

Transgender youth avoid health care due to discomfort with doctors

December 5 2017



Lead author Drew Clark, a PhD candidate in interdisciplinary studies at UBC.
Credit: R. Doucette

Close to half of transgender young Canadians aren't accessing health care when they need it, according to a new study from the University of

British Columbia.

The study also found that increasing confidence in [health](#)-care providers is important for improving the physical and mental health of transgender youth.

Researchers analyzed data from 923 youth ages 14-25 who responded to a countrywide transgender youth health survey conducted in 2013-2014. Overall, the survey found participants didn't feel comfortable talking with their doctors about their gender or trans-specific health-care needs.

Sixty-eight per cent of younger youth (ages 14-18) had forgone needed [mental health care](#) in the last 12 months, and 34 per cent did not seek professional care for physical problems even when it was needed. Among older youth (19-25), 47 per cent had forgone mental health care, physical health care, or regular checkups.

In some cases, young people did not seek care because they hoped the problem would go away on its own, or because of issues with cost or transportation. However, many reported previous negative health-care experiences, or being afraid of what a doctor would say or do, as reasons for not getting care.

Many participants described negative encounters with health-care providers, such as being denied routine prescription refills by clinicians unfamiliar with providing gender-affirming care.

"Many transgender youth have experienced uncomfortable and frustrating encounters with doctors, particularly when a doctor isn't well informed about transgender health," said lead author Drew Clark, a PhD candidate in interdisciplinary studies. "An encouraging finding was that young people who were more comfortable discussing trans health-care needs with their family doctors reported higher levels of mental health

and health overall."

The analysis showed that people whose transgender identity was known by their doctor reported better general health than those who said their doctor was unaware, or those who weren't sure if their doctor knew. Youth who reported their doctors knew they were transgender also reported better overall [mental health](#) than those whose [doctors](#) did not know.

Study senior author Elizabeth Saewyc, a nursing professor who leads the Stigma and Resilience Among Vulnerable Youth Centre at UBC, says the results highlight the need for a more supportive and informed approach in health care for transgender youth.

"Trans [youth](#) have higher risk for negative health outcomes due to stigma and discrimination, so knowing that they don't access health care even when they need to is concerning. The responsibility lies with us—with health professionals, health educators, and policymakers—to improve our competency in [transgender](#) health and ensure our trans patients can have confidence in the [health care](#) they receive," said Saewyc.

More information: Beth A Clark et al, Primary care access and foregone care: a survey of transgender adolescents and young adults, *Family Practice* (2017). [DOI: 10.1093/fampra/cmz112](https://doi.org/10.1093/fampra/cmz112)

Provided by University of British Columbia

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