

Supportive families and schools help prevent substance use among trans youth: study

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Strong family and school connections are helping prevent transgender youth from smoking cigarettes and using marijuana, even among those targeted by violence.

That's the key finding of a new national study led by researchers in the Stigma and Resilience Among Vulnerable Youth Centre (SARAVYC) in the school of nursing at the University of British Columbia.

The study analyzed data from 323 transgender [youth](#) ages 14 to 18 who took the 2014 Canadian Trans Youth Health Survey. Among trans youth who reported experiencing high amounts of [violence](#), those who had no [family support](#) or caring friends had a 61 per cent probability of smoking tobacco. But that probability dropped to only 20 per cent among those with supportive [family](#) and friends.

In addition, youth who reported high family connectedness were about 88 per cent less likely to report smoking cannabis in the past month, compared to those who reported lower family connectedness. For trans adolescents with high levels of both family and school connectedness, the probability of marijuana use dropped to only two per cent.

"Trans youth in Canada face unacceptably high levels of violence, and this contributes to substance use," said UBC nursing professor Elizabeth Saewyc, the study's principal investigator and executive director of SARAVYC. "However, our research showed that even when transgender youth experience high levels of violence or discrimination, a supportive

family and safe school make a difference."

Transgender youth reported experiencing an average of 11 out of 29 different types of violence, including bullying, sexual or physical abuse, cyberbullying, sexual harassment and discrimination. The study found that each additional type of violence increased the odds of marijuana use or binge drinking by 11 per cent, and tobacco use by 12 per cent.

However, youth who reported high levels of two protective factors, such as a supportive family and a safe school, had much lower probabilities of substance use than those with one or no protective factors.

"These findings suggest that supportive families and schools are integral to preventing [substance use](#) among [transgender youth](#)," said lead author Ryan Watson, an assistant professor at the University of Connecticut, who was a SARAVYC postdoctoral fellow when the research was conducted.

"While we should work to reduce stigma and violence against trans young people, our findings also point to the important role of supportive adults and friends. Caring adults at home and at [school](#) are just as essential for our trans adolescents as they are for all youth," he added.

The research, published in *Preventive Medicine Reports*, was funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and the U.S. National Institute on Drug Abuse.

More information: Ryan J. Watson et al, Risk and protective factors for transgender youths' substance use, *Preventive Medicine Reports* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.pmedr.2019.100905](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmedr.2019.100905)

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