents' ability to influence the upbringing and education of their children but surreptitiously moves to restrict speech about gender (Fowler & Mountz, 2023). This policy uses rights-based language and wording that references war and violence to try to justify punitive and restrictive actions and to appeal to emotional responses to garner support (Fowler & Mountz, 2023). Policy frames that attempt to center parents' rights also have a historical link to framing used to counter the Civil Rights Movement—when using overtly racist language to argue against school integration and busing was no longer as acceptable, those against integration shifted discourse to be about community control and parental involvement (Omi & Winant, 1994, as cited in Stone, 2019).

A third policy frame focuses on "protecting" and "promoting fairness" for cisgender women. Many bills go so far as use words like "saving women's sports" in their titles (Kline et al., 2023). The framing around protection and fairness almost exclusively focuses on the risks posed by trans women (as opposed to trans men or nonbinary individuals) and the male bodies/male sex drives they are framed as representing (Lenning et al., 2021). Scholars have noted the link between anti-trans frames that emphasize "protecting women" and the construct of benevolent sexism (beliefs about the differences between men and women that advance the idea that women need more protection and are weaker than men; Turnbull-Dugarte & McMillan, 2022). Support for benevolent sexism tends to relate to support for traditional gender roles, discouraging women's independence, limiting women's opportunities in traditionally masculine

jobs, and upholding the hierarchical status quo (Atwood et al., 2023). In anti-trans sports-related bills, framing focused on “fairness” for women/girls is based on assumptions about the superiority of men (and, by extension, trans women) in athletic competition (Desjardins et al., 2022). Although such framing centers values such as “protecting” women and “fairness” in sports, the types of essentialist views these arguments are built on are associated with worse outcomes for women—those supporting essentialist views of gender tend to be more likely to stereotype women, support gender hierarchies, accept rape myths, and acquiesce to inequality in situations that disadvantage women (Atwood et al., 2023; Martin & Rahilly, 2023).

A fourth common theme in anti-trans legislative discourse is portraying trans people as being “fake” and deceptive, such as categorizing trans women as “men who are impersonating women” (Turnbull-Dugarte & McMillan, 2022). The language will often completely ignore the language used by TNB communities, instead referring to trans girls as “biological males” or “boys” (Desjardins et al., 2022). These frames of TNB people are based in religious beliefs that queer identities are “mutable,” implying they can be changed back to the (preferred) cis-heteronormative identities, and that sex is binary, constant, and based in “natural” reproductive roles (Alstott et al., 2024).

Finally, advocates of anti-trans bills use the language of science to masquerade religious-based beliefs that are the foundation of these policy frames. Many of the supposed scientific claims are based on misinformation and religious pseudoscience (i.e., the use of scientific terms as a front for religious beliefs that are not based in science, Alstott et al., 2024, p. 223). In efforts to support or uphold bills, anti-trans advocates also will use public opinion pieces and quote them as “evidence” to support a stance (Desjardins et al., 2022).

Social work is not immune to these narrative plays, and at times social workers have explicitly endorsed anti-trans rhetoric. Retired social work professor Shirley Cox from Brigham Young University has been noted as a key figure in the development of a state bill in Utah that makes it a felony to offer gender-affirming care to adolescents, and other social workers gave evidence to support the bill (Kant & Boskey, 2023). Lead social work organizations such as the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) have not effectively collaborated to create a unified front in advocating for TNB communities in the face of harmful policies, leaving a vacuum in the advocacy arena (Whitfield et al., 2023). During the first Trump administration, there was notable growth in anti-trans legislation, including bills that defined the provision of gender-affirming care to adolescents as child abuse and that would make it illegal to provide gender-affirming mental health care. Only after more than a hundred other organizations drafted a letter defending gender-affirming care did the NASW offer itself as a co-signer (Kant & Boskey, 2023). Much of the social work leadership in support of TNB people has come from the grassroots or from the purposeful actions of LGBTQ+ faculty, students, and community members; one example was a national town hall on anti-trans policies and social work education organized by the University of Kansas Center for LGBTQ+ Research and Advocacy (Greenwood & Pacey, 2023). There is a need for social workers to be able to both be aware of and critically engage with anti-trans policy frames in order to more effectively challenge them.

### **Gaps and Research Question**

To date, most discourse analyses of anti-trans bills have focused on bathroom access and sports, with some focus on education bills. However, there has been little attempt to analyze discourse *across* different types of bills impacting TNB communities to reveal larger discursive

patterns. Martin and Rahilly (2023) have called for more research that looks at discursive themes in anti-trans bills since athlete bans were first introduced. There has been a strong surge of anti-trans bills in the Southeastern U.S., calling for greater attention and analysis. TNB people in this region face notable hostility, with more than half of the known murders of TNB people between 2013-2019 occurring in the Southern U.S. while this region only has 38% of the U.S. population (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, n.d.). This study aims to address these gaps by studying the discourse of anti-trans state bills introduced in the Southeastern U.S. in 2023 and how they are upholding cisgender dominance.

The research question of this study is:

- How is cisgender identification and dominance being legitimized and reinforced through recent political discourse in the Southeastern United States?

### **Methods**

This study uses critical discourse analysis to examine anti-transgender policies in the Southeastern U.S. that were introduced in 2023. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) exposes the hidden dynamics of power that inform everyday social acts (Fowler & Mountz, 2023) and reveals how certain uses of language maintain or disrupt existing power structures (Jen et al., 2021). CDA focuses on not just what a text *says*, but what a text *does*, including how language is used to construct what is viewed as “truth” (Leotti et al., 2022). CDA can be used to examine how certain people, behaviors, or beliefs are constructed as the “norm” and others are cast as the “other” and subjected to stigma (Leotti et al., 2022). In social work, CDA can be particularly helpful in uncovering how groups of people (especially underrepresented groups) are described and whether language is advancing constructions that emphasize the humanity and agency of populations or that denigrate and disempower them (Jen et al.). CDA aligns with this project’s

conceptual frameworks by deconstructing and questioning the underpinnings of gender-related policy discourse (informed by feminist post-structuralism) and taking an overtly political stance in critiquing the ways that cisgender dominance is being upheld through discourse (informed by structural cisgenderism).

### **Selection of Data**

This study focused on state bills introduced in the Southeastern U.S. in 2023. I selected the Southeast because this is a region with notable policy-driven hostility towards LGBTQ+ populations, yet where large numbers of TNB people live, including sizable Black and Latinx TNB communities (Herman et al., 2022). This is also the region where I am situated as a scholar studying LGBTQIA+ topics. For this project, I defined this region according to the definition of “Southeastern” used by the American Association of Geographers (n.d.), which includes Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. Like other scholars who analyze anti-trans legislation, I chose to focus on any *introduced* legislation, rather than only bills that became law, because the media coverage and public discussion of introduced legislation can have a significant impact on constructions of outgroups and detrimentally impact their well-being. Introduced bills are often the “ideal” version of law being advanced by advocates and shed light on a specific worldview (Desjardins et al., 2022). I focused on bills rather than resolutions, except in the case of South Carolina where joint resolutions can be used to propose constitutional amendments. I also excluded related items, such as “memorials” in Florida that are directed at executive agencies/Congress, as well as other forms of discourse, such as witness testimony and media coverage, to keep the amount of data manageable.

To identify relevant bills, I searched across two legislative databases. Several legislative trackers run by community organizations track anti-LGBTQ legislation; after reviewing several options, I decided to use <http://translegislation.com> to identify anti-TNB bills introduced in 2023 in the Southeast because it offered more comprehensive results than other databases and had an exclusive focus on gender (rather than the larger LGBTQ+ community). Second, to broaden the search, I also used the LegiScan website to search 2023 state bills in the Southeast using keywords that I believed would commonly occur in legislation targeting the transgender community, such as “gender identity,” “gender expression,” “biological male,” “biological female,” “transgender,” and “opposite sex.” I reviewed some of the bills identified by <http://translegislation.com> to add commonly used language that I did not expect to the list of keywords, such as “immutable,” “impersonator,” “cabaret,” “puberty blocker,” and “diversity equity inclusion.” When reviewing bills, I paid attention to whether the bill appeared to further cisgender dominance, as proposed in the first research question. Generally, this meant examining whether a state bill promoted or furthered the power of cisgender people, usually by taking action to deny the power, humanity, and/or agency of TNB people. Although the LegiScan search produced some bill results that provided discursive evidence of challenges to cisgender dominance (i.e., they supported TNB people, such as HB1657 in Virginia that included LGBTQ+ input for a STEM education advisory board), those results were greatly outnumbered by bills upholding cisgender dominance and were not included in the analysis because they did not reflect the focus of the research question. This process was repeated for each state, and the identified bills were retrieved from state legislative websites or legislative databases. This process resulted in 158 retrieved state bills; after removing 31 exact or near-exact duplicates, 127 state bills remained for analysis.

### **Analytic Approach**

Copies of the bills were uploaded to NVivo qualitative software for analysis. Within NVivo, I reviewed each state bill, applying line-by-line and in vivo coding as part of a thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017). As others have noted, CDA calls for dialogic approaches to analysis (Willey-Sthapit et al., 2022); this encompassed me asking questions of the text, analyzing patterns across bills based on previous scholarship, and putting the state bills in dialogue with each other by comparing the patterns emerging across and across topics. The analysis focused particularly on how the language of these state bills reinforced the dominance and normalization of cisgender existence, including looking at the subtleties of what is implied or left unsaid by this policy discourse (Leotti et al., 2022). After reviewing the 127 bills, I created a visual representation of themes using Canva, grouping like codes together and identifying main themes and subthemes. From there, main themes and exemplar text from the bills were identified to use as evidence of these themes.

### **Positionality and Seeking Feedback**

Reflexivity is a key part of the rigor of qualitative research (Willey-Sthapit et al., 2022), and this includes speaking about what draws us to this research and how our perspectives of this topic have been informed. I am drawn to this work as a white, queer cisgender woman, now living in the Southeastern U.S., who has been engaging in scholarship and action to try to disrupt cisgender dominance. I have lived in the Southeast for 14 years and see a critical need to do analytic work about the unique context of this region and the strong macro-level discourse here that perpetuates harm against TNB people. I also hold a particularly unique perspective as a cisgender woman who received what might be termed “gender-affirming care” as a teenager, yet did not face the systemic harassment, barriers, or disabling of my medical agency that TNB

young people face because my care was not seen as a threat to structural cisgenderism (Seelman, 2022).

As part of the analytic process, I sought feedback from two individuals—one who was familiar with post-structuralism and critical perspectives, and another who is active in critical scholarship related to TNB communities. This feedback process has helped to inform my coverage of previous literature, my approach to the state legislative data, and my discussion of implications based on the research findings; for example, their input led to clearer linkages between this study’s conceptual framework and the work of Gramsci, a more thorough discussion of the need for social workers to address the fallout of anti-TNB bills, and the creation of tables and charts displaying information about the state bills analyzed.

### **Findings**

In 2023, 127 unique state bills were introduced in the Southeastern U.S. that attempted to legitimize and reinforce cisgender identification and dominance. Very few of the bills explicitly used terms such as transgender, gender identity, or gender-affirming care, instead using veiled and/or pathologizing language such as “immutable,” “gender ideology,” “claimed gender,” and “sexual deviation.” The identified bills targeted different spheres of life that intersect with gender, from birth certificates to educational settings, healthcare, sex-segregated facilities (bathrooms), and sports. See Supplemental Table 1 for a list of included bills, organized by policy topic and state. The most common topic within the analyzed state bills was gender-affirming care, followed by K-12 education (see Supplemental Figure 1). For consistency’s sake, all house bills are referred to using the acronym HB and senate bills as SB within this paper, even if some states might use slightly different acronyms (e.g., H) in their own legislative processes.

| Insert Supplemental Table 1 approximately here |

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I will cover three overarching themes that appeared in these bills: (1) attempts to prohibit, stigmatize, and erase identities that counter cisgender normativity; (2) creation of a narrative of cisgender people as “victims” who are under attack; and (3) emerging efforts to undermine regulatory bodies – such as educational accreditation and professional licensure – that have policies and ethical codes that confront cisgender dominance. For each theme, I present examples of text from state bills that demonstrate the presence of that theme within political discourse. In general, there was no substantial disconfirming evidence of these themes within the bills analyzed, as many had highly similar language or foci, although some themes (e.g., treating TNB identities as fake) were more thoroughly present across many bills than other themes (e.g., treating gender fluidity as a phase). In presenting these findings, I purposefully frame language in a way that makes visible the privileging, legitimizing, and reinforcing of cisgender identities (although none of the bills even use the term “cisgender”) to help reveal the intentions behind such discourse, drawing inspiration from scholars who do similar work to reveal whiteness within racist discourse (e.g., Beck, 2019; Christie, 2010; Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016).

### **Attempts to Prohibit, Stigmatize, and Erase Identities that Counter Cisgender Normativity**

Within these state bills, there are efforts to stop the existence of gender expansiveness and creativity, at times trying to outlaw TNB identities (e.g., bills that restrict the sex listed on a birth certificate), attaching stigma (e.g., calling trans people “male and female impersonators” in bills outlawing drag shows), or making trans lives invisible (e.g., bills that exclude trans kids from sports teams in their schools). In Table 1, I have provided examples of discursive themes

that attempt to legitimize and reinforce the normalization and dominance of cisgender identities, with exemplars of such efforts drawn from the language of specific bills.

| Insert Table 1 here |

Many of the identified discursive themes in Table 1 reinforce TNB stigma, including framing that presents TNB identities as immoral/criminal, unnatural, pathological, and sterilizing. The implied message of this discourse is that cisgender people, in contrast to TNB people, are inherently moral, natural and healthy in their experience of gender and live in a way that promotes sexual reproduction. These contrasting frames are then used to justify punishing, surveilling, censoring, and segregating TNB people, attempting to prohibit them from existing and thriving.

Other discursive themes in Table 1 focus on erasing TNB people, such as the frame that TNB people are fake and contrary to science, or that TNB identities cannot exist without medical interventions. Cisgender identities are comparatively framed as being “real” and “scientific” and presented as a natural identity that never requires medical intervention to conform to cultural gender norms. Another theme treats TNB identities as “just a phase,” one that most people will outgrow, and they will regret any steps taken to medically affirm their gender. This framing both stigmatizes gender expansiveness (as something to “regret”) and erases the existence of TNB people who live outside the gender binary without needing or wanting medical intervention. This framing assumes that cisgender existence is permanent and that cisgender people are always satisfied with their gendered existence. Finally, several bills—particularly those focused on gender-affirming care access for minors—use a framing that treats TNB people—especially teenagers—as unable to make medical decisions for themselves that may have long-term consequences. Such an argument is used to prohibit teenagers from taking such action, including

access gender-affirming care. This framing purposefully ignores norms in society that allow cisgender teenagers to provide assent (with parent/guardian consent) when considering forms of medical care unrelated to gender transitions.

### **Creation of a Narrative of Cisgender People as “Victims” Who Are Under Attack**

Another thread among anti-trans bills in the Southeastern U.S. is the framing of cisgender people as being “victims” who are “under attack” and needing various forms of protection and action to support them. Although not nearly the most common bill topic, there were three different state bills analyzed (see Table S1 and Figure S1) that primarily focused on protecting biased beliefs and discriminatory behavior, while other bills included such discursive framing when focusing on other topics (e.g., K-12 schools). Frequently, the focus is on subpopulations of cisgender people who are already commonly framed in American society as being vulnerable, such as cisgender children and cisgender women. However, cisgender parents as well as those cisgender people who disagree with TNB existence or equity are also portrayed as being “under attack.” Table 2 provides examples of groups of cisgender people who are being framed as needing protection.

| Insert Table 2 here |

There were several different ways such discourse from Table 2 is used within state bills. First, bills about sports and facilities (e.g., bathrooms, locker rooms) frequently base their argumentation on an assumption that transgender women/girls pose a threat to the physical and sexual well-being and safety of cisgender women and girls. Such argumentation is built on the underlying assumption that female bodies are “naturally” weaker and more vulnerable than male bodies; because transgender women/girls typically are assigned a male sex at birth, their presence is thus framed as a “risk” to cisgender women and girls. These arguments are made without evidence that the presence of transgender women/girls results in increased injury or

harm to cisgender women/girls in sports or in facilities. Within such discourse, transgender men/boys generally go unmentioned, remaining invisible.

In a similar fashion, other bills frame TNB people as a threat to cisgender children (see Table 2). This framing often appears in bills related to drag shows, school bathrooms and locker rooms, and in some cases gender-affirming care, including counseling services. Some of the discourse of these bills uses “social contagion” framing – that simply being exposed to the presence of TNB people might lead cisgender children to “catch” on to such “fashionable” (WV HB3183) ideas and claim a TNB identity themselves. These bills subsequently argue for steps such as prohibiting minors from accessing drag shows, controlling what books or lessons children have access to in libraries or school, and requiring bathrooms to be restricted to either males or females. Bills related to bathrooms and locker rooms for children, such as KY HB30, assume that even the presence of bodies that look different (e.g., TNB bodies) threaten children’s safety and prompts embarrassment and shame. Even some bills related to gender-affirming care took a stance of needing to “protect” children, implying that cisgender children are at danger of being influenced by adult figures to question their cisgender identity or seek out treatments like gender-related counseling or puberty blockers. These arguments build on assumptions such as TNB identities not being “natural” or real or being “just a phase” of adolescence that will be overcome with time, making such health interventions inappropriate.

Third, another example of discourse treating cisgender people as “victims” are bills that frame cisgender parents as the people under attack (see Table 2). This framing largely appears in bills related to K-12 education (the second most common policy topic in bills analyzed, see Table S1 and Figure S1)—such as bills that attempt to censor what schools can teach about gender and diversity, that require reporting a student who is questioning their gender to their

parents or guardians, that restrict the behaviors of school employees related to supporting gender diversity, and that control school policies that relate to gender identity. The discourse uses frames about “parents’ rights,” including their right to control their child’s education and moral development. The implication is that if cisgender parents are given more control, they can stop their children from being TNB. There are also precise ways these bills attempt to shut down supportive actions that cisgender allies may take to support TNB youth, such as outlawing displays of “slogans, emblems, phrases, or symbols” that support LGBTQ+ people on school property (KY HB 173) and forcing school employees to “out” TNB students (KY HB 470), all with the goal of shutting down supports for TNB students and giving control to cisgender parents.

The fourth group protected by the discourse is cisgender people who disagree with TNB existence or equity (see Table 2). This framing is less explored in previous research. The bills that use this framing often focus on topics such as the allowable behaviors of state employees including K-12 and college employees (e.g., the right to refuse to use correct pronouns for a TNB individual), protecting anti-TNB beliefs and behaviors from being subject to claims of discrimination or defamation, and prohibiting state government from interfering or bringing suit against businesses or foster/adoptive parents who uphold cisnormative beliefs in their actions or policies. What is striking about the language of such bills is their attention to explicitly protecting cisnormative beliefs and behaviors—such as the right to refuse to use pronouns that do not match a person’s sex assigned at birth—and the lack of mention of protecting the opposite behavior (e.g., the right to refuse to use incorrect pronouns for a TNB person).

#### **Efforts to Undermine TNB-Affirming Regulatory Bodies (e.g., Accreditation & Licensure)**

The language of these bills suggests that bill supporters anticipate pushback to these proposed laws from regulatory bodies that are generally more supportive of TNB communities. Some of the proposed bills either anticipate such pushback or attempt to proactively overrule the policies of these bodies, such as accreditors in higher education (e.g., Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges), programmatic accreditors like CSWE, and state boards overseeing licensure (for medicine, counseling, social work, etc.). There are signals that the bill supporters expect such regulatory bodies to challenge the cisnormative policies of schools and medical institutions with threats of rescinding accreditation or enforcing licensing standards that require TNB affirmation among practitioners. Such anticipatory signals show up in the defensive posture of proposed state bills that try to pre-empt such challenges, as well as in language that directs regulatory bodies about what their policies should be. An example of a defensive posture is shown in AL HB261, which prohibits any “government entity, licensing or accrediting organization, or athletic organization” from filing complaints, investigating, or taking “any other adverse action” against public schools or colleges in the state for upholding sex-segregated sports teams. SC HB 3611 prohibits removing the accreditation or licensure of any person who is acting based on a “sincerely held religious belief or moral conviction,” specifically naming protection for the belief in “the nature of male and female.”

Other bills dictate what regulatory bodies should be constructing as their policy, such as MS HB 1126. This bill says that anyone who refers a patient under the age of 21 for gender-affirming care will be considered as engaging in “unprofessional conduct” and is “subject to discipline by the appropriate licensing entity for the health care professional.” This bill also says that mandated reporters must report anyone who allows a youth under age 21 to receive gender-affirming care, as this is considered felony child abuse and a sex crime against a minor. Another

example is SC HB 4290, which restricts units in public higher education in the state from taking positions on topics such as allyship, transgender ideology [sic], anti-racism, social justice, and systemic oppression, all topics that I would argue are central to the competencies in modern social work accreditation through CSWE.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to analyze the discourse of anti-trans state bills from the Southeastern United States in 2023 and to examine how such discourse upholds cisgender dominance. Through the analysis of 127 state bills, common policy frames legitimize cisgender dominance through particular strategies—including by discounting TNB people and their experiences of satisfaction with transitioning and/or living as TNB, by ignoring gender diversity as a reality of human life, by overlooking that not all TNB people require medical interventions, and by purposefully ignoring the established science about how supporting and affirming TNB people is connected to better health outcomes. These strategies allow for advancing the voices of politicians, peddlers of pseudoscience, and anti-TNB advocates over both the vast majority of TNB people and the rigorous scientific evidence about TNB lives and the harms caused by stigmatizing policies. By using the phrase *scientific evidence* here, I refer to research that uses methods that demonstrate rigor, validity, trustworthiness, reliability, and appropriate sampling for the study's purpose; ideally, such research would also involve TNB perspectives either within the research team or as community consultants. Some of the pseudoscience being used to advance anti-TNB positions (such as the statement that TNB identity is “just a phase”) can be demonstrated as false by a review of existing scientific evidence (e.g., Olson et al., 2022).

Some themes from these findings add to previous literature. Past research has recorded policy frames that treat TNB people as immoral, indecent, or criminal (Stone, 2019), fake or

unnatural (Alstott et al., 2024), or pathological or problematic (Alstott et al., 2024; Kant & Boskey, 2023). Such frames are built on bias and pseudoscience and are harmful to TNB people through the reproduction of stigma. Scholars have also critiqued policy frames that treat TNB identities as requiring medical interventions. While healthcare interventions are an important and valued aspect of gender affirmation for some TNB people, others may have no interest in gender-affirming care or focus on other factors, such as their social transition (Kant & Boskey, 2023).

Similarly, researchers have criticized political discourse that regards TNB adolescents as incapable of making long-term decisions (Alstott et al., 2024; Kant & Boskey, 2023) and that treats TNB identities as “just a phase” (see Table 1), frequent frames used in bills that restrict access to gender-affirming medical care. These bills are being introduced despite the reality that gender-affirming surgeries are generally not used among TNB youth (Alstott et al., 2024); however, many of these bills also include restrictions on puberty blockers, which are included in treatment guidelines from the World Professional Association for Transgender Health Standards of Care for TNB adolescents (Lockmiller, 2023). This framing underestimates the capacity of youth and young adults for understanding long-term risk and is counter to evidence that parent/guardian consent can be effectively accompanied by a youth assent model (Kremen et al., 2021). Unfortunately, the framing fits within a larger pattern in social work of treating TNB people as “less capable” of making decisions and less deserving of autonomy than cisgender people (Kant & Boskey, 2023). Presenting TNB identity as being “just a phase” mirrors policy frames used in the past against lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, implying that they are simply confused or have been socially influenced by others but will eventually identify as straight/cisgender. Such a frame undercuts the agency of LGBTQIA+ people in understanding themselves, ignores the experiences of those who experience a steady identity from youth

through adulthood, and stigmatizes LGBTQIA+ identities. What is also clear is that those advocating for bills restricting gender-affirming care do not intend to stop at restricting care for youth—multiple state bills from 2023 attempt to restrict healthcare access or insurance coverage for TNB adults (e.g., MS HB1126; MS SB2864; SC H3730), suggesting that a larger intention of this movement is to stop gender-affirming care access for *all* TNB people.

This analysis also uncovered the implied framing of cisgender people that is part of this discourse (see Table 1). Contrary to what these frames imply, being cisgender is not necessarily more moral, “real,” or healthy than being TNB. Cisgender identity can be intertwined with medical interventions – such as when a young cis woman chooses to get breast implants to appear more feminine or when cisgender individuals receive medical care to balance their hormone levels (Seelman, 2022). Cisgender teenagers are often allowed to assent to medical procedures (paired with parent/guardian consent), based upon our understanding of them as capable of assessing risk and understanding consequences (Kremen et al., 2021). Additionally, although some of the analyzed legislative discourse (Table 1) implies that cisgender identity is permanent (because it is assumed to be “natural” or “God-given”), in the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey, 8% of TNB participants said they first started to think they were transgender sometime after the age of 25, supporting the idea that perceptions of one’s gender can change over the life course (James et al., 2016) . Unpacking the implied messaging about cisgender people can be useful in countering frames that, on the surface, are hyper-focused on TNB people, yet are built on cisnormativity.

Another common pattern in anti-trans policy framing is the narrative of groups needing “protection” from TNB people (see Table 2). Other scholars have identified similar patterns of framing that emphasize protecting cis women/girls (Atwood et al., 2023; Fischer, 2023),

cisgender children (Kant & Boskey, 2023), and cisgender parents (Fowler & Mountz, 2023). These frames are often built around myths that are meant to prompt fear, panic, and recrimination of TNB people—whether myths of TNB sexual predators, TNB “masquerading” as women to get an advantage in women’s sports, or social contagion narratives (that kids will become trans by being exposed to information about TNB people). The image of the innocent child is used as a symbol of a policy stance that – as it is framed—no one could *logically* be against, putting TNB identities and the queerness they represent as a risk to child well-being and subsequently the well-being of the future of cisgender normativity (Edelman, 2004). What is a new thread in the present analysis is that this framing of “protection” also extends to cisgender people who disagree with TNB existence, protecting them from discrimination, punishment, or acting in ways that are contrary to their personal beliefs. Some of these state bills protect specific cishnormative beliefs, such as believing that there are only two possible genders or that pronouns should be used based on a person’s sex assigned at birth, legislatively enforcing such consciousness. Yet, there is no similar stated protection for the opposite beliefs, indicating that views supporting TNB equity are not meant to be protected. By framing certain cisgender groups as “victims” needing protection, these frames are used to justify policies that uphold cisgender dominance and that punish gender transgressions through surveillance, criminalization, enforcement of the gender binary, and censorship. Past research has highlighted the very real harms caused by such state violence, such as the problematics of surveillance, gender binary enforcement, and predictive policing (Shelton et al., 2021).

Other dynamics of policy framing are less discussed in past literature. One is the framing that all gender-affirming care results in sterilization and the inability to have sex or orgasm (Table 1), statements based in myth and intended to provoke fear. Puberty blockers are one

example of a procedure that may be used with adolescents that does not sterilize (Kremen et al., 2021). Other scholars have done work identifying the value of gender-affirming hormone therapy for improving orgasm quality (Zaliznyak et al., 2023) and detailing how access to gender-affirming surgeries promote sexual pleasure for TNB populations (Bradford & Spencer, 2020).

Another policy frame less explored is that many of these bills are increasing the “cost” for cisgender allies in taking a public stance to support TNB equity by accelerating punishments and creating greater fear and anxiety. For example, these state bills enforce punishment for actions that affirm TNB people, such as displaying supportive symbols (e.g., a trans pride flag), referring a student to medical providers to learn more about gender-affirming care, disclosing one’s own identity as a sexual minority, or presenting oneself as a safe adult for TNB students to talk to (hard to do when state bills require automatically reporting any gender transgressiveness to parents/guardians). Social workers would benefit from candid discussion of how to support TNB individuals in line with our professional *Code of Ethics*, despite such threats of punishment.

Finally, several state bills had policy frames focused on educational accreditation and professional licensure. The anti-trans policy discourse in these areas is moving in a direction of creating “carve outs” for religious beliefs. The move here is to frame accreditation and licensure policies that support TNB people as a “threat” to religious freedom, with an aim to dismantle accreditation and licensing standards that support TNB people and/or create ways to use accreditors who align with cis-dominant viewpoints. There is a danger here of further development of a tier of accreditors who prioritize anti-trans agendas that states might opt into. Some states (e.g., North Carolina) have already passed laws to require changing accrediting bodies for public higher education after each accreditation cycle (Moody, 2023). Some of these

state policies also spell out how licensing bodies should work and the political beliefs they should enforce, such as restricting healthcare professionals from referring people under age 21 for gender-affirming care. Such political involvement in licensure is worrisome for social work—if state licensing boards are forced to conform to the political agenda of legislators and are unable to independently determine their standards as appropriate for social work, how do we hold a consistent set of ethical expectations for licensed social workers that align with our profession’s core values and principles?

### **Implications for Social Work**

This study detailed the discourse occurring in state bills in the Southeastern U.S. that upholds cisgender dominance. Social workers have an opportunity to use their own discursive strategies that can counter such efforts, particularly as we engage in macro practice. Some policy counter frames that can be used by social work practitioners, scholars, and students as part of challenging cisgender dominance include:

1. **TNB people (not politicians or cisgender gatekeepers) are the experts on their own lives.** This framing builds from similar work of disability activists that uses the language “Nothing about us without us” (Charlton, 1998). Policy decisions that affect the well-being of TNB people should be based in their voices and experiences, particularly as linked to rigorous scientific evidence (ideally, also driven by the TNB community).
2. **People deserve freedom** in making informed medical decisions for themselves and their children (such as making informed decisions about gender-affirming care) and accessing comprehensive education programs about gender and sex for their children in school.
3. **TNB people deserve privacy** in making their own medical decisions, deciding how to live and present their gender, and determining what their transition process looks like.

4. **Science already shows us what is helpful to TNB people** – for example, a consistent and large body of research indicates that affirming and supporting TNB people promotes their well-being, while rejecting them is harmful (e.g., Lelutiu-Weinberger et al., 2020; Simons et al., 2013). Social work scholars, research organizations, and students need to do more to highlight the existing research about the importance of affirming TNB people and the harms of anti-transgender policies. It would be a huge step if social work research organizations could partner with supportive grant funders to create funding streams for TNB scholars to continue to advance research about what promotes thriving among TNB communities. This is even more of a critical issue considering the recent executive order from President Trump early in 2025, declaring that no federal grant funds can be directed towards research related to “gender ideology” (The White House, 2025, Section 3(g)).

Social workers need to do more to address the harms created by such bills and to establish safety for TNB people. Social work educators need to better prepare cisgender social workers not just in understanding strategies for being a co-conspirator in disrupting cisgender dominance but also the potential consequences for doing so in a restrictive political environment, which is likely going to be a continued reality in much of the Southeastern U.S. (and beyond) for the near future. Although the NASW has previously released statements supporting gender-affirming care and reiterating the profession’s commitment to challenging prejudice and discrimination affecting TGD communities (e.g., NASW, 2023), there is a need for considering what actions social work organizations might take to protect students or practicing social workers who advocate for TGD people and face threats to their education/internship position, their jobs, or their own lives. Such actions might include helping cisgender allies connect to legal advocates, and challenging the states, colleges, and organizations that are upholding harmful laws that replicate anti-TNB bias.

There are opportunities for cisgender social workers to take more active stances against political interference in social work licensure, against laws that make it difficult to protect the privacy of TNB youth who disclose their identity, against censorship in education, and against requirements to report “child abuse” in families that support TNB children. Some BSW and MSW students are already showing what this can look like by educating elected officials about the impacts of proposed bills and through writing op-eds (e.g., see Hanna, 2024; Olson, 2023). Our BSW and MSW programs can do a better job of helping students understand the consequences they may face in taking such active stances, such as impacts on their licensure or employment (sanctions or being fired), experiencing social rejection when expressing support for TNB people, and possible doxxing when they take a public stance on TNB equity in the media.

Part of the challenge for social work is in articulating and enacting a vision of a more utopian (queer) world that has not yet been achieved influenced by theories of queer futurity (e.g., Muñoz, 2019), rather than always operating in crisis mode to present threats to TNB lives. There is a gap in social work education, research, policy, and practice in terms of planning for the futures we *want*, as has been articulated by other scholars exploring foresight practice in social work (e.g., Nissen, 2020). In 2024, there was a national forum run by the Social Work Futures Lab that gathered social workers from around the world in a virtual space to discuss topics like the future of Black aliveness, using foresight in social work education, and possible futures in conservative places (Social Work Futures Lab, 2024). We can continue to build on such efforts in our communities, our research, and our classrooms to better envision the futures we desire and bring them about through action.

Shifting dynamics of higher education accreditation and social work licensure require that our profession proactively consider how we will stand for TNB equity at a time when some

politicians are dictating which accreditors are used and how to control the actions of licensed professionals through licensing bodies. Will CSWE take a direct stance for TNB equity, such as with the development of specific TNB-affirming policy expectations for social work programs and/or more explicit competencies related to gender diversity and affirmation (Whitfield et al., 2023)? Will CSWE take action to help protect schools that are acting in line with accreditation expectations about challenging injustice and advancing anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion when they are located in states where legislators are increasingly hostile to such efforts, or will they allow politicians to dictate what can be taught or what policies and stances a School of Social Work can have? How will state licensing boards adjust (or not) to try to stop political interference from elected officials pushing a partisan agenda, and what role can the National Association of Social workers play in this dynamic? These are questions yet to be answered but critical to social work's stance in relation to advancing TNB equity.

### **Limitations**

Although this study had several strengths – such as analyzing anti-trans state bills across multiple topics – there are limitations worth mentioning. First, this project only examined state bills in the Southeastern U.S.; there is a need for research in other regions of the U.S. and in other countries affecting TNB communities. Second, this project only studied *introduced* bills, not those passed into law; there may be particularly important impacts of political discourse when anti-trans bills are signed into law. Third, this project did not analyze discourse outside of legislative text; there is value in studying other sources of information, such as witness testimony related to bills, media coverage, and social media posts.

### **Conclusion**

This research detailed some of the discursive themes appearing in introduced legislation in the Southeastern United States that uphold cisgender dominance. Since this project was started, there continues to be a surge in anti-trans bills in the United States, with 87 such bills passed into law in 2023 alone (Trans Legislation Tracker, n.d.) and executive orders issued at the start of President Trump's term further attacking the existence of TNB people (The White House, 2025). Social workers face important decisions about how we will resist and organize in the face of such legislative efforts, how we will contribute to policy frames that affirm TNB communities, and how we will prepare future social workers to dismantle cisgender dominance in our society.

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**Table 1**

*Prohibitions, Stigmatization, & Erasure of TNB Identities: Explicit and Implicit Messages and Example Language from State Bills in the Southeast U.S. in 2023*

Explicit Messages that Subordinate TNB Identities	Implicit Messages that Affirm, Uphold, and Normalize Cisgender Dominance	Example Language in State Bills
Being TNB is immoral, indecent, and inherently criminal	Being cisgender is moral, decent, and inherently non-criminal	<p>AL HB401 – classifies “drag queens or drag kings” as content that is “obscene” and “harmful to minors,” alongside of behaviors such as bestiality</p> <p>TN HB0001 – describes gender-affirming care as “unethical” and “immoral” and says that organizations that provide such healthcare also kill “tens of thousands of unborn children” (referring to abortion)</p>
TNB identity is fake and contrary to science	Cisgender identity is “real” and “scientific”	<p>FL SB1320 – says that it shall be the policy of all K-12 schools that “a person’s sex is an immutable biological trait and that it is false to ascribe to a person a pronoun that does not correspond to such person’s sex”</p> <p>KY HB470 – defines gender as “the psychological, behavioral, social, and cultural aspects of being a person whose sex is <i>male or female</i>” (emphasis mine)</p> <p>SC HB3730 – defines “gender reassignment surgery” as procedures that “alter or remove healthy physical or anatomical characteristics or features that are typical for the individual’s biological sex” with the aim of “<i>resembl[ing]</i> a sex different from the individual’s biological sex” (emphasis mine)</p> <p>SC HB3827 – groups “gender theory, including nonbinary pronouns or honorifics” as topics that are “not firmly or widely established, empirically or scientifically accurate”</p>
Gender expansiveness and fluidity are unnatural	Cisgender binaries and gender permanence are the “natural order”	<p>AL HB405 – defines female as “an individual whose biological reproductive system is designed to produce ova” and male as “an individual whose biological reproductive system is designed to fertilize the ova of a female”</p> <p>WV HB3183 – states that “as divinely created beings, humans are necessarily subject to the natural order established by our Creator, including biological realities;” invokes Erik Erikson to argue that “normal, healthy adolescence is the natural process by which children develop within their biological parameters toward realization of their natural potential;” states that “the objective reality of biological sex is self-evident and incontrovertible, leaving no need or place for...gender identity counseling”</p>
Being TNB is unhealthy and pathological	Being cisgender is healthy and non-pathological	<p>SC SB0274 – Instructs educators to direct students “afflicted with a gender identity condition” to a mental health professional, and to avoid encouraging students “to pursue gender transition procedures”</p> <p>WV HB1707 – groups a student who “is self-identifying as a gender that is different than his [sic] biological sex” with suicidal students and requires immediately informing parents so they are “aware of the student’s mental state” and to offer counseling services</p>

<p>Gender-affirming care always results in sterilization and permanently removes the capacity to have sex or to orgasm</p>	<p>Cisgender identity (and alignment of sex and gender) always promotes human reproduction and sexual capacity</p>	<p>NC HB786 – Describes both puberty blockers and surgeries removing reproductive organs as being expected to result in “irreversible sterility” for children</p> <p>NC SB560 – States the puberty blockers can “prevent your child from ever being able to engage in sexual activity or achieve orgasm for the rest of...life”</p>
<p>TNB identity is intertwined with medical interventions and cannot exist without them</p>	<p>Cisgender identity is “natural” and does not require medical intervention to conform to cultural gender norms</p>	<p>FL HB1265 – Defines “gender dysphoria treatment” as “surgery, hormone replacement therapy, or any other procedure or treatment that assists persons with gender dysphoria in transitioning”</p> <p>SC SB0364 – defines a “gender change” as changing from one gender to the opposite one through a medical procedure; to change the sex on one’s birth certificate, a person must have an affidavit from a licensed physician indicating a person has “permanently” undergone “gender change” medical procedures such as surgeries, hormone therapy, or puberty blockers</p>
<p>TNB people – especially teenagers – are incapable of making medical decisions with long-term consequences</p>	<p>Cisgender people – including teenagers – are capable of making medical decisions with long-term consequences.</p>	<p>GA SB140 – states that “taking a wait-and-see approach to minors with gender dysphoria, providing counseling, and allow the child time to mature and develop his or her [sic] identity is preferable to causing the child permanent physical damage;” says that children need “protection...from undergoing unnecessary and irreversible medical treatment” and they cannot make these decisions because their “brains and executive functioning are still developing”</p> <p>NC HB786 – declares that minors are “incapable of comprehending the negative implications and life-course difficulties” related to gender-affirming care; prohibits offering gender-affirming care (surgeries, puberty blockers, hormone therapy) to minors or supporting them in obtaining such care</p> <p>WV HB3183 – says that “minors lack the autonomy and resources of adults, and are generally bound to their environments”; prohibits any mental health counseling, treatment or referral by any public employee; prohibits minors from obtaining any gender-affirming hormonal treatments or surgeries</p>
<p>Gender expansiveness is “just a phase” and most people who undergo medical procedures to affirm their gender come to regret that choice</p>	<p>Being cisgender is permanent and always satisfactory across the life course</p>	<p>GA HB653 – states that “studies consistently demonstrate that the vast majority of children who are gender nonconforming or experience distress at identifying with their biological sex come to identify with their biological sex in adolescence or adulthood, rendering most medical health care interventions unnecessary”</p> <p>NC HB786 – states that the “internal sense of discordance [of gender] is not permanent or fixed, but to the contrary, numerous studies have shown that a substantial majority of children who experience discordance between their sex and identity will outgrow the discordance” in puberty and will be cisgender</p> <p>WV HB3183 – “normal characteristics of healthy adolescence include a variety of transient and evolving interests, personal insecurities, self-doubt and body image concerns, none of which should become permanent fixtures of identity, particularly as a result of outside influence”; “if left to natural maturation and socialization processes, and parental guidance, such issues are generally resolved during the transition to adulthood, or sufficient coping mechanisms are learned to enable a functional life”</p>

**Table 2**

*Creating a Narrative of Cisgender People as “Victims” Who are Under Attack: Example Groups Framed as Victims and Related Policy Discourse from State Bills in the Southeast U.S. in 2023*

Group Framed as Victims	Example Language in State Bills
Cisgender women/girls	<p>AL HB261 – declares that having separate athletic teams by sex assigned at birth “reduces the chance of injury to biological female athletes”</p> <p>MS HB1144 – called the “Title IX Preservation Act,” uses the statement that “biological differences between the sexes leave females more physically vulnerable than males to specific forms of violence, including sexual violence”</p>
Cisgender children	<p>AL HB401 – describes drag shows (termed “male or female impersonators”) as “harmful” to minors and indicates that children need “protection” from them</p> <p>GA HB653 – declares that the state needs to protect its citizens, but “especially vulnerable children,” then prohibits any gender-affirming care for children including puberty-blockers and requires public school staff to notify parents or guardians if their child is questioning their gender</p> <p>KY HB30 – says that “School personnel have a duty to protect the dignity, health, welfare, and privacy” of students... and that “allowing students to use restrooms, locker rooms, or shower rooms that are reserved for...a different biological sex” is “unsafe” and can cause “potential embarrassment, shame, and psychological injury”</p> <p>WV HB3183 – called the “Child Protection Act,” discusses how “outside influences” and “adult agendas” can harm children, who are “suggestible to fashionable ideas,” especially those “who have demonstrated social, emotional, or psychological distress;” prohibits any counseling that questions or affirms a child’s gender; prohibits any affirming symbols in schools and any referrals for hormone therapy and gender-affirming surgeries for minors</p>
Cisgender parents	<p>KY HB173 – says that the rights of parents are “deeply embedded in our nation’s history and tradition” and are “among the unalienable rights...under the Ninth Amendment”</p> <p>MS HB0509 – called the “Families’ Rights and Responsibilities Act,” this bill requires the release of all class syllabi to parents and notification of any instruction that “has the goal or purpose of studying, exploring or informing students about gender roles or stereotypes, gender identity, gender expression;”</p> <p>SC HB3827 – has as a stated purpose to “respect the rights of parents as their child’s decision-makers for health and well-being, including emotional and sexual development” and the “child’s primary source of moral and social values”</p>
Cisgender people who disagree with TNB existence or TNB equity	<p>FL HB991 – states that it is not defamation when allegations of discrimination are related to one’s beliefs about gender identity and that defendants of defamation claims cannot use the plaintiff’s “constitutionally protected religious expression or beliefs” or “scientific beliefs” about gender alone to prove discrimination happened</p> <p>SC H3611 – titled the “Live and Let Live Act,” says that it is designed to keep the government from “discriminating against certain individuals and organizations based on their beliefs regarding marriage and a person’s sex;” explicitly protects the belief “that male (man) and female (woman) refer to an individual’s immutable biological sex”; prohibits the government from interfering with any person who requires specific employee or student dress/grooming or access to bathrooms or overnight lodging based on religious beliefs about sex; prohibits the state from discriminating against foster or adoptive parents who are raising a child based upon “sincerely held religious belief or moral conviction”</p> <p>WV HB3001 – offers protections for K-12 teachers from being required to use pronouns that do not match a student’s “biological sex” from being civilly liable and from experiencing “adverse employment action”</p>

**Table S1***Analyzed State Bills from the Southern United States, 2023, by Policy Topic and State*

<b>Topic</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Bill Numbers</b>	<b>Number of Introduced Bills Across States by Topic</b>
GAC	Florida	HB1421; SB254	29
	Georgia	SB140	
	Kentucky	HB120	
	Mississippi	HB0456; HB0576; HB1125; HB1126; HB1127; HB1258; SB2760; SB2770; SB2861; SB2864; SB2883	
	North Carolina	HB43; SB560	
	South Carolina	HB3730; SB0243; SB0274	
	Tennessee	HB0001; HB1215; HB1447; SB1339	
	Virginia	SB1203	
	West Virginia	HB2007; HB2972; HB3097; SB697	
K-12 Schools	Alabama	HB354	26
	Florida	HB1069; HB1223; HB1629; SB1320	
	Georgia	SB88	
	Kentucky	SB150	
	Mississippi	HB0509; HB1489; SB2058; SB2763; SB2764; SB2765	
	North Carolina	SB49	
	South Carolina	HB3304; HB3466; HB3485; HB3728; SB0234	
	Tennessee	HB1269; HB1414; SB0620	
	Virginia	HB1434; HB1707; HB2432;	
West Virginia	HB3001		
GAC + other topics	Georgia	HB653	11
	Kentucky	HB470	

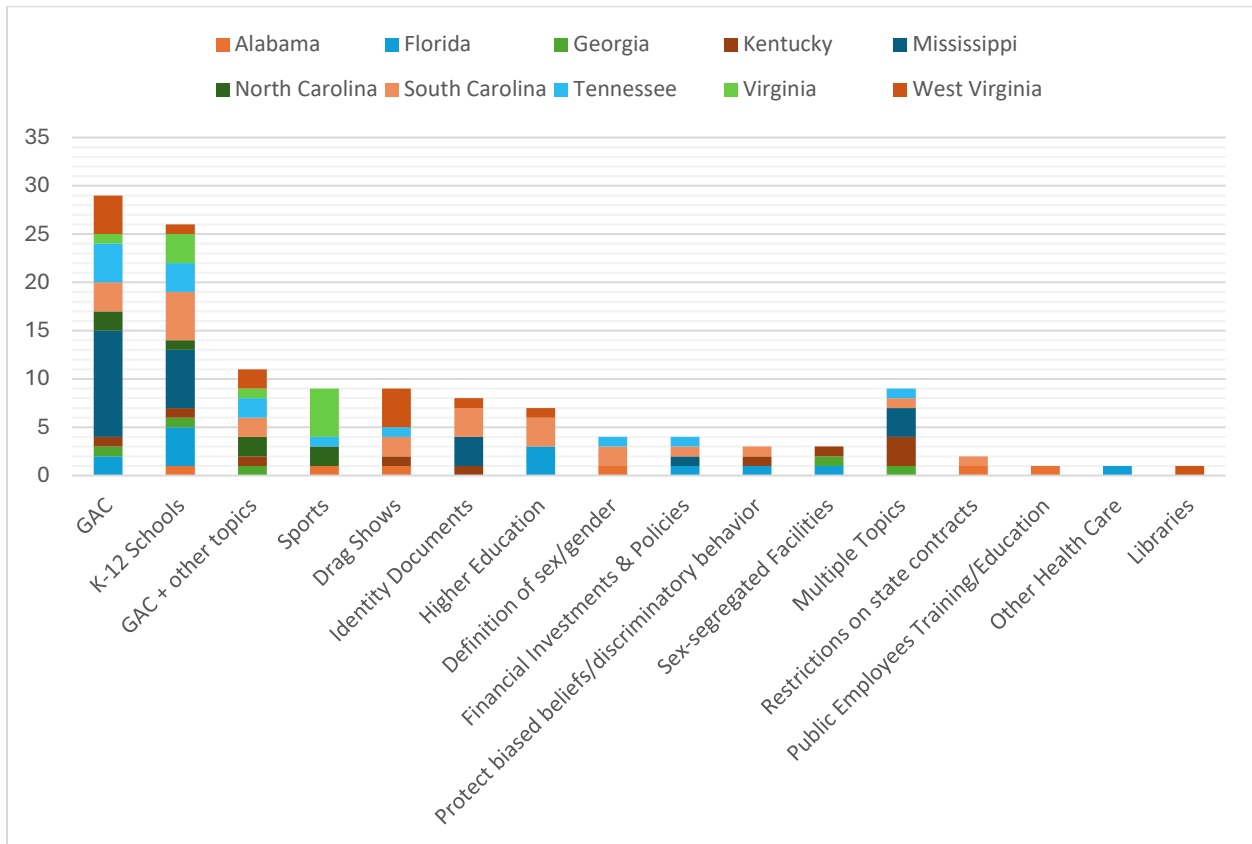
	North Carolina	HB786; HB808	
	South Carolina	HB3551; SB0627	
	Tennessee	HB1378; SB0005	
	Virginia	SB960	
	West Virginia	HB3183; SB692	
Sports	Alabama	HB261	9
	North Carolina	HB574; SB636	
	Tennessee	HB0306	
	Virginia	HB1387; HB1399; SB911; SB962; SB1186	
Drag Shows	Alabama	HB401	9
	Kentucky	SB115	
	South Carolina	HB3616; SB0585	
	Tennessee	HB0030	
	West Virginia	HB3176; SB103; SB252; SB278	
Multiple Topics	Georgia	SB261	9
	Kentucky	HB173; HB177; SB102	
	Mississippi	HB1074; HB1480; SB2820	
	South Carolina	HB3827	
	Tennessee	HB0571	
Identity Documents	Kentucky	HB585	8
	Mississippi	HB1144; SB2076; SB2773	
	South Carolina	SB0332; SB0364; SB0623	
	West Virginia	HB2998	
Higher Education	Florida	HB931; HB999; SB266	7
	South Carolina	HB4289; HB4290; SB0833	
	West Virginia	HB3503	
Definition of Sex/Gender	Alabama	HB405	4
	South Carolina	HB3552; SB0276	
	Tennessee	HB0239	
Financial Investments & Policies	Florida	HB0003	4
	Mississippi	HB1099	

	South Carolina	SB0583	
	Tennessee	HB0728	
Protect Biased Beliefs / Discriminatory Behavior	Florida	HB991	3
	Kentucky	HB58	
	South Carolina	HB3611	
Sex-Segregated Facilities	Florida	HB1521	3
	Georgia	HB836	
	Kentucky	HB30	
Restrictions on State Contracts	Alabama	SB261	2
	South Carolina	HB3564	
Public Employees' Training/Education	Alabama	H007	1
Other Health Care	Florida	HB1265	1
Libraries	West Virginia	HB2923	1

*Note.* GAC = gender-affirming care. These topic classifications are for reader information only and were not used during the analytic process. This table does not include duplicate or near duplicate bills that were excluded from this study's analysis. Bills focused on restricting sports access by sex were labeled here as being related to "Sports," even if they applied to only certain grade levels. If a bill focused on segregating bathroom/facility use by sex, it was labeled as being related to "sex-segregated facilities," even if the bill applied to only certain school levels. Bills about policies related to name changes on school records were labeled by the appropriate level of schooling, rather than as an Identity Documents bill. Bills that focused on gender-affirming care and at least one other topic were classified as GAC + other topics. Bills covering multiple topics not related to gender-affirming care (e.g., sports and required disclosure of student's pronouns to legal guardians) were classified as "Multiple Topics" bills.

**Figure S1**

*Counts of Analyzed State Bills from the Southern U.S., 2023, by Topic and State*



*Note.* GAC = gender-affirming care. These topic classifications are for reader information only and were not used during the analytic process. This chart does not include duplicate or near duplicate bills that were excluded from this study’s analysis. Bills focused on restricting sports access by sex were labeled here as being related to “Sports,” even if they applied to only certain grade levels. If a bill focused on segregating bathroom/facility use by sex, it was labeled as being related to “sex-segregated facilities,” even if the bill applied to only certain school levels. Bills about policies related to name changes on school records were labeled by the appropriate level of schooling, rather than as an Identity Documents bill. Bills that focused on gender-affirming care and at least one other topic were classified as GAC + other topics. Bills covering multiple topics not related to gender-affirming care (e.g., sports and required disclosure of student’s pronouns to legal guardians) were classified as “Multiple Topics” bills.