

RESEARCH THAT MATTERS

Transgender Individuals' Experiences with the Criminal Legal System in Memphis, Tennessee

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Executive Summary

In 2022, the Williams Institute analyzed enforcement of HIV-related laws in Tennessee, including sex work statutes that impose enhanced penalties based on a person's HIV-positive status.¹ The analysis found that a substantial share of HIV-related sex work convictions occurred in Shelby County, particularly in Memphis. Black women experiencing economic vulnerability accounted for nearly three-fourths of those affected by the state's HIV-related sex work criminal law. Although a growing body of research identifies gender-based disparities in HIV criminal enforcement,² this research is generally not able to identify transgender and other gender diverse individuals. Similarly, Tennessee's crime data systems classify individuals only as male or female, preventing researchers from examining how HIV-related criminal enforcement affects transgender people. The limitation reflects a broader gap in empirical research on transgender-specific experiences within the criminal legal system.

This report addresses that gap by directly examining how transgender people experience the enforcement of criminal laws, including those that focus on HIV status, in Memphis, Tennessee. Drawing on focus group and in-depth interviews with 24 participants—each with current or prior experience in sex work and/or contact with the criminal legal system, and many of them living with HIV—this study provides contextual, narrative-based evidence of how intersecting identities shape legal system interactions. Specifically, this report analyzes how gender identity, race, HIV status, and history of sex work affect encounters with police, courts, jails, and prisons.

Participants in this study primarily characterized their interactions with Tennessee's criminal legal system as negative. They described how economic circumstances, transgender visibility, and engagement in economic survival activities increased exposure to police surveillance and enforcement. Participants further described how routine policing practices and jail conditions created structural barriers to safety, stability, and continuity of care. These findings align with national research demonstrating that transgender individuals, particularly those engaged in sex work, face disproportionately high rates of police interaction, harassment, and violence.

Key Findings

Assumed Criminality

- Participants consistently described being viewed and treated as criminals based solely on appearance or presence in public places. Officers routinely conducted stops, demanded identification, and ran warrant checks without clear apparent cause for doing so.
- Individuals perceived as transgender, especially transgender women of color, were frequently presumed to be engaged in sex work, regardless of behavior.
- Participants also reported being misidentified as perpetrators of crime when they sought help for or attempted to report domestic incidents to police.

¹ Cisneros, N., Sears, B., & Lennon-Dearing, R. (2022). *Enforcement of HIV criminalization in Tennessee*. Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/HIV-Criminalization-TN-Jun-2022.pdf>

² The Williams Institute. (2022). *HIV criminalization in the United States*. UCLA School of Law. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/visualization/hiv-criminalization/>

Verbal Harms

- Frequent misgendering and deadnaming were reported across encounters with law enforcement and jail correctional staff. These interactions were described as dehumanizing and deeply distressing.

Physical Harm

- Participants described routine encounters with law enforcement officers escalating into physical violence once their transgender status became suspected or known.
- Participants reported being forcibly removed from vehicles, aggressively handcuffed, physically restrained, or placed in unsafe conditions (e.g., locked in a hot patrol car), even when they were compliant and posed no threat.

Sexual Assault/Coercion by Law Enforcement

- Multiple participants described sexual coercion and assault by police officers, including under threat of arrest.
- Participants emphasized that fear of retaliation, disbelief, and further criminalization prevented reporting of police misconduct to law enforcement agencies.

Jail Experiences

- Participants described incarceration experiences that included verbal abuse and harassment, and that failed to protect participants from other detainees.
- Reports included humiliating strip searches, denial or irregular provision of medical care, and placement in facilities inconsistent with gender identity, increasing their vulnerability.
- Participants feared physical and sexual harm while in custody.

Navigating for Safety

- Participants described adopting strategies to minimize harm, including emotional self-regulation, silence during encounters, and avoidance of police altogether.
- Many reported that avoiding law enforcement, even when victimized, was the safest option.
- Tactics to minimize police contact included staying away from certain neighborhoods, limiting time in public, staying silent during stops, or refraining from calling police, even when in danger.

These findings suggest that transgender individuals, particularly Black transgender women with histories of economic marginalization or sex work, experience the criminal legal system not as a source of protection, but as a system of surveillance, coercion, and harm. For transgender people in Memphis, gender identity and race—not HIV status—were the primary factors driving police contact. However, HIV status compounded these harms by intensifying criminal legal consequences, including through longer sentences.³ Moreover, transgender people in Memphis, including those who may benefit from police protection, are often deterred from seeking police aid.

³ Cisneros, N., Sears, B., & Lennon-Dearing, R. (2022). *Enforcement of HIV criminalization in Tennessee*. Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/HIV-Criminalization-TN-Jun-2022.pdf>

Introduction

Transgender⁴ individuals experience intensified surveillance by law enforcement.⁵ An individual's race, poverty, HIV status, and actual or perceived involvement in sex work, together with gender identity and expression, might further increase vulnerability to policing.⁶ A person's intersecting identities shape how that person is perceived and treated by the criminal legal system,⁷ producing different risks of surveillance, harassment, and violence during encounters with law enforcement.⁸

Research indicates that police frequently assume transgender people—particularly transgender women of color—are involved in illegal activity regardless of their actual conduct.⁹ Visibility itself becomes a risk factor for law enforcement contact, as surveillance and profiling practices disproportionately target those perceived as transgender.¹⁰ These practices, commonly described as “walking while trans,” rely on gender expression, perceived transgender status, location, and entrenched stereotypes, rather than evidence of wrongdoing, as the basis for interactions with law enforcement.¹¹ Such profiling leads to increased risk of being stopped, questioned, searched, harassed, or arrested.¹²

Research has also linked economic insecurity to more frequent police interactions.¹³ Transgender individuals experience disproportionately high rates of unemployment, poverty, and housing instability compared to their cisgender peers.¹⁴ Research shows that these factors can drive engagement in sex

⁴ Throughout this report, we use the term “transgender” as an umbrella term to describe individuals whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth, encompassing those who identify as transgender or nonbinary. We specify throughout the report when we are discussing particular groups, such as transgender women, transgender men, or nonbinary people.

⁵ Arrayales, J., Mallory, C., & Grasso, J. (2025). *Law enforcement and LGBTQ people*. Los Angeles, CA: The Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Police-Interactions-LGBTQ-Nov-2025.pdf>

⁶ Carpenter, L., & Marshall, R. B. (2018). Walking while trans: Profiling of transgender women by law enforcement, and the problem of proof. *William & Mary Journal of Women and the Law*, 24(1). Temple University Legal Studies Research Paper No. 2018-07, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3122565>; James, S.E., Herman, J.L., Durso, L.E., & Heng-Lehtinen, R. (2024). Early insights: A Report of the 2022 U.S. Transgender Survey. National Center for Transgender Equality, Washington, DC. https://transequality.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/2022%20USTS%20Early%20Insights%20Report_FINAL.pdf

⁷ Dwyer, A., & Valcore, J. (2023). Policing transgender people: In: Panter, H., Dwyer, A. (eds) *Transgender People and Criminal Justice*. Critical Criminological Perspectives. Palgrave Macmillan https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-29893-6_5

⁸ Stenersen, M. R., Thomas, K., & McKee, S. (2022). Police and transgender and gender diverse people in the United States: A brief note on interaction, harassment, and violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 37(23-24), NP23527–NP23540. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605211072161>; Stotzer, R.L. (2014). Law enforcement and criminal justice personnel interactions with transgender people in the United States: A literature review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 19, 263–277.

⁹ Stenersen, M. R., Thomas, K., & McKee, S. (2022). Police and transgender and gender diverse people in the United States: A brief note on interaction, harassment, and violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 37(23-24), NP23527–NP23540. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605211072161>

¹⁰ Beauchamp, T. (2019). Going stealth: Transgender politics and US surveillance practices. Duke University Press; Jenness, V., & Rowland, A. (2024). The structure and operation of the transgender criminal legal system nexus in the United States: Inequalities, administrative violence, and injustice at every turn. *Annual Review of Criminology*, 7, 283–309. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-criminol-022222-040947>.

¹¹ Carpenter, L., & Marshall, R. B. (2018). Walking while trans: Profiling of transgender women by law enforcement, and the problem of proof. *William & Mary Journal of Women and the Law*, 24(1). Temple University Legal Studies Research Paper No. 2018-07, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3122565>

¹² LaMartine, S., Nakamura, N., & García, J. J. (2023). “Even the officers are in on it:” Black transgender women’s experiences of violence and victimization in Los Angeles. *Women & Therapy*, 46(2), 103–129. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02703149.2023.2226012>; Meyer, S. J., & Moore, P. L. (2025). “Who ya gonna call?” Maybe not the police: Transgender peoples’ perceptions of and experiences with the police. *Public Administration Quarterly*, 50(1), 3–16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07349149251323570>

¹³ Fredrik S. (2016). *Down, Out, and Under Arrest: Policing and Everyday Life in Skid Row*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁴ Carpenter, L., & Marshall, R. B. (2018). Walking while trans: Profiling of transgender women by law enforcement, and the problem of proof. *William & Mary Journal of Women and the Law*, 24(1). Temple University Legal Studies Research Paper No. 2018-07, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/>

work among transgender women.¹⁵ This in turn is strongly associated with increased police contact, harassment, or violence. For example, one large U.S. study found that 89.2% of transgender sex workers who interacted with police reported experiencing harassment or violence by police.¹⁶ Further, policing in the United States is concentrated in low-income communities, which is further exacerbated by structural discrimination and residential segregation, disproportionately harming transgender Black and Brown Americans who are more likely to live in these communities.¹⁷

A person's HIV-positive status can also put them at increased risk of criminalization.¹⁸ Nearly two-thirds of states explicitly criminalize people living with HIV through statutes, regulations, or case law.¹⁹ Most HIV-related criminal laws do not require actual transmission or the attempt to transmit HIV.²⁰ They often criminalize conduct that cannot transmit HIV, and may ignore mitigation and prevention strategies.²¹ Several states have HIV-related criminal laws that specifically target sex workers, creating harsher penalties solely because of a person's HIV status.²² As a result, transgender individuals living with HIV may face increased legal vulnerability, particularly when combined with other marginalized identities.

Together, these overlapping identity traits—gender identity, economic vulnerability, race, and HIV status—increase the likelihood of engaging in survival strategies like sex work and of interacting with police. Individuals perceived as sex workers experience frequent police contact—whether or not the individual engages in sex work—which can interfere with employment, housing, and safety.²³

abstract=3122565; James, S.E., Herman, J.L., Durso, L.E., & Heng-Lehtinen, R. (2024). *Early insights: A Report of the 2022 U.S. Transgender Survey*. National Center for Transgender Equality, Washington, DC. https://transequality.org/sites/default/files/202402/2022%20USTS%20Early%20Insights%20Report_FINAL.pdf

¹⁵ Hereth, J. E. (2024). Pathways leading to arrest for transgender women. *Feminist Criminology*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15570851241250126>; Jenness, V., & Rowland, A. (2024). The structure and operation of the transgender criminal legal system nexus in the United States: Inequalities, administrative violence, and injustice at every turn. *Annual Review of Criminology*, 7, 283–309. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-criminol-022222-040947>

¹⁶ Stenersen, M. R., Thomas, K., & McKee, S. (2022). Police and transgender and gender diverse people in the United States: A brief note on interaction, harassment, and violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 37(23–24), NP23527–NP23540. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605211072161>

¹⁷ Firebaugh, G., & Acciai, F. (2016). For blacks in America, the gap in neighborhood poverty has declined faster than segregation. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 113(47), 13372–13377. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1607220113>; Ghandnoosh, N. (2015, February 3). Black lives matter: Eliminating racial inequity in the criminal justice system. The Sentencing Project. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/black-lives-matter-eliminating-racial-inequity-in-the-criminal-justice-system/>; James, S. E., Brown, C., & Wilson, I. (2017). *2015 U.S. Transgender survey: Report on the experiences of Black respondents*. National Center for Transgender Equality, Black Trans Advocacy, & National Black Justice Coalition. <https://www.transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/usts/USTSBlackRespondentsReport-Nov17.pdf>

¹⁸ Hoppe, T., McClelland, A., & Pass, K. (2022). *Beyond criminalization: Reconsidering HIV criminalization in an era of reform*. *Current Opinion in HIV and AIDS*, 17(2), 79–85. <https://doi.org/10.1097/COH.0000000000000715>; Williams Institute. (2022). *HIV criminalization in the United States*. UCLA School of Law. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/visualization/hiv-criminalization/>

¹⁹ Center for HIV Law and Policy. (2025). *Mapping HIV criminalization laws in the U.S.* <https://www.hivlawandpolicy.org/sites/default/files/2025-11/Mapping%20HIV%20Criminalization%20Laws%20in%20the%20US%2C%20CHLP%20111225.pdf>

²⁰ Center for HIV Law and Policy. (2025). *Mapping HIV criminalization laws in the U.S.: A user guide to CHLP's updated HIV criminalization maps*. <https://www.hivlawandpolicy.org/sites/default/files/2025-11/Mapping%20HIV%20Criminalization%20Laws%20User%20Guide%2C%20CHLP%20111225.pdf>

²¹ Cisneros, N., Sears, B., & Lennon-Dearing, R. (2022). *Enforcement of HIV criminalization in Tennessee*. Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/HIV-Criminalization-TN-Jun-2022.pdf>

²² Center for HIV Law and Policy. (2025). *Mapping HIV criminalization laws in the U.S.* <https://www.hivlawandpolicy.org/sites/default/files/2025-11/Mapping%20HIV%20Criminalization%20Laws%20in%20the%20US%2C%20CHLP%20111225.pdf>

²³ Fletcher, J. B., Kisler, K. A., & Reback, C. J. (2014). Housing status and HIV risk behaviors among transgender women in Los Angeles. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 43(8), 1651–1661. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-014-0368-1>; Jenness, V., & Rowland, A. (2024). The structure and operation of the transgender criminal legal system nexus in the United States: Inequalities, administrative violence, and injustice at every turn. *Annual Review of Criminology*, 7, 283–309. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-criminol-022222-040947>

The Current Study

In this study, we examine how gender identity, race, history of sex work, and HIV status shape experiences with the criminal legal system, including interactions with law enforcement, the courts, and incarceration facilities. While prior research demonstrates that each of these factors independently influences criminal legal system outcomes, less attention has been paid to intersecting effects on policing and criminalization.²⁴ This gap has direct policy implications: without an intersectional understanding of these dynamics, laws and enforcement practices may reinforce inequities and ultimately undermine public safety through profiling, discretionary policing, and the uneven application of HIV-related criminal statutes.

This study documents the lived experiences of transgender individuals in Memphis who have interacted with police and the broader criminal legal system. Transgender people remain largely absent from empirical research on law enforcement interactions,²⁵ in part because existing data systems and research methods often fail to capture their experiences. As a result, there remain critical gaps in understanding of how current policies and practices affect transgender people.

A central barrier to this research is the absence of gender identity data in administrative criminal legal system records. In most U.S. jurisdictions, official records—such as booking documents and court documents—do not identify a person's gender identity. For example, Tennessee law recognizes only sex assigned at birth, resulting in the routine misclassification, misgendering, and disappearance of transgender individuals in official records.²⁶ Similar limitations exist for sexual orientation. As a result, researchers cannot use administrative data to document the prevalence of practices such as misgendering and targeted enforcement of HIV-related laws.

Even if such data were available, administrative records do not capture how individuals experience the criminal legal system in practice. They do not reveal whether police interactions are respectful or abusive, whether gender identity is acknowledged or denied, or whether individuals are able to access necessary medical care while incarcerated. These experiences reflect how laws are implemented and whether they harm individuals, undermine public health, or erode trust in legal institutions. For example, discriminatory policing practices, including profiling based on gender expression or perceived involvement in sex work, can increase exposure to arrest and physical violence, while barriers to care in custody can disrupt HIV treatment and worsen health outcomes.

To address these gaps, we conducted interviews with 24 transgender²⁷ individuals in Memphis, Tennessee who together presented a range of HIV histories and prior engagement in sex work.²⁸ The findings in this report provide evidence to inform policy reforms aimed at improving policing practices and accountability, and promoting equitable treatment within the criminal legal system.

²⁴ Avalos, S. (2024). The trans experience with the criminal legal system. *Crime & Delinquency*, 70(5) 1505–1515. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00111287221134914>; Rogers, S. A. (2023). Intersectionality, trans people, and the criminal justice system. In J. E. Sumerau (Ed.), *The Rowman & Littlefield Handbook of Transgender Studies*. (pp. 39–51). Rowman & Littlefield.

²⁵ Meyer, S. J., & Moore, P. L. (2025). “Who ya gonna call?” Maybe not the police: Transgender peoples’ perceptions of and experiences with the police. *Public Administration Quarterly*, 50(1), 3–16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07349149251323570>

²⁶ Quinan, C. (2025). From criminalization to erasure: Project 2025 and anti-trans legislation in the US. *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17416590241312149>

²⁷ See Footnote 4 above for an explanation of how we use the term “transgender” in this report.

²⁸ Additional information about participants and the Memphis context is provided in the Methods section.

Findings

This section presents the key themes that emerged from participant interviews. We first describe participants' accounts of how they believed their gender identities shaped police perceptions of criminality and guilt at every stage of the criminal legal system. Next, we detail the harms participants described in interactions with the criminal legal system, including verbal, physical, and sexual abuse.

We illustrate the key themes that emerged with quotes from participants. Each quote begins with the participant's chosen pseudonym followed by their pronouns in parentheses when the participant is first introduced. Additional context for these findings is also provided in the appendix.

Across interviews, participants consistently linked their transgender identity or gender expression to negative treatment by police, courts, and incarceration settings. Their transgender status frequently heightened their vulnerability to mistreatment, abuse, and criminalization.

Assumed Criminality

Many participants described police encounters that appeared driven by officers' assumptions of criminality rooted in gender identity, race, and perceived involvement in sex work, rather than actual illegal conduct. Participants reported being stopped during routine activities—such as walking, driving, or seeking police assistance. Participants further reported being treated as presumed sex workers regardless of behavior. These experiences reflect what scholars have termed “walking while trans,” in which gender expression and intersecting identities function as proxies for suspicion rather than evidence of wrongdoing.²⁹ We describe participants' accounts of these interactions across several contexts, including street-level policing, during traffic stops, and when participants sought police assistance.

Walking While Trans

Interview participants frequently described police encounters while walking in public spaces. For example, Love (she/her),³⁰ a Black transgender woman in her 30s, recounted repeated encounters with Memphis police. “You get harassed just by walking,” said Love. The police “will just stop and ask you for your ID, ask you where you’re going ... you had to worry about the police.” According to Love, these stops were especially common in Midtown Memphis, a neighborhood she described as a hub for the LGBTQ+ community. Officers, said Love, would stop her for no reason at all. “They just stopped and ran your name [to see] if they have a warrant.” Love attributed these stops to officers' assumptions that transgender women were engaged in sex work. Starkesha (she/her), a Black transgender woman in her 30s, shared a similar experience while walking to a local business. “I walk to the store, and [the police] still stop me and ask me for my ID, trying to see what I’m doing,” she said. Starkesha recalled officers directly asking her, “You actually a sex worker?” to which Starkesha replied, “No, I’m just walking to the store.” Starkesha emphasized that police repeatedly assumed she was engaging in sex work when she was simply running errands.

²⁹ Carpenter, L., & Marshall, R. B. (2018). Walking while trans: Profiling of transgender women by law enforcement, and the problem of proof. *William & Mary Journal of Women and the Law*, 24(1). Temple University Legal Studies Research Paper No. 2018-07, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3122565>

³⁰ We use pseudonyms throughout this report to protect participants' identity. Each time a participant's name is introduced for the first time we also include their pronouns in parentheses.

Pat (he/him), a Black non-binary individual in his 50s, likewise described repeated police interactions related to standing or walking in public spaces. Pat felt harassed and targeted, and characterized these experiences as “racial profiling and walking while trans.” Reflecting on these experiences, Pat asked rhetorically, “What is you harassing me for? I’m not doing nothing. I’m not getting in nobody’s car... You just see me walking up and down the street.” The continual surveillance left Pat feeling criminalized for simply existing in public space. “It’s just ridiculous. You can’t go here. You can’t go there.” According to Pat, police routinely instructed him to “move on,” leaving him feeling there was nowhere they could exist without police interference.

Tiff (she/her), a Black transgender woman in her 20s, reported that police frequently stopped her while she previously worked “on the block,” but emphasized that officers also stopped her when she was not engaged in sex work. To Tiff, the stops felt like harassment. Officers would detain her for “just standing there on the block...just to pick on us.” She recounted one such encounter with a white police officer:

I was just standing on the block. This one white police officer stopped me, ask me, “What are you doing, standing on the block?” I’m like, “Just standing here.” He got out of the car, told me to come spread my legs, pat me down and whatnot. Took my purse, and he took all my condoms and poked holes in them. He gave them back to me, said, “You won’t be using these no more tonight.”

Tiff explained that the same police officer repeatedly stopped and harassed her every time the two crossed paths regardless of her conduct. In one instance, she recalled, “I wasn’t doing nothing, I was with my boyfriend heading home.” She described the officer’s actions: “[He] took my purse, looked in my purse, took the condoms,” and alleged that moisturizer in her bag was drug paraphernalia. The encounter ended without any allegation of criminal conduct. Reflecting on these interactions, Tiff stated: “I feel like they was violating [my] rights ... ‘cause they never tell us what they’re [stopping us] for.”

Driving While Trans

Interview participants described similar patterns of what seemed like unwarranted stops and assumed criminality while traveling in vehicles. For example, Farrari (she/her), a Black transgender woman in her 30s, believed that transgender women in Memphis, especially in Midtown, were frequently targeted and harassed while driving. “You can’t even ride through Midtown, really, and be trans,” she stated. Farrari recounted an encounter with Memphis police: “I was with another trans person, and we was literally just [driving] through, going to [a local store] ... and the police pulled me over.” Farrari emphasized: “I wasn’t speeding ... [Police] automatically assume I was doing something and we wasn’t.” Farrari interpreted the stop as based not on her driving or any violation of traffic laws, but on officers’ assumptions that she and her passenger—another transgender woman—were engaged in sex work.

Tiff similarly described being pulled over by Memphis police while traveling out of town with friends. According to Tiff, the officer never explained the reason for the stop and ignored questions from Tiff and her friends about why they had been pulled over. Instead, the officer demanded identification from everyone in the vehicle, Tiff claimed, which contained five Black transgender women. Aware of the power imbalance and fearful that officers could fabricate charges against them, Tiff said that she and her friends remained quiet during the traffic stop. Ultimately, no one was arrested, as no outstanding warrants were found, but Tiff believed the stop was motivated by the race and gender of her and her friends. As she explained:

I was mad ... He didn't even answer our question, why did we get pulled over for, and he didn't answer that. Yeah, just ignored the question. Just pulled us over and everybody got their ID out. Nobody had no warrants, because I think that's what he was looking for. It seems like, when I get around a lot of people, and I don't like to be racist, a lot of Black people who are trans, they always target us out, pulling us over. I don't understand.

In some instances, participants reported that while a stop may have involved a minor traffic violation, the interaction escalated due to how officers perceived their transgender identity. For example, Tomeka (she/her), a Black transgender woman in her 40s, described being stopped because of the placement of her license plate tag. She recalled that the officer immediately accused her of having an active warrant, ordered her out of the car, handcuffed her, and placed her in the back of the police vehicle. Tomeka remembered repeatedly attempting to explain that there must be a mistake, but that the officer ignored her. She believed the officer's suspicion and treatment stemmed from her visibility as a Black transgender woman. According to Tomeka, the officer stated, "We know how y'all like to change up," suggesting that Tomeka had committed a crime and altered her appearance to evade law enforcement. Although she was eventually cleared, Tomeka described feeling humiliated and dehumanized by the experience. She recounted going home in tears: "No matter what you do, no matter how good you stay—a perfect model citizen—it doesn't matter. It all goes back to what they think, and that was law."

Some participants indicated that officers treated them differently only after reviewing identification documents that disclosed the interview participant was transgender. Toya (she/her), a Black transgender woman in her 40s, described being stopped because her license plate light was not working. According to Toya, the interaction shifted once the officer reviewed her ID: "I feel like, once [the law enforcement officer] saw my ID ... and once he found that I was trans, it was like, 'Okay, yeah, I got you.' I got a ticket, and they towed my car. He made me walk home. I feel like once he got that I was [trans], that's what happened." Although the stop made her fear arrest and incarceration, Toya explained that she ultimately preferred walking home in the dark to the possibility of going to jail as a transgender woman.

Police Encounters When Seeking Help

Some participants reported that even when they contacted police to seek assistance—including during domestic violence situations—they were treated as criminal suspects rather than victims seeking protection. Tomeka described calling 911 for help after her partner allegedly fired a weapon into her home, only to be met with blame by the responding officer. "What are you doing to him?" Tomeka recalled the officer asking. According to Tomeka, officers suggested she was responsible for violence she experienced: "They said it was my fault that he was shooting into my home, or it was wrong for me to call them, like, or as if I tricked him, or something, like ... What you do to him? I'm like, I didn't do nothing. And what are you even asking me for? Why aren't you doing what you supposed to be doing?"

Moe (he/him), a Black transgender man in his 20s, and TeTe (she/her), a Black transgender woman in her 40s, both described calling police for protection during incidents involving intimate partner violence. In each story, their requests resulted in being misgendered, disbelieved, and arrested, rather than supported or protected. In Moe's recounting of events, responding officers repeatedly used incorrect pronouns. Moe explained that officers refused to consider his account of the incident. "It wasn't fair ... She was putting her hands on me. So how come she's not going to jail and I have to? They, again, they didn't want to hear anything I had to say." Moe described being handcuffed, placed in a patrol car, and

incarcerated. He ultimately spent approximately a year and a half in jail as a result of the incident and resulting police interaction, despite the interaction beginning with Moe's request for police assistance with his partner.

TeTe similarly described being arrested and incarcerated after calling police for a domestic dispute. She reported that officers repeatedly misgendered her, ignored her explanation of events, and ultimately arrested her rather than her former boyfriend. "The responding officers looked at me, and they looked at him, and they'd rather talk to him than talk to me." TeTe recalled officers describing her as "too hysterical." "They didn't want to listen to me whatsoever," she said. "And I'm the one who called the police—and they still arrested me." TeTe reported being charged with domestic violence and spent 30 days in jail before appearing before a judge, who dismissed the charges. She also described delays in access to legal counsel, which unnecessarily prolonged her incarceration. Although she believed police mishandled her case, TeTe felt too exhausted and vulnerable to pursue legal action against the department. The experience profoundly shaped her willingness to seek police assistance: "It would have to be like ... bloody murder, really, for me to call."

Verbal Harm

Interview participants described verbal harms during interactions with police and other criminal legal system actors that they tied directly to their transgender status. Many explained that officers' behavior shifted once their gender identity became apparent. Participants emphasized that verbal harm—like the physical harm discussed in the next sub-section—produced lasting psychological and emotional consequences. Anticipation of such harm also shaped how participants navigated encounters with law enforcement. Participants adopted preemptive and reactive coping strategies, including remaining silent, or minimizing self-expression to reduce the likelihood or severity of verbal abuse.

Misgendering and Deadnaming

The most common forms of verbal harm involved misgendering and deadnaming. Participants frequently described these practices not only in interactions with police officers, but also with booking and jail personnel, judges, and court staff. *Misgendering* refers to identifying someone using a gender different from the one with which they identify, whether intentionally or unintentionally.³¹ *Deadnaming* involves using a name a person has rejected—sometimes through a legal name change, often in the context of gender transition or coming out as transgender.³² Misgendering and deadnaming can involuntarily "out" a person as transgender, regardless of intent, exposing them to harassment and other harms. Even when participants informed officers of their correct pronouns or name, personnel often continued using incorrect pronouns and deadnames, which participants perceived as intentional and hostile.

When Moe called police for help with a domestic partner, he reported that officers repeatedly misgendered him and made transphobic comments rather than providing support. Despite informing officers that his pronouns were he/him, one officer reportedly told him, "You not a man. God didn't

³¹ Gunn, H. A., Suyemoto, K. L., Puckett, J. A., & Pantalone, D. W. (2025). The experience of misgendering among transgender and gender diverse people. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000879>

³² Lane, E. (2025). The impact of deadnaming. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pq/pqaf060>

make you a man, he made you a woman.” Rachel (she/her), a white transgender woman in her 40s, distinguished between accidental mistakes and deliberate disrespect. While she acknowledged that occasional errors—such as being misgendered on the phone—are understandable, she explained that continued misgendering after correction conveyed malicious intent:

You can tell when somebody is being malicious with it or not, or if it's genuinely they don't understand ... I can understand ... to a point ... But if I correct you, like it's "ma'am" or whatever, then we should be able to move on. You should be able to make an adjustment. If you continue to do it, or if the tone in your voice is different, then I can say, Okay, maybe this person is really being malicious. But ... You can, you can always tell.

Misgendering and deadnaming occurred at both the interpersonal level—through direct interactions with law enforcement officers—and the structural level—through policies, procedures, and official documentation. Police and jail staff relied on information in official records rather than using a person's expressed name or gender. These records, derived from routine paperwork and intake systems, often listed a person's sex assigned at birth—which cannot be legally changed in Tennessee—and their given name. Tiff described police in Memphis as “very disrespectful” when she informed them of her pronouns during a traffic stop. “But they still go on the [law enforcement] computer,” she continued, and “misgender me all the time.” Even though Tiff had a legal name change, she explained, “my deadname still comes up too.”

Several participants described abrupt shifts in officers' behavior after their transgender identity became known through fingerprinting or system checks. Interactions that initially seemed neutral or respectful often became disrespectful, hostile, or aggressive once officers discovered discrepancies between participants' identities and official records. Participants emphasized that, in most cases, their gender identity was irrelevant to the reason for police contact. Nevertheless, participants believed that being “outed” as transgender through these routine institutional systems altered officers' demeanor and behavior.

Chocolate (she/her), a Black transgender woman in her 30s, explained that she generally avoided mistreatment when officers perceived her as cisgender: “I didn't have a negative experience with [law enforcement when] ... they didn't know I was transgender ... I have had all my documents in line for a very long time.” However, she explained that fingerprint records continued to reveal outdated information. “I can't change my fingerprint,” Chocolate continued. “When they fingerprinted me, that's when my birth name and birth information came up ... That's when the mistreatment came.” Chocolate described how officers' behavior changed once they realized she was transgender: “When they found out the truth [that I was transgender], they begun to be very aggressive and very biased.” Chocolate's story is an example of how criminal legal system processes can act as de-facto outing systems for transgender residents even when a person has gone through legal formalities such as name change and gender marker change.

Verbal Harm as Exertions of Power

Participants often interpreted misgendering, deadnaming, and slur usage as tactics designed to exert power and harm participants.³³ Some described officers using degrading language such as “sissy” and “fag” in ways that reinforced fear and constrained transgender people's access to public spaces.

³³ Fiani, C. N., Nadal, K. L., Han, H., Mejia, D., Deutsch, T., & Murillo, M. (2017). A system of transphobic injustice: Microaggressions toward transgender and gender nonconforming people in the criminal justice system. *New York State Psychologist*, 29(3), 5-15.

Love described police officers intentionally using incorrect names and pronouns over loudspeakers from their vehicles to publicly humiliate people known to be transgender or suspected of engaging in sex work. In Love's view, police were harassing people "just because they feel like they can. In Memphis," she continued, "they feel like they're in control. They feel like, just because they have a badge, that they're what it is, and they feel like they have more power than you." Tomeka similarly described officers using loudspeakers to direct slurs and sexualized harassment toward transgender sex workers gathered in public spaces. She described officers using their loudspeaker to hurl slurs and insults such as, "I want to take you f--- ... for a ride," in front of others. Tomeka understood these actions as deliberate attempts to instill fear and anguish in "people who are trying to survive." She explained that the tactic succeeded in forcing people to flee: "I definitely was afraid for my life, and so I left. I left; I went to another spot where we would go to. I went to that spot to do my survival work."

Variations in Experiences: Positive Interactions

Not all participants reported negative experiences of verbal harassment, misgendering, or deadnaming. A small number described interactions in which officers and other criminal legal system personnel used correct names and pronouns or otherwise respected their gender identities. Although these experiences were comparatively rare in the interviews, they provide important insight into how institutional practices and individual officer behavior can shape interactions with transgender individuals.

For example, Chocolate recalled that after she was the victim of a violent crime, both police and local media referred to her using the correct gender and pronouns. She described this recognition as meaningful in the context of an otherwise traumatic event. Similarly, Ross (he/him), a white transgender man in his 40s, described a positive experience at a women's jail. Upon arrival, he presented identification with his legally updated name and recalled that staff initially appeared uncertain about how to proceed but ultimately treated him with respect:

I think there was a lot of behind-the-scenes conversations happening because you could see people walking back and forth and looking in on me. I will say, once the staff did understand who I was and why I was there, they did actually treat me well. They addressed me as I wish to be addressed, including pronouns.

Participants also described instances in which officers actively affirmed their gender identity in interactions with others. Toya recounted an encounter in which officers responded to a call at her workplace and corrected a customer who was misgendering her. As Toya explained, "The police said, 'that's a woman.' So I feel like they was taking up for me versus trying to bash me ... because what they saw was a woman."

These accounts demonstrate that respectful and affirming interactions between transgender people and law enforcement or criminal legal system personnel are possible within existing institutional settings. Participants' experiences suggest that the use of correct names and pronouns, acknowledgment of gender identity, and affirming treatment can contribute to feelings of dignity and safety. At the same time, participants described these experiences as exceptions rather than the norm. The relative rarity of affirming interactions underscores the inconsistency of current practices, suggesting that respectful treatment depends on individual discretion rather than standardized policy or training.

Physical Harm

Harms described by participants were not limited to verbal harassment or discriminatory treatment. Participants also detailed physical violence by police across a range of encounters, including routine traffic stops, warrant enforcement, and responses to calls for service. The descriptions in these accounts align with the World Health Organization's definition of violence as "the intentional use of physical force or power—threatened or actual—that results in, or has a high likelihood of resulting in, injury, death, or psychological harm."³⁴ Participants frequently identified gender identity, sexual orientation, and race as shaping both their risk of violence and how they were able to respond when violence occurred. Many participants explained that these intersecting identities limited their ability to assert themselves during police interactions. Participants also reported lasting effects from these incidents, including physical injuries, psychological distress, and legal consequences.

Physical Violence During Routine Police Encounters

Participants described physical violence as a common and recurring feature of routine police interactions, which some participants believed occurred more frequently because of their race and gender. Kendrick (he/him), a Black gender nonconforming man in his 30s, believed that police targeted him because of his appearance. He recounted an experience in central Tennessee during which officers "maced" him, causing burns to his skin and aggravating an underlying health condition. Kendrick connected this violence directly to his feminine appearance and perceived sexual orientation. He explained that others assumed he was "in a gang," "trans," or "a girl" because of his race and gender presentation. Kendrick stated, "They feel like they can treat certain people [poorly] ... just because of how I look ... people have to get to know me versus judging me off of how I look first."

Shaunte (he/him), a Black gender nonconforming man in his 40s, recalled an encounter with law enforcement when he was 19 years old that he characterized as "very traumatic and degrading." Shaunte said that he was riding in a car with friends when police stopped the group outside of Memphis. "I think we were basically stopped for no reason," Shaunte said. "I figured it's because we were all gay and they recognized that." When Shaunte asked why they had been stopped, he recalled the officer responding, "Get your f---t B---k a-s out of the car." Shaunte described being pulled from the car by his hair and struck with a baton "hurting me quite badly." The encounter ended, said Shaunte, with a disorderly conduct charge, which he believed was unjustified. "I ended up serving 30 days for a crime that I've never committed, but there was nothing I felt I could do about it," Shaunte said. Reflecting on the experience, he emphasized the enduring emotional harm of the experience: "This was so upsetting and humiliating to me and for me, and even today, whenever I see an injustice being done by the cops to anyone, it still bothers me and just, like, it's not fair, it's not right."

³⁴ Krug, E. G., Dahlberg, L. L., Mercy, J. A., Zwi, A. B. & Lozano, R. (2002). *The World Report on Violence and Health*. World Health Organization, Geneva. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9241545615>

Risk Due to Mistaken Identity

Participants also connected cases of mistaken identity to escalation and physical harm. These encounters were often connected to the use of deadnames, outdated records, or assumptions that a person's transgender identity reflected deception. Some encounters that began as routine stops quickly intensified when officers relied on inaccurate identity information.

Tomeka, for example, described being forcibly removed from her vehicle, handcuffed, and detained in a hot police car after officers claimed she had an active warrant. Tomeka recalled that despite attempts to resolve the situation through identification and communication, interaction with the officer escalated toward aggression. Tomeka felt she was perceived as being deceptive “just because of my gender identity.” Officers, she continued, later determined that the warrant belonged to another person who had used Tomeka's deadname as an alias. Although she was eventually released, Tomeka described the encounter as humiliating and traumatizing.

Jasmen (she/her), a Black transgender woman in her 20s, recounted a similar incident in which she recalled officers arriving at her residence with weapons drawn, ordering her to the ground, then pursuing her when she feared for her life and fled. Jasmen said she was arrested on a warrant that was later determined to belong to someone else. Although authorities eventually acknowledged the mistake, the encounter resulted in a citation and court appearance. Jasmen described the encounter as life-threatening and profoundly traumatic, with lasting psychological effects including ongoing fear, nightmares, and a diminished sense of safety.

Sexual Assault

In some cases, descriptions of physical violence involved sexual coercion and assault perpetrated by law enforcement officers. Participants reported that officers threatened arrest, incarceration, or further criminalization if participants refused sexual demands. Participants—particularly Black transgender women—believed they were targeted because police perceived them to be sex workers or associated them with sex work. They described how officers concealed or distorted their own identities, employed intimidation tactics, and used their police power and authority to coerce sexual favors.

Multiple participants described experiences of sexual exploitation, coercion, and assault by police under threat of arrest. For example, Tiff recounted being approached by a man in plainclothes while she was engaged in sex work. After soliciting sexual services, the man revealed himself to be a police officer by showing his badge and presented her with an ultimatum: “You could take this money and go to jail, or you could just leave and go about your life,” Tiff recalled. Faced with the threat of arrest, she felt she had no meaningful options other than to comply. “I didn't have no choice. I just left the money. And went about my life, like he said,” Tiff concluded.

Participants also described ongoing harassment and sexual exploitation along a well-known “trans track” in Midtown Memphis. Tomeka described repeated incidents of sexual extortion in these areas. She explained that certain officers “would come through like clockwork all the time,” not to enforce the law, but “to harass and to break the law... to bully us.” She described officers routinely turning off their patrol lights to surveil the area, “sneak up on us,” and intimidate people. According to Tomeka, one officer “would get you in his car and he would make you” perform oral sex under threat of arrest. When she

resisted, the officer escalated the threat, saying "'I'm gonna beat your a-s and take you to jail,'" Tomeka relayed. Tomeka described complying with officer demands out of fear of physical violence.

Tomeka also recounted an incident involving an undercover police officer posing as a client. After getting her into his vehicle, said Tomeka, the officer identified himself as law enforcement and told her "the only way I can stay out [of jail] is if I gave him ... services." She described being sexually assaulted and later being given the officer's phone number as if the encounter had been consensual. Tomeka stated that she did not report these assaults because of fear for her safety and distrust of police and legal system.

Other participants recounted similar experiences. Starkesha described repeated propositions, harassment, and sexual assaults by police. "Sometimes they stop me and ask for maybe [to go] on a 'date' and stuff like that," she explained, "and I tell them, 'No, I don't do that.' They still try to harass me." She further stated that officers threatened arrest when sexual advances were refused: "If you don't date them, they will take you to jail." Starkesha described feeling trapped and unable to seek protection or accountability.

Farrari similarly recounted experiences of sexual coercion and assault by police: "I was assaulted by a police officer. I was forced to have sex with him if I didn't want to go to jail." She believed that such practices were widespread among local law enforcement, and that they disproportionately targeted transgender women perceived to be engaged in sex work: "We trans girls were always targeted ... they'll see us out there ... catch us on the back street, and then boom, there it go." According to Farrari, officers from multiple agencies, including sheriff's deputies, engaged in this behavior. There are "a lot of girls that have been in that predicament that are forced to do that if they don't want to go to jail or accumulate a criminal record," she said.

Farrari also described a particular officer who routinely targeted transgender women believed to be engaged in sex work. According to her account, the officer "would threaten girls and put them in the police car," drive them to secluded locations, sexually assault them, and then abandon them on the roadside. "You have to walk back to wherever you were," she said. Multiple women were assaulted by the same officer, according to Farrari, who exploited their fear of criminal charges. "He [threatened that he] will take us to jail for soliciting [or for drug offenses] ... So he would use that against them... and he'll get what he wants."

Participants emphasized that sexual coercion by police was not limited to situations involving sex work. Love recounted being stopped by police while walking to the store. "I know what you're doing," Love recalled the officer saying. Love said that the officer then attempted to coerce her into sex under threat of arrest. She reflected that officers in Memphis "feel like they're in control... they have more power than you." She described fear of retaliation if she reported the incident because officers knew where she lived and could arrest her.

Across these accounts, participants painted a pattern of profiling, harassment, and coercion into sexual activity under threat of incarceration. Experiences ranged from coercive propositions to sexual assault and rape. Interview participants described officers exploiting both the authority of law enforcement and the vulnerability of transgender women, particularly Black transgender women. Participants also emphasized that fear of retaliation, disbelief, or further criminalization prevented them from reporting these incidents. Together, these narratives hint at a systematic absence of institutional accountability for sexual misconduct against transgender individuals locally.

Jail Experiences

Negative experiences and violence continued once incarcerated in jail facilities. Many participants described their jail incarcerations as degrading, traumatic, and profoundly dehumanizing. Participants described interconnected aspects of incarceration that contributed to this harm, including intake procedures that stripped them of gender expression and identity, denial of medically necessary care, verbal and physical violence, lack of protection from other incarcerated individuals, and the psychological toll of isolation through segregated placement. Together, these narratives depict institutional disrespect, neglect, and indifference toward the safety, dignity, and well-being of transgender people.

Jail Intake Procedures

Participants described jail intake procedures as degrading and dehumanizing. Intake practices in Tennessee jails generally require the confiscation of personal property, physical searches for contraband, and issuance of jail clothing, according to interview participants.³⁵ Participants reported that these procedures routinely involved the removal of all gender-affirming items, including wigs, makeup, and gender-affirming clothing.³⁶ Transgender women housed in male facilities described being required to wear male uniforms, regardless of their gender identity.

Farrari shared how traumatic incarceration can be for transgender individuals. It “is something that doesn’t get talked about,” she said. “They do demean you. ...they strip you down.” Farrari recalled that during her incarceration, jail staff prohibited her from wearing all things that “make me appear as female.” Staff required the removal of wigs, nails, lashes, and other gender-affirming items: “If ... you don’t have your natural hair, you can’t keep it. They will make you take off your nails ... you cannot wear pads ... if it ain’t on you ... it is coming off ... There’s no lashes, there’s no ... hair. You’re humiliated.” This humiliation extended to booking photographs, where transgender individuals were photographed after being stripped of gender-affirming items, leaving them, as Farrari explained, “basically bare” before the photograph was taken.

Participants also described intake searches as invasive and degrading. Strip searches and pat-downs were frequently experienced as sexualized, humiliating, and degrading. Chocolate recounted that officers in the jail “made it known that they don’t like transgender individuals” and explicitly ordered her to expose her genitals during intake. Toya similarly described feeling objectified while changing into jail attire under staff observation. “They said they had to stand in there and watch me undress,” Toya said, but “I think ‘cause I got breasts ... like, that’s their way of seeing a trans [person] up close.” Toya described feeling staff were looking “at me ... in a sexual way.”

Lady Roslyn, (human), a Black transgender woman in her 50s, explained that transgender people with visible breasts often faced heightened scrutiny and mistreatment during incarceration, noting that “your journey is gonna be a little bit rougher.” Lady Roslyn continued, “You are really treated terrible, like animals ... And there’s nothing we can say or do ... you swallow that pill ... and you just hope you survive.”

³⁵ See also Tenn. Comp. R. & Regs. ch. 1400-01, *Minimum Standards for Local Correctional Facilities* (rev. Jan. 2018), <https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/tci/policies-and-standards/TCI%20Local%20Jail%20Minimum%20Standardsv1-UA%20%281%29%20ruling.pdf>

³⁶ Tennessee Department of Correction. (2023). *Inmate rules and regulations: Offender handbook* (Handbook No. 502-04) <https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/correction/documents/502-04OffenderHandbook.pdf>

Verbal Harm from Jail Staff

Similar to their experiences with police, participants described verbal harassment and humiliation as persistent features of incarceration. Transgender women confined in men's facilities reported frequent misgendering, ridicule, slurs, and demeaning commentary from both correctional officers and other incarcerated individuals. These accounts suggest that transphobic harassment was normalized within the jail environment and often tolerated by staff.

Structural misrecognition of participants' identities was particularly evident in jails and courts, where people experience strict categorization based on state record systems. For example, Ferrari described how "the courts don't recognize my pronouns at all...they even still call me by my previous name." Although Ferrari repeatedly informed officials that she had legally changed her name, she believed that asserting her identity in this way had costs. "You get a different type of treatment," she said, "You really do." Similarly, Starkesha experienced both misgendering and deadnaming while detained in jail. "They was rough, misgendering me," she said. Starkesha explained to jail staff that she was a transgender woman, but "It was a lot, because ... when they were misgendering me, they didn't care ... I was telling them that I'm a trans woman, and you know, they still didn't care. They was calling me by my [previous] name, instead of my current name."

Other forms of verbal abuse also emerged from interviews. Tomeka described how jail staff would call her slurs and told her that she was "not a trans woman." According to Tomeka, staff "look at all of us the same. And so there's no difference." Ferrari similarly recounted being mocked by correctional officers after clearly identifying herself as transgender: "I said, I am trans. I'm on hormones. I had a legal name change and everything." Although one caseworker treated her respectfully and informed intake staff that "this is a trans person," one supervising officer repeatedly referred to her as a "sissy," she recalled. These disparaging comments compounded the humiliation of incarceration: "When you deal with the slurs, ... like ... getting told you ain't no woman ... it was just the verbal attacks and, and then you have the ones that look at you as sexual, the harassment ... it was just a lot," said Tomeka.

Participants emphasized that verbal abuse and intimidation were frequently tied to their gender identity and presentation rather than the nature of alleged offenses. As Mariah (they/them), a Black gender nonconforming individual in their 20s, explained, "They treated me like a murderer because of my gender identity. Like, I could just be going down there for maybe a driving ticket, and they still treat me like I murdered someone ... because you see the person that I am."

Lack of Medical Care/Medications

Interview participants described being unable to access needed medications while incarcerated, with consequences including interruptions in hormone therapy and denial of treatment for chronic medical conditions. Withholding gender-affirming medical care, including hormone therapy, can have severe consequences for the people who are denied care, and result in worsening physical and mental health.³⁷ Lady Roslyn explained that transgender people in custody "don't get your medicine ... if you're trans and

³⁷ Rosenberg, R., & Oswin, N. (2014). Trans embodiment in carceral space: hypermasculinity and the US prison industrial complex. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 22(9), 1269–1286. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2014.969685>

you're on hormones, different stuff, you don't receive this." Farrari echoed this experience, describing the jail medical system as "very awful," noting that "you don't get your medicine every day."

Even individuals who are already receiving hormone treatment prior to incarceration reported being denied continuity of care. Phallon (she/her), a Black transgender woman in her 40s, described disclosing her medications during intake only to have her essential and prescribed medication denied. "They do ask you, like, what medication you're on?" she recalled. "I was telling them all the medication that I take and ... they were like, 'well, we don't give hormones. Just give you your basic medication that you need.'" Hormones, according to Phallon, were not considered basic medications: "So, yeah, they didn't give me my hormones."

Participants also described the denial of treatment unrelated to gender-affirming care. TeTe reported that despite disclosing her HIV-positive status to jail staff, she did not receive HIV medication during a 30-day incarceration period. "I was getting sicker and sicker," she explained, recalling that staff told her, "Well, you'll be okay ... As soon as you get out of here and stuff, your medicine will still work for you." Although TeTe stated that she was able to maintain effective medication treatment after release, interruptions in HIV treatment—along with other medications—increase health risks, including the potential for viral rebound and medication resistance.³⁸

Lack of Protection from Other Incarcerated Individuals

Participants described feeling unsafe within jail facilities, and reported that correctional staff frequently failed to protect transgender individuals from harassment, threats, and violence perpetuated by other incarcerated individuals. Transgender women housed in men's jails were particularly vulnerable to verbal harassment and physical and sexual violence. Tomeka, who described herself as a visibly transgender woman, relayed how staff knowingly placed her in a men's facility: "That wasn't the right environment for me to be in, and ... I feared for my safety, because I could have been [sexually assaulted]." Tomeka described how verbal harassment against her intensified in the presence of large groups of men: "It's a million and one men, you know, sitting there, and here comes more discrimination, because now you got guys ... and they want to make you the butt of their joke." Phallon similarly believed staff knowingly placed her in dangerous situations despite being aware that she was transgender. "The guards knew I was trans ... still put me with the men. They didn't care, even when I told them I was scared."

Transgender men also described violence perpetrated by other incarcerated people while in custody. Moe recalled being housed in a women's facility with a cellmate who repeatedly threatened him and expressed open hostility toward transgender people. "She had threatened me, saying, 'I'm gonna get you.'" Moe reported that he requested to be moved but correctional officers dismissed his concerns. They "didn't want to listen and she just kept picking at me," he explained. Moe remembered warning staff more than once: "Don't put me back in there. This girl was gonna kill me." According to Moe, officers minimized the danger and told him, "She not gonna do nothing ... just go in there and just be quiet, don't say nothing to her." Moe later reported that he was physically and sexually assaulted by the same person he had

³⁸ Strategies for Management of Antiretroviral Therapy (SMART) Study Group, El-Sadr, W. M., Lundgren, J., Neaton, J. D., Gordin, F., Abrams, D., Arduino, R. C., Babiker, A., Burman, W., Clumeck, N., Cohen, C. J., Cohn, D., Cooper, D., Darbyshire, J., Emery, S., Fätkenheuer, G., Gazzard, B., Grund, B., Hoy, J., Klingman, K., ... Rappoport, C. (2006). CD4+ count-guided interruption of antiretroviral treatment. *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 355(22), 2283–2296. <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMoa062360>

warned staff about, resulting in injuries severe enough to require emergency surgery. At the time of the interview, Moe reported continuing trauma, nightmares, and fear of leaving home: “So it’s like, I don’t want to go nowhere,” he said.

Segregated Placement

Some participants described being forced to choose between exposure to violence in the general population and psychological harms associated with isolation in solitary confinement. Although segregation was sometimes framed as a protective measure, participants often experienced it as punitive and psychologically damaging.

Farrari described requesting protective custody after being threatened by other incarcerated individuals: “I told the jail staff that I felt unsafe. Rather than protect me, the officers tried to make it seem like I was crazy.” When Farrari appeared in court, “I told the judge that I want to be in PC, protective custody,” that is, a more secure section of the jail rather than in the general population. Farrari reported that the judge agreed to her request. However, said Farrari, jail officials placed her in isolation rather than honoring the judge’s protective custody order. “They said, ‘Well, you don’t have no court order for PC.’ So what they did was just put me in a cell by myself. My whole duration, I was by myself, for three months.” Although Farrari saw this isolation as the only available option for self-protection, she noted a significant decline in her mental health as a result of the prolonged isolation. “It will drive you crazy. You have no one to talk to ... You in the cell, you know, no TV.,” Farrari explained. She was let out of her cell for one hour each day. “Yeah, it’s traumatic,” Farrari added.

In contrast, Chocolate chose to stay in general population despite being offered protective custody. “I was treated regularly in general population. There wasn’t anything abnormal given to me.” Her account illustrates variation in experiences and suggests that experiences of safety and housing preferences differ among transgender individuals.³⁹

Fear of Reporting

Nationally, transgender people face high levels of violence, including violence perpetrated by law enforcement officers themselves.⁴⁰ Participants in this study described deep-rooted fears of reporting police misconduct. These fears were rooted in multiple causes, including the lack of anonymity in reporting procedures, officers’ access to internal systems that reveal identifying information, and the risk of retaliation through harassment, arrest, or incarceration. For many, the risks of reporting far outweighed any expectation of safety, accountability, or justice.

Love described a long-standing pattern of harassment by a specific officer. After she reported his misconduct, the officer was transferred to another precinct but allegedly continued to target her and other transgender women in Midtown Memphis. The officer’s persistence and ability to seek out and arrest transgender women reinforced Love’s belief that reporting alleged police abuse was dangerous

³⁹ Chesnut, K., & Peirce, J. (2024, February 20). *Advancing transgender justice: Illuminating trans lives behind and beyond bars*. Vera Institute of Justice. <https://www.vera.org/advancing-transgender-justice>

⁴⁰ Stenersen, M. R., Thomas, K., & McKee, S. (2022). Police and transgender and gender diverse people in the United States: A brief note on interaction, harassment, and violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 37(23-24), NP23527–NP23540. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605211072161>

rather than protective: “They harass you—real-life harass you—and still to this day, it’s police officers just arrest people in Midtown, just because they feel like they can.” She emphasized the impossibility of safely reporting misconduct in contexts where officers are frequently around. Love ultimately decided against filing a formal complaint regarding intimidation, threats of arrest, and sexual coercion because the officer was regularly in her neighborhood. As she explained, “When you report things, people don’t understand that ... it makes it worse ...” Filing a complaint, she believed, would result in escalation rather than protection.

Tomeka similarly never filed complaints regarding the assaults she experienced. She described pervasive fear of retaliation, including fear of being identified, located, and subject to further violence. Neither she nor her peers trusted the complaint process or believed their identities would remain confidential:

I never, myself, made a report. And from my friend's point of view, I don't think anybody ever made a report... [They are] scared for their life ... because the way the system is, they don't have any ways to protect you or to protect your identity. It's not going to be anonymous; they tell you it's going to be anonymous, but it's not. And the police ... they're able to go back in there and find out who you are and your address. They have friends in there who can pull up the camera, pull up the tape ... I wouldn't trust it at all.

For Tomeka, the justice system itself was perceived as a source of danger rather than protection because the officers were members of the same institution to which misconduct would have to be reported, leaving her with no realistic path to safety or accountability. As she explained, “You don’t know who to talk to. You don’t know who to report. You don’t know if it’s safe to report, and in this community, it’s just best if you don’t report them ... It’s a [bad] situation to be in.” Tomeka further noted that at the time of her experiences officers did not wear body cameras, leaving her without corroborating evidence beyond her testimony. In her view, it would be “their word against yours.” Silence in this case can be seen as an adaptive strategy.

Effects of Police Interactions

The reports of harm from interactions with law enforcement and other criminal legal system personnel often continued far past the point in time of the immediate encounter itself. Verbal, physical, and sexual coercion produced lasting psychological, emotional, and behavioral consequences. Participants described how repeated harmful interactions with law enforcement negatively affected their mental health, altered their perceptions of safety, and contributed to avoidance of police contact, even in situations involving personal danger or victimization.

Psychological Consequences of Verbal Harm

Participants described misgendering, deadnaming, and other forms of verbal harm as psychologically harmful experiences with lasting consequences. Repeated exposure to these interactions contributed to feelings of fear, helplessness, and emotional exhaustion, as well as trauma-related responses such as hypervigilance, anxiety, and social withdrawal. For example, Tomeka described the result of negative police encounters as “really bad. I felt crappy. I went home and cried myself to sleep.”

Phallon similarly described the psychological burden of needing to remain constantly vigilant during police interactions because of the potential for future harms: “It’s just crazy that you have to be on guard

for the people who you want to protect you ... who you supposed to be able to call?" She explained that repeated misgendering despite her gender presentation felt intentional and disrespectful, reinforcing her sense of vulnerability during police encounters. Jasmen recounted how a traumatic police encounter stemming from mistaken identity led to ongoing fear and social withdrawal: "I don't feel safe with them. I'm scared for my life every time I get pulled over." Following the incident, Jasmen said she began isolating herself and stopped participating in activities she used to enjoy: "I don't want to go out on public no more, because I'm scared for my life to be around, or be in a predicament where I need them and they're, they're not there." She also described avoiding public spaces and experiencing persistent sleep disturbances, characterizing the experience as "literally traumatizing."

Perceptions of Limited Access to Justice

Participants also detailed how verbal harm and discriminatory treatment affected their willingness to seek assistance from law enforcement and shaped broader perceptions of the criminal legal system. Fear of police, mistrust of law enforcement, and anticipation of mistreatment were consequences of prior negative interactions. Many participants explained that these experiences led them to avoid police altogether, even in situations involving victimization.

For example, Tomeka explained that she actively avoids law enforcement whenever possible: "If I see an officer, I don't trust him, I go the other way ... I just rather not call the police." She emphasized that outcomes during police interactions were shaped less by an individual's behavior than by officers' assumptions and perceptions, stating that "it doesn't matter ... it all goes back to what they think."

Moe similarly described how negative experiences and arrest after seeking help fundamentally altered his willingness to seek police assistance in the future. He stated, "There's no point of me trying to call ... if y'all gonna be the same way." Jasmen expressed a comparable loss of trust in law enforcement: "Police is supposed to be someone that I go to ... now I can't even feel safe." She described no longer viewing police as a source of protection and stated that she no longer felt comfortable calling 911 in situations of danger.

Adaptation and Responses to Adverse Conditions

Participants' responses to economic insecurity and strategies for avoiding harm were connected responses to structural conditions that shaped daily life. Employment discrimination, housing exclusion, poverty, transphobia, and criminalization created circumstances in which participants had to make difficult decisions to meet basic needs while also trying to stay safe. Within these conditions, participants developed strategies to survive, reduce risk, and navigate systems that at times failed to protect them.

Economic Insecurity

Transgender interview participants in Memphis described employment exclusion, housing insecurity, criminal legal system involvement, and transphobia as barriers to economic security and self-sufficiency. Some participants who engaged in sex work described it as a survival strategy in response to discrimination, unemployment, and economic hardship.

Participants repeatedly connected housing instability to gender identity and criminal legal system involvement. These experiences included being denied housing, evicted, turned away from shelters, harassed by landlords, or forced into unstable living arrangements. For some participants, arrest or incarceration linked to discriminatory gender-based policing led directly to the loss of housing. This deepened poverty and increased reliance on informal, temporary, or unsafe places to stay.

More than one participant seeking temporary housing reported being turned away from shelters because of sex-segregated policies that required placement according to sex assigned at birth rather than gender identity. In these situations, access to shelter was sometimes conditioned on denying or concealing one's gender identity. TeTe described trying to access temporary housing services in Memphis: "The homeless shelters wouldn't let me in because of being trans. It's like, if you come in, you got to take off those clothes, because it's against our policy." TeTe refused the shelter's demand and instead "took my chances back on the streets."

Housing instability further heightened participants' vulnerability. Farrari explained that "most girls" live in hotels as short-term housing that often becomes long-term because of limited alternatives. Although Farrari said she was "blessed" to live in her family home, she still faced financial pressures related to "light bills ... food" and other basic needs. "So, yeah, I just had to do what I had to do," she explained.

Participants also frequently described exclusion from formal employment because they are transgender. Even when participants had work experience or qualifications, they described being denied jobs because of gender identity rather than ability. Lady Roslyn explained, "A lot of time we go and apply for jobs, they're not giving us [a] job... It's because [of] who we are, not the capability of doing the job." Another participant linked employment exclusion to criminal legal involvement that she believed was tied to her gender identity. Tiff described the employment consequences of a criminal charge: "I cannot get a nursing job [which I previously had] ... I can't work in a nursing home ... because of the domestic violence charge on my record."

Participants with histories of sex work described it as a way to meet basic needs when safer or more stable income options were unavailable. Tomeka said she turned to sex work because she lacked viable employment and income opportunities. She described sex work as "survival work" and explained that she "had to rely on sex work to ... make ends meet" and "to be able to pay my rent and things." Love similarly described sex work as labor and survival, stating that "sex work is real work ... And that's what a lot of trans [women] have to survive."

Participants also described how economic instability shaped the risks they felt compelled to accept while engaged in sex work. Farrari explained that being in "survival mode" can "push you to do things you wouldn't normally do," including engaging in unprotected sex or staying in unsafe situations in order to afford food, rent, or other necessities. She described how transgender sex workers who were housing insecure or living in hotels may enter more dangerous situations "just so they can survive for another day or two."

Although sex work is criminalized in Tennessee and can increase the risk of police contact, participants emphasized that simply being perceived as engaging in sex work was often enough for police to treat them as criminal. Participants described this perception as tied to gender identity, gender expression, race, and location, regardless of whether they were engaged in illegal conduct. Housing insecurity and lack of access to private space heightened this risk because spending time in public spaces, hotels, or on the street increased the likelihood of police contact and reinforced assumptions of criminality.

Strategies for Avoiding Harm During Police Interactions

Participants detailed a range of strategies for navigating law enforcement interactions and reducing the risk of harm. These strategies included avoiding police contact when possible, remaining silent when misgendered, managing emotional responses, monitoring body language, and deciding when it felt safer not to challenge disrespectful treatment. Some participants insisted on correct names and pronouns despite possible negative consequences, while others described silence and restraint as forms of self-protection.

Participants' accounts suggest that police interactions often required significant emotional and behavioral exertions. Many described carefully regulating their tone, facial expressions, body language, and responses to avoid escalation, retaliation, arrest, or violence. Starkesha summarized this process by saying, "I had to go sit and meditate."

Participants described silence in response to misgendering as a deliberate safety strategy. They explained that correcting officers who used the wrong name or pronouns could escalate an encounter or lead officers to interpret their response as resistance or noncompliance. Phallon interpreted repeated use of "sir" by police as an intentional act of disrespect meant to assert power and control. She explained that she often avoided responding because officers could "flip it around and say ... you were being combative," creating a reason to arrest her.

Rachel similarly described the power imbalance between police and transgender people. She explained that officers "have that sense of power over you" and described feeling unable to challenge disrespectful treatment without risking escalation:

They think they can talk to you and say what they want and get away with it. You get called "Sir," or, you know, "he" or whatever. And you're like, "Hey, it's ma'am," or "it's she." I guess not. "But you look like a man to me" or something like that. It's just unnecessary and rude, and you can't, you feel like you can't say anything back to them, or they'll put you in handcuffs and throw you in jail.

Tomeka described suppressing her emotional response during a traffic stop because she feared violence or arrest. Reflecting on the encounter, she explained, "Let me just contain myself, because I don't want to be beaten ... I don't want them to arrest me ... and then I'd be stuck in jail."

Together, these accounts show that participants' strategies for avoiding harm were shaped by prior experiences with police, fear of criminalization, and the possibility that asserting dignity or correcting disrespect could be treated as defiance.

Discussion

This study documents the lived experiences of transgender individuals in Memphis who have interacted with police and the broader criminal legal system. Prior research in Memphis demonstrates that transgender people are particularly impacted by HIV criminalization laws, including laws targeting people engaged in sex work and statutes imposing sentence enhancements for people living with HIV.⁴¹ The findings presented here suggest that policing practices more broadly in Memphis may be less driven by individuals' behavior or HIV status and more by gender identity, race, and structural barriers. Participants' accounts indicate that police contact often occurred within contexts of gender-based profiling, where transgender identity itself is associated with criminality and suspicion.

Gender identity emerged as the central factor shaping participants' experiences with law enforcement and the criminal legal system. Participants frequently described intentional and hostile misgendering, deadnaming, and other forms of identity-based mistreatment during police and jail encounters. These experiences often occurred within interactions where officers exercised significant discretionary authority, contributing to feelings of humiliation, vulnerability, and fear, including fear of arrest. These findings are consistent with prior research identifying misgendering and identity-based policing as forms of institutional violence against transgender and gender diverse individuals.⁴² Moreover, Tennessee's recent restrictive policies governing name and gender marker changes may further increase the vulnerability of transgender individuals during police encounters, as discrepancies between participants' gender identity and official records were a distinct source of harm, resulting in mistaken identity, prolonged detainment, and risk of criminalization.

Participants consistently described being treated as suspicious or criminal based on gender presentation and other marginalized identities rather than because of specific behaviors. Participants, particularly Black transgender women, reported frequent stops, questioning, and assumptions that they were engaged in sex work while walking, standing outside on the street, or driving, even in the absence of observable criminal conduct. These accounts reflect broader patterns of "walking while trans," in which transgender identity itself is associated with criminality, which results in police surveillance.⁴³ Participants' experiences of assumed criminality were further shaped by intersecting structural conditions, including poverty, housing instability, limited employment opportunities, and reliance on survival economies. Consistent with prior research, we found that economic marginalization and race increased police exposure and vulnerability to criminalization.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Lennon-Dearing, R., Hirschi, M., Dill, S., & Gore, K. (2021). "We all deserve justice": The experience of being arrested for aggravated prostitution. *Journal of HIV/AIDS & Social Services*, 20(3), 183-208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15381501.2021.1963385>; Cisneros, N., Sears, B., Lennon-Dearing, R. (2022, June). *Enforcement of HIV criminalization in Tennessee*. The Williams Institute. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/hiv-criminalization-tennessee>

⁴² Gunn, H. A., Suyemoto, K. L., Puckett, J. A., & Pantalone, D. W. (2025). The experience of misgendering among transgender and gender diverse people. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000879>; LaMartine, S., Nakamura, N., & García, J. J. (2023). "Even the officers are in on it:" Black transgender women's experiences of violence and victimization in Los Angeles. *Women & Therapy*, 46(2), 103-129. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02703149.2023.2226012>; Woods, J. B., Galvan, F. H., Bazargan, M., Herman, J. L., & Chen, Y.-T. (2013). Latina transgender women's interactions with law enforcement in Los Angeles County. *Policing: A Journal of Policy & Practice*, 7(4), 379-391.

⁴³ Carpenter, L., & Marshall, R. B. (2018). Walking while trans: Profiling of transgender women by law enforcement, and the problem of proof. *William & Mary Journal of Women and the Law*, 24(1). Temple University Legal Studies Research Paper No. 2018-07, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3122565>; Dwyer, A., & Valcore, J. (2023). Policing transgender people: In: Panter, H., Dwyer, A. (eds) *Transgender People and Criminal Justice*. Critical Criminological Perspectives. Palgrave Macmillan https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-29893-6_5

⁴⁴ Daum, C. W. (2015). The war on solicitation and intersectional subjection: Quality-of-life policing as a tool to control transgender populations. *New Political Science*, 37(4), 562-581. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2015.1089030>; Stenersen, M. R., Thomas, K., & McKee, S. (2022). Police

A central finding of this study was the pervasive nature of harmful police interactions described by participants. Every participant reported experiencing some form of harm during interactions with law enforcement, ranging from verbal degradation and intimidation to physical violence, sexual coercion, and false arrest. (Although see also “Limitations” in the appendix below.) Even participants who described isolated respectful interactions also recounted patterns of mistreatment, underscoring the cumulative and systemic nature of harmful treatment.

Reports of sexual coercion and violence by law enforcement emerged as some of the most severe findings of this study. Participants described officers using threats of arrest, incarceration, or retaliation to coerce sexual acts during routine policing encounters. These accounts highlight how police authority and discretionary power can be used against transgender individuals, particularly transgender women perceived to be engaged in sex work. The findings presented here align with growing research identifying police sexual violence as a significant but underreported form of state violence.⁴⁵ National data indicate that transgender individuals involved in sex work are at significant risk of sexual exploitation by law enforcement, and a disproportionate number report being forced into sex by police to avoid arrest or legal consequences.⁴⁶

Participants' narratives further underscore the ways structural vulnerability, fear of incarceration, and lack of institutional accountability contribute to conditions in which reports of abuse can emerge with seemingly limited consequences.

Given participants' experiences, it is unsurprising that rather than providing safety, police presence was often perceived to increase feelings of fear and vulnerability. Prior experiences of harassment, discrimination, disrespect, and being blamed for their own victimization contributed to participants' reluctance to seek police assistance, even in situations involving potential physical danger or victimization on the part of participants. Participants expected mistreatment or criminalization when interacting with police, leading many to avoid police altogether. Instead, participants adopted self-protective strategies in response to anticipated police harm, including avoiding public spaces, altering routines, remaining hypervigilant, and suppressing emotional reactions during encounters. While these strategies reflect resilience and adaptation, they also indicate that persistent exposure to police harm can restrict freedom of movement and deepen vulnerability to future violence.

Participants described how experiences of harm continued while in custody. Such experiences were consistently described as traumatic and psychologically harmful. Standard jail procedures—including intake searches, confiscation of gender-affirming items, housing assignments, and routine misgendering by staff and other inmates alike—were often experienced as humiliating and dehumanizing. Similar to prior research, participants also described denial of medical care, lack of protection from violence, and

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⁴⁵ Purvis, D. E., & Blanco, M. (2020). Police sexual violence: Police brutality, #MeToo, and masculinities. *California Law Review*, 108(5), 1487–1531. <https://doi.org/10.15779/Z38XD0QZ2V>

⁴⁶ Stenersen, M. R., Thomas, K., & McKee, S. (2022). Police and transgender and gender diverse people in the United States: A brief note on interaction, harassment, and violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 37(23-24), NP23527–NP23540. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605211072161>

the harmful effects of prolonged isolation through segregated housing.⁴⁷ Carceral systems' reliance on binary gender classification fails to account for transgender identities, resulting in heightened risk of harassment, assault, and sexual violence.⁴⁸ Additionally, although segregation and solitary confinement are sometimes justified as protective measures, they often further isolate transgender people and exacerbate negative mental health effects.⁴⁹

Although this project was initially informed by the authors' previous research on the local disparities in HIV criminalization enforcement, participants generally did not identify HIV status as salient in their police interactions. Instead, participants overwhelmingly emphasized gender identity as the trait that shaped interactions with the criminal legal system, although race, economic vulnerability, and previous experiences of violence also emerged as themes. Although a person's HIV status is not generally known at the initial point of encounter (unless the person has a prior arrest for an HIV-related offense), the relative absence of HIV in coloring interactions is itself notable, suggesting that police interactions in Memphis may be shaped more directly by visible identity and structural inequality than by HIV status specifically. At the same time, HIV remains an important contextual factor given the disproportionate impact of HIV criminalization laws on transgender communities and the overlap between HIV vulnerability, poverty, criminalization, and survival economies. Although participants did not describe HIV status as a direct catalyst for police contact, prior research demonstrates that HIV criminalization laws continue to be enforced and operate to enhance punishment once individuals enter into the criminal legal system.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Frazer, S., Saenz, R., Aleman, A., & Laderman, L. (2023). *Protected and Served?* Lambda Legal and Black and Pink National. <http://protectedandserved.org/2022-report-full-report>; Stotzer, R. L. (2014). Law enforcement and criminal justice personnel interactions with transgender people in the United States: A literature review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 19(3), 263–277. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2014.04.012>

⁴⁸ Chesnut, K., & Peirce, J. (2024, February 20). *Advancing transgender justice: Illuminating trans lives behind and beyond bars*. Vera Institute of Justice. <https://www.vera.org/advancing-transgender-justice>; can cite Val's study on transgender people's elevated risk of sexual assault when incarcerated; Jenness, V., Sexton, L., & Sumner, J. (2019). Sexual victimization against transgender women in prison: Consent and coercion in context. *Criminology*, 57(4), 603–631. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12221>

⁴⁹ Stenersen, M. R., Thomas, K., & McKee, S. (2024). Police harassment and violence against transgender & gender diverse sex workers in the United States. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 71(3), 828–840. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2022.2132578>

⁵⁰ Cisneros, N., Sears, B., Lennon-Dearing, R. (2022, June). *Enforcement of HIV criminalization in Tennessee*. The Williams Institute. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/hiv-criminalization-tennessee/>

Conclusion

Transgender interview participants in this study overwhelmingly described negative interactions with the criminal legal system—particularly with police and jail systems. Participants reported experiences of verbal, physical, and sexual harm. Many described being stopped while in public based on assumptions that they were engaged in criminal activity—like sex work—regardless of their actual behavior or past history. Denial of gender-affirming care, restrictions on gender expression, and confiscation of gender-affirming items were described as routine features of incarceration and sources of psychological harm. In the absence of respectful treatment and institutional care, many participants described reluctance to interact with police, even when they are the victim of a crime or in need of assistance. Participants adopted self-protective strategies to minimize police contact and reduce the risk of harm. While these survival strategies reflect resilience and adaptation, they also raise broader safety concerns. Distrust of police may discourage individuals from reporting crimes or seeking emergency assistance, thereby affecting not only transgender communities but also the broader Memphis and Shelby County community.

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The Williams Institute is dedicated to conducting rigorous, independent research on sexual orientation and gender identity law and public policy. A think tank at UCLA Law, the Williams Institute produces high-quality research with real-world relevance and disseminates it to judges, legislators, policymakers, media, and the public. These studies can be accessed at the Williams Institute website.

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Appendix

Local Context

In this section, we describe some of the local context for our interviews, including economic considerations and local Memphis history that formed an important backdrop for many of the stories recounted in the main “Findings” section.

Local Memphis History and Geography

Memphis is located in Shelby County, Tennessee, one of the poorest large metropolitan counties in the United States, with long-standing racial and economic inequality.⁵¹ Moreover, poverty, housing instability, and limited employment opportunities disproportionately impact Black transgender individuals.⁵² The social and political climate in Tennessee is also increasingly hostile toward transgender individuals, with recent state-level policies targeting transgender rights and gender-affirming care.⁵³

Participants' experiences exist within a history of anti-transgender violence in Memphis and strained relationships between the transgender community and law enforcement. In 2008, Duanna Johnson, a Black transgender woman, died after being beaten by police officers in the Shelby County Jail. Her death remains in the city's collective memory.⁵⁴ Video documenting Ms. Johnson's physical and verbal abuse exposed systemic failures in jail oversight, accountability, and respect for transgender lives.⁵⁵ Participants in the current study referenced this broader history as shaping community perceptions of law enforcement and institutional trust.

Memphis and the surrounding Shelby County have also historically enforced HIV criminalization laws aggressively, particularly among marginalized communities.⁵⁶ Prior research shows that transgender women of color in Memphis, including those living with HIV, experience frequent contact with the criminal legal system, and that these interactions may be especially harmful.⁵⁷ At the same time, Memphis is home to strong transgender-led advocacy networks, mutual aid efforts, and grassroots organizing, including efforts to reform Tennessee's HIV criminalization laws.⁵⁸ These community-based efforts provide important sources of support and resistance in the face of ongoing structural abandonment and inequality.

⁵¹ Delavega, E., & Blumenthal, G. M. (2025). *The 2025 Memphis Poverty Fact Sheet*. School of Social Work, University of Memphis. <https://www.memphis.edu/socialwork/research/2025-poverty-fact-sheet-updated.pdf>

⁵² James, S. E., Brown, C., & Wilson, I. (2017). 2015 U.S. Transgender survey: Report on the experiences of Black respondents. National Center for Transgender Equality, Black Trans Advocacy, & National Black Justice Coalition. <https://www.transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/usts/USTSBlackRespondentsReport-Nov17.pdf>

⁵³ ACLU. (2025, December 29). *Mapping attacks on LGBTQ rights in U.S. State Legislatures in 2025*. <https://www.aclu.org/legislative-attacks-on-lgbtq-rights-2025?state=TN>

⁵⁴ Local 3 News. (2008, June 18). *Memphis police hit transsexual suspect*. https://www.local3news.com/memphis-police-hit-transsexual-suspect/article_bfd859a-57e6-5a5c-818f-465acd9b08b3.html

⁵⁵ Dwyer, A., & Valcore, J. (2023). Policing transgender people: In: Panter, H., Dwyer, A. (eds) *Transgender People and Criminal Justice*. Critical Criminological Perspectives. Palgrave Macmillan https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-29893-6_5

⁵⁶ Cisneros, N., Sears, B., & Lennon-Dearing, R. (2022). *Enforcement of HIV criminalization in Tennessee*. Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/HIV-Criminalization-TN-Jun-2022.pdf>

⁵⁷ Lennon-Dearing, R., Hirschi, M., Dill, S., & Gore, K. (2021). “We all deserve justice”: The experience of being arrested for aggravated prostitution. *Journal of HIV/AIDS & Social Services*, 20(3), 183-208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15381501.2021.1963385>

⁵⁸ Hipp, T. N., Gore, K. R., Toumayan, A. C., Anderson, M. B., & Thurston, I. B. (2019). From conversion toward affirmation: Psychology, civil rights, and experiences of gender diverse communities in Memphis. *The American Psychologist*, 74(8), 882-897. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000558>

Methods

This study was conducted in Memphis, Tennessee, through a collaborative partnership between the University of Memphis, the Williams Institute at UCLA's School of Law, and members of the local transgender community in Memphis. A transgender community member served on the research team and contributed cultural expertise throughout all phases of the study, including research design, development of the interview guide and demographic survey, participant recruitment, data collection procedures, and analytic discussions.

Participant recruitment and data collection occurred between November 2024 and July 2025. Eligible participants were adults (18 years or older) who self-identified as transgender or nonbinary and reported at least one prior interaction with law enforcement. Recruitment materials were distributed via flyers at community organizations that serve transgender and gender-diverse individuals in Memphis.

Data were collected through individual and small group semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted in private spaces within trusted community organizations to promote participant comfort and safety. Participants selected pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. All interviews were conducted by the first author, audio recorded with participant consent, transcribed verbatim, and de-identified prior to analysis. Audio recordings were initially transcribed using Otter.ai and subsequently reviewed for accuracy by a member of the research team before being uploaded into Dedoose qualitative analysis software.

Data analysis followed an iterative qualitative content analysis approach. Two of the researchers first engaged in repeated readings of the transcripts to develop familiarity with the data.

During initial coding, meaningful excerpts were identified by the first author and assigned preliminary subcodes representing emerging concepts within participants' narratives. These subcodes were then refined, defined, and organized into broader conceptual categories under higher-level parent codes. A comprehensive codebook was developed that included parent codes, subcodes, and operational definitions using the Dedoose software. The research study member who conducted the interviews did primary coding, while themes were collaboratively developed by the research team. Parent codes and associated themes were reviewed, discussed, and resolved in team meetings. The findings presented in this report reflect themes identified through analysis of participants' transcripts.

Participants

A total of 24 people participated in the study, including 19 participants who identified as transgender and five who identified as nonbinary. Participants ranged from 22 to 63 years old, with an average age of 41.8 years old. Most participants (92%) identified as Black or African American, while the remaining participants identified as white.

Over half of participants (58%) indicated completing some college, technical training, or having earned a college degree. Half (50%) of the participants reported formal employment as their main source of income, while an additional 21% indicated that their main source of income was Supplemental Security Income or Social Security Disability Insurance. Three participants (13%) reported being unemployed at the time of the interviews, and two participants identified sex work as their primary current source of income. However, 58% of participants reported having engaged in sex work at some point in their lives.

Participants also reported housing and economic hardship. More than one-third reported receiving housing or rental assistance, were currently experiencing homelessness, or were living in a shelter or other temporary housing.

Just over half (54%) of participants reported an HIV-positive status. Self-reported health status was varied: 29% rated their health as “fair,” 29% as “good,” and 38% as “excellent.”

Table A1. Participant demographics (N = 24)

Demographic	Category	N/M	%/SD
Age		41.8	11.4
Race/ethnicity	Black or African American	22	91.6%
	White	2	8.3%
Sex assigned at birth	Male	22	91.6%
	Female	2	8.3%
Gender identity	Male	3	12.5%
	Female	4	16.6%
	Transgender	12	50.0%
	Other	5	20.8%
Education	Less than 12 th grade	2	8.3%
	High school diploma or GED	7	29.1%
	Some college or technical training	9	37.5%
	College degree	5	20.8%
	Missing	1	4.1%
Residence	Homeless	2	8.3%
	Living with partner or family	2	8.3%
	Shelter or temp housing	2	8.3%
	Receive housing/rental assistance	4	16.6%
	Own or rent home	14	58.3%
Household size	1	11	45.8%
	2	7	29.1%
	3	3	12.5%
	4	1	4.1%
	5	1	4.1%
	Missing	1	4.1%
Main source of income	Employed	12	50.0%
	Supplemental Security Income or Social Security Disability Insurance	5	20.8%
	Sex work	2	8.3%
	Unemployed	3	12.5%
	Missing	2	8.3%

Table A2. Participants' HIV and health status (N = 24)

Health Factor	Answer	N/M	%/SD
HIV status (n = 24)	Living with HIV	13	54.1%
	Not living with HIV	11	45.8%
Years living with HIV (n = 13)	Range 5 – 36 years	18.6	9.8
Health status (n = 24)	Fair	7	29.1%
	Good	7	29.1%
	Excellent	9	37.5%
	Missing	1	4.1%
Prescribed HIV medication (n = 24)	Yes – for HIV	13	54.1%
	Yes – for PREP	2	8.3%
	No	9	37.5%
HIV medication taken as prescribed (n = 15)	Most of time	1	6.6%
	All the time	14	93.3%

Table A3. Participants' experience with sex work (N = 24)

Experienced sex work	N	%
Yes	14	58.3%
No	10	41.6%

Table A4. Participants' self-disclosed experience of police physical or sexual assault (N = 24)

Experienced police physical or sexual assault	N	%
Yes	12	50.0%
No	6	25.0%
Unknown or missing information	6	25.0%

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, as a qualitative study focused on one geographic area, the findings are limited to this group of 24 individuals and may not be generalizable to other settings or other states. That noted, the purpose of this qualitative research study was to understand the lived experiences of transgender individuals who have interacted with police and the broader criminal legal system in Memphis.

Second, the recruitment strategy may have shaped who participated in the study. Participants were recruited through community-based networks and organizations, including organizations that provide HIV-related support services, housing resources, and other forms of assistance, especially for transgender people in the Memphis area. This recruitment approach may overrepresent individuals who are already connected to services and underrepresent people who are more isolated or not engaged with HIV or LGBTQ+ service providers.

Third, participants self-reported their accounts of interacting with law enforcement and how they understood and experienced these interactions. Although the people who directly experienced the interactions are the primary source for information on the subjective experience of those encounters, the results presented here are sensitive to what participants were able to remember and the extent to which participants were willing to share their experiences.

Finally, recruitment criteria were based in part on participants' prior interactions with the criminal legal system. We did not analyze the histories of people with no police interactions. This recruitment criterion may also have affected the histories of sex work described in this report, which were exclusively street-based.