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Supportive families and schools critical in protecting transgender youth health: UBC study

A new national study shows that while Canada's transgender youth face significant physical and mental health issues, strong family, school and community connections are helping many of them navigate these challenges.

The study is the first and largest of its kind in Canada, with 923 individuals participating between the ages 14-25. They answered a range of questions in English or French on their home and school life, physical and mental health, access to health care, and gender identity.

"We found high numbers of youth had experienced discrimination, harassment, and cyberbullying in the past year," said Elizabeth Saewyc, the study's principal investigator and a nursing professor at the University of British Columbia. "For example, two-thirds of those surveyed reported discrimination because of their gender identity. "

Not surprisingly, many participants also experienced mental health challenges. Nearly two-thirds reported self-harming in the past year, and more than one in three had attempted suicide.

Health care was also problematic, as only 15 per cent of youth with a family doctor felt "very comfortable" discussing their trans-specific health care needs.

But the report also uncovered positive sources of support for trans youth -- parents, family members, schools, and community adults, especially when these adults supported the youth in living in their preferred gender.

"If someone had a supportive adult in the family, they were about four times less likely to have self-harmed in the past 12 months," Saewyc said. "If they felt more connected to school, they were almost twice as likely to report good or excellent mental health as those with lower levels of school connectedness."

The report calls for measures to improve the well-being of trans youth, including: improved support for families, so they can better understand and support their transgender children; developing safer, more inclusive schools; retooling health care to provide gender-affirming services for trans youth; and reducing health care disparities between provinces.

"Caring adults at home, at school and in the community are just as essential for our trans youth as they are for all youth. By reinventing our societal supports, we pave the way for their healthy development," Saewyc said.

The study, *Being Safe, Being Me*, was funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and completed in collaboration with universities and health researchers across Canada. Copies of the report in English or French are available at www.saravyc.ubc.ca.

The researchers are available for interviews in English and French. Contact Tracy Tang at 778-888-6848 or tracy.tang@nursing.ubc.ca.

About the study:

The Trans Youth Health Survey took place between October 2013 and May 2014. The survey was anonymous, although participants were asked to provide their postal code and province of residence. Responses were received from every province and territory except Nunavut and the Yukon.

This survey was funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) Institute of Gender and Health. CIHR is the Government of Canada's health research investment agency.

Key findings:

- Eighty-three per cent of participants lived in their “felt gender” at least part-time; half lived in their felt gender full-time. Those who lived in their felt gender all the time were almost 50 per cent more likely to report good or excellent mental health.
- Nearly two-thirds of youth reported self-harm within the past year. More than one in three had attempted suicide.
- Seventy per cent of participants reported sexual harassment. Two-thirds reported discrimination because of their gender identity.
- More than one in three, or 36 per cent, of the younger participants (ages 14-18) had been physically threatened or injured in the past year.
- One in three youth did not have an adult in their family they could talk to about problems, and seven in 10 felt their family did not understand them. When they felt cared about and supported by family, they reported better health.
- Only 15 per cent of youth with a family doctor report feeling comfortable discussing their transgender-specific health care needs.

- One-third of younger (ages 14-18) and half of older youth (ages 19-25) reported missing needed physical health care during the past year, and even more missed needed mental health care.

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