

LGBTQ+ History Month: The Struggle for Civil Rights in the United States

Every October, LGBTQ+ History Month highlights role models, builds understanding, and represents a civil rights statement about the contributions of members of the LGBTQ+ community to the history of the United States.

LGBTQ+ History Month has been observed since 1994, when Missouri high school teacher Rodney Wilson gathered support for the teaching of LGBTQ+ history. Wilson, the first openly gay public school teacher in Missouri, selected October to coincide with National Coming Out Day on October 11, as well as to commemorate the first and second LGBTQ+ Marches on Washington, in October 1979 and October 1987. Today, LGBTQ+ History Month is an opportunity to center the stories of [LGBTQ+ trailblazers](#) in your industry or community.

The modern history of LGBTQ+ rights in the U.S. begins in 1952, the year the first DSM, or Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, was published. The DSM-I claimed heterosexuality as the “norm” and considered all other sexualities as deviant, reasoning that any non-procreative sex was unnatural. This categorization was immediately criticized by doctors, mental health professionals, and other scientists due to a lack of clear and empirical data.

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, steady pressure was building to remove the DSM diagnosis. In 1955, the first lesbian rights organization, the Daughter of Bilitis, was founded, just five years after the first sustained national gay rights organization, the Mattachine Society, was formed. Over the next few decades, activism that was focused on LGBTQ+ civil rights continued to increase across the country, as people fought to decriminalize homosexuality and remove the mental illness label.

The Stonewall Riots, widely considered as the most pivotal event in LGBTQ+ civil rights history, occurred on June 28, 1969. On the first anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, Christopher Street Liberation Day marked the first gay pride parade in the U.S. Three years later, in 1973, homosexuality was officially removed from the DSM and a domino effect occurred in legislation. In January 1974, Kathy Kozachenko became the first openly gay American elected to public office, and in November 1977, [Harvey Milk](#) won a seat on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors.

In the 1980s, the gay rights movement largely centered on the HIV and AIDS epidemic. An organization called ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, was formed to support New York's LGBTQ+ community, which was devastated by the disease. In 1987, gay rights activists held the second National March on Washington to protest high prescription prices and achieved national coverage for ACT UP. In December 1988, the World Health Organization organized the first World

AIDS Day to raise awareness of the pandemic. And in 1990, President George H.W. Bush signed the Ryan White Care Act, a federally funded program for people living with AIDS. By 1991, the red ribbon was adopted as a symbol of awareness and compassion for those living with HIV or AIDS, showing a shift in the public perception of people with HIV and AIDS.

In 1992, the U.S. military adopted the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, which allowed gay and lesbian people to serve, but only if they hid their sexuality. Four years later, President Bill Clinton signed the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act, which defined marriage as the union of one man and one woman and allowed states to refuse to recognize same-sex marriages performed in other states.

At the same time, LGBTQ+ rights activists were working hard to further hate crimes legislation. This effort was largely driven by two high-profile hate crimes: the 1998 murder of [Rita Hester](#), which led to the creation of the [Transgender Day of Remembrance](#), and the 1998 murder of [Matthew Shepard](#). The Hate Crimes Sentencing Enhancement Act was passed in 1994, and President Barack Obama signed the Matthew Shepard Act in 2009 to broaden hate crimes protections.

In 2002, the Transgender Law Center opened in San Francisco to advocate for trans communities, and the city's first Trans March took place in 2004. Transgender Day of Visibility was founded in 2009. And in 2012, the Supreme Court ruled that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, preventing discrimination on the basis of gender, also applies to transgender people.

In 2003, homosexual activity was decriminalized when the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the Texas Homosexual Conduct Law. In 2004, Massachusetts became the first state to legalize gay marriage, and in 2015, the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage nationally.

While we've come a long way since the 1950s, we must continue to advocate for equity for LGBTQ+ individuals, families, and communities. In recent years, there has been a notable rise in [anti-LGBTQ+ legislation](#), aimed primarily at [transgender people](#). The discriminatory legislation negatively impacts not only the targeted individuals, but also their families, and by extension, their communities and the companies where they work. Organizations that are committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) should ensure that their policies and procedures are fully inclusive and supportive of LGBTQ+ employees. Business leaders can also [act as allies](#), standing with marginalized communities by listening and understanding their issues, developing empathy, and helping to dismantle barriers and oppression through tangible actions.

Source: The Diversity Movement – TDM Library