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# Transgender Youth Experiencing Homelessness: Health Concerns, their Upstream Causes, and Protective Factors

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## Background

- Clear health and mortality disparities exist both in transgender populations and for youth experiencing homelessness (YEH).
- Transgender youth are overrepresented within populations of YEH. 1 in 100 youth is transgender, but an estimated 1 in 11 youth experiencing homelessness is transgender.<sup>1,2,3</sup>
- No peer-reviewed research has yet explored the structural factors that underlie health disparities experienced by transgender YEH.

## Research Question

What are the primary health concerns, upstream causes, and protective factors encountered by transgender youth experiencing homelessness in the San Francisco Bay Area?



## Methods

- Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted in English with (1) youth ages 19-24, recruited through flyers at SF Bay Area service provision sites and via snowball sampling, and (2) key stakeholders.
- Interviews ranged in length from 45 mins to 1.5 hours.
- Topics explored included physical and mental health, identity, causes of homelessness, survival strategies, HIV risk, violence, stigma, and service access.
- Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and double-coded in Dedoose.
- We conducted a thematic data analysis, which is a methodology that seeks to interpret and describe qualitative data through recurring motifs identified from the data set.

REFERENCES: <sup>1</sup> Choi 2015; <sup>2</sup> Administration For Children And Families, Family And Youth Services Bureau Street Outreach Program 2016; <sup>3</sup> Gates 2011

Table 1: Emerging themes and representative quotes

Disproportionate homelessness	<p><i>I don't know any trans people who haven't been homeless at one point or another.</i></p> <p><i>The groovy people that I've been hanging out with are in need... I think <b>all of them are homeless or in a shelter.</b> Or in the process of getting an SRO or finding some kind of apartment or something... For whatever reason and wherever they were from, <b>it seems like everybody is homeless or looking for shelter.</b></i></p>
Mental health disparities	<p><i>It's kind of hard to be homeless and then come out of it and not be a little traumatized. I guess the traumatizing part of being homeless would be... you never really know where food is going to come from. You don't know where you're going to sleep or if you're going to be able to sleep... You're not used to having things in general.</i></p> <p><i>The first time I attempted suicide - it was trans-related - I was eight... Being <b>harassed or assaulted</b> because of who you are, it leads to other health problems, such as you can <b>catch diseases</b>, or you can have <b>mental health issues that affect your everyday life.</b> And, therefore, it just makes everything worse.</i></p>
Hygiene concerns	<p><i>I think cleanliness is a huge thing... <b>especially when you're injecting your testosterone</b> – whether you're transitioning either way – <b>having the access to alcohol wipes or just to the clean needles and things...</b> If people are sleeping on the streets, obviously <b>it's not very clean anywhere around you.</b></i></p> <p><i>My main concern would be staying clean down there. And for transgender [women], we like to tuck... It gets really dirty down there. And <b>it's hard to get a hold of resources that provide sensitive skin wipes where we can wipe down there and clean ourselves.</b></i></p>
Survival tradeoffs	<p><i>With transgender women, in order for us to obtain housing for the night, we might have sex or like do drugs... Sometimes <b>we don't think about condom use.</b> Or sometimes we don't think about asking this person, "Do you have HIV?" until we have sex... It's like <b>trading sex for drugs and a roof over my head just for the night.</b></i></p>
Intersecting hardships	<p><i>The hardest part for my experience in being trans is just all of the different hoops that I've had to jump through just to get basic things. <b>Because people tend to not want to take trans people seriously... It makes it harder to access housing, to access healthcare, and to have those issues addressed. It makes accessing therapy, mental healthcare a lot more difficult... It allows for more damage to be done to trans people.</b></i></p>

## Results

### Demographics

- We completed 27 in-depth semi-structured interviews with transgender YEH (n=20) and key informants (n=7).
- Youth participants included 6 trans women, 3 trans men, and 11 youth who identified as genderqueer, nonbinary, agender or multiple genders.
- Youths' median age was 22 years.
- Youth were two-thirds people of color or mixed.

### Health Concerns

When asked directly, participants expressed that homeless trans youth communities have the following health concerns:

- Trans health: Exacerbation of gender dysphoria and body dysmorphia; sustained misalignment of physical appearance with gender identity
- Mental health: Depression, anxiety, bipolar, PTSD, suicidality & suicide; substance use/abuse and smoking; experiences of violence, trauma, and abuse
- Sexual health: HIV/STIs; PrEP access issues; risk of unwanted pregnancies
- Physical health: Lack of sleep; food and diet; rapid weight gain/loss; unmet disability needs; poor personal hygiene; poor chronic pain management; infection and non-violent injury



## Conclusions

- Transgender YEH face many health disparities, exacerbated by limited access to basic necessities and stigma and marginalization.
- By identifying their health disparities, their structural antecedents and protective factors, we highlight possible areas for impactful intervention at the health services and policy levels to improve the health of transgender YEH.
- Ultimately, it is our hope that providers, policymakers, and health professionals in every sector of the medical system work collaboratively to advocate for the advancement of trans YEH's health and wellbeing.