

THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF TRANS & NON- BINARY YOUTH IN ALBERTA

A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH REPORT



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ABOUT THE STUDY

While many research studies have begun to include lesbian, gay, and queer individuals, it is still common for these studies to overlook or exclude the transgender and non-binary (TNB) community. Further, the studies that do include TNB people often focus on adults, overlooking the unique perspectives and experiences of youth.

The research in this report focuses on the lived experiences of TNB youth in Alberta, Canada, in an effort to better understand their unique experiences and to ensure their voices are heard. As such, this report shares our research findings alongside direct quotes from TNB youth in the province.



We use the terms transgender and non-binary (TNB) throughout this report to describe youth whose gender identity and sex assigned at birth differ. We acknowledge this umbrella term does not fit everyone. Where possible, when discussing a specific participant, we use the term(s) and language they used to best describe themselves.

We thank our community partners, Skipping Stone Foundation, and the MacEwan Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity for supporting this research.

The overarching study received ethical approval from the MacEwan University Research Ethics Board. File number: 101794.

GLOSSARY:

GENDER AFFIRMING (GA) CARE:

A range of social, psychological, behavioural, medical, and physical services and interventions provided across the lifespan that are aimed at supporting and affirming an individual's gender identity. Gender affirming care also refers to all healthcare that is provided in a manner that recognizes and respects an individual's gender identity or expression.

GENDER EXPRESSION:

Gender expression is how a person publicly presents their gender, which can be both in their behaviour and outward appearance. Gender expression can include how someone dresses, wears their hair, puts on make-up, their body language and their voice. A person's chosen name and pronoun are also common ways of expressing gender.

GENDER IDENTITY:

An individual's innate, internal conception of being male, female, both, neither, or any combination thereof. TNB people have a gender identity that is different than the sex assigned to them at birth.

MISGENDER/MISGENDERING:

Deliberately or unintentionally addressing someone, typically a TNB person, with pronouns, phrases, names, or references that do not align with the person's gender identity and/or expression. Purposeful misgendering is considered degrading and transphobic and may impact a TNB person's safety and wellbeing.

NON-BINARY:

An umbrella term used to describe someone whose gender identity falls outside of the traditional Western binary of gender (man or woman).

TRANSGENDER:

An umbrella term describing individuals whose gender identity differs from the one assigned to them at birth.

TRANSITION:

The process of undertaking social, legal, and/or medical changes in order to bring gender expression and gender identity into alignment. Transitioning is a personal and individualized process and does not look the same for every person.

TRANSPHOBIA:

Hatred or prejudice toward TNB people enacted through negative beliefs, behaviours, and/or language.

STUDY PURPOSE & METHODS



This research study expands on themes addressed in The Canadian Trans Youth Health Survey (CTYHS), a national, online survey that focuses on health, education, safety, and a variety of issues and topics relevant to trans youth in Canada.

Our qualitative research study involved in-depth interviews with 25 trans and non-binary youth in Alberta between the ages of 14 and 25. These interviews took place in 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, these interviews helped us better understand the experiences, challenges, and protective factors specific to TNB youth living in Alberta.

The study was designed and conducted by Dr. Kristopher Wells, an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Health and Community Studies and the Canada Research Chair for the Public Understanding of Sexual and Gender Minority Youth at MacEwan University, and Dr. Teresa Hardy, a postdoctoral researcher and clinical speech-language pathologist who specializes in providing gender-affirming voice and communication training. Dr. Emilie Maine, a postdoctoral fellow, assisted in the analysis and interpretation of the data, and designed this report.

STUDY PURPOSE & METHODS



Youth were invited to participate in the study if they were between the ages of 14 and 25, lived in Alberta, and identified as transgender or non-binary (TNB) or felt their gender identity was different than their sex assigned at birth.

Youth were recruited for the study through announcements on social media platforms and trans and 2SLGBTQ+ websites. These included Gay-Straight Alliances, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Posters were also distributed at community drop-in groups and trans-related youth and health clinics. Youth were also recruited via word of mouth and through community connections and networks. Efforts were made to purposely invite youth with specific backgrounds to share a diversity of lived experiences.

Youth participated in individual, one-to-two-hour virtual interviews where they were invited to discuss a series of topics, including education, healthcare, safety, sexual health, and general life experiences as TNB youth in Alberta. They had the option to remain anonymous and choose a pseudonym or use their real first name.

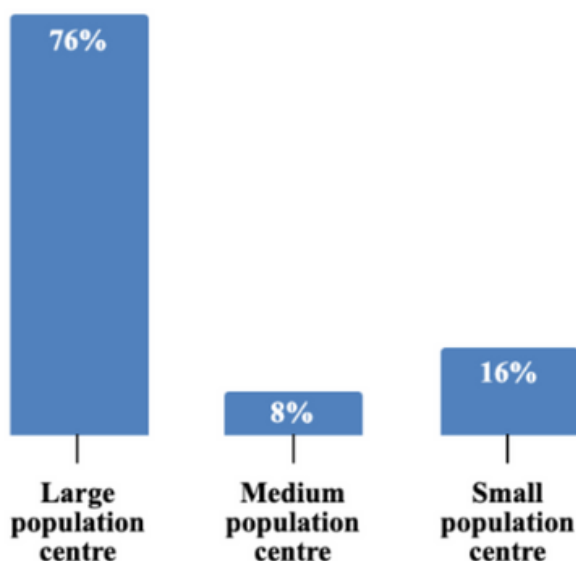
WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE STUDY?

DEMOGRAPHICS

25

TOTAL PARTICIPANTS

GEOGRAPHY:



Large population centre: 100,000 people or more.

Medium population centre: 30,000-99,999 people.

Small population centre: 1000-29,999 people.

No participants were from First Nations Reserves.

AGES:

Participants ranged in age from 14-25, with the largest representation from 17 year olds. Below is our age representation (in percentages) in comparison to the age representation from national data from the CTYHS.

AGE	Alberta	National (CTYHS)
14	4%	6%
15	0%	6%
16	8%	8%
17	20%	10%
18	12%	8%
19	8%	10%
20	4%	8%
21	12%	10%
22	12%	8%
23	8%	8%
24	8%	9%
25	4%	9%

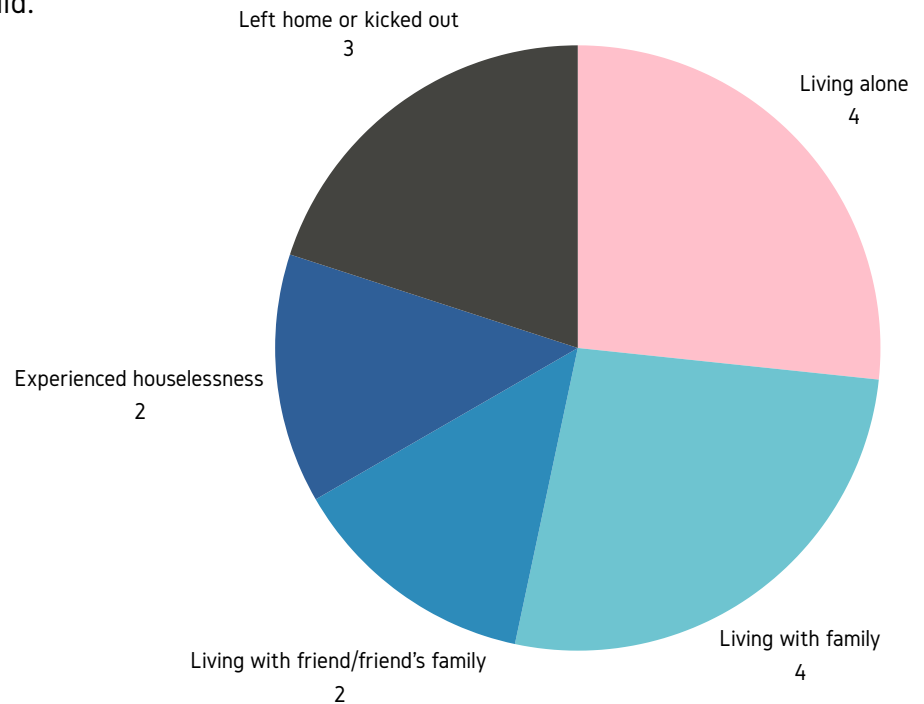
44% of youth in our study were between 14 and 18 years old, and 56% were between 19 and 25 years old.



HOME/LIVING:

Homelessness and housing instability are reported at higher rates among TNB youth. For youth in our study who experienced houselessness, were kicked out, or left home, they all specifically noted this was because of families that did not support their gender identity or expression.

Note: Not all youth explicitly commented on their current or past living situations. The numbers here represent the 15 of 25 youth that did.



“For the most part I was just couch surfing. Although there was this one friend who whose parents were super supportive, in which I stayed there most of the time. But the days that I couldn’t, I would just kind of couch surf wherever I could.” (Storm, 19, transmasculine)

“I didn’t really want to be religious anymore because of that [transphobic/homophobic] messaging and I was struggling with like my sexual orientation or my like sexual identity. And all of that kind of resulted in my parents kicking me out of the house as a teenager and I had a brief stint of houselessness... I was one of the very lucky ones that I didn’t really ever have to sleep rough, usually somebody I knew had a car, somebody I knew had a couch or a basement that I could stay anywhere for a few days.” (River, 25, non-binary/gender fluid)

FINANCES:

Six youth shared that they come from stable financial backgrounds and had access to monetary resources. Four mentioned having difficulties meeting basic needs due to their life circumstances. These circumstances included leaving home for school and/or work as well as being a newcomer to Canada, which created difficulties. Two youth explicitly noted how financial resources are crucial for survival as TNB youth.

“I hate to put it this way, but everything really, in a trans youth life, does depend on money. Your basic necessities need to be covered, if your parents or anything suddenly gives out. So you need money for that. You need money for transitioning, in hormone medications. You need money for any kind of legal protection if you feel wronged. So – and money solves depression too. I mean, hobbies cost money, and everything is money-related and – yeah, money I think would help.” (Jaeseo, 21, MtF).

28% noted that they are in a precarious position as young adults as they are not yet ‘established’ adults, and also not as ‘protected’ as a minor. Youth may fall through the cracks or have difficulty accessing resources during this time.

“There’s definitely, like real problems that LGBT people, I think, all generally go through, which is lack of financial ability and difficulty with housing...” (Jaeseo, 21, MtF).



ETHNIC & CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Ethnic or Cultural Background	Alberta	National (CTHYS)
White	84%	89%
Chinese	4%	4%
South Asian	4%	1%
Black	0%	2%
Indigenous	8%	12%
Filipino	0%	1%
Central & South American	4%	2%
Southeast Asian	4%	1%
West Asian or Arab	4%	2%
Korean	4%	0%
Japanese	4%	1%
Unknown	4%	4%

We utilized the same data categories as the CTYHS survey. 40% of participants ID within a racialized group, with 16% of participants reporting only 1 ethnic/cultural background, and 24% reporting more than one ethnic/cultural background, one of which was white. Here is a comparison of our Alberta participants backgrounds, and the national data from the CTYHS.

RACIALIZED YOUTH

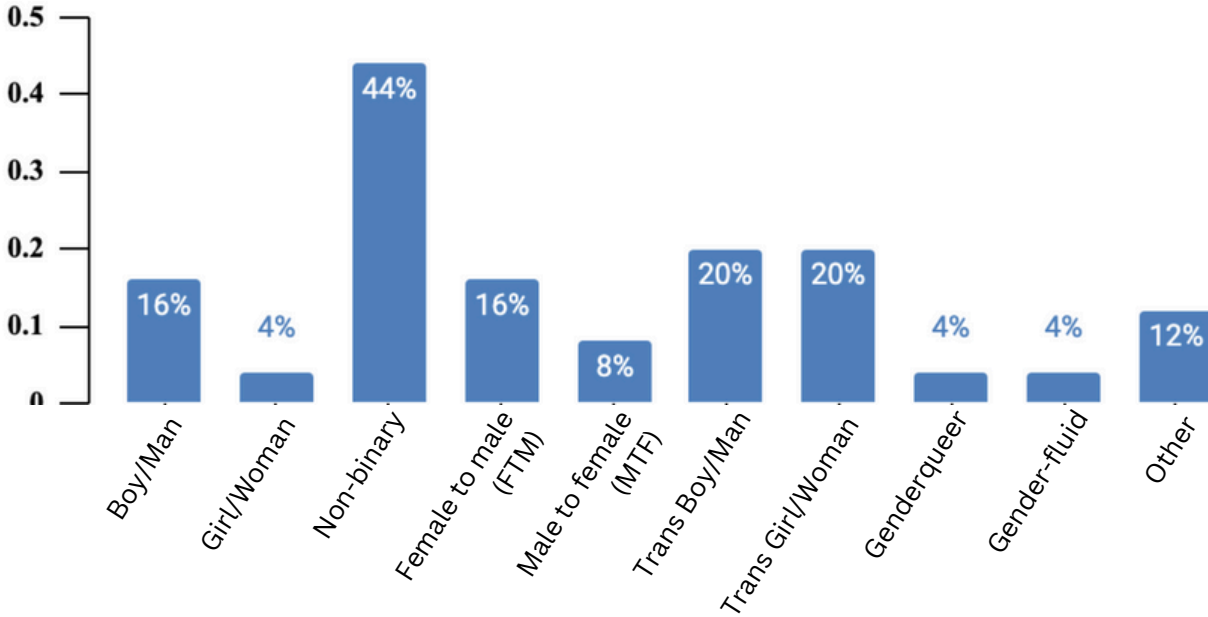
The youth of colour who participated in the study noted their specific experiences being TNB and racialized. All racialized participants (100%) noted that they not only deal with transphobia, but they also experience discrimination and racism, with 50% noting that they frequently deal with microaggressions. 52% of all study participants remarked that there is a common belief/assumption that all TNB people are white (assuming “white normativity”). Participants also noted how this belief system stems from ongoing colonialism and colonial beliefs surrounding sex and gender.

“There's this huge stereotype that everybody is just – everybody that is LGBTQ+ is white. There are no LGBTQ+ people that are people of colour, that's the stereotype and it sucks.” (Storm, 19, man).



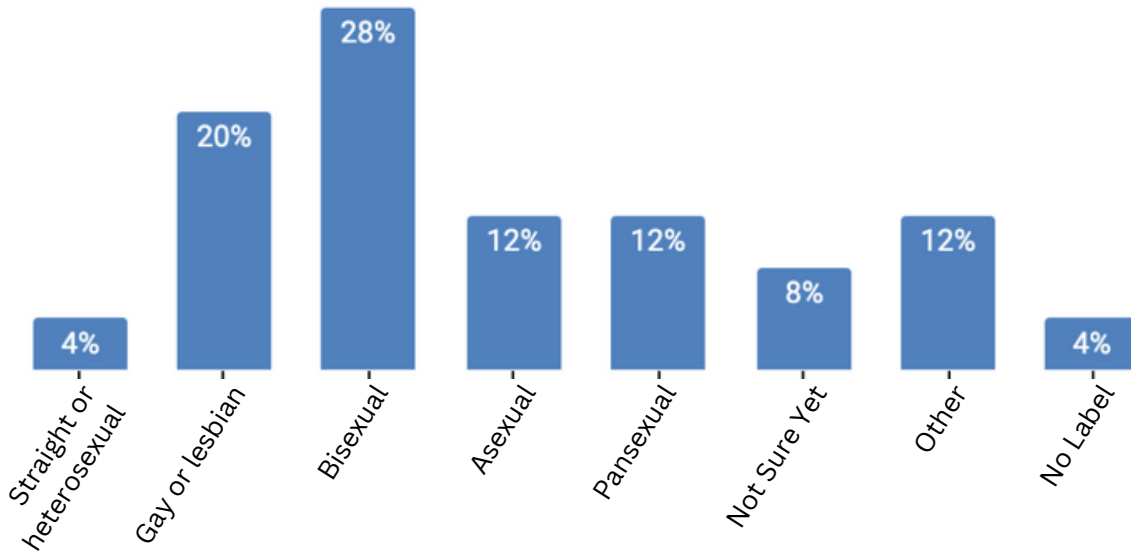
GENDER IDENTITY

We asked our participants to best describe their gender identities in as many terms as they feel relevant. The graph below represents the various identities our participants hold.



SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Regarding their sexualities, a small number of participants identified as straight or heterosexual (4%), and the remainder (96%) of the participants identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, questioning, or queer.



ALBERTA



Given the lack of qualitative research exploring the experiences of TNB youth in Alberta, participants were asked questions related to their experiences living in the province.

All (100%) of participants found that being TNB in Alberta is hard, scary, weird, or complicated, with 32% believing that the government does not take 2SLGBTQ+ issues seriously, nor value TNB Albertans.

Participants discussed the provincial government as an active factor that impacted both how they are treated, and their overall quality of life.

There were many comments that Alberta is (or perceived to be) “conservative” (40%), “non-inclusive” (36%), “unsafe”, “lacking services” (24%), “lacking diversity” as compared to other places like British Columbia or Ontario, but it is better than some other provinces (i.e. smaller, less prosperous) or places in the USA (e.g., Southern states) (12%).

“I've only ever really lived in Alberta and as a trans person only lived in Alberta. But in public spaces I notice looks, I notice – I've been harassed a couple times and yeah it's really scary, you know, to be a trans person in public. Now, on the level of like politics and kind of what I'm hearing from people. Like I come from rural Alberta. That's where my family is and that's a really unsafe place for me to be. Like I can't exist in those communities at all I feel.”
(Chrissy, 23, trans girl/woman)

“I'm very happy to live in Alberta as opposed to Texas [laughs] or somewhere around there. I'm very – because generally Alberta of course has its downside but it's in my opinion and for law, it is generally safer than the U.S.. I'm happy to live in Canada instead of there.”
(Jay, 14, FtM)

ALBERTA

“Being in Alberta isn’t... the best place to be as a trans person because of the way our government likes to do things, but there are very good people here and I feel very grateful and safe when I’m with those people.” (Jamie, 18, genderqueer, agender)

“At the end of the day I would say that our government is killing people, like the suicide rate alone right now has skyrocketed; and I know partially like pandemic stuff but I think that within the trans community alone there has been a marked increase. I don’t know the statistics but I would not be surprised if it was very directly correlated to the fact that government we live in has been legitimizing these forms of violence and emboldening people on systemic and individual levels. I would totally say they’re responsible and to blame for a lot of the deaths of queer people, if not all.” (River, 25, non-binary)

“The amount of people who are uneducated, and who refuse to accept education, is, frankly, terrifying. I don’t know why anyone would consciously refuse to be educated on a matter by someone, and it doesn’t make sense to me. It’s terrifying that those people exist, because they are the people who are most likely to hurt you and they are the people that are least likely to change their opinions.... Knowing that those people hold weight over who’s elected and, in turn, who gets to say stuff about how our lives get to pan out, knowing those people have control in that is terrifying, honestly.” (Blue, 16, non-binary, agender)

“It’s kind of scary being in Alberta as a trans person. I can’t – I don’t really trust the people here too much to be nice to me about it.” (Robin, 22, trans woman)

ALBERTA

“When I came here to ‘large City’ in Alberta, in 2016 definitely something that was seen a lot more, as more conservative, a lot more White, in terms of the area and population. So it’s generally, like not expected, at least from when I was in ‘large city in British Columbia’ that people here in Alberta aren’t necessarily super supportive of LGBT movements and things like that; but being here in person, it’s actually not that much different, and in some ways it’s probably more inclusive than other places in Canada, at least in my experience.” (Jaeseo, 21, MtF).

Some youth remarked that TNB Albertans are strong and resilient in spite of, and because of, the challenges they face.



“Since it’s so hard to be trans here, we have to continuously fight to be recognized. I noticed the community here seemed to be so resilient and just scrappy. Willing to stand up – stand up for yourselves and I think that’s great. I really do.” (Chrissy, 23, trans girl/woman)

BEING UNDERSTOOD AS TNB YOUTH

Many of our participants expressed the various ways in which they feel seen and understood in their gender identities. They also noted the various ways that their gender expression or gender identity is misunderstood or misattributed, or the ways they have experienced transphobia. These experiences occurred throughout their lives, from school to work to just walking down the street. A key theme highlights the ways TNB youth are understood and how support, or lack thereof, impacts their lives in profound ways.

UNDERSTANDING TRANS IDENTITIES:

Participants commented throughout the interviews about how the general public did not understand or have factual knowledge about TNB identities.

- 68% expressed that people lack competence in understanding gender identities and expression.
- 56% felt as though people don't understand gender as a spectrum, pointing out that even for those who may understand binary transgender identities and gender expression, there was still a lack of understanding of non-binary/agender/bigender identities.
- Five of our participants (20%) felt that people don't understand diverse identities, that gender and sexuality are different, and not all TNB youth are LGB+.
- 16% of youth believe that people don't understand "the basics" of gender.
- 3 participants (12%) remarked how they've heard people say that gender diversity is a new trend.

"It's ... honestly kind of weird [being TNB in Alberta]. Because a lot of people don't quite get the whole no gender, or both genders sort of thing. Definitely is hard. I did come out at work not too long ago and it was very hard because not everyone understands." (Sam, 19, non-binary)

BEING UNDERSTOOD AS TNB YOUTH

UNDERSTANDING TRANS IDENTITIES:

At the institutional level (e.g., in school, government, health care, etc.) 56% of TNB participants expressed how institutions are not inherently affirming or inclusive. For example, people are still largely assumed to be cisgender unless otherwise indicated, and inclusive practices aren't implemented unless given explicit instruction or notice.

Youth also felt that professionals (i.e., teachers, health care workers) don't understand TNB identities and lack the overall competence needed to work with them and for them. However, more than half (56%) of youth are hopeful that the systems in place are becoming more inclusive, and 36% believe that society overall is becoming more inclusive. Seven youth (28%) credited these changes to positive trans representation in media.



BEING UNDERSTOOD AS TNB YOUTH

UNDERSTANDING PARTICIPANTS' IDENTITIES:

Individually, participants talked to us about being affirmed, validated, and/or understood as TNB youth. Some youth had found people and spaces that fully embraced their gender identity and expression. For many (84%), they still continued to be, or had been, misgendered or misattributed. Youth also discussed only being attributed to a certain gender based on whether or not they conformed to the gender binary (52%), acknowledging that they felt they needed to fit societal expectations of 'boy' and 'girl' to be attributed correctly.

“I worked in retail and food service for a really long time, so I would get misgendered every day, like multiple multiple times a day.” (Sloane, 24, non-binary)

“I feel like if I was being consistently misgendered, and dead-named a lot, that would definitely have an impact [on mental health] for sure. But I haven't had to be in those sorts of spaces in a long time. And if and when it does happen, I'm able to correct them. And I think I'm pretty lucky not having to interact with so many people that are not respectful.” (Andy, 20, non-binary)

“I almost never correct people and that's something I'm working on with my therapist [laughs] because she's like, “You deserve to have people refer to you in the way that you want them to.” So, that's a current project that I have, trying to feel more comfortable correcting people when they misgender me or use overly gendered language around me.” (River, 25, non-binary/gender fluid)

BEING UNDERSTOOD AS TNB YOUTH

NAME/PRONOUNS:

Using a person's correct name and pronouns can be extremely affirming, making a significant difference in the lives of TNB youth. 40% of our participants shared how they consistently have their name and pronouns used, and 28% of youth said that people try and use their pronouns and names. At school (both junior/high school and university) participants shared they have noted positive changes regarding chosen names and proper pronoun use, with 60% expressing their correct name and pronouns were used at school by staff and students.

"I always felt really safe there [in class]... I genuinely can't think of a class that I took where an instructor at the beginning of the class was like, if you have a different pronoun or a different name that you want me to use... let me know and I will use that or you can speak up now and I'll write it down and I will use that name for you. So that was very inclusive and very nice. Because it didn't make it feel like it was a chore. (Sloane, 24, non-binary)

"Clearly the teachers have been trained on pronouns and names. That's great." (Sean, 17, non-binary, trans boy)

"I remember one teacher, she came up to me and she said, "Hey, I've noticed some other students calling you Jordyn. Am I getting it wrong? Do you want me to call you something else?" And I just told her what happened and she's like "OK, well regardless I'm going to call you what your friends are calling you. I'm not going to call you what you don't want to be called." And I was like "Word. Thanks man. I appreciate that." (Jordyn, 18, non-binary, androgynous)

BEING UNDERSTOOD AS TNB YOUTH

44% have people still slip-up and/or make errors when trying to use their correct name and pronouns. Sadly, 40% of youth have been dead named. Unfortunately, not everyone knows how to use pronouns. There were comments from 10 youth (40%) about people being confused by, or not knowing how to use diverse pronouns, and 28% of youth were not sure how to ask others to use their name/pronouns, or feel comfortable correcting others if they made mistakes

“I've also run into it a lot where people are using ‘they’ pronouns and sounds really confusing, so we're not going to do that. And I'm like, that's... really belittling and I don't particularly enjoy that.” (Sloane, 24, non-binary)

“It was difficult [to change names]. I think certain teachers found out from my friends. So the teachers I was closest with catch on from my friends or me writing X instead of my dead name in the corner of papers or assignments. A lot of them just caught onto that, where for other [teachers] it was them calling out my name in attendance and me saying, ‘No, that’s incorrect.’” (Jay, 14, FtM)

“Their [school] lists, which they thought was perfect. And then I'd go to school the next day and it would happen again and again and again. And they promised me it's all good, and then the next day I'd go in and again it would happen. And it was like seven or eight times of [me saying], “You need to fix this.” “Yeah it's fixed.” “No, it's not.” And in front of the entire class who are just trying to learn and accept my new name and now they're being told, no actually it's not. You can use the other one. The other one's also valid. So it just kind of contributed to some of them pushing that envelope more.” (Sean, 17, non-binary, trans boy)

BEING UNDERSTOOD AS TNB YOUTH

AUTHENTICITY:

The youth in our study spoke about how they have worked towards, or are, living authentically as themselves. 60% of youth shared that becoming their authentic self bolstered their self-esteem and well-being. They found confidence and happiness from coming out and being accepted, and cultivating and nurturing their authentic selves. For some (36%), their self-esteem and self-worth increased after their transitions, as they embraced who they are and lived their life authentically.

Three youth shared that being TNB fosters self-knowing. They made comments about really getting to know themselves after going through the process of affirming their gender. They noted that the soul searching and personal work lends to a deeper understanding of self.

“I get to express myself using my gender. So I can feel more like I can wear whatever I want now, than before I came out. And I can refer to myself differently than I would have before.” (Sam, 19, non-binary)

“I don't feel like I have any societal rules for how I can present myself. If I want to grow a giant handlebar moustache and wear nine inch stiletto heels and put glitter in my hair, I feel no societal pressure to either not do that or do that. Or, some days I'm, like, I want to wear drag makeup and have eyebrows up to here. Or some days I just want to wear plaid and skater shoes. And I don't feel any societal pressure to lean one way or another. I have so much freedom.” (Sloane, 24, non-binary)



WHAT IS THE BEST THING ABOUT BEING TNB?

We asked youth, “What is the best thing about being TNB?” Here are some of their responses:

“The community is always the best part. It’s only lovely people that I wouldn’t know. We just meet on one axis of identity and then they turn out to be super cool and then I got lots of friends because of it.” (Jamie, 18, genderqueer, agender)

“To be like comfortable with being me.” (Kas, 16, FtM)

“I think I’ve met some cool people through being trans that I probably wouldn’t have, and I think it is more eye-opening, in a way, that can make me tolerant ... and mindful of other people and what they might be going through.” (Noah, 17, boy, FtM)

“I feel it's nice to not have to care anymore. Even though I like to present myself more masculine, there are times where I still want to be like, hey I want to look androgynous. Maybe I want to give off some femme like energy. I feel like I don't have to restrict myself as much. I can be a weird kind of eccentric type of person.” (Ashton, 22, transmasculine, non-binary)

“I’ve made a lot of like good friends because of it in certain trans and LGBT communities.” (Robin, 22, trans woman)

“It like makes me have to think about how I’m growing as a person a lot.... Yeah, the self-awareness is really expanded, I think, having to think about being trans and stuff.” (Andy, 20, non-binary)

SAFETY

SAFETY IS A REGULAR CONCERN:

Although youth may feel safe in certain contexts or with certain people, concern for safety is frequently a factor they often have to think about in their daily lives. Comments about feeling unsafe or needing to be aware of safety were more prominent than assertions that youth were not concerned for safety, with 88% of youth remarking that safety is a regular and consistent concern.

44% of youth are always aware of their safety, with 60% noting that safety can't be assumed and the default for them is fear and/or caution. 56% of youth feel unsafe in public versus 28% who feel safe. 8% of youth always feel safe.

“I think people see that someone like me isn't as likely to be defended by people in public. And so they kind of see me as an easy target. Moreover, I think most people, when I'm in public, perceive me as like a hyper-feminine gay man, but to the kind of person who's pursuing me in those instances, the distinction doesn't matter.” (Chrissy, 23, trans girl)

SAFETY

SAFETY STRATEGIES:

Youth highlighted a variety of safety strategies they employ in their everyday lives, including avoiding people/places/ situations that have a higher risk, or leaving a potentially unsafe space/situation (80%), having safety in numbers (44%), avoiding confrontation (20%), blending in (which often involves conforming to the gender binary or norms in their gender expression and behaviours) (12%), and looking for inclusive spaces and people (8%).



“If I know I’m with people who aren’t safe for me, it’s not as bad as when I’m in a scenario where I can’t predict what’s happening, because I definitely like to have game plans for what’s going to happen.”

(Blue, 16, non-binary, agender)

“I most often feel safer, if I have somebody around me, especially if I’m going downtown or somewhere.” (Jay, 14, FtM)

SAFETY

VISIBILITY:

While visibility is important for many youth, especially when seeking out safe(r) spaces, 92% of youth noted that being visible (being read, disclosed/out) puts them at a higher risk for discrimination, harassment, or violence. 80% remarked that 2SLGBTQ+ visibility can create vulnerability or opens people up to judgement and potential harassment. So, while youth in Alberta desire increased visibility, they note that it does come with increased safety risks.

UNSAFE SPACES:

Bars are generally perceived by youth as unsafe spaces, except for some gay/queer bars, because of the uncertainty that alcohol/drinking brings, and because of cis-heteronormativity (i.e., a lot of straight couples/flirting/advances). The Calgary Stampede was also specifically mentioned as an unsafe space due to similar reasons. Other spaces that were noted as unsafe included: crowds and crowded hallways (40%), city downtowns (40%), and public transit (32%). Many youth shared that being in public generally nearly always comes with a potential safety threat.



“If I'm holding hands with my boyfriend walking around I don't feel as safe and sometimes I'll stop holding hands with him. I used to make a lot of eye contact with people while walking. And if I'm with my boyfriend holding hands, I don't make eye contact with people. And, if I'm presenting more femininely, I feel less safe.” (Ian, 24, transmasculine, non-binary).

SAFETY

SAFE SPACES/PEOPLE:

Youth found a few key spaces and people where they could feel safe. For example, spaces with visible 2SLGBTQ+ presence/representation (i.e., flags, symbols) (52%) were often seen as safer. Youth also expressed how explicit 2SLGBTQ+ spaces were safe (48%) and when with friends (36%).

“The safest I’ve ever felt is at Camp fYrefly. It was like a gay commune. It was so good [laughs].” (Jamie, 18, genderqueer, agender)

“[I] feel the most safe when I’m with my girlfriend, just because [its] someone I trust, someone who I know, or if I’m with my family.” (Noah, 17, boy, FtM)



SAFETY

TRANSPHOBIA:

All (100%) of our youth have experienced transphobia in some form. This includes being on the receiving end of transphobic comments, hate from themselves (internalized transphobia), and discrimination from others, including the Government of Alberta. Youth also mentioned witnessing transphobia that was directed towards others, which included comments on TNB identities, which ranged from experiences of being sexualized [32%], feelings that TNB individuals are not valid/desirable/acceptable [32%], or being pathologized in medical settings [28%]. Additionally, 24% of youth had experienced transphobia from within the greater LGBTQ+ community.

“People will date me or hook up with me because I’m trans, because of the parts that I have and because I look a certain way. I’ve had that happen to me and it’s not a good feeling and you feel really violated.”
(Ayrin, 22, transmasculine, non-binary, FtM)

“The queer community, like the number of cis gay people I’ve met who have said really horrible things about trans people or think that the T should be dropped from the community altogether, it’s all so astounding.”
(River, 25, non-binary)

SAFETY

CONVERSION THERAPY PRACTICES:

Almost all youth (92%) described some experience with attempts at conversion therapy practices because of their gender identity or expression. For example, one youth related how they were threatened with being sent to conversion therapy and two others expressed how they experienced conversion attempts through religious institutions. Conversion therapy practices included attempts to “fix” them or force them to conform to gender norms. Some youth also described being interrogated about their gender identity or expression or were prevented from being able to access gender-affirming care.

“I wasn’t willing to go see the Priest to fix whatever “demon problem” I was having at the time. I still haven’t gotten that looked at and I might still have a demon in me, I’m not sure [laughs]. I remember they had like an exorcism done in my room once, and that was interesting.”

(River, 25, non-binary)



HEALTH CARE

Health care was a major theme in our study, which included both:

1. Transition-related medical care (e.g., surgery, hormone replacement therapy), and
2. Experiences accessing general health care as a TNB youth.

There were a variety of important themes youth discussed regarding their health care experiences, which we share in this section.

SPECIALISTS, WAIT LISTS, & GATEKEEPING:

Youth emphasized that access to gender-affirming (GA) care is not universal. While some had access to and already used supports, many youth highlighted the challenges of not easily accessing the health care supports they needed.

A significant concern for our participants was wait times for accessing GA health care. Many participants shared they were on wait lists for things like GA surgery or mental health supports, with 60% noting how wait times were excessively long.

“I initially went to a physician in my neighbourhood before I came out, and his referrals took forever. I ended up in a place where they just kind of cut me out of the system.” (Sean, 17, non-binary, trans boy)

“My biggest frustration, in terms of the medical side of things, was just really long wait times.” (Sloane, 24, non-binary)

“From all my experiences, the thing that people talk about the most, and is something they really don’t like, is having to wait sometimes years to get the medical help they need.” (Brooke, 17, trans girl)

“I can’t remember how long it took me to see [the doctor]... It felt like quite a while... when I finally got to see him, I think it was a year. (Ashton, 22, transmasculine, non-binary)

HEALTH CARE

Other youth participants noted that even when they were able to receive care from a clinic, the wait times in between appointments or for referrals was distressing, with 72% noting that both the initial wait to access GA care and the waits between follow-up visits or to the next referral source were very long and depressing.

“I've gone 12-month intervals without seeing them [at the gender clinic]. Phone calls have gone unanswered for 10 weeks. Like, it's just hard to get a hold of them.” (Sean, 17, non-binary, trans boy)

“Getting in touch with a psychiatrist was hard. That takes around three months of waiting. Gender reassignment surgery and everything will probably take two years or more, and I know with the current situation it's probably bound to take two and a half, maybe three, so – you can't afford to wait for anything.” (Jaeseo, 21, MtF)

“I got on the waitlist, and I'm finally getting my surgeries this year [two years later]. Which is a pretty long wait because it's just so dysphoric for us to constantly just be in this state.” (Storm, 19, man)

“It was a lot of referrals for this place to this place and this place. Constant referrals everywhere and it's a lot of waiting.” (Jay, 14, FtM)

“She [doctor] was nice, but she also said, hormones would be a two-year wait. And that kind of crushed me. I remember sort of sitting outside after the appointment and I just couldn't drive. I just felt so drained. Because to me, waiting two years was like a ticking time bomb.” (Lyra, 21, girl/woman, MtF, trans girl/woman)

HEALTH CARE

For those seeking GA care, 52% felt as though health professionals acted as gatekeepers - meaning they often felt that medical professionals were controlling or limiting their access to the care they desired. 40% expressed how the kinds of criteria they needed to meet in order to access GA care were often redundant, outdated, and prohibitive.



72%

FELT THEY HAD TO PROVE THEY WERE "TRANS ENOUGH" TO RECEIVE THE CARE/SERVICES THEY DESIRED

48%

FOUND THAT HEALTH SERVICES WERE NOT INCLUSIVE

(I.E., NOT CULTURALLY COMPETENT, TRANSPHOBIC OR HOMOPHOBIC, AND NOT GENDER INCLUSIVE OR AFFIRMING).

"In terms of specifically being non-binary, in the realm of transgender healthcare, non-binary transgender people have an incredibly hard time having access to things like surgeries, because in Alberta, a lot of the rules surrounding surgeries require you to have been to hormone replacement transplant therapy [HRT] for a specific number of years. And, I know myself and quite a few other non-binary people, want different surgeries, but we don't necessarily want to be on HRT, which will have effects that we don't want... it's really restrictive to people like myself who feel vastly uncomfortable with the idea of some of the [healthcare system] requirements. And, that doesn't make our gender identity any less valid, or what we want any less valid, and that doesn't mean we shouldn't get the [healthcare] coverage for it." (Blue, 16, non-binary, agender)

HEALTH CARE

INCLUSIVE EXPERIENCES WITH HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS & SERVICES:

Many participants reported having positive experiences accessing healthcare services or engaging with healthcare professionals (HP). Some expressed how there were steps being taken to be more inclusive, such as giving options for chosen name, gender, and pronouns on forms, or HP taking additional training and/or increasingly advocating for TNB patients.

“My sister’s friend’s mother was talking about her great family physician who lives a 20-minute drive from here. She’s great! I’ve [seen] her for three years, she’s amazing. If she doesn’t know, she tells you she doesn’t know. I was probably her first trans patient. She had relatively no clue [from the start] ... It’s a lot of educating health people on how to do it. Like, they’re good about pronouns and not asking too many invasive questions, they’ve clearly had some training on that.” (Sean, 17, non-binary, trans boy)

“My doctor was very knowledgeable. And when it came to bloodwork... she respected my privacy and she would sort of make it so the [other] doctors didn’t have to see that. Didn’t have to see my trans bloodwork.... Because I’m not out. I haven’t changed my name legally... So it’s nice that [my own] doctor was able to keep my privacy like that.” (Lyra, 21, girl/woman, MtF, trans girl/woman)

“I was trying to find a doctor at the medical clinic. I was messaging the receptionists about like ‘hey, I don’t really go by male or female’. They made sure that my documents or files would have the gender marker of X... They went out of their way to make sure I felt safe.” (Ashton, 22, transmasculine, non-binary)

HEALTH CARE

LACK OF COHESIVE SYSTEM & NAVIGATION:

The overwhelming majority (96%) of youth expressed a desire to access medical transition supports, with 60% currently waiting for access to gender affirming care. 76% of youth did not know where to go or how to access services, expressing that there isn't a consistent or cohesive system for multi- or interdisciplinary gender-affirming care with clear lines of communication.

“I had to see – probably five different people, starting from my school counsellor all the way to getting prescribed [hormones]. And yeah, it was a seven-month process, and I feel like it didn't need to be.”
(Quinn, 23, trans woman)

“I was very confused the entire time about the whole process of accessing hormones because that was very important to me. It was very confusing and I felt like I was getting different answers from so many people.” (Lyra, 21, girl/woman, MtF, trans girl/woman).



88%

NOTED A LACK OF ACCESS TO GENDER AFFIRMING CARE

As a result, some youth felt they “fell through the cracks” of the healthcare system and did not receive the care they desired or needed. Overall, 44% of youth emphasized how the lack of a centralized and coordinated process made it difficult to navigate necessary referrals, appointments, and specialists.

HEALTH CARE

COMMUNITY SUPPORT:

Positively, some youth remarked that having TNB community supports, such as the Skipping Stone Foundation, helped them navigate through the health care system and supported them through the often complicated referral process.

“For me, specifically, it was very easy to get access to medical stuff as well as mental stuff because Skipping Stone is a public service and I got access to hormones through them.”

(Brooke, 17, trans girl)

“I wish I knew about Skipping Stone from the start... because the first probably two months of trying [to access GA care] was spent finding the right person to talk to.” (Quinn, 23, trans woman)



HEALTH CARE

EDUCATION:

Many youth spoke about the challenges of accessing a healthcare practitioners who were knowledgeable about TNB-specific health needs. They described encounters with healthcare professionals who were uninformed about gender diversity and the unique health needs of TNB people and identified having to carry the burden of educating their service providers. Conversely, some youth had knowledgeable practitioners who helped them access inclusive care. Overall, youth expressed how they wished health care providers were given and sought out more education regarding TNB identities and specific health needs.

“I think it’s so important to try to provide education, regardless of the doctor’s specialties, because you don’t know when a trans person is going to come in through those doors and need healthcare.” (Storm, 17, man)

“Hormone therapy, that’s something they should teach psychologists and [others]... like just [make it] really, really clear about educating them so that it’s not something that you should fear.” (Lyra, 21, girl/woman, MtF, trans girl/woman)

“My doctor’s actually been to a few conferences regarding gender and sexual health and gender and trans stuff. So, yeah, I think it felt really good to know they were trying their best to educate themselves.” (Noah, 17, boy, FtM).

“My doctor that prescribed me my testosterone, is a pretty big role model for me to be honest... she always uses wonderful terminology. And if she uses the incorrect terminology, she catches herself on it and apologizes and corrects herself without me having to say anything.” (Storm, 17, man)

HEALTH CARE

SELF-DIRECTED EDUCATION:

Many youth turned to alternative means of seeking out information relevant to their physical, emotional, and sexual health needs, such as talking to friends and peers, other TNB individuals, and going online to search websites and find social media communities.

“I think everything that I’ve sort of learned about trans identity I’ve had to look up for myself – I’ve had to go out or have researched... typically online. I’ve noticed that Reddit has a very big trans community.”
(Brooke, 17, trans girl)

“I found out [about binders/binding] from probably Tumblr when I was younger. I think that’s where a lot of kids find out about themselves online.”
(Jamie, 18, genderqueer, agender)

“Yeah, it’s fairly easy to find communities online where you know they talk about like the best way of doing it [finding HRT] and kind of how to do it safely to the best of your ability.”
(Chrissy, 23, trans girl)

“A lot of my friends were and are pretty open about their gender, sexuality and sex life. Just because they know that a lot of people aren’t getting the resources they need to be safe and to be happy.” (Sam, 19, non-binary)



HEALTH CARE

GETTING 'LUCKY'

We observed the phenomena of 'getting lucky', where TNB youth (28%) shared their feelings of 'luck' when they found a provider who was knowledgeable about gender diversity, TNB healthcare needs, and who had previous experience working with TNB individuals.

Due to experiences of discrimination in medical environments, TNB individuals are more likely to postpone or avoid needed care, and for those who do seek care, if they have a neutral or positive experience, they feel as though they have 'gotten lucky'.

"I would say that personally, I'm incredibly lucky as a non-binary youth, because I haven't experienced a lot of the really awful conditions that other people have had to experience. (Maverick, 17, gender-fluid & non-binary)

"One of the first people that I told [general practitioner] and was the first person who originally set up the initial referrals to medical transition... I think I sort of struck lucky, especially with him because he has other patients that are also trans." (Brooke, 17, transgender girl)

"I've been very, very lucky with my transition experience. And I recognize that a lot." (Ian, 24, transmasculine, non-binary)



MENTAL HEALTH

EMOTIONAL DISTRESS, SELF-HARM & SUICIDALITY:

All our participants (100%) discussed past or present experiences with emotional distress, self-harm (including risk-taking or self-destructive behaviours), and suicidality. Often distress was related to identity/dysphoria but not exclusively.

Some of our participants shared their experiences with suicide, which included both thoughts of death/suicide and suicide attempts. The reasons for wanting to die by suicide varied, but included unsupportive family members, mental health struggles (i.e., with anxiety, depression, OCD), transphobia and discrimination, and non-affirmation.

Nine youth noted that their emotional distress was worse before they began transitioning and for 3 youth, the emotional distress they experienced was worse at the beginning of their transition.

Eighty percent of our participants had previously or currently engaged in self-harm. There were various reasons behind their actions, including: a response to trauma (25%), self-harm to manage dysphoria (15%), self-harm because they did not understand/recognize their trans identity or what they thought was 'wrong' with themselves (10%), death to avoid life (5%), and self-harming to connect to their bodies (5%).

Two youth shared that at one point, they didn't think they would survive to adulthood, so they did not plan for or could not see a future for themselves.

***"I did not expect to be older than 22. And now here I am two years later and just flying by the seat of my pants."
(Sloane, 24, non-binary)***

***"I expected that I would end my life, so I didn't expect to go to high school, or especially university, so it's kind of scary."
(Finn, 18, man)***

MENTAL HEALTH

COPING MECHANISMS:

Our youth participants described a variety of coping mechanisms that they currently or previously use(d) to deal with mental health challenges. These included both adaptive and maladaptive mechanisms, including self-harm (24%), addiction (16%), distraction/escape (16%), exercise (12%), anti-depressants (8%), self-isolation (8%), and blocking from memory (4%),

“Usually I like to – I wouldn't say isolate myself, but I like to be alone and just focus. Focus on myself maybe like watch something on Netflix. A lot of the times I will like hop on a group call with some of my friends while just hanging out. That really helps as well.”
(Sam, 19, non-binary)

“Not eating properly. Like not taking care of myself physically that much. Or getting into negative thought spirals.”
(Ashton, 22, transmasculine, non-binary)



MENTAL HEALTH

COPING MECHANISMS:

They also discussed a variety of supports that helped them cope with the challenges of negative mental health outcomes they experienced.

These supports included being creative (i.e., drawing, painting, sewing) (44%), engaging with music (i.e., listening, playing, creating) (28%), physical activities (24%), being outdoors (16%), cooking/eating (12%), gaming (12%), learning (12%), reading (12%), and watching TV/videos/movies (12%).

In addition, 60% of youth identified that spending time with friends and leaning on them in times of difficulty or crisis was important, and 40% noted they find happiness and joy in their friendships.

“It’s one of my favourite coping mechanisms – I play trumpet, I sing, I write songs sometimes and honestly, listening to music if I’m too lazy to do anything else. Music is one of my huge outlets and then after that it would probably be exercising, just getting all of that anger, all of that tension out.”
(Storm, 19, man)



MENTAL HEALTH

POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS:

Having supportive relationships and sources of connection was a protective factor for mental health, with all youth (100%) sharing that they have some sort of supportive relationship in their lives. These relationships included family members (92%), partners (92%), friends (80%), 2SLGBTQ+ specific community connections (80%), general community connections (52%), chosen family (48%), siblings (40%), pets (16%), and social media/online friends (12%).

“Community. 10/10 it’s just always that community that you build. I recently went to fYrefly online version, and I’ve been the past two years in person, and they’re amazing... There’s nothing like just being around a bunch of trans and queer kids for me.” (Sean, 17, non-binary, trans boy)

“I make sure I stay connected with my people and make sure I don’t isolate. I keep my support group. I try and see the sunshine as much as I can.” (Jordyn, 18, non-binary, androgynous)

“My parents are both very supportive, but my mom has often been the [key] parent in my life. So she was very supportive. Both her and my dad took me to a lot of the medical appointments. My dad was able to get off work early or take some time off work more easily to take me to appointments. So when I think back on it, both my parents were very supportive.” (Ian, 24, transmasculine, non-binary)

“Definitely my dogs. It feels weird to say oh yeah they support me, but like they don’t care. They don’t care what my gender is. They don’t care who I hang out with. They don’t care. They just love me unconditionally.” (Sam, 19, non-binary)

MENTAL HEALTH

2SLGBTQ+ COMMUNITY:

100%

FEEL LIKE THEY BELONG TO, AND HAVE POSITIVE CONNECTION WITH, THE 2SLGBTQ+ COMMUNITY

*“There’s actually two other trans people at my work, and everyone... that works weekends is queer in some way... It’s very open and accepting, and I’m very open about being trans.”
(Ian, 24, transmasculine, non-binary)*

“My previous general manager was very supportive [after coming out as TNB]. She’s actually a lesbian so I just felt comfortable talking to a fellow LGBTQ+ member about it. And then she provided a lot of support and resources.” (Sam, 19, non-binary)

Many youth shared the positive impact of having 2SLGBTQ+ individuals in their lives. Many reported having 2SLGBTQ+ friends (40%), 16% also had a 2SLGBTQ+ sibling, and some (8%) sought out the 2SLGBTQ+ community after coming out . Some youth also remarked how the TNB community is “close-knit”, with 64% having TNB role models and 16% with 2SLGBQ+ role models. Others shared that they worked with other 2SLGBTQ+ people, making the workplace feel safer.

MENTAL HEALTH

NEGATIVE RELATIONSHIPS:

Unfortunately, the youth in our study also had negative relationships that impacted their mental health and wellbeing, which included having non-accepting and unsupportive family members (60%), experiencing the loss of relationships (20%), experiences in abusive (physical, verbal, emotional, and/or sexual) relationships (16%), having unhealthy romantic relationships (16%), and dating unsupportive people (4%). These negative relationships often outweighed the positive factors in their lives.

“I was so vulnerable and so desperate for a place to stay and he knew that, like it was blood in the water. I was the limping deer and easy target.” (River, 25, non-binary)

MENTAL HEALTH

THERAPY/PSYCHIATRY:

Accessing therapy and/or psychologists was an important part of some youths lives, particularly in managing their mental health and/or getting referrals and support for their larger GA care needs. 36% found talking to a mental health professional helpful, and a majority of youth engaged with a therapist and/or psychologist.

“One of the things I still do is see a therapist. And even though I’ve been in therapy, literally my entire life, and I don’t actively need therapy, I keep the therapist for like regular meetings to keep myself accountable... You’ve got to have someone challenging your thoughts and you need someone to validate those from an outside point of view as well.”
(Jordyn, 18, non-binary, androgynous)



“She [university counsellor] was really good. She was specifically trained to help trans, non-binary people of all ages, but specifically youth. So she was really helpful. Her talking to my parents, I think, it was almost like a light switch flipped when... she pressed, and then suddenly they were trying to be supportive.” (Finley, 17, boy)

MENTAL HEALTH

THERAPY/PSYCHIATRY:

Unfortunately, for some youth, therapy and psychologists were not the affirming resources of support that they had hoped for. Participants shared how they had negative and/or unhelpful experiences, with 20% of our participants noting that finding an affirming therapist is difficult.

“Yeah, I started therapy. That didn’t last very long though... I found that it didn’t really help me. It kind of just – if anything it hurt me. I think it was probably just because we – myself and my therapist didn’t click. And then I just kind of quit and I never went back.” (Sam, 19, non-binary)



“It felt like she [psychiatrist] was trying to have me prove that I was adequately trans enough.” (Chrissy, 23, trans girl)

SCHOOL

CLIMATE & CULTURE:

School climate and culture was a major factor contributing to whether or not TNB youth felt safe at school. If the climate/culture was inclusive, diverse, and respectful, 44% youth felt as though school was a safe(r) place to be.

“I knew it would be so much better on my mental health and wellbeing to be somewhere where I was accepted and embraced because that’s a big difference. You can be accepted and respected, but if you’re not embraced, you will not grow.” (Jordyn, 18, non-binary, androgynous)

Importantly, most students (88%) felt their school was a safe place, with a large majority (92%) of participants being out as TNB at school.

“I had some really, really good teachers... my Italian teacher was the one who I came out to halfway through the semester, and he was just super, super great... you can tell when a teacher just actually respects you and doesn’t treat you any differently.” (Noah, 17, man, FtM)



SCHOOL

CLIMATE & CULTURE:

“I was very pleased with my school. It was a very safe place. I had some very, very good teachers who were very loving and very kind. I was very happy. It’s definitely a scary place especially with other students and with the bullying and stuff like that, always having to be on your toes, but in general where I went to school I felt safe.” (Jayson, 14, FtM)

“I felt really safe at school and specifically in certain classrooms. I don’t think I ever felt unsafe at school in a classroom even with unaffirming teachers who didn’t know. I still felt like they’d probably be OK. I just didn’t feel like telling them. I felt safe at school.” (Jamie, 18, genderqueer, agender)

“For the most part, I feel very safe at school. I know even if there are unaccepting people, there are enough people there that will stand up for me and there are enough teachers that care about stuff like that.” (Blue, 16, non-binary, agender)

SCHOOL

A minority of youth (12%) never felt safe at school, and some youth only felt unsafe with certain people, situations, or schools. One participant transferred schools due to a lack of safety. There was also a noted difference between being in elementary/high school versus being in university, with 48% of youth sharing that their high school or junior high tended to feel less safe than university.

“Every once in a while, I would have, especially an older teacher, make a joke or say something, or even just walk in and go ladies and gentlemen, even though I know for a fact the day before all the teachers had a meeting in which they were told not to do stuff like that... It just made me feel uncomfortable. And a lot of the time, not very supported.” (Maverick, 17, gender-fluid & non-binary)

Additionally, at the elementary/high school level, certain classes were deemed more safe than others. Classes such as language arts and art were safer, and gym class and gym teachers were viewed as especially unsafe, due to the often gendered nature of gym class (i.e., dividing into ‘boys’ and ‘girls’ teams, and sex segregated change rooms).

“Gym teachers as a whole seem to not understand gender as a construct and that it shouldn’t be divided, and that change rooms are a problem and actually incite a lot of violence.” (Sean, 17, non-binary, trans boy)

“I was really into theatre in high school, which is a place for a lot of people, a lot of LGBTQ people like to go.” (Lyra, 21, girl/woman, MtF, trans girl/woman)

Overall, 40% of youth felt that schools could be a place to help students understand and explore gender identities and expression, with 16% only learning/understanding what TNB identities were after they graduated high school.

SCHOOL

SUPPORTS:

The most frequently described gender-affirming supports were identified as all-gender bathrooms/change rooms or access to affirmed binary bathroom/change room; GSAs or other 2SLGBTQ+ safe space(s); and the ability to change names and pronouns. Some schools also offered gender-neutral physical education uniforms, online options for physical education, and mental health or counselling services to assist with accessing and navigating medical and social transition (although these were more commonly available in post-secondary institutions).

“The name change specifically... is really, really important, and I wish more people knew about it because very few school systems that I know do that. So to have something, like that major sort of change in the school system, is really important and a really big step forward.”
(Brooke, 17, trans girl)

“I had the huge privilege of getting a university where I was able to access counselling services, psychiatric help that 100% saved my life, like getting campus LGBTQ+ groups, those are the things that saved my life”
(River, 25, non-binary)

“We have Pride Week [and]... the GSA does a bunch of events like making buttons or passing out little tiny flags and then we have a dance at the end.”
(Jamie, 18, genderqueer, agender)

“We got my name changed at school this last year, which was definitely a relief.” ***(Kas, 16, FtM)***

When supports were made available to them, 64% of TNB youth found them to be helpful. Not all youth have/had access to TNB specific support(s) in their K-12 schools, and many youth expressed how they wished their schools would be more supportive for students wanting to transition or who were already transitioning. For 8 youth attending postsecondary schools, they remarked how universities were more likely to provide much needed supports and services than K-12 schools.

SCHOOL

SUPPORTS:

Overall, youth described having to continually ask for specific TNB supports, and often to multiple individuals (e.g., using correct names and pronouns, gender-neutral bathrooms, and gender-inclusive rooming options on trips).

Self-advocacy and persistence were often required to ensure supports were implemented correctly or at all, with the burden and responsibility for inclusion primarily falling on the TNB youth themselves, often to the detriment of their own social and emotional wellbeing.

“I remember when I was in high school, it was like we as students had to initiate everything in informing the teachers, which was not the responsibility we should have had.” (Andy, 20, non-binary)

“We shouldn’t have to be denied. We don’t have to fight in order to get something and - I hate that we do. I fought so hard and so long to be able to get gender neutral washrooms and to be able to use the male locker room, it was ridiculous.” (Storm, 19, man)

“I was like the first out trans person there, simultaneously with [another student]. We were kind of introducing my school to what trans kids are like. They had theoretical knowledge and yet zero clue of what to do. They were very wanting to seem like they knew what trans people were and how to deal with it and, ‘Yes, we’re all-inclusive and fine.’ Holy wow, there was a lot of work to do there.” (Sean, 17, non-binary, trans boy)



SCHOOL

SUPPORTS AND TEACHER TRAINING:

Youth also discussed the impact it had on their schooling experience whether or not their teachers and school staff had any training and/or knowledge about TNB identities and issues. They shared that having more supportive and educated school staff would have/had a positive impact on their schooling experience(s).

“I didn’t have support from my school or my teachers. There was no mental health counselling at my school, or at my high school. There was nothing, and the teachers were all pretty uneducated.” (Finley, 17, boy)

“I think my dad tried to make sure it happened but there’s a team – I think they’re called the SOGI Team. So they come to schools and help educate teachers. And so just having a workshop, it’s like oh, this is how that works. It really helps if the teachers are ready for that information. Like, ready to take it apart and sort of do their part with it.” (Finn, 18, man)



“I remember actually one of my teachers, she was my favourite and it was probably because she was super supportive. And she would just always sit down with me and talk me through anything that was going on. And a lot of it had to do with trans related stuff and she was super supportive of that. And even though she didn’t know answers, she would try to find the answers for me.” (Storm, 19, man)

SCHOOL

TIMES HAVE CHANGED (FOR THE BETTER):

Thankfully, many youth shared how they believe times have changed, for the better, for TNB and 2SLGBTQ+ youth. From inclusive policies, to more educated teachers, and designated safe spaces (like GSA's), TNB youth expressed hope for positive changes occurring in schools.

“I do notice more now, than when I started high school, how things are changing and they're adding – they're implementing things to make it easier to be a LGBTQ youth in high school... There's a lot more involvement in Gay Straight Alliance groups. I have noticed a lot more trans youth coming out during school.... Like my sister, she's still in high school. She has a lot of friends who are coming out even if it's just like exploring. And if they don't end up LGBTQ, I still appreciate that they're getting the support they need to figure it out.” (Sam, 19, non-binary)

“I think those [affirming] spaces exist now today in a way that they didn't when I was in high school.” (Chrissy, 23, trans girl)

“I know there has definitely recently been a lot of changes with having the option of a non-binary identity when you're registering into the school and stuff like that, which has been good.” (Blue, 16, non-binary, agender)

“I think it's better for people coming out now than it was when I came out back in 2010. I don't know there's a huge difference, but schools are definitely better, I think.” (Ian, 24, transmasculine, non-binary)



SEX EDUCATION



To learn more about the sexual health education (SHE) of TNB youth, we asked them about their experiences. While all of the youth interviewed received some limited information on sexual health topics, most youth (76%) taught themselves, finding relevant information through social media/online (88%), from friends and peers (32%), from adults or health professionals (32%), and from watching pornography (16%). A large number of youth (88%) expressed that information relevant to their lived experience is hard to find, or is limited, especially gender-specific information.

“I get that kind of [sexual health] information a lot through older queer folks. St. Albert has a support meeting called Out Loud, which hasn’t met in a while because of COVID. But there’s a lot of older folks there and so every once in a while we’ll have a sex ed night in which people who are professionals will come in and answer questions.” (Maverick, 17, non-binary, gender-fluid)

“I would say most of my outside sexual education was definitely on the Internet. I grew up very much in that [online environment]. I have been on social media since I was 13... And even just through my own curiosity I was [wondering] what are other steps that I can take? Or, I would come across comics about people [suggesting that] when I sleep with women, all I have to worry about is STD control, and then I was wondering, ‘What does STD control look like between two women? What can I do to be a healthier partner for people that I want to have in my life?’ So that was a little bit of a personal thing. But it was definitely mostly talking to other people or talking to people on the Internet and just researching it for myself.” (Sloane, 24, non-binary)

“I think the most help, like the most useful information that I’ve got... I sort of just got it from pamphlets at Pride.” (Finn, 18, man)

SEX EDUCATION

IN SCHOOLS:

100%

OF YOUTH FOUND SEXUAL HEALTH EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS TO BE INADEQUATE IN SOME WAY

In schools, the majority of youth (60%) noted that SHE was limited in scope, typically focusing on biological aspects related to reproduction and STIs, which was often binary and heteronormative.

76% of youth said their SHE was not SOGI (sexual orientation and gender identity) inclusive. Either SOGI was not included at all in the class content, or not covered comprehensively (e.g., just define but don't provide relevant sexual health information). 60% of youth explicitly stated they think SHE should include SOGI positive information, with 28% noting that more SHE resources are starting to include information surrounding a variety of sexual orientations.

“Yeah, sexual health was just like, are you kidding me? Like none of this is ... OK, some of it's applicable, a lot of it's not. I'm very glad that you're not separating people by gender, however, it actually kind of happened just by the way people were sitting. It's like here's the boys' table and here's the girls' table... So as a trans person it's like how do I figure this out?”

(Sean, 17, non-binary, trans boy)

“I wish it had gone a little bit more into queer sexual health because until I was 16 or 17, I didn't know about sex between two women or anything like that. I knew a little bit about it but it was never really discussed as heavily as birth control and STD control between a man and a woman.”

(Sloane, 24, non-binary)

AFFIRMING TNB YOUTH

Our participants listed numerous ways that educators and providers can affirm their gender identities. These ranged from everyday encounters, to larger, systemic changes. Here, we list some of the ways to become more gender inclusive and affirmative, as suggested by the youth themselves.

INCLUSIVITY & RESPECT:

- Ask questions sensitively, not asking inappropriate or invasive questions
- Be mindful of microaggressions when providing supports
- Have a positive and supportive response to disclosure
- Create inclusive forms, files, systems, and class rosters
- Develop inclusive rooming policies (i.e. for school trips)
- Make inclusion and gender diversity mainstream practice
- Support youth and their chosen gender expression and/or the exploration of their gender expression.
- Listen to and respect TNB youth. Appreciate that they know who they are, how they're feeling, and what they want.

SUPPORTING TNB YOUTH

EDUCATION:

- Educate all Albertans (i.e., youth, students, people overall) about TNB issues and identities, including how to be supportive and inclusive.
- Teach kids at a young age about gender diversity to normalize gender expansiveness.
- Provide adequate and ongoing training surrounding TNB issues for professionals (i.e., teachers, health care providers) with methods of accountability.
- Support diversity in the workforce and training programs.
- Stop putting the burden on the oppressed. TNB youth are tired of having to educate others, advocate, create programs, provide support, come up with solutions, and problem-solve.

68%

OF YOUTH WANT THE BURDEN OF EDUCATING OTHERS ON TNB ISSUES TO STOP FALLING ON THEIR OWN SHOULDERS.



SUPPORTING TNB YOUTH

SAFE(R) SPACES:

- Provide consistent access to all-gender or desired bathrooms and change rooms.
- Support the creation of safe spaces & promote allyship.
- Wear pronoun pins and add pronouns in email signatures.
- Stop gendering things, people, behaviours, and activities unnecessarily (e.g., clothing, dancing, groups/clubs, addressing people).

STRUCTURAL CHANGE:

- Address barriers/inequities in gym exercise (e.g., co-ed sports teams, non-gendered change rooms).
- Make gender affirming supports more accessible (i.e., more services available, less wait for services, more providers, more ways to access a variety of supports).



WHAT WOULD YOU CHANGE?

Q: Our last research question asked, “If you had a magic wand, what would be the one thing that you’d want to do to improve the lives of trans and non-binary youth in Alberta?”

“Giving all of them a safe place. So a safe place looking like a place with other trans and non-binary people so they know they’re not the only one and they have someone to talk about it with.” (Jordyn, 18, non-binary, androgynous)

“I think probably, in terms of medical stuff, just more staff, and more staff in every area, you know? Like, more therapists, more people who are trained or who are comfortable with working with trans people and being there, and people who are willing to learn how to give surgeries to trans people and more incentive to do that, too.” (Noah, 17, boy, FtM)

“I would put a lot more funding into like all of these, like medical [supports] and get much easier access. From all my experiences, the thing that people talk about the most is something that they really don’t like is having to wait, sometimes, years to get the medical help that they need. Or, I think about how the funding for Skipping Stone was planning to be cut for a specific amount by the Alberta Government and like the de-funding of these social services is putting a major impact on the amount of people who can access this sort of thing.” (Brooke, 17, trans girl).



WHAT WOULD YOU CHANGE?



Q: If you had a magic wand, what would be the one thing that you'd want to do to improve the lives of trans and non-binary youth in Alberta?

“My magic wand move would be like, for people to just accept ‘they’ as a pronoun. Where it's like if people are – oh do you use they pronouns and you're like yes, they're like, cool. Done.” (Sloane, 24, non-binary)

“I would want to be able to just make people suddenly aware of how to approach questions respectfully... But also just have more people understand that we exist and be partially aware with our struggles and our successes. And just that we're here. Because, I like to think that humans are not inherently horrible. And that if people are aware that we're having troubles and need help then there will be at least – there will be more people who go hey, no we need to help sort this out and lets make this more fair.” (Finn, 18, man)

“More financial ability. Money solves everything.” (Jaeseo, 21, MtF).

“I would just make the healthcare accessible, with a lot shorter wait times and stuff like that. ‘Cause not necessarily even medical health. Mental health care, I think, is what a lot of people are seeking.” (Finn, 18, man)

“Mass social acceptance ... yeah. Or we can refer to it like in, you know, like Paris is Burning like drag language, you know, “the realness” and recognizing that trans people are real and they're people, trans women are women, trans men are men, and actually believing that and understanding all of the intricacies of that statement.” (River, 25, non-binary)

WHAT WOULD YOU CHANGE?

Q: If you had a magic wand, what would be the one thing that you'd want to do to improve the lives of trans and non-binary youth in Alberta?

“Eliminate the wordings and specific gendered products that they have. Like the women’s clothes, the men’s clothes, like everyone, like cis and the people that are on the non-binary and Trans spectrum, that makes them feel more validated to not have those labels on everything they use.” (Kas, 16, FtM)

“Make it so the healthcare regarding trans folk is more quicker, and more reliable and kind of better I guess. Regarding how we have to go for five appointments just to get hormones. If there's a way maybe to make it a little bit quicker and just better...or having better wait times for surgery, and getting your surgery done. And also maybe more mental health practitioners that do work with trans and non-binary folk.” (Ashton, 22, transmasculine, non-binary)

“Definitely proper education from a young age, because education in general will fix a lot of the problems, both now and in the future. Having education will mean that you’re more likely to work to keep those people. Keep people like us, even binary people, even people who are cis-het, having that proper education will give a lot of people the ability and empathy to work for a better life for those people. If you know about things like that, you’re more likely to care about it.” (Blue, 16, non-binary, agender)

MESSAGES TO TNB YOUTH

We asked youth, “If you were to give a message to other trans youth, what would you say?”
Here are some of the thoughts, advice, and wisdom they wanted to share with others.

“I love you, you’re valid, even if you’re not out. I believe in you. And you will be able to be yourself one day, even if you can’t right now.” (Blue, 16, non-binary, agender)

“Not to sound super-cliché and tacky, but like, it gets better. I know that’s like, oh god, but it does. I never thought it would and I didn’t think I’d live past it. And I thought I’d be depressed for the rest of my life and would never have support from my family. But you know, all of that has kind of been proved wrong...” (Finn, 18, man)

“I would say that there’s no need to rush, because they can take their time about how they feel about themselves, how they feel about others, how they think others will perceive them. I know it’s a lot to do this, but there’s always a lot of time to come to terms with those kinds of thoughts.” (Emil, 21, trans boy, transmasculine)

“Hold in there, hang tight. It might be difficult a little bit. At least especially with your first coming out, or first moving to a new area in Alberta without a group of friends. But maybe look online for groups in your areas and to find communities. Look for places of support where there are other trans and queer folks and allies so you can have a place where you can feel accepted.” (Ashton, 22, transmasculine, non-binary)

MESSAGES TO TNB YOUTH

“Right now, keep pushing. Push as much as you possibly can because the medical system and school systems and every system you have to go through will NOT push for you. You have to do the pushing. Push, push and find a community because that will help.” (Sean, 17, non-binary, trans boy)

“Things take time and where you are now, like when you look back on it in a year, you’re going to be blown away by how much has changed. Yes, this literally does – this will save your life.” (Ayrin, 22, transmasculine, non-binary, FtM)

“A lot of the times, you know, things probably won’t get better; they will be different, but YOU get better. As time goes on, you know, I kind of don’t really like the whole things get better... sort of thing because sometimes it doesn’t, sometimes it gets worse; but you as a person, you become more resilient and you’re able to achieve things that you never thought would be possible, like to this day I kind of look back on some of my experiences and I’m like... I have no clue how I got here, but you just kind of close your eyes and you do it. And yeah things may not get better, but you will.” (River, 25, non-binary)

“There are no rules for being non-binary and you shouldn’t have to feel like you have to fit into any of those rules. So just do what makes you the most comfortable and the most happy.” (Sloane, 24, non-binary)



THANK YOU

We would like extend our deepest gratitude to all the youth who participated in this study. Thank you for sharing your stories, your experiences, and your life with us. We are grateful for each of you.

FORTHCOMING RESEARCH PUBLICATIONS:

Maine, E., Hardy, T., & Wells, K. (in press). “This is killing me. Please let me leave”: Trans and non-Binary youth and sexual health education in Alberta. *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*.

Hardy, T., Maine, E., & Wells, K. (in press). “It was trans hell:” The schooling experiences of trans and non-binary youth in Alberta. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*.