

Why Are So Many Transgender Women of Color Being Killed in America?

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VIOLENCE

Tee Tee Dangerfield is reportedly the 17th transgender person to be killed in the U.S. this year. Thirteen of them have been black women.



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Facebook

Atlanta police do not know if Tee Tee Dangerfield, reportedly the 17th transgender person to be murdered this year, was killed because she was trans.

What is known is that on Monday morning police responded to a “person shot” call at around 4:20 a.m., and discovered Dangerfield, 32, inside her vehicle in the College Park area of the city. She was found outside an apartment complex, suffering from multiple gunshot wounds.

Dangerfield, who was shot outside the South Hampton Estates on the 3100 block of Godby Road, [according to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*](#), later died at Atlanta’s Grady Memorial Hospital from her injuries.

Major Lance Patterson of the Atlanta Police told The Daily Beast that Dangerfield’s family had been notified. “We don’t have any viable leads, and we have not identified a motive. We don’t know anything that leads us to think that this was a hate crime, but we will follow up any lead

we come across, he said. (Concessions International, Dangerfield's employer as listed on her Facebook page, did not respond to a Daily Beast request for comment by press time.)

[On a GoFundMe page set up](#) to help pay for funeral and burial costs, TeeTee's family write, "The Dangerfield family would like to thank everyone who has expressed their condolences – and blessed us with their prayers during this extremely difficult time.

"Our family never thought we would have to bury our loved one – unexpectedly.

"We know this story has touched many people in the Atlanta-metro area and across the country. Especially, those in the LGBT community. We want you to know your love and support has meant everything to our family. We also want you to know that Tee Tee was a prideful transgendered woman and happily supported her community.

"If you feel compelled to donate to Tee Tee's Fund to cover her burial and funeral expenses, we would gladly appreciate it.

"For all those who a part of the LGBT community, in transition, scared of people's perceptions know that Tee Tee would say – "Be fabulous, honey!"

Dangerfield is the 17th trans person to be murdered in the U.S. this year, according to the [Anti-Violence Project \(AVP\)](#). (The often-cited figure is 16, but 17, say the AVP, takes into account the [fatal police shooting](#) of trans man Sean Hake in Pennsylvania in January.) As the Human Rights Campaign [noted in a post about Dangerfield](#), "so far, almost every victim has been a woman of color—and nearly all have been black women."

AVP spokesperson Sue Yacka told The Daily Beast that of the 17 homicides of trans and gender-nonconforming people in 2017 that the project has counted so far, 16 had been people of color; 15 had been transgender women; and 13 had been black transgender women. "This is that we know of," said Yacka. "The figure may be much higher, due to misgendering and misnaming often by police and local media."

Before Dangerfield, the last trans women to be killed also died in Georgia. In June, [Ava Le'Ray Barrin](#), 17, was shot and killed in Athens during an altercation in an apartment parking lot.

Barrin is the youngest trans person to be murdered this year.

It remains to be seen if the number of trans people murdered during 2017 eclipses 2016 statistics—[as previously reported by The Daily Beast](#), between 22 and 27, according to different estimates.

Of trans prejudice in the state, Chanel Haley, gender inclusion organizer for [Georgia Equality](#), told The Daily Beast: “I will say [Atlanta](#) is a lot more diverse. There is even a city ordinance inclusive of the trans community. It is not as bad in Atlanta as it is in the rest of the state.

“I’ve been in very small towns in Georgia and there are trans people who are afraid to walk out of the house, who literally if they go to a store have people taking pictures of them and posting them on community websites. They can’t get jobs, they’re ridiculed, and so is their entire family by association.”

Haley said trans people over the last two years had felt the effects of a “heightened spotlight,” first thanks to the positive effects of [President Obama](#)’s letter to educators across the country stating that trans students should be allowed to use restrooms according to their gender identity.

“[Obama] trying to do good put everyone else on alert,” said Haley. “There were trans students going to school before that letter, and then we had people going out looking for trans kids. Now we have an administration catering to that mob, fueling and feeding that hatred.”

The Trump administration’s various anti-transgender moves—most dramatically, the president’s hugely criticized tweets foreshadowing [a ban on trans people serving in the military](#)—have collectively “made it more dangerous for our community whether in rural or

urban Georgia. We feel that people who are against us feel justified because this administration supports them,” said Haley.

“The discrimination is pretty blatant. People are not trying to hide it as much as they were before. The Trump administration has given them a license to discriminate.”

Dangerfield’s murder comes in the wake of the highly publicized crusade of Texas’s governor and lieutenant governor [to pass a “bathroom bill”](#) in a special session of the legislature.

It also comes after comments [made by Lil Duval](#), in which the comedian said he would kill a woman he had had sex with, if afterward he discovered she was trans—and this is during a radio show discussion in which trans people were called “transgenders,” and Janet Mock herself was misgendered and insulted by Duval.

The hosts have been widely condemned, and Mock herself wrote a [powerful rejoinder to them in *Allure*](#).

“It’s just so unfortunate how this death is in the wake of that,” said Raffi Freedman-Gurspan, director of external relations at the [National Center for Transgender Equality \(NCTE\)](#). “We’ve got a problem in our country where trans women and particularly trans women of color are not only under attack but also not valued, and where people can say something as horrible publicly as they would kill someone who was trans.”

The comedian Dave Chappelle also made a series of trans-baiting jokes at his Radio City Music Hall gig this week, [according to *Vulture*](#), qualifying his thoughts on Caitlyn Jenner’s “man-pussy” among other things with claiming that, while he doesn’t understand transgender people, he doesn’t believe that “disqualifies them from being a human being that deserves a life with dignity and happiness and respect.”

Of Dangerfield’s murder, Freedman-Gurspan said: “Every death is a real person with their own story. Every year we are seeing more and more trans women, of color in particular, being killed

by murder. We are very upset. It only reinforces the truth of what transgender people are telling us about the heinous violence and feelings of un-safety they face on a daily basis.”

Signs of Change

The NCTE had been heartened, Freedman-Gurspan said, by the successful prosecution last year of [Joshua Vallum of Mississippi for killing Mercedes Williamson](#), his transgender former girlfriend. Vallum’s was the first case of its kind to be prosecuted under the federal Hate Crimes Act.

Freedman-Gurspan said the NCTE “wanted to be careful about generalizations,” but that cases of violence the NCTE is observing tend to feature a trans woman, “usually of color, usually but not always from poorer backgrounds, in a relationship with a man. Something goes awry and someone gets killed, and it’s the trans woman,” said Freedman-Gurspan.

The reality, she added, was that relationships with transgender people, particularly women, have a “flavor of taboo-ness in certain parts of the country that are very strong, although that is no excuse for one human being taking the life of another human.”

LaLa Zannell, lead organizer at [NYC Anti-Violence Project](#), told The Daily Beast that education was the key, and educating children as young as possible.

“You have to think about society, and where and when did we learn transphobia from. At school these things were taboo and not talked about, and so for years this has been an untouched topic. Trans folk have been trying over years to shift that and have that conversation.

“Some people are not open to that conversation or not had access to education around those conversations. Really prevalently in black communities, it is not talked about at all. It’s looked at as a sign of weakness, like ‘how could you be black and want to do this?’”

Trans people, said Zannell, experience violence from people they knew: parents, friends, and people they date. “Trans folks are not even safe in relationships,” Zannell said. “A lot of that comes from the shaming that happens to the men who love us. Men are shamed and teased for loving us, and that makes them ashamed, so they feel like they have to prove something.”

The narrative of trans people “tricking” partners obscures the trans people who “live their lives unapologetically as who they are,” said Zannell. “But then people see that those who live openly are killed, and so it may not make sense to tell someone, to be open. It comes down to education, policy, and helping and supporting parents to understand.”

Zannell said transgender-protecting policies and laws are important, although “we shouldn’t need a policy to change. I believe us as people and communities can change these things: building educational tool kits for parents because trans kids are coming out so young these days; having conversations in schools; having conversations within religious platforms and stop using religion as a form of hate.

“We need men who love trans women to step up to the front and say they love trans women and affirm us, and for people in the black community talking about hate against anyone who is a person of color as wrong, and that sexuality and gender have nothing to do with it.”

Zannell called on media outlets to cover transgender people “not just in the context of death, or as the ‘glamazon’ on the red carpet, but living our lives authentically as everyday citizens of this country—showing our struggles, happiness, our pain. Some of us have families. I know a trans woman firefighter. So many stories are not heard.”

Zannell also called for a wider range of voices in the media. “Me as a black woman will never be at the television forefront. I don’t fit the image, the white Hollywood standard of beauty, which doesn’t allow for BBW (Big Black Women), or dark skin, or kinky hair.” The trans people the media focuses on, said Zannell, are ones who can “pass.”

The Law and Beyond

As regards Dangerfield's death, it is yet unknown if her murder was based around a relationship issue, or if she was a victim of a robbery gone wrong, or something else entirely. But her murder, said Freedman-Gurspan, brings "a heightened awareness within our community that there is this pattern, and the most vulnerable tend to be black trans women."

The NCTE has done training with multiple law enforcement organizations, and the successful Mississippi prosecution last year showed that trans awareness is not limited to the progressives' agenda. "Law enforcement has a pulse on these issues because they are interacting with our communities every day," said Freedman-Gurspan. "They realize this is a serious problem."

President Trump's pronouncements had been alarming and led to "a heightened sense of vulnerability among trans people. We in the trans community are as diverse as any community: there are transgender Muslims, transgender military folks, transgender folks wanting access to reproductive services. We time and again see transgender lives dismissed as essentially disposable, especially for transgender black women out there who are very, very scared."

As more trans people come out, Freedman-Gurspan hopes that the "daily onslaught" of violence and anti-trans rhetoric might abate.

"In poorer black and brown communities, poverty, violence, hunger, a lack of education and resources exacerbate these situations," she said. "When people are faced with the rhetoric that is out there and looking for scapegoats unfortunately, it is women in particular who are punching bags. It has got to stop."

"Primarily it seems perpetrators of this violence are cisgender men. There needs to be a conversation among men about what is happening to transgender women, and that this really does need to stop."

“I’m a black trans woman in America,” said Zannell. “Every day I am able to go work and come home and hug my daughter and spend time with her. That is a blessing to me. Every day that I am able to get up and breathe again is a blessing to me. I wish we could get to a point of addressing the root causes of transphobia, and have a public conversation around it.”

The increased numbers of trans homicides may be down, in part, to a greater reporting of trans-specific violence, Zannell said.

“There was a time when I was a younger trans woman that you heard nothing. So many girls I grew up with never had any justice. They never had the things that they have now. Back then you could go to the media, but they didn’t care. It’s unfortunate that people care about the deaths of trans women, but at least it’s bringing awareness to that.”

Trans people initiating conversations, pursuing justice, resisting and calling out prejudice, and holding the media accountable—such as with Duval—showed, said Zannell, that “we’re not going to wait on the system to hold people accountable, and we will come together as family through social media, through coming together, and showing up.”

Anyone with information about Tee Tee Dangerfield’s death should call Major Lance Patterson of the Atlanta Police at 404-761-3131.