

A Year of Hate: Anti-Drag Mobilization Efforts Targeting LGBTQ+ People in the US

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Executive Summary

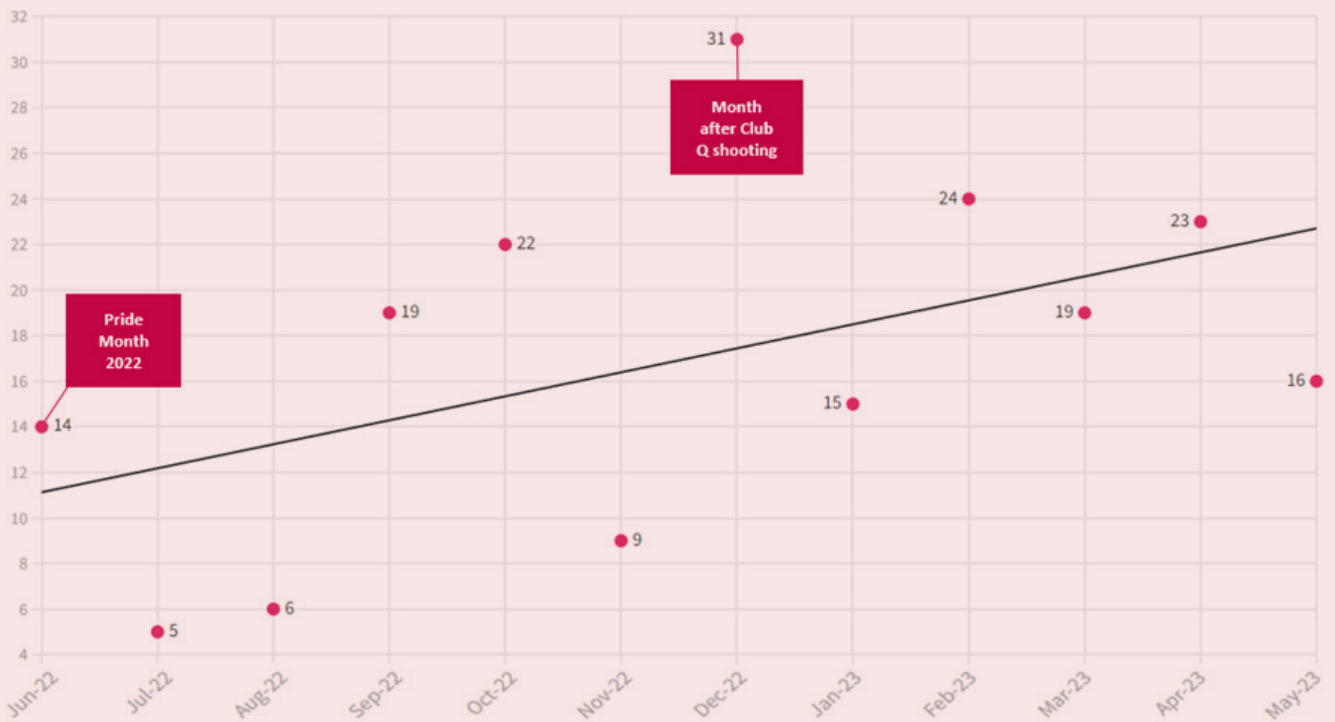
This country profile provides an analysis of on- and offline anti-drag mobilization in the United States; key tactics used by groups and individuals protesting drag events; and principal narratives deployed against drag performers. Through ethnographic monitoring of relevant US-based Telegram channels, Twitter profiles, Facebook groups, and use of external resources such as the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), Crowd Counting Consortium, and previous reports on anti-drag activity by groups such as GLAAD and the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), ISD analysts compiled, categorized and analyzed anti-drag protests or online threats against drag events from June 1, 2022 to May 20, 2023.

The findings of this research reveal that the first five months of 2023 have seen more incidents of anti-drag protests, online and offline threats, and violence (97 in total; average of 19.4 per month) than in the last seven months of 2022 (106 in total; average of 15.1 per month).¹ Notably, ISD analysts find that the actors behind anti-drag activity are not just traditional anti-LGBTQ+ groups but include growing numbers of assorted other actors, from local extremists and white supremacists through to parents' rights activists, members of anti-vaxxer groups, and Christian nationalists. ISD also finds an increasing number of incidents where online hate speech has manifested in offline activity – for example, a popular online slur being found spray painted on a location hosting a drag event. This report also shows the concerning upward trend of anti-drag mobilization across the US, and shows how it harms the LGBTQ+ community, small business, parents, and poses serious risks to community security throughout the nation. And, while public debate about what is appropriate entertainment for children, and at what ages, is absolutely legitimate and deserves fair hearing, the identified tactics only serve to undermine that discussion, with chilling consequences for free expression, and create fertile ground for a potential uptick in violence.

Timeline

Figure 1: A breakdown of the instances of anti-drag mobilization from 1 June 2022 to 20 May 2023 found by ISD, by month.

Online and Offline Anti-Drag Mobilization, per month 1 June 2022 - 20 May 2023



Glossary

5G Conspiracy Theory

A conspiracy theory whose believers assert that 5G technology – which underpins the current fastest mobile phone networks – is being implemented for sinister purposes. These include the spreading of the COVID-19 virus.

Anti-drag

Activity undertaken to oppose the hosting of drag shows. These are shows in which, typically, performers caricature or challenge gender stereotypes, often by dressing in clothing stereotypical of another gender, using exaggeratedly gendered mannerisms, or combining elements of stereotypically male and female dress.² Anti-drag activists normally oppose drag performances or performers appearing in front of minors at events such as all-ages drag shows and Drag Queen Story Hours.

Anti-lockdown

The term “anti-lockdown” has come to stand in for a range of positions held by individuals who broadly oppose the implementation of restrictions on individual freedoms in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Anti-lockdown individuals or groups may advocate for alternative approaches, such as emphasizing individual responsibility or the prioritization of other societal needs alongside public health considerations.

Anti-vaccine

The terms “vaccine sceptic” and “anti-vaxxer” cover a wide range of attitudes that are characterised by distrust of a specific vaccine or vaccines in general. Vaccine sceptics are not categorically opposed to vaccines but have reservations of varying degrees about them. Certain vaccine sceptics accept some vaccines but reject others, sometimes including the COVID-19 vaccines. By way of contrast, anti-vaxxer are fundamentally opposed to vaccines. Their reasons range from suppositions derived from conspiracy theories to the deeply held belief that all vaccines represent a harmful intervention into the body’s biochemical processes.

Christian nationalist

Christian nationalism has multiple definitions, but for ISD’s purposes it is understood to be an ideology that “idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity and American civic life” (Whitehead and Perry 2020:10). Christianity in this form is typically racialized (as white) and exclusionary (implying that other religions cannot or should not be part of the nation).

Doxxing

Searching for and publishing the private data of individuals or organisations on the internet, usually with malicious intent.

Drag Queen Story Hour (DQSH)

An event in which a drag performer (typically, though not always, a drag queen – usually a man dressed in female gendered clothes) reads books or tells stories, normally to children.

Extremism

Extremism is the advocacy of a system of belief that claims the superiority and dominance of one identity-based ‘in-group’ over all ‘out-groups.’ It propagates a dehumanising ‘othering’ mind-set that is antithetical to pluralism and the universal application of Human Rights.

Far-right

ISD’s definition of far-right is in line with far-right expert Cas Mudde, who conceptualises “far-right” as an umbrella term that includes both radical right-wing and extreme right-wing actors. Mudde states that both radical and extreme right-wing actors believe that “inequalities between people are natural and positive,” but have differing attitudes towards democracy. Radical right-wing actors are not against democracy in principle, while extreme right-wing actors reject democracy as a form of government.

Parents’ rights

In the context of this report, “parents’ rights” groups are organisations or collections of individuals whose unifying objective is to advocate for the rights of parents to choose the kinds of materials, lifestyles, ideologies and beliefs their children are exposed to. In this context, they may oppose the hosting of all-ages drag events or other events that showcase LGBTQ+ identities.

Save The Children

In this context, Save The Children (often stylised #SaveTheChildren) is a conspiracy theory offshoot of QAnon, claiming that there is a wide-reaching conspiracy by powerful individuals who are trafficking children for the purposes of paedophilia and ritualistic abuse.¹⁴

Sovereign Citizens

The Sovereign Citizens movement comprises a highly heterogenous anti-government ideology that originated in the United States. Adherents are united in their belief that the US government illegitimately rules over them. They live under the assumption that by declaring themselves sovereign, they are not obliged to abide by government legislation.

While it is an ideology that has manifested in many different forms, contemporary interpretations are frequently linked to conspiratorial and extremist beliefs. US law enforcement agencies have labelled the movement a domestic terrorist threat. In recent years, anti-government sentiments in relation to imposed COVID-19 measures triggered a surge in popularity of Sovereign Citizens-related ideas in many national contexts.

White nationalism

White nationalism is advocacy for a separate white society or white nation, also sometimes referred to as a white ethnostate. The Anti-Defamation League describes white nationalism as a euphemism for white supremacy; the term is now used to “refer to a form of white supremacy that emphasizes defining a country or region by white racial identity and which seeks to promote the interests of whites exclusively, typically at the expense of people of other backgrounds”.

White supremacism

White supremacy is a system of belief that posits the superiority of whites over non-whites and advocates that white people should be politically and socially dominant over non-white people. This can extend to a belief in the need for violence against, or even the genocide of, non-white people.

Key Findings

There were 203 incidents that targeted drag events online and offline across the US in the time period reviewed (June 1, 2022 to May 20, 2023).

Of the 203 US incidents, 100 (49%) targeted drag queen story hours and 75 (37%) targeted drag shows. Other targets included drag brunches and drag bingos.

The states with the most anti-drag activity are New York, Texas, California and Illinois.

The Proud Boys, an organization that has been proscribed as a terrorist entity in the UK,³ Canada⁴ and New Zealand,⁵ is the most active group targeting drag events offline and online including organizing in-person protests. In total, local Proud Boys chapters targeted 60 drag events of the 203 in ISD's dataset, with 39 of these events resulting in verbal or physical clashes.

"Libs of TikTok" on Twitter is one of the largest sources of anti-drag content online. The account averages 3K new followers per day and earns thousands of likes on content attacking drag performers.⁶

The most common narratives found in content analyzed slander drag queens and those who support drag queen events - including businesses, librarians and parents - as "pedophiles" or "groomers," the latter term replacing a prior meme "recruiter." Protestors also claim that drag is inherently sexual and therefore inappropriate for children.

Tactics targeting drag events include on-site protests, at which weapons are sometimes present; stickering campaigns; encouraging doxxing of drag performers, hosts, or parents bringing their children to drag events; sending threatening messages to performers and hosts; and harassing email or phone call campaigns to get events canceled.

Organizers canceled 6.4% of drag events for security reasons after being targeted online and offline. Five of the canceled events still faced protestors in-person.

Key Actors

Anti-drag activity in the US, both online and offline, is not limited to a few lone actors or fringe groups. It has become a unifying topic for far-right extremist groups and localized activists, and it is increasingly common to see different local groups attending or organizing protests targeting the same event. In conducting the research for this report, analysts identified 5 categories of groups mobilizing against drag events:

- Far-right extremist and/or white supremacist groups;
- Parents' rights groups;
- Anti-vaccine or anti-lockdown groups;
- Christian nationalists;
- Anti-LGBTQ+ groups (if distinct from above).

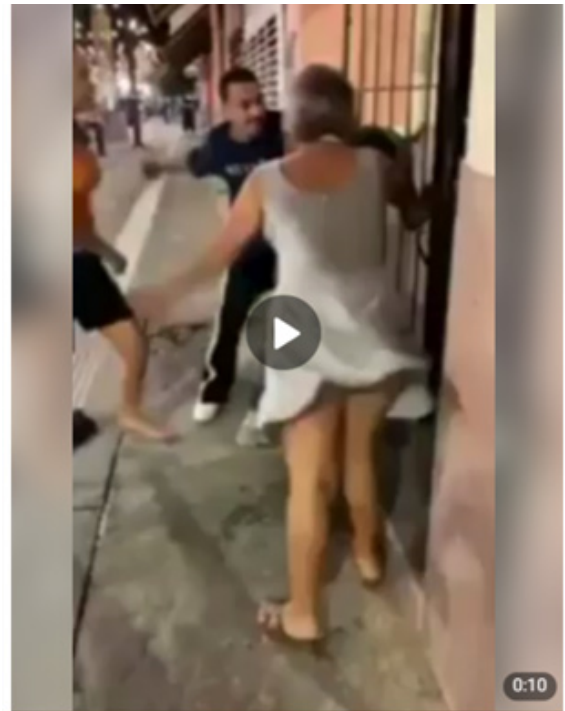
Some individuals have more influence on this issue than others, such as anti-LGBTQ+ actor Chaya Raichik, who runs the Libs of TikTok account on Twitter, and who was one of the most popular and prolific disseminators of anti-drag content analyzed for this research. The content Raichik shared was found across all categories of groups observed and has shaped narratives around drag performers and people attending drag events – even inspiring several offshoot groups and pages on Twitter and Telegram such as “Libs of TikTok Fans” or “Retards of TikTok”.⁷ Her videos and posts can earn millions of views, frequently listing addresses, names of organizers and supporters, and phone numbers and email addresses of companies or organizations that host events. This content has been observed to garner violent replies and comments.⁸

The resharing of content originally shared by Raichik, and the proliferation of similar narratives about drag performers, shows that even though these groups may not always align with each other on other topics such as race, gender, or religion, they are united in their views about drag performers and transgender people. These similar views often mean that drag events can be (and have been) targeted by multiple separate groups – whether they planned to protest together or not.

Far-right extremist and/or white supremacist groups

Based on data gathered and analyzed by ISD, the Proud Boys are the group with the most significant influence on online tactics and narratives about drag performers and events and have been present for the most offline protests reviewed as part of this research. While anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments and mobilization have always

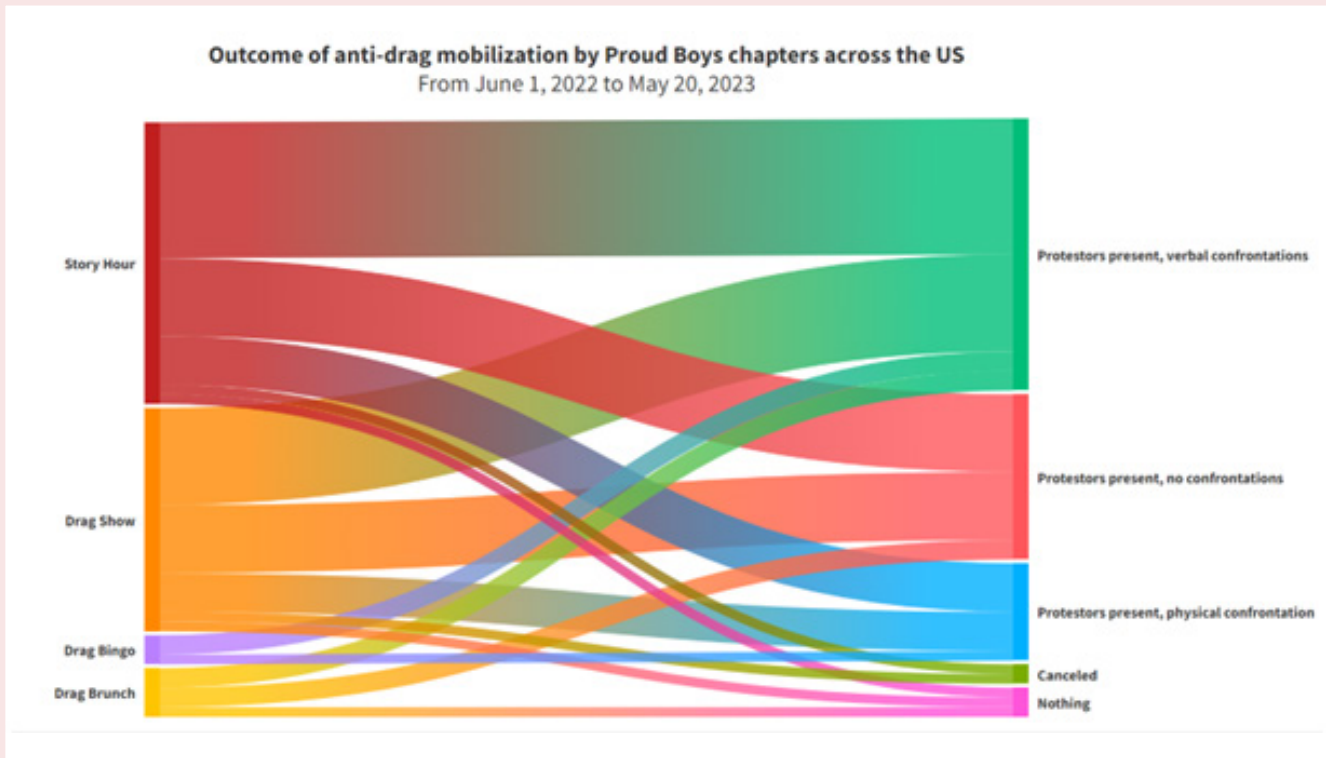
Figure 2 An Illinois Proud Boys chapter shares a clip of a group of people assaulting a man while encouraging others to do the same at a drag event held in August 2022.



existed amongst Proud Boys groups, the targeting of LGBTQ+ events started early 2022 and snowballed after June 2022, or what some Proud Boys groups referred to as “groomer awareness month.”⁹ Both online and offline (in chants or posters), Proud Boys have become regular users of the “groomer” slur.¹⁰

In total, ISD found that Proud Boys targeted 60 drag events across 20 states online and/or offline in between 1 June 2022 and 20 May 2023. As the chart below shows, the main targets were Drag Queen Story Hours (DQSH) and all-ages drag shows, with around 17% of those ending in physical confrontations between protestors and counter protestors or attendees. Some of these protests that Proud Boys either promoted or attended have ended in arrests and the vandalism of locations hosting the drag event. At times – even though the groups claim nothing would happen unless it was “self-defense” – Proud Boys members have attended drag events armed with weapons.¹¹

Figure 3 Outcomes of the 60 drag events Proud Boys have targeted online and offline from 1 June 2022 to 20 May 2023.



ISD also identified local White Lives Matter, NSC-131 (Neo-Nazis¹²), Active Clubs (white supremacists¹³), Blood Tribe (neo-Nazis¹⁴), and other extremist and white supremacist groups targeting drag events online and offline in the past year. ISD found several instances in which members of multiple extremist, supremacist, or far-right groups attended. One in early March 2023 occurred when a DQSH held in Ohio was protested by local White Lives Matter, Blood Tribe and Proud Boys groups. Protestors were armed, several physical fights occurred, and two protestors were arrested.¹⁵ While the Proud Boys denounced the neo-Nazis at the Ohio event, calling both Nazis and “groomers” their “enemies,” the increased presence of conflicting groups only increases the odds of physical clashes, which could potentially escalate to further violence.¹⁶

Parents’ rights groups

ISD found that “parents’ rights” groups have also become involved in anti-drag activity. Parents’ rights groups have been active in the US for the last century,

Figure 4: Examples of offline activity by extremist groups.



reacting to or protesting desegregation, sex education, and books they consider inappropriate in the classroom or library. More recently, some parent’s rights groups also organized against schools’ COVID-19 safety measures, which sometimes evolved into protesting all vaccinations.¹⁷

Here it is important to flag that by no means all individuals or groups involved in anti-drag activity are extremists.¹⁴ Some “parents’ rights” groups such as Protect Texas Kids express intolerant attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people but do not meet ISD’s threshold for extremism. However, convergences and coalition building are still important phenomena; these groups and the events they organize and attend represent vectors through which extremists can influence broader social movements.

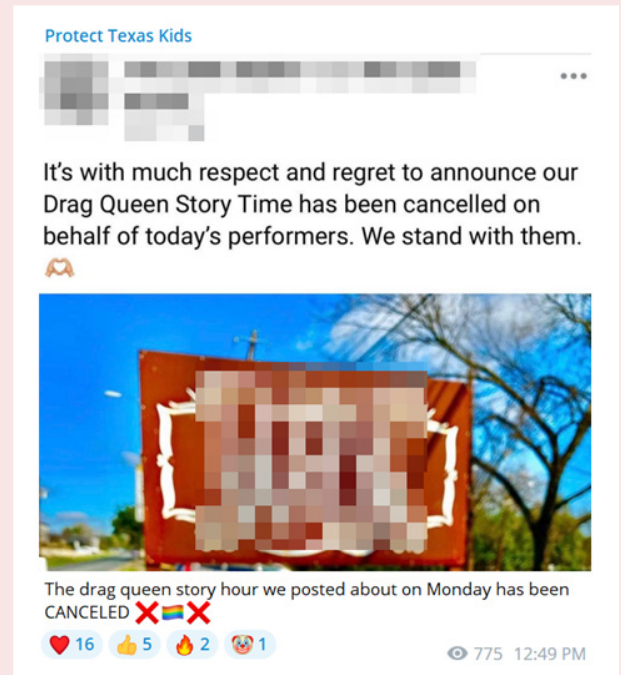
“Moms for Liberty”, for example, has spearheaded the book banning movement, often disguising anti-student inclusion efforts as initiatives to protect children.¹⁸ A Tennessee chapter attempted to remove books about Martin Luther King Jr and Ruby Bridges from a 2nd grade curriculum, stating the books promoted “anti-American” and “anti-white” sentiments.¹⁹ In 2022, the American Library Association found that there were 1,269 attempts to ban books across the country: some of them were led by Moms for Liberty.²⁰ A vast majority of the books were by or about LGBTQ+ people and/or people of color.

More recently, parents’ rights groups have protested drag performances and drag story hours for children. The individuals behind these groups may be different, but the goal and primary narratives the groups push against drag performers are identical to those of the groups discussed above: they are trying to “groom” younger children; they are pedophiles; and they are pushing an LGBTQ+ agenda on minors.

One of the most active groups in this category present at drag events is Protect Texas Kids (PTK), a group formed in mid-2022 with the goal to “empower” parents to take a stand against the “leftist machine [coming] for [their] children.”²¹ PTK was formed by Kelly Neidert, who gained notoriety in 2021 and 2022 when she began sharing transphobic and anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric online and on her college campus, and was invited to speak at a Moms for Liberty chapter meeting in Dallas.²²

Analysts found that PTK was present at 13 anti-drag protests in Texas during the period analyzed, and 9 of these events ended in verbal or physical clashes between protestors and counter-protesters or attendees. One anti-drag protest hosted by PTK in mid-December 2022 was attended by Proud Boys, the Aryan Freedom Network (neo-Nazis), various Christian nationalist groups,

Figure 5: Protect Texas Kids posting an update about a DQSH they had targeted. Note the use of the cross emoji in conjunction with a Pride flag emoji, indicating a broader anti-LGBTQ+ agenda.



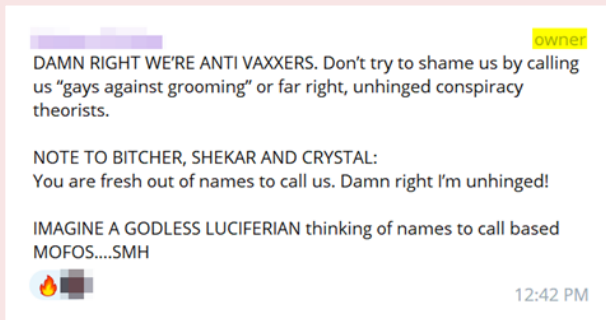
Open Carry Texas (which advocates for openly carrying firearms), and Groypers.²³ One neo-Nazi showed up with a handgun.²⁴ Eventually, law enforcement was deployed to deescalate rising tensions and clashes.²⁵ After the protest, a business in the area canceled a planned story hour while PTK celebrated its cancellation online.

Anti-vaccine or lockdown groups

ISD found that some groups originally formed to protest lockdown measures during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, or to protest vaccine and mask mandates across the US, have now pivoted to protesting drag events.

The leading group behind anti-drag activity in the state of New York, Guardians of Divinity, was originally a small subset of anti-vaccine protestors with ties to the anti-vaccine and anti-lockdown “New York Freedom Rally” group.²⁶ Guardians of Divinity began its pivot in September 2022, when members of the group disrupted a DQSH in New York City. Since then, the group has orchestrated 21 anti-drag events (averaging 3 events a month), 16 of which have ended with verbal

Figure 6: A March 12 post from the Guardians of Divinity Telegram, referring to themselves as “anti vaxxers” and “unhinged” and calling a New York City councilmember a “Luciferian.”



or physical clashes between Guardians of Divinity and either counter-protestors or event attendees. Online, Guardians of Divinity operates on Telegram (where the group has only 229 members, demonstrating how even small followings can generate offline harms) and Twitter, and reshares posts from Libs of TikTok, Gays Against Groomers (GAG), and various QAnon conspiracy groups. The group continues to share COVID-19 vaccine disinformation, but their offline action suggests they have become more focused on anti-drag mobilization.

Analysts observed other anti-vaccine or anti-lockdown groups began to pivot to more anti-drag activity in the period assessed, but none have yet been as consistently active offline as Guardians of Divinity – who are still less prolific than the extremist and white supremacist groups involved in anti-drag activity. However, as

vaccine mandates and lockdowns fall out of the news cycle (and public attention), anti-drag activity may become a more consistent mobilizing force. More recently, for example, an anti-vaccine mandate group based in Northern California with over 1.5K followers on Instagram held its first “peaceful rally” against a DQSH in the area. The Telegram channel for the same group still consistently posts vaccine disinformation, but analysts noted that the group began to share anti-trans and anti-drag content in April and early May of 2023.

Christian nationalists

ISD found that well-established Christian nationalist groups such as the American Society for the Defense

Figure 7: The New Columbia Movement protests a drag event in Texas in December 2022.²⁷



Figure 8: A post shared in the New Columbia Movement Telegram channel expressing anti-LGBTQ+ views.



of Tradition, Family, and Property (the American TFP) and newer groups such as FEC United (Faith, Education, Commerce), the New Columbia Movement, and Warriors for Christ have all been involved in anti-drag activity. These groups express explicit anti-LGBTQ+ views and often attend anti-drag protests to pray or to carry homophobic and transphobic banners.

An example of a Christian nationalist group that has pivoted to anti-drag mobilization in the period reviewed is the New Columbia Movement, a group that describes itself as an “organization of like-minded patriotic Americans seeking a return to wholesome family

values.” The group formed in early 2021 and released a manifesto in August of 2021, which among other topics labeled being gay as a “severe threat.” In June of 2022, the group protested its first drag event in Dallas, Texas, carrying signs that read “stop groomers.” Since then, the group has encouraged its followers to email and call locations to get drag events canceled and pray the rosary outside of locations hosting drag events. It has allied itself with other groups involved in anti-drag mobilization in Texas, such as Protect Texas Kids.

The New Columbia Movement’s messaging at anti-drag protests has evolved to reflect their wider anti-LGBTQ+ stance, which they adopted long before they were involved in anti-drag mobilization. In more recent protests, the group has carried banners that are mostly unrelated to the main narratives about drag performers, rather pushing homophobic rhetoric.

Anti-LGBTQ+ groups

As noted throughout this report, the “groomer” slur has been incorporated into anti-drag and anti-LGBTQ+ narratives spread by extremist and white supremacist, parents’ rights, and anti-vaxx and lockdown groups alike. However, ISD analysts found several groups have formed with the purpose of being “anti-groomer” groups. These groups claim to be apolitical and solely focused on the safety of children, but most of their efforts have been put toward attacking trans healthcare, all-ages drag events, and LGBTQ+ Pride events. In total, these “anti-groomer” groups targeted 17 events in the time period studied, of which three events were canceled, four events ended in verbal confrontations, and one event ended in physical violence.

These groups post about drag events across the country, urging followers to attend and protest. They also post videos of drag events or the names and social media profiles of drag performers, often drawing hateful comments and further harassment. More recently, they have encouraged followers to attend school board meetings and get involved in local politics. This activity started online, but groups such as Project 171 or Gays Against Groomers have started to expand to offline actions and local chapters.

Project 171, formed in early January 2023, is a “metapolitical initiative” to stop the “grooming and

Figures 9 and 10: In the top image, content from a Proud Boys group shared to the Project 171 group. In the bottom image, content from the Project 171 group shared to a Proud Boys group.

Proud Boys Ohio Forwarded from Project 171 Official



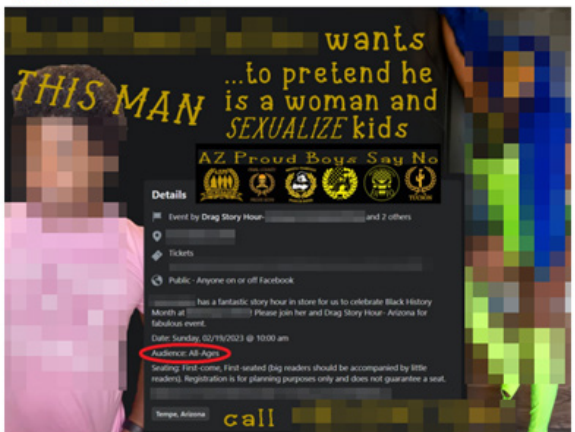
TRIGGERED Leftist FUMES At Anti-Child Sex Abuse Protest

It looks like THIS little piggy regretted going to the market...



228 3:52 PM

Project 171 Official Forwarded from A Z P B



Join us in protecting the children in our community! Protest starts at 9am. Let these groomers know this won't be allowed in Arizona!

shared content from various Proud Boys chapters and GAG.

Gays Against Groomers (GAG) was founded in June of 2022 by Trump supporter Jaimee Michell, also known as “The Gay Who Strayed” on Twitter. Prior to creating the GAG Twitter account, Michell had shared election denial content such as information about ‘Stop the Steal’ events prior to the January 6 attack on the US Capitol.²⁹ Mimicking the already-popular Libs of TikTok, GAG started to share anti-trans content while encouraging offline protests against various drag events across the country.³⁰

Now, with 274.7K followers on Twitter, GAG members have moved to more offline action. Members have written letters to companies hosting all-ages drag shows asking that they restrict or cancel the event, claiming they want to prevent “premature exposure” to drag and threatening to draw negative attention to their business. Chris Barrett, a member from GAG Missouri, testified at the Tennessee Criminal Justice Committee supporting the state’s anti-drag bill in February.³¹ Local chapters have also formed in North Carolina and Illinois, and members have attended school board meetings and even met with officials to try to put “an end to drag queen story hours.”³²

Unlike the extremist and white supremacist groups referenced above, these anti-LGBTQ+ groups do not just focus on protesting drag events. Rather, they have a wide range of strategies to attack drag events at different levels, and their activism extends to attacking trans rights -- particularly access to healthcare.

Figures 11 and 12: Outside of attacking drag events, groups such as GAG and Project 171 also target gender-affirming health care and young trans people.

Gays Against Groomers

“Gender affirming care” for “trans youth” is just groomerspeak for the mutilation of children. That’s it.

Don’t let them set the terms. Call it what it is.

#GaysAgainstGroomers

<https://gaycitynews.com/anti-trans-laws-imperil-gender-affirming-care-youth/>

Gay City News

Anti-trans laws imperil gender-affirming care for 140k+ youth

The state-by-state evisceration of transgender rights in the healthcare realm has jeopardized or restricted gender-affirming care for more than 144,000 young



🔥 26 👍 3 🗨️ 2

👁️ 1406 11:06 AM

Project 171 Official

Munchausen by proxy, child abuse, grooming, brain washing call it what you will but trans kids do not exist in a vacuum they exist because they have sick, evil, or misguided parents. This abuse must end

171

👍 7 🗨️ 2

👁️ 398 4:56 AM

Key Tactics

The actors involved in anti-drag activism have deployed a variety of tactics to try to have drag events canceled, intimidate venues and performers, and rally support for their cause. In this section we provide an overview of the range of tactics, with individual cases described in more detail in the Actors section.

Protesting

Protests are one of the most common forms of anti-drag activism. This report details numerous instances in which far-right extremists, parents’ rights groups, anti-LGBTQ+ activists and others have physically protested outside drag events, with some of these protests leading to violent confrontations or verbal altercations with others present.

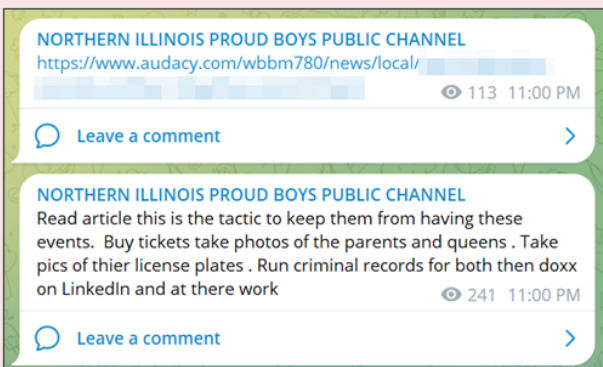
Vandalism

Activists have used vandalism to intimidate drag performers, venues, and supporters. In one instance a New York City councilmember had his house vandalized with graffiti calling him a “pedo child groomer.”³³ As detailed later in this report, a Chicago bakery which hosted a drag show had its windows smashed and graffiti daubed on its walls.³⁴

Doxxing

Anti-drag activists have in multiple instances encouraged their followers to dox (reveal the private details) those involved in drag performances, including both the performers themselves and parents taking their children to events.

Figure 13: Proud Boys encourage the doxxing of drag performers and parents taking their children to an event.



Incitement to violence

Incitement to offline violence has been witnessed primarily in comment sections underneath social media posts. Major anti-drag influencers do not tend to directly incite violence, as this opens them to both deplatforming and potential legal liability. However, their followers have incited violence. For example, the Figures below show responses from followers of Gays Against Groomers, which posted about a Canadian drag show on Telegram.

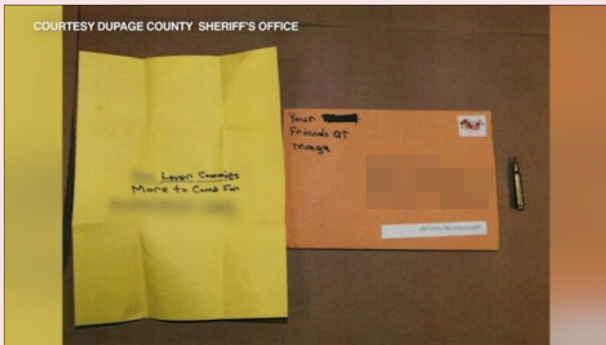
Figures 14 and 15: Followers of Gays Against Groomers incite violence – “Pizza gate that place up” is likely a reference to the man who stormed a Washington DC pizza restaurant with a gun, inspired by a conspiracy theory that there were children being trafficked in a non-existent basement.



Harassment, intimidation, and threats

A common tactic for anti-drag activists is to attempt to intimidate venues and performers in the hope they will cancel shows. This can take the form of abusive phone calls, attending public meetings with intent to disrupt, or violent threats. In one instance a library received a letter with a bullet enclosed and a note reading “More to Come for [the library].”

Figure 16: An envelope with a bullet and a note saying “more to come” was sent to a library in Illinois.³⁵



Key Narratives

Anti-drag activists cite a variety of reasons for their opposition to all-ages drag shows. This section provides an overview of the most common narratives, with individual cases and examples explored in detail in the Actors section.

Drag performers are “grooming” children

The most common narratives found in the content analyzed by ISD slander drag performers and those who support drag events – including businesses, librarians, and parents – as “pedophiles” or “groomers.” In the past year, the “groomer” slur has not just been used in the context of drag events but has also been used against members of the LGBTQ+ community as a whole.

All-ages drag is child abuse

Anti-drag activists frequently equate all-ages drag shows with child abuse, citing what they believe to be the sexualized nature of the performances. Some call for adults involved to be arrested and charged (see Figure 18).

LGBTQ+ identities are ideological, and so is drag

The term “gender ideology” has been adopted by some anti-drag protestors to make the claim that drag performers are attempting to indoctrinate children through their performances. Anti-drag activity is therefore framed as resistance against what one anti-drag activist group, Protect Texas Kids, calls the “leftist machine [coming] for [their] children.”³⁶

Figure 17: A local Active Club chapter on Telegram shares a video of Blood Tribe Ohio protesting a drag event, calling it a “tranny groomer event.”



Figure 18: A user on Telegram calls for parents bringing their children to drag shows to be arrested.

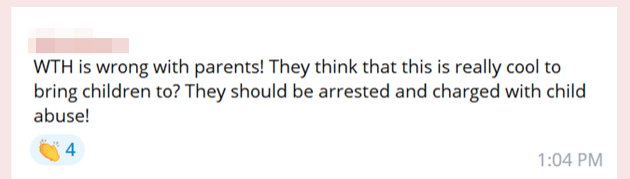
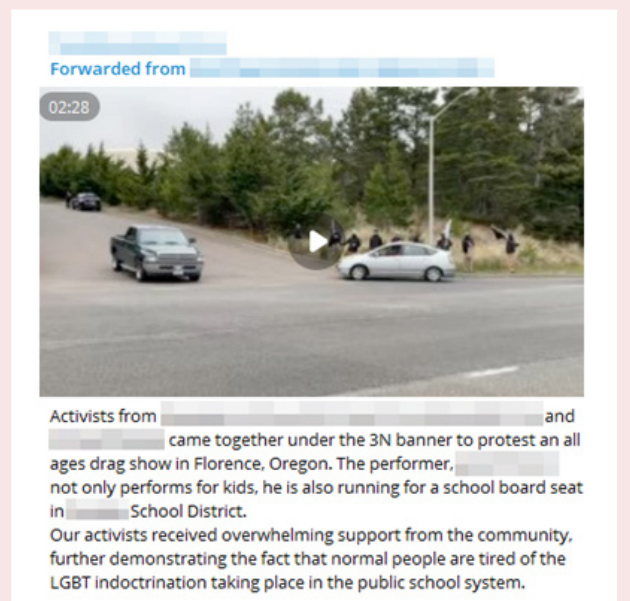


Figure 19: A local Active Club chapter shares an update on its offline mobilization, saying that “normal people are tired of the LGBT indoctrination taking place.”



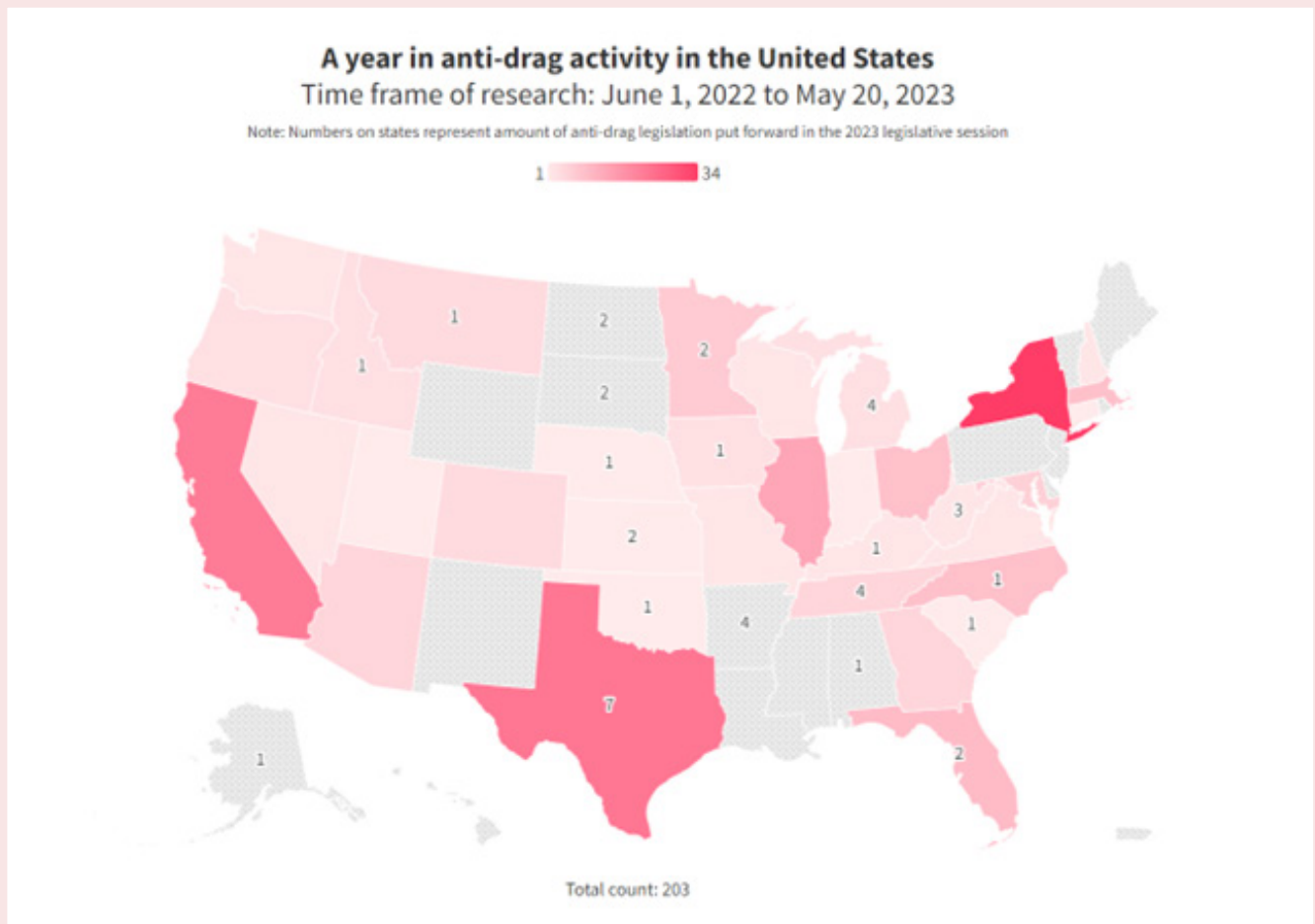
Consequences of online and offline hate

Verbal and physical clashes between protestors, counter protestors and attendees at drag events are neither the beginning nor end of the consequences of these protests. According to the Human Rights Campaign, as of May 2, 2023, over 540 anti-LGBTQ+ bills have been introduced in state legislatures, of which at least 220 specifically target transgender and non-binary people. According to the ACLU, 43 bills in 20 US states target drag performers.³⁷ 5 have been defeated, but 3 have been introduced into law, and 35 are advancing through different state committees, state senators, or representatives. The language in the bills reflects some of the generalizations the groups discussed above have made about drag performers, sexualizing them and arguing that no drag performance is appropriate for minors.

As shown in the map below, the states with the highest amount of anti-drag legislation do not necessarily have the most anti-drag incidents. This is why it is crucial to understand where and why different anti-drag tactics are deployed across the US; a higher amount of anti-drag protests does not necessarily reflect the opinion of whole communities, towns, and counties – nor does a higher or lower amount of anti-drag legislation.

Experts and academics alike have expressed concern with the vague language in these bills, and what this means for enforcement if passed.³⁸

Figure 20: A map of all anti-drag activity in the US in the past year, with the number of bills targeting drag performers by state.

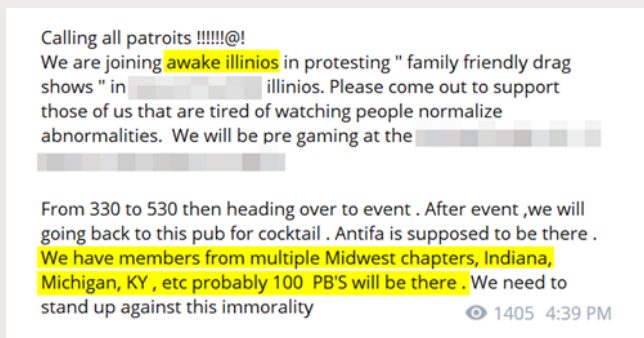


Case Study

Bakery in Illinois almost goes out of business due to threats

ISD found 15 instances of groups targeting drag events online and offline in the state of Illinois. 8 of those instances targeted the same local bakery in suburban Chicago known to host drag events. In July 2022, after being targeted online by both Awake Illinois (a “parents’ rights” group that has targeted many drag events in the Chicago area) and Proud Boys, and having received threatening notes ahead of a drag event, the bakery was vandalized.³⁹ The perpetrator smashed windows and graffitied the side of the bakery with homophobic slurs reflecting the rhetoric spread by these two groups.

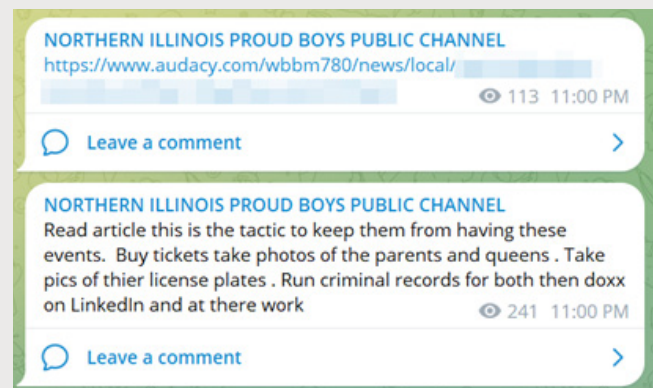
Figures 21 and 22: On top, the message Proud Boys Illinois sent about joining forces with Awake Illinois to protest the drag show at the bakery. Below, A homophobic slur and “groomer” graffitied on the side of the bakery. Proud Boys and Awake Illinois condemned the vandalism.



The threatening notes and acts of vandalism preceded a sustained campaign against the bakery. Online, Proud Boys and Awake Illinois continued to highlight drag events being hosted by the bakery,

encouraging sustained protests at the location and the doxxing of all the drag performers and parents who brought their children to drag events there. Several protestors continuously camped out in front of the bakery with signs and flags. After complaints in July about the shows being inappropriate for minors, local law enforcement investigated but found no evidence that drag performers violated any law.⁴⁰ In December 2022, the bakery canceled an event due to security concerns.

Figure 23: Proud Boys encouraging the doxxing of drag performers and parents taking their children to drag events at the bakery.



Despite the outpouring of community support after facing eight months of online and offline threats, the bakery owner announced in March she may have to close due to low patronage and challenges in finding partners who feared being targeted themselves for being associated with the bakery. In April 2023, the owner announced that the bakery had chosen to move to a different and more “accepting” location after a successful fundraising campaign.

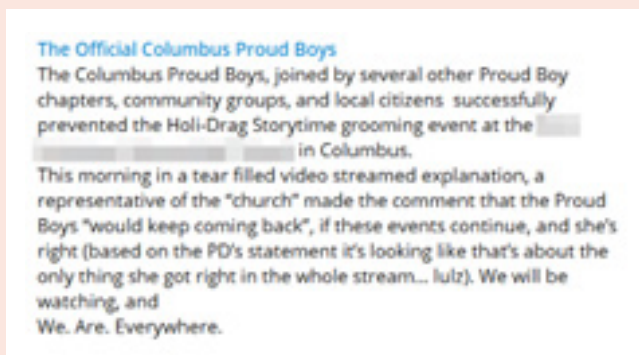
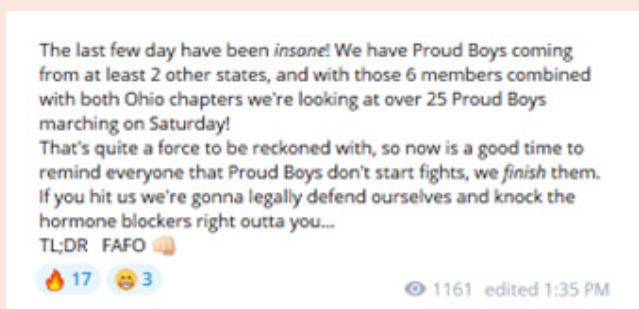
Case Study

What happens after drag events get canceled?

ISD found that between 1 June 2022 to 20 May 2023, 13 drag events were canceled after receiving threats. However, analysts found that canceling an event did not always spare the location, host, or drag performer from continued online and offline harassment.

For example, when a restaurant near Sacramento, CA, canceled its drag show in June 2022 due to safety concerns after receiving reports of a local Proud Boys chapter circulating the event details, a group of Proud Boys still showed up to protest and tried to force their way into the restaurant. The protestors were stopped at the door by patrons and police but continued to shout insults.⁴¹ The Sacramento Proud Boys reshared videos of the incident on Telegram and several months later complained, “we weren’t given much respect for the Battle [at the bar].” While the restaurant received support from the local community, it did not publicize drag events online for the remainder of the year.

Figures 24 and 25: Posts from Columbus Proud Boys on Telegram.



A similar incident happened in December 2022 in Columbus, Ohio, when a group of Proud Boys, Patriot Front members, and unaffiliated armed individuals protested at a church where a drag event was meant to take place but had been canceled due to online intimidation. The church grew increasingly concerned about security as the Columbus Proud Boys posted that members were travelling from other states, promising the protest would be “wild” and that they were ready to “defend” themselves. The church announced that it would not host drag events for now.

Local libraries, which were among the first locations to host drag queen story hours across the US, have also become subject to intimidation by varying groups. In September 2022, a library in Illinois had to cancel their drag queen bingo event celebrating National Coming Out Day due to threats they received by mail and online. Weeks before, Awake Illinois had posted a call to action to their followers, urging them to email and call the library, send letters, and attend the library board meeting ahead of the event. The mayor of the town later revealed that the library had received a letter with a note saying, “More to Come for [the library]” and a bullet inside. Since this incident, the library has not hosted any drag events.

Conclusion

On the night of November 19, 2022, a gunman opened fire at Club Q in Colorado Springs, CO, just as the nightclub was wrapping up its weekly Saturday night drag show. The shooting left five people dead and 17 injured, making it the deadliest attack against the LGBTQ+ community in 2022, and the second deadliest shooting targeting an LGBTQ+ space in recent US history after the Pulse nightclub shooting of 2016 in Orlando, FL.

The Club Q shooting occurred in the context of background noise from a variety of groups, from white supremacists to anti-vaxxers, posting and sharing online and offline threats against drag queens.⁴² ISD found that anti-LGBTQ+ discourse intensified even further after the Club Q shooting: Neo-Nazis online celebrated the massacre, and analysts noted 31 instances of anti-drag mobilization in December 2022 (the highest observed during this report's timeline).⁴³

As shown by Figure 1 and by the various examples highlighted in this report, anti-drag mobilization is on the rise, and has the potential to further encourage violence, threats, intimidation, and harassment.

The US is at the forefront of anti-drag activity and has influenced other movements internationally. In subsequent reports, ISD will show how US anti-LGBTQ+ messaging and online and offline anti-drag mobilization has influenced movements in the UK, Australia, France, and beyond.

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