

# Addressing Hate in Rock Springs, Wyoming

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## **Abstract**

With the rise in suicide rates in young LGBTQ populations and bias-motivated incidents emphasizing racial conversations nationwide, local municipalities have been called on to make a change to protect disadvantaged populations. Rock Springs, WY, known for one of the most extreme examples of bias-motivated incidents against Chinese American coal workers, has been noticeably slow to act. This paper recommends options for the City Council and School Board to help better protect disadvantaged populations and address the inherent issues. These measures include at-home policies, school policies, and social policies across the community that all incorporate ways to decrease LGBTQ suicide rates.

# Introduction

In September of 1885, 150 white coal miners brutally attacked their Chinese coworkers, killing 28, wounding 15 others, and driving many others out of town (Ichioka, 1979). This incident was not the first case of a bias-motivated instance in Rock Springs, but it remains one of the darkest spots in Rock Springs' history over a century later. Growing up in Rock Springs, we learned about this event in elementary school and were constantly reminded of it throughout our public education. Teachers used it as an example of tolerance, and students seemed to treat it as they did with any other subject: ignoring the message and waiting for the lesson to end.

While the Chinese Massacre remains the most obvious example of racial intolerance in the town I grew up in, intolerance continues to be a massive problem for the entire community. In an attempt to symbolically right their wrongs by installing a permanent memorial, Rock Springs seems to be only taking actions that have very public receptions. While this did help focus on the historical issue, it seemed to be the only way any person in power would stand against intolerance. However, as the monument went up, a new form of intolerance became more prevalent. Walking the hallways of the local high school, tolerance seems to be in hibernation. Racial slurs are thrown from clique to clique, and constant misgendering of LGBTQ+ youth highlights a new form of issue that needs to be addressed.

This paper aims to address this growing intolerance and lack of a willingness to change in the entire community and answer the question: What can Rock Springs do to address internal hate and bias-motivated events? We first will address the problems that currently persist and the inherent need to act now, both locally and with general trends in the rise of bias-motivated instances, emphasizing racial and LGBTQ+ hate crimes. Next, we will analyze current trends in anti-hate crime legislation, and the purpose of anti-hate legislation, before finally making a recommendation on what each level of the government in Rock Springs should do. Lastly, we will discuss the limitations, what future actions can and should be taken in Rock Springs, Wyoming, and the nation, and why starting with communities like Rock Springs is essential for developing nationwide tolerance.

## **Inherent Issue**

So first, let us dive into the current problem plaguing Rock Springs and the nation. Wyoming currently has the highest suicide rate per capita in the United States (CDC, 2021). While one would think this would incentivize lawmakers to take action, local municipalities have been forced to look for solutions without top-down support, leading to either inadequate or no policies. Disadvantaged populations are significantly harmed by this statistic as well. Moreover, Wyoming has only reported 13 hate crimes since 2014 (USCCR, 2020), and in Cheyenne, one of the two hate groups officially classified by the anti-defamation league that reside in Wyoming began to make their presence known more known in Cheyenne (Kull, 2019). Spreading fliers across the state, this hate group ensured that immigrants and people of color were not welcome in Wyoming. State officials declined to comment, but more importantly and visibly, Laramie County School District 1 declined to denounce white supremacy after anti-gay fliers were found in elementary and junior high schools in Cheyenne (Hughes, 2019). This problem is not due to improper legislation. Instead, it is cemented repeatedly by ignorance at all levels and refusal to act even when it is too late. But what does this issue look like across the nation?

According to The Trevor Project, an independent agency committed to reducing LGBTQ youth suicide rates, (2021) 42% of LGBTQ youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year, and over half of transgender and nonbinary youth. Additionally, they estimate that more than 1.8 million LGBTQ youth consider suicide each year, and at least one attempts suicide every 45 seconds. Compared to their heterosexual counterparts, LGBTQ youth are four times as likely to attempt suicide (Johns et al., 2019). Moreover, these numbers increased when considering minority status and race. The Trevor Project (2021) found that more significant experiences of minority stress associated with increased odds of attempting suicide were 12 times greater odds of attempting suicide compared to their peers.

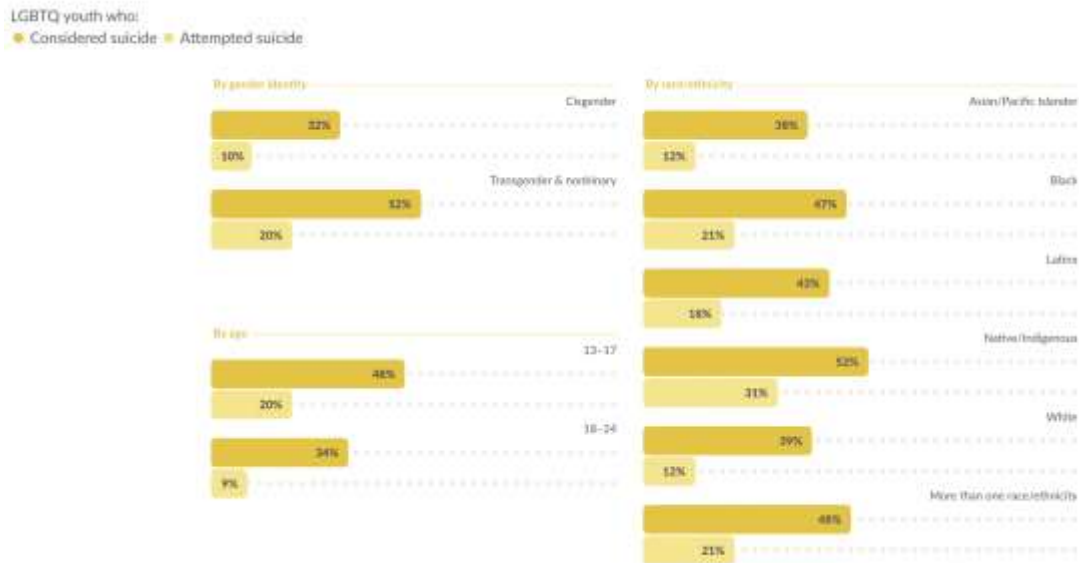


Figure 1: Percentages of LGBTQ youth who considered and attempted suicide accounting for different descriptive statistics. SOURCE: Trevor Project 2021 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health.

Shifting our focus away from LGBTQ statistics, the trends of suicide rates and biased motivated instances against disadvantaged populations continue when looking at race. Hate Crimes directed toward Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) rose by 339% from last year (CSHE, 2022). More locally, AAPI hate crimes also increased, even if they were unreported. Similarly, American Indian hate crimes also go unreported, highlighting a systemic problem. Perry (2005) found that when hate crimes were reported on reservations, local officials would not act for jurisdiction issues and felt like the reservation could police themselves even when the hate crime occurred outside of reservation jurisdiction. In an interview with University of Wyoming Professor Jingke Tang, the Physics and Astronomy department head, NPR (2021) found that anti-AAPI hate comments found their way to the streets of Laramie and the paths of Prexy's. The Kaiser Family Foundation (2022) found that 1 in 3 AAPI Americans has felt some discrimination since the beginning of the pandemic. When looking at both race and sexuality together, suicide rates and suicide attempts increase for every race and ethnicity compared to their white peers, with native youth reporting the highest rate at almost 31% (Huebner et al., 2009). Moreover, black transgender and nonbinary individuals report extremely concerning numbers, 59% seriously considering suicide and more

than 1 in 4 (26%) attempting suicide in the past year. This trend is extremely worrisome and shows the devastating impacts of historical and ongoing oppression and trauma inflicted on Black, Indigenous, and all people of color.

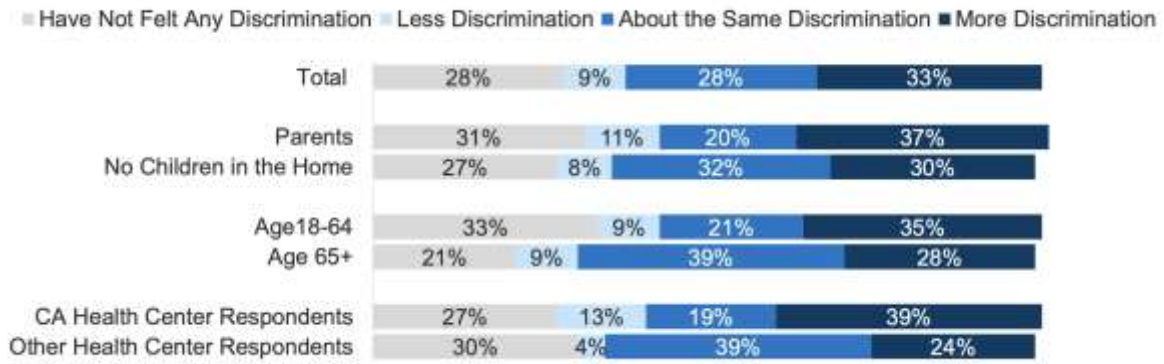


Figure 2: Kasier Family Foundation (2022) statistic on discrimination felt by AAPI American citizens since the beginning of the pandemic.

These statistics tell a gruesome story of negligence that has an easy fix in the coming years. However, these problems continue to persist nationwide, statewide, and countywide and seem to be cemented into the communities they are found. Why has nothing been done? Why do the authority figures continue to do nothing even when presented with the opportunity to do so?

## Recommendation and Support

Before we can accurately give our recommendation, we must fully understand what anti-hate legislation is and what components impactful legislation have. Ancheta & Hughes (2021) show that establishing anti-hate crime bills protects LGBTQ and at-risk individuals in the entire community and then extrapolates further into saying that anti-hate rules and policies need to be incorporated into schools for meaningful change. In the 2022 budget session, the Wyoming State Legislature proposed a bill that would aim at comprehensive anti-hate legislation that had suicide prevention measures included. The bill did not make it out of committee. This bill’s failure is an

obvious and direct choice to ignore a significant issue in the state that would benefit Rock Springs and other communities, which continually begs the question, why?

This question is one that critics tend to focus on because it highlights the crux of the issue. A hate crime, as defined by the Washington State Legislature, is "A person(s) is guilty of a hate crime offense if they maliciously and intentionally commits one of the following acts because of their perception of the victims' race, color, religion, ancestry, national order, sexual orientation, gender expression or identity, or mental, physical, or sensory disability: 1) Causes physical injury to the victim or another person(s), 2) Causes physical damage to or destruction of another person's property, and/or 3) Threatens a specific person(s) in reasonable fear of harm to person or property." Wyoming statute 6-9-102 states, "No person shall be denied the right to life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness or the necessities of life because of race, color, sex, creed, or national origin." The statute outlines that any violation comes with upwards of a \$750 fine and/or a maximum sentence of 6 months. Critics say that this is a cookie-cutter policy and that from the state level, there is no enforcement mechanism for local municipalities to address any hate crimes that occur in their jurisdiction. However, while there is no enforcement mechanism, Wyoming senate and house republicans argue that Wyoming does have a hate crime law, and any additional legislation is state overreach.

This has created a stalemate at the state level, which leaves local municipalities to make the ultimate decision as to whether they should establish hate crime statutes or not. Assuming that Rock Springs is willing to consider establishing anti-hate legislation, the factors must go into the statute. The first focuses on social support and acceptance for LGBTQ youth from adults and peers. Increasing education and knowledge of LGBTQ transitions and norms for adults. The CDC (2019) found that having at least one accepting adult nearby can reduce the risk of suicide and suicide attempts amount for LGBTQ youth by 40%. Increasing education about sexuality and other queer issues for adults can increase the potential that adults in the household will be more accepting. Moreover, additional research from the Trevor Project (2019) found that when you control transgender and nonbinary individuals precisely, those who reported gender identity acceptance from adults and peers had significantly lower odds of attempting suicide than the previous year. In

general, this trend stays the same; from a youth perspective, those who report high levels of social support from family and friends are significantly less likely to attempt suicide than those with lower social support levels (Meyers, 2003).

The following recommendation we have is ensuring safe spaces in schools and away from home. In educational spaces, LGBTQ youth who feel the presence of trusted adults have higher levels of self-esteem (Dessel et al., 2017), and having support peers significantly reduces the feelings of anxiety and depression, those who do not have support at home saw more significant reductions in those feelings as well (Parra et al., 2018). Statistically, the Trevor Project (2019) found that when LGBTQ-friendly faculty and staff are active, LGBTQ youth reported a 35% reduction in suicide attempts. We also need to take a stand against legislation that aims to prevent LGBTQ persons from participating in extracurricular activities. The same research that supports participation in after-school clubs and activities found that the same benefits happen for LGBTQ youth, only at a higher rate (Eccles et al., 2003). Rock Springs High School does have a Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA). However, they are forced to meet in secret locations prior to the end of school, which makes students choose between classes and social support. More importantly, transgender and nonbinary youth attempt suicide less when their pronouns are respected and when they can legally change the gender marker on legal documents that affirm their gender identity (Toomey et al., 2011). Respecting pronouns reduces the risk of suicide by 50% compared to individuals who do not have respected pronouns.

My last recommendation is that gender-affirming medical care needs to be available for all of those wanting to transition. The Trevor Project (2021) found that gender-affirming care is associated with positive mental health outcomes and has continued to show promise for reducing suicide risk. Hormone therapy is significantly related to decreases in rates of depression, suicidal thoughts, and attempts among transgender and nonbinary youth.

## **What Next?**

There still needs to be a substantial change, but I believe meaningful change can happen with this recommendation. When making amends for past actions and current wrongdoings framing legislation with minority communities, even if it seems small, is vital in making meaningful change

(Busey & Coleman-King, 2020). This inclusion will help make minority communities feel more welcomed in communities and repair events that happened over a century ago. Moreover, policies that focus on changing the actions of an individual or a specific group of people help expedite policymaking. For these policies to work, significant systemic change is needed, which requires internal reflections and change, meaning that lawmakers, the board of education, and other political leaders in Rock Springs will have to work towards positive change (Liquori, 2021) actively.

Hopefully, with this paper, these problems will be brought to the surface by those who read it. With the actions and lobbying of governmental officials, meaningful changes can happen. In order to save disadvantaged youth, one must consider legislation that emphasizes saving lives and preventing suicides. Considering all of these facts, remembering the past, and preparing for the future are essential for making effective and substantial change.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this paper, we have painted a picture of neglect and despair on the part of both state and local governments alike. We discussed how racial and sexual inequality persist in Rock Springs and rural communities. We focused primarily on the growing problem of suicide rates, primarily in LGBTQ youth, and how, when accounting for race, the statistics get even darker. Moreover, throughout careful research and recommendations by the Trevor Project, we have made suggestions on what should be included in anti-hate legislation. Rock Springs should focus on making ordinances and statutes that affirm those who feel ostracized by the community they grew up in. They should also focus on reforming home life, school life, and everything. With these recommendations, suicide rates should decrease exponentially, and Rock Springs can make meaningful strides in righting the wrongs of its past.



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