

# The Health and Rights of Transgender Youth

Understanding and support are critical for this highly marginalized group

Transgender individuals identify in many ways, but most share the experience that their assigned sex falsely or incompletely describes them. Sex refers to a person's physical body and genetic composition. A person's gender is their understanding of their self-expression, self-image, and self-reflection and how this relates to the traditional gender binary of male and female. Transgender is an umbrella term that often is used to describe people who identify as the opposite gender from their assigned sex, a combination of both genders, or neither gender.

**Gender identity** is the gender a person feels explains their lived experience – who they are. When one's gender identity does not match their assigned sex they may experience dysphoria, which is a feeling of disconnectedness from their body. While many people wish to communicate their gender identity to others, some do not feel it is necessary to reveal or are not in a safe space to do so.

**Gender assignment** is the gender ascribed to an individual based upon how the world perceives them. This is often based on physical and personality characteristics that society associates with being male or female.

**Gender expression** is how a person signals their gender identity to the world. From clothes to mannerisms to the role one assumes in society, gender expression can be conveyed in many ways. Depending on the individual, gender expression may or may not match a person's gender identity. However, many transgender people aim to have their gender expression be consistent with their gender identity to feel comfortable and avoid social stigma.

**Sexual orientation** is a term to describe to whom one is romantically and sexually attracted. Sexual orientation is separate from gender identity. A person may be transgender and identify as heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, or other.

Transgender young people have the right to express who they are without risk of violence

and harassment. They have the right to equal treatment under the law. Because of the extreme disparities transgender youth experience, they also need programs which address their health, housing, safety, and legal needs.

## HOW LARGE IS THE TRANSGENDER POPULATION?

- Some estimates find that .25-1 percent of the US population is transsexual, meaning they have physically transitioned to the opposite gender. However, it is estimated that between 2-5 percent of the population fits under the broader transgender identity in which they experience some gender dysphoria.<sup>1</sup>
- An analysis of the Youth Risk Behavior Survey administered to San Francisco students found that 1.3 percent of middle school students identified as transgender.<sup>2</sup>
- In general, little data exists on the lives of transgender people. The reports that do exist typically focus on the transgender population as a whole and do not distinguish between the experiences of young and older individuals.<sup>1</sup>
- An individual can experience gender dysphoria, and come to the realization that they are transgender, at any point in their life. Very young children, adolescents, and adults can all experience gender dysphoria. Signs are not always evident throughout a person's life, and others may be surprised when a young person discloses that they are transgender.<sup>3</sup>
- In a survey of over 6,000 transgender people, 59 percent reported being "generally out" as transgender.<sup>4</sup>

## HARASSMENT AND VIOLENCE AT SCHOOL CREATE A HOSTILE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

- While in grades K-12, transgender individuals reported high rates of harassment (78 percent), physical assault (35 percent), and sexual violence (12 percent).<sup>4</sup>

THE FACTS

# “Many transgender students experience discrimination and harassment at school, while only 1/3 feel school staff address the problem adequately.”

- Ninety percent of transgender students have heard negative remarks about their gender expression in school. Thirty-nine percent reported hearing school staff make similar comments in the past year. Very infrequently will students report these incidences, and school staff rarely intervenes. Only a third of students felt that school staff would address the situation properly if they did report the incident.<sup>5</sup>
- Forty-four percent of transgender students felt unsafe at school as a result of their gender expression and identity. Due to this fear, 30 percent had skipped at least one day of school in the past month.<sup>6</sup>
- Despite a hostile school environment, one study found that the transgender community is highly educated. Compared to the general population, transgender people reported higher rates of having some college, a college degree, or a graduate degree as their highest education attainment.<sup>4</sup>

## DISCRIMINATION AGAINST TRANSGENDER PEOPLE IS UBIQUITOUS AND INSTITUTIONALIZED

- Over half of transgender individuals who “come out” or discuss their gender identity with their families face significant rejection from their families; one-fifth have experienced violence at the hands of a family member because of their gender identity.<sup>4</sup>
- Only 16 US states, the District of Columbia, and 150 cities and counties have explicit non-discrimination laws that include gender identity and expression.<sup>3</sup> Without such laws, transgender people may be denied employment, housing, and access to appropriate restrooms on the grounds of their gender identity.
- Government-issued identification, legal forms, and intake forms at health care providers often do not accommodate transgender identity, forcing transgender

individuals to inaccurately identify themselves and their needs.<sup>4,7</sup>

- Almost half of transgender people have experienced adverse employment outcomes (being fired, not hired, or not promoted) because of their identity, while 90 percent have experienced discrimination on the job.<sup>4</sup>
- Transgender people are barred from serving openly in the military.<sup>8</sup>
- Seventy-three percent of transgender patients believe they will be treated differently by medical personnel due to their gender identity and expression. This fear can make patients hesitant to seek out health care, even when necessary.<sup>9</sup>
- Transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals face the risk of harassment by staff, law enforcement, and the public when they use public restrooms, locker rooms, or changing rooms.<sup>10</sup>
- Transgender individuals rarely see positive representations of themselves in popular culture. In an analysis of movie releases from 6 major studios, none contained a transgender character in 2013. Depictions that mock transgender identity are frequent.<sup>11</sup>

## TRANSGENDER YOUTH OF COLOR FACE INSTITUTIONALIZED DISCRIMINATION AT ALARMING RATES

- Transgender youth of color experience some of the highest levels of adversity in their daily lives due to the intersectionality of transphobia and racism.<sup>12</sup>
- Transgender youth of color are harassed for their gender identity and expression as often as the general transgender population, however, hearing racist language from school staff (54 percent) and fellow students (23 percent) puts additional stress on these students. As a result, transgender communities of color have lower levels of educational attainment in comparison to their white counterparts.<sup>12,13</sup>
- In one study it was found that transgender youth of color faced many stressors such as not having a stable home (18 percent), being involved in sex work (59 percent), non-consensual relationships (52 percent), unemployment (63 percent), and challenges securing healthcare (41 percent).<sup>12</sup>
- Among homeless transgender youth, 62 percent are black and 22 percent are Latina/o.<sup>5</sup>

- Transgender women of color face the highest rates of violence and abuse. In 2012, there were 25 LGBTQ-related homicides. Half of these homicides were against transgender women, many of whom were women of color.<sup>14</sup>

### **DESPITE MANY CHALLENGES, THERE ARE SOME SIGNS OF PROGRESS**

- Many transgender individuals do have accepting families. Transgender youth whose families accept them are less likely to attempt suicide, less likely to experience homelessness, and less likely to be involved in sex work.<sup>4 5</sup>
- New technology has brought new opportunities for support for transgender youth. In one survey, 100 percent of transgender youth of color found spaces on social media websites where their gender identity was affirmed.<sup>4</sup>
- On March 7, 2013, the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) was reauthorized and for the first time included protections against discrimination based upon gender identity.<sup>15</sup>
- While at time of publication there is no federal non-discrimination law on the basis of gender identity and expression, the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission stated that under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, discrimination against those who are transgender and gender non-conforming constitutes as sex discrimination.<sup>16</sup>
- In 2013, California passed a law ensuring that transgender young people may use bathrooms and locker rooms appropriate for them and play on sports teams which correspond to their gender identity.<sup>17</sup>
- Over half of Fortune 500 companies offer non-discrimination policies that explicitly cover gender identity.<sup>18</sup>

### **TRANSGENDER YOUNG PEOPLE NEED SUPPORT AND COMPASSION**

Our culture holds a strong bias against transgender individuals. These young people experience discrimination in employment, health care, education, and in public. Many are unsafe at school and even at home. Youth-serving professionals must strive for cultural competency around transgender issues – including respecting young people’s rights and decisions and advocating for legal equality and cultural acceptance for transgender individuals.

## **THE PROCESS OF GENDER TRANSITION**

**Some transgender individuals “transition,” or move toward living as a gender different than the one they were assigned at birth. Typically, transgender youth first address their dysphoria via forms of self-expression such as clothing and hairstyle. Transgender youth may wish to choose a different name that more appropriately reflects who they are and use the pro-nouns of the gender with which they identify.**

**Transgender youth who are certain of their gender identity may wish to begin hormone replacement therapy or undergo surgery. At this point in transition, it is crucial that transgender youth consult with a health professional that is familiar with the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) Standards of Care. These standards provide flexible, appropriate guidelines for physically transitioning.<sup>2</sup>**

**There is no set path for transitioning. While hormone replacement therapy and gender affirmation surgery may be desired by some transgender people, it is not deemed necessary for all.<sup>14</sup>**

Written by Nicholas Peterson. Nicholas Peterson is supported by the Civil Liberties and Public Policy Program.

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**“Family acceptance is crucial to young people’s well-being. Transgender youth whose families accept them are less likely to attempt suicide and less likely to experience homelessness.”**

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