

# Gender Expansive Students at Greater Risk for Bullying, Increased Tobacco Use and Substance Use as Possible Coping Strategies

All youth face a wide variety of risks in their homes, schools, and communities. Research shows that among the general secondary school student population, one in five youth has experienced school bullying.<sup>1</sup> Within this population, nearly one in six (16%) students had smoked cigarettes within the last month and more than one in five (22%) had been offered, sold, or given an illegal drug by someone on school property. However, research shows that when youth express gendered behaviors or identities that fall outside of traditional binary gender roles, these risks are magnified.

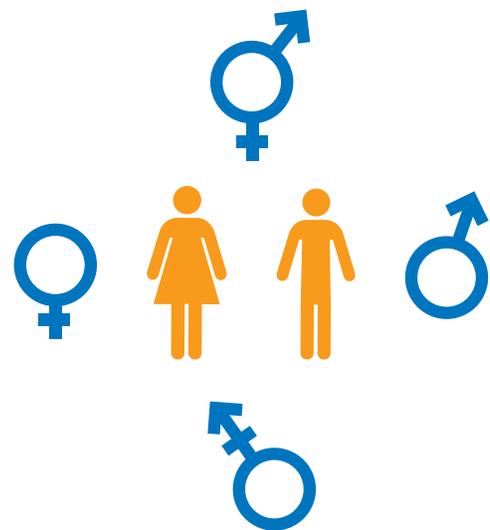
Gender expansive youth are facing significant disparities compared to their peers when it comes to bullying victimization and tobacco and substance use, challenges that too often go unaddressed and follow them into adulthood. This brief examines the particular risks that gender expansive youth face and offers suggestions for advocates, researchers, policy makers, educators, and others who work with gender expansive youth to better meet their needs and address the unique challenges they face.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS ON GENDER EXPANSIVE YOUTH \*

Research on gender expansive youth is limited; even so, the existing data reveal alarming disparities between gender expansive youth and their peers, including higher levels of victimization, risk behaviors, and suicidality. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) has surveyed high school students across the country every two years since 1991. The YRBSS asks questions about a variety of risk behaviors including drug and alcohol use, nutrition, access to firearms, sexual behavior, experiences with violence, sadness and suicidality, and safety precautions like seatbelts and bike helmets.<sup>2</sup>

### WHO ARE GENDER EXPANSIVE YOUTH?

Youth whose gender expression does not fit traditional roles based on their sex assigned at birth are often referred to as gender nonconforming, gender expansive, genderqueer, or nonbinary youth. While some gender expansive youth are transgender, this brief focuses on a broader category of youth, many of whom do not use any particular label to describe the way they express their gender. Research shows that the majority of gender expansive youth identify as heterosexual.



\* This Issue Brief looks at two data sets on gender expression and identity from the YRBS and the USTS, respectively. While comparing the data the YRBS provides self-reported data on student's gender expression, who may or may not identify as transgender. The USTS provides self-reported data from adults who identify as transgender.

In 2013 and 2015, the CDC approved an optional question that assessed gender expression and gender nonconformity among students. It asked:

*“A person’s appearance, style, dress, or the way they walk or talk may affect how people describe them. How do you think other people at school would describe you?”*

Students could choose: very feminine, mostly feminine, somewhat feminine, equally feminine and masculine, somewhat masculine, mostly masculine, or very masculine. Four sites--Broward County, FL; Chicago, IL; Los Angeles, CA; and San Diego, CA--used the optional question and about 9,000 students responses were analyzed. While the majority of students said they expressed their gender in traditionally masculine or feminine ways corresponding to their sex assigned at birth, 14.7% of males described their gender expression as feminine and 3.7% of females described their gender expression as masculine. There were similarly significant percentages of androgynous males (10.0%) and females (11.2%), who described their gender expression as “equally masculine and feminine.” **Taken together, then, about 20% of youth who answered the question would fall into the category of gender expansive.**<sup>3</sup>

Another primary source of robust research data on gender expansive people is the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey and Report (USTS), the largest survey ever devoted to the lives and experiences of transgender people, published by the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE).<sup>4</sup> The USTS collected responses from 27,715 transgender adults in the US about their experiences with education, employment, family life, health, housing, and interactions with the criminal justice system. More than one-third of USTS respondents identified as nonbinary (people’s whose gender is not male or female), further reflecting the need for research that incorporates a broader range of gender identities than simply male and female.

The YRBSS data offer a unique sample of youth who demonstrate a range of gender expansive behaviors, but may not necessarily claim identity terms such as transgender or nonbinary. Conversely, the USTS offers more specific data on people who self-identify as transgender and/or nonbinary, but the respondents are all adults, meaning that their answers about their experiences as youth are retrospective and may not fully reflect the day-to-day realities of our current generation of gender expansive youth. Taken together, however, the data from these major studies suggest that youth whose behaviors,

expression, or identities can be described as gender expansive face alarming levels of bullying and victimization, trends that appear to translate into higher rates of risky and harmful behavior including tobacco use and substance use.

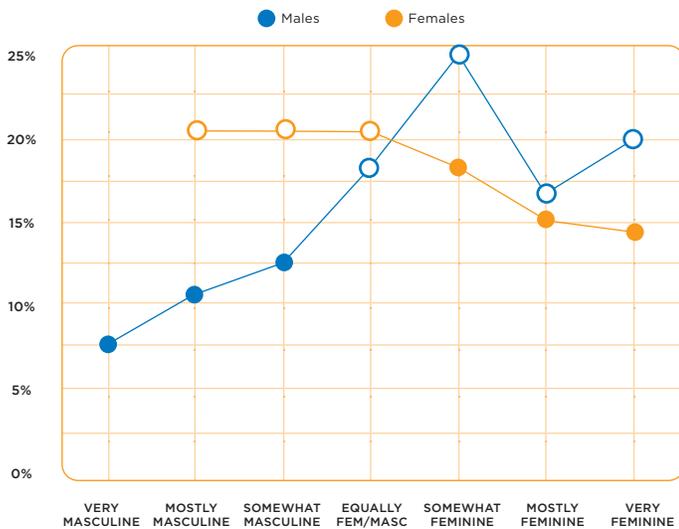
The YRBSS data and analysis in this issue brief comes from, *Health Risk Behaviors among Gender Expansive Students: Making the Case for Including A Measure of Gender Expression Population-Based Surveys*, a report published by Advocates for Youth. You can download the full report on our website: <http://advocatesforyouth.org/storage/advfy/documents/YRBSS.pdf>

## **GENDER EXPANSIVE YOUTH AT GREATER RISK FOR BULLYING AND HARASSMENT**

The small but growing body of research on LGBTQ youth that has emerged in the last decade universally indicates a climate of bullying, harassment, and other forms of victimization, traumatic experiences that too often lead to unhealthy coping strategies and risky behaviors. According to GLSEN’s 2016 report, *From Teasing to Torment*, gender expression was one of the most common reasons for bullying among secondary school students, with one in five reporting that they were bullied for their gender expression.<sup>5</sup> This research demonstrates a pervasive pattern within the K-12 school context of victimizing anyone who deviates from traditional gender roles or expression, and the harmful consequences of that pattern on the well-being of those youth.

The YRBSS data offer a fuller picture of the particular experiences of gender expansive youth in secondary schools, and reveal a strong relationship between gender nonconformity and bullying. Feminine and androgynous male respondents to the YRBSS survey were twice as likely as masculine males to report having been bullied on school property; and androgynous females were nearly one-and-a-half times more likely than feminine females to have been bullied at school. Similarly, androgynous and feminine boys were three times more likely than masculine boys to have been teased or harassed for being gay; and androgynous and masculine females were about twice as likely as feminine females to have been teased or harassed for being gay. These numbers strongly suggest that gender expansive students are targeted by their peers--consciously or not--based on perceived deviation from traditional, binary gender norms that are defined by a person’s assigned sex at birth.

**Figure 1: Bullied on School Property**



**KEY:** ○ ○ *open dots signify gender expansive youth for the purposes of this study.*

*Due to the large outcomes which had insufficient sample size for "mostly" and "very" masculine females, these categories have been combined throughout the analysis.*

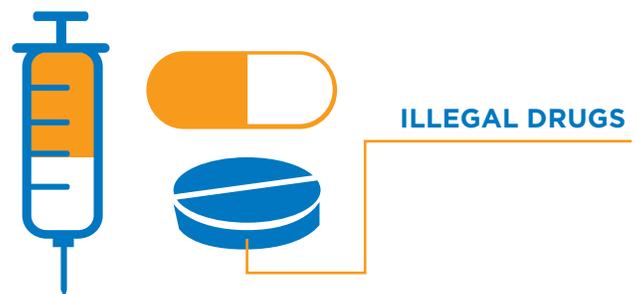
The USTS data confirm these findings among adults. Of those who were out or perceived as transgender in K-12 schools, 54% reported having been verbally harassed, 24% were being physically attacked and 13% were sexually assaulted in school, because people thought they were transgender. About one in six (17%) left a school because the abuse and mistreatment were so severe.

**GENDER EXPANSIVE YOUTH AT HEIGHTENED RISK FOR TOBACCO USE AND SUBSTANCE USE RISK BEHAVIORS**

As this research demonstrates, gender expansive youth are facing a host of challenges that put them at a disadvantage in their schools, relationships, and communities. Moreover, we know that these trends seem to correlate with educational and social disparities, including low self-esteem, mental health concerns, suicidality, and substance abuse.<sup>6</sup>

Twenty-nine percent of USTS respondents reported illicit drug use, marijuana consumption, and/or nonmedical prescription drug use in the past month, nearly three times the rate of the general U.S. population. Although research has long found associations between substance use and LGBTQ identity among adults,<sup>7</sup> the YRBSS data show that these disparities also include risk-taking behaviors such as drug and tobacco use among gender expansive youth.

While the short- and long-term effects of marijuana, tobacco, and various illicit drugs vary widely, numerous studies have shown that all of these substances can have substantial negative impacts on brain development. Our brains continue to grow beyond childhood and adolescence, and well into our twenties. Substance use among gender expansive youth is particularly concerning, as even more socially acceptable drugs like tobacco and marijuana can do lasting damage. A recently published longitudinal study of youth, for example, found that both marijuana and cigarette use are associated with an increased risk of psychotic experiences in adolescents.<sup>8</sup> Combined with the more evident risks of highly chemically addictive drugs and the well-documented health problems associated with tobacco use, gender expansive youth who engage in substance use and abuse may face further disparities throughout their lives.





### TOBACCO USE

Although USTS respondents reported similar rates of current smoking compared to the general US adult population, gender nonconformity does seem to have an association with increased previous and current tobacco usage among youth. Among YRBSS respondents, feminine and androgynous males and masculine females were more likely than their gender conforming peers to have ever tried smoking, with feminine males being more than twice as likely and masculine females being three times as likely to have smoked a cigarette before age thirteen. Notably, masculine females and feminine males were five times more likely than their gender conforming peers to use smokeless tobacco, which increases the risk of cancers of the mouth and throat.



### MARIJUANA USE

Although marijuana is becoming increasingly accepted by the medical community and the public for treating problems ranging from cancer to depression, studies consistently show that it negatively affects cognitive development in children and teens.<sup>9</sup> Although current marijuana use was not associated with gender expression among males, current use was more prevalent among androgynous females. Additionally, feminine males were one and a half times more likely than masculine males to have tried marijuana before age thirteen.

However the USTS data suggest that gender expansive adults use marijuana at a significantly higher rate. One-quarter of USTS respondents said they had used marijuana within the past month, compared to 8% of the U.S. population. Among that group, about one-third (34%) said they smoked marijuana on 29 or all 30 of the past 30 days.

Figure 2: Ever Tried Smoking

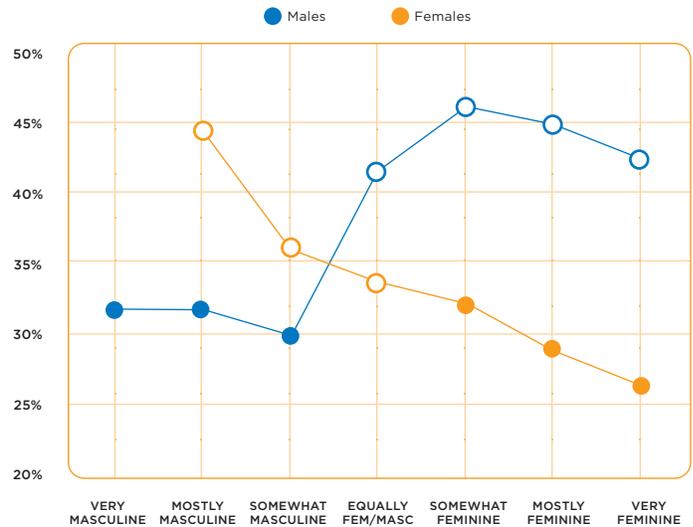


Figure 3: Smoked a Whole Cigarette Before Age 13

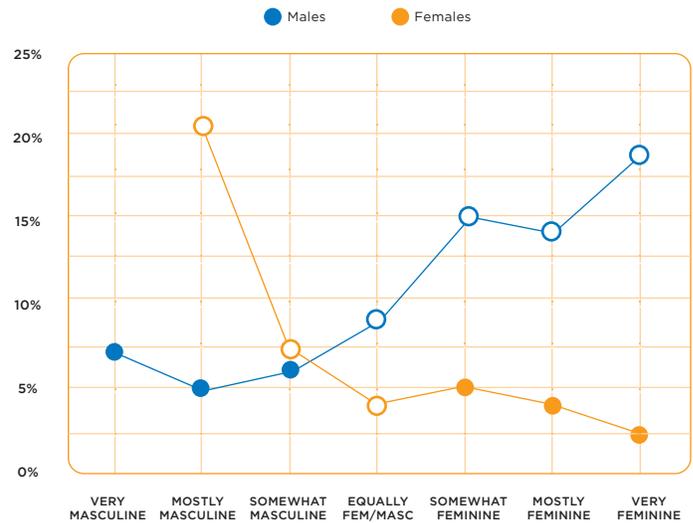
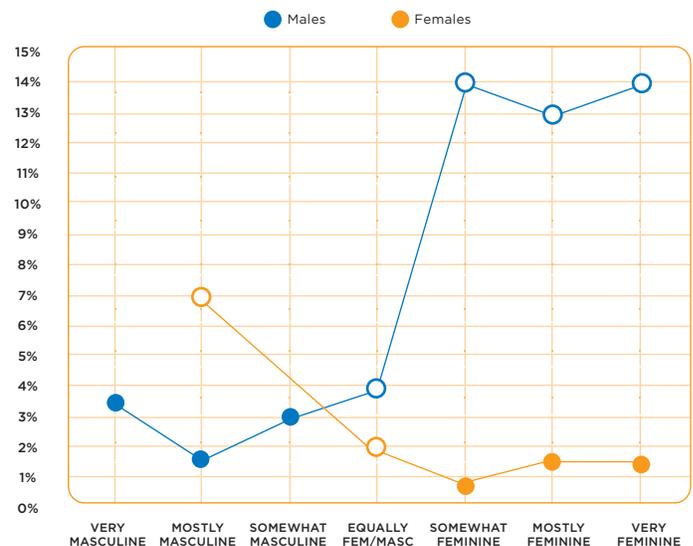
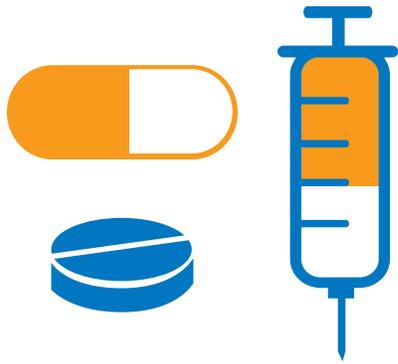


Figure 4: Current Use of Smokeless Tobacco





### ILLEGAL DRUGS

The YRBSS data show an alarming relationship between drug use and gender nonconformity, particularly among males. Feminine males are three times more likely than masculine males to have ever used cocaine, twice as likely to have ever used inhalants, six times as likely to have used heroin, twice as likely to have used ecstasy, and four times as likely to have tried methamphetamines. Overall, feminine male respondents were nearly twice as likely as masculine males to have ever used hard drugs, and five times as likely to have ever injected an illegal drug, a behavior that increases the risk of acquiring HIV and other blood borne diseases. Masculine females were also found to be four times as likely to have used heroin, twice as likely to have ever used methamphetamines, and twice as likely to have tried inhalants.

The USTS data show similar trends among gender expansive adults with 4% of respondents reporting current (within the past 30 days) illegal drug use (not including marijuana). Additionally, 7% reported current use of prescription drugs that were not prescribed to them or not used as prescribed, compared to 2% of the U.S. population.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADVOCATES, RESEARCHERS, POLICYMAKERS, EDUCATORS, AND PUBLIC HEALTH PRACTITIONERS

Gender expansive youth face a host of challenges and risks that can hamper their success, cause lifelong trauma, and even threaten their survival. From bullying and harassment, to sexual assault and intimate partner violence, to substance use and abuse; gender expansive youth need support and resources to face and overcome these challenges.

**Improve data collection regarding gender expansive youth.**

The available data on gender expansive youth shows that gender expression can predict risk for victimization as well as risk behaviors such as substance abuse, yet there is still so much more we should know in order to help these young people navigate adolescence, heal from victimization, and avoid harmful coping strategies. [We recommend](#)

Figure 5: Ever Used Inhalants

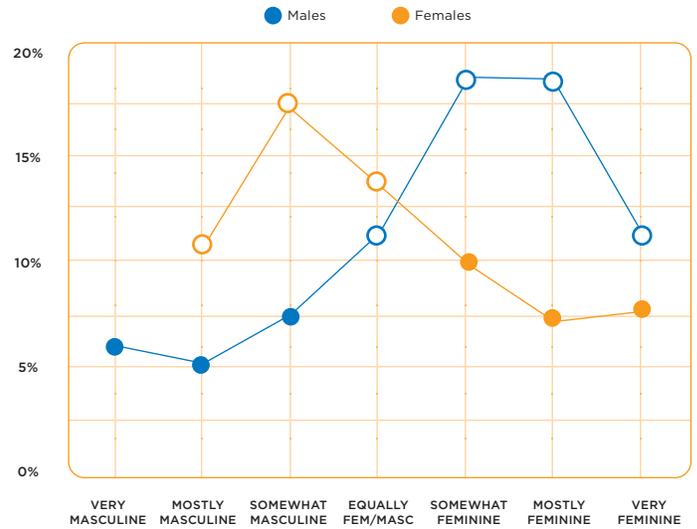


Figure 6: Ever Used Heroin

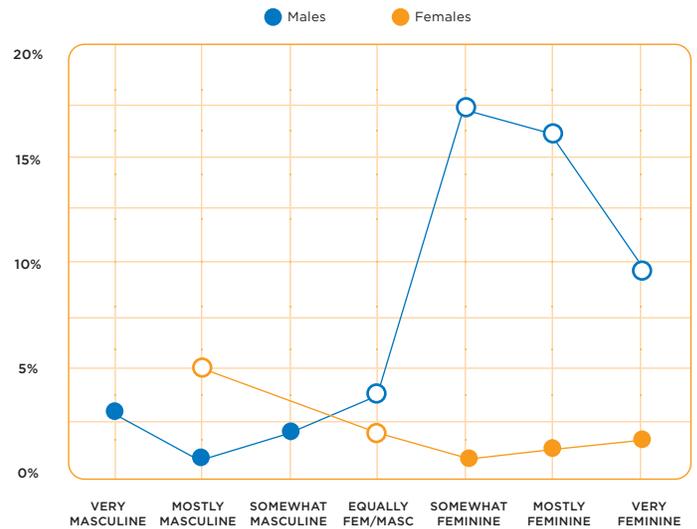
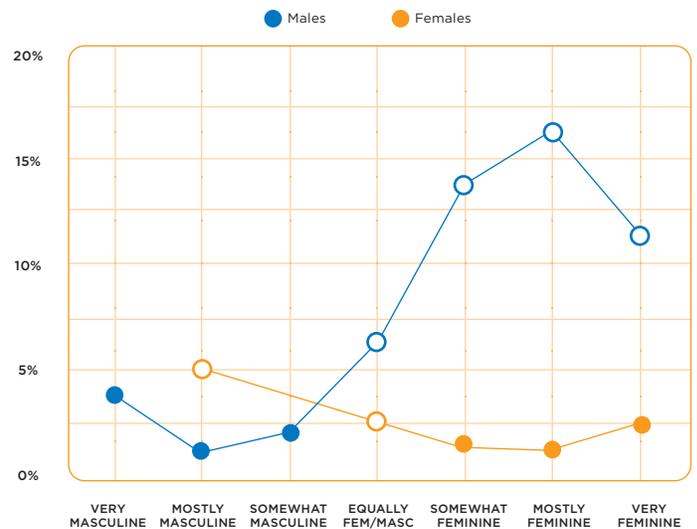


Figure 7: Ever Used Methamphetamines



that states, municipalities, schools, research entities, and public health organizations begin to collect data regarding gender expression to help all youth-serving professionals further their understanding of gender expansive youth and how gender expression affects adolescent risk behaviors.

***Pass safe schools policies with specific protection on the basis of gender expression.***

Schools can mitigate victimizing behaviors among students that disproportionately affect gender expansive students, especially those relating to bullying and harassment. Research has shown that in schools with comprehensive anti-bullying policies, students experience less victimization related to their gender expression. School staff are more likely to intervene when bullying takes place, and students are more likely to report incidents of bullying.<sup>10</sup> Existing anti-bullying policies that prohibit bullying based on sex can and should be used to address bullying based on gender expression. Schools should clarify the scope of their policy to ensure its properly enforced. [We recommend that school districts pass comprehensive anti-bullying policies that specifically enumerate gender expression as well as gender identity.](#)

***Train educators and health professionals regarding the disparities and risk behaviors experienced by gender expansive students.***

Education and health professionals who receive training on tobacco and substance use are in a better position to support all young people. While such trainings can help school personnel and others who work with youth identify risk behavior and refer students in crisis to supportive resources, they rarely account for the unique risks associated with gender expansive youth. [We recommend that school and health professionals be trained to identify risk among young people, and information about gender expansive youth should be integrated into these training programs.](#)

***Integrate gender expansive students and gender expression into programming aimed at reducing risk factors for substance use.***

Young people spend the majority of their time in school, making school districts the optimal place to implement prevention programs for substance use. New data relating to gender expansive students can be used to develop a greater understanding of how gender expression and nonconformity relate to heightened risk for substance use and how to approach prevention. [We recommend that educators, policymakers, advocates, and public health practitioners adapt prevention programs focusing on bullying and tobacco and substance use to integrate data and content that reflects gender expansive youth.](#)

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