

Avoidance of Public Spaces by Trans Ontarians: The Impact of Transphobia on Daily Life



Building our communities through research

Trans PULSE E-Bulletin

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Trans PULSE is a community-based research project investigating the impact of social exclusion and discrimination on the health of trans people in Ontario, Canada. Funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, this project is a partnership between researchers, trans community members, and community organizations committed to improving health outcomes for trans people. We hope that health professionals, policy makers, trans communities and allies will use the results of this research to remove barriers, create positive changes, and to improve the health and well-being of trans people.

Background

The ability to leave the house and access public or shared spaces such as public transit, washrooms, restaurants, and schools is taken for granted by many non-trans people. However, trans people experience much prejudice, discrimination, and violence related to being trans.¹ The fear of such harassment or violence is also bad for our health, and may result in avoiding public spaces. Recent studies have described the violence and harassment experienced by trans people in the United States, particularly by those who are socially perceived as trans or gender non-conforming.² In response to the potential for violence or harassment, trans people have reported curtailing their public activities. This includes avoiding public spaces that may be necessary for maintaining one's health: grocery stores, gyms, and in particular, washrooms.³ We sought to describe avoidance of public spaces and situations among trans people in Ontario, and to understand the impact of transition status and past experiences of violence on the number of spaces people had to avoid.

Our Approach

Trans PULSE used a research method that allowed us to take the most statistically accurate picture possible of trans Ontarians.⁴ Surveys were completed in 2009-2010 by 433 trans people age 16 or older who lived, worked or received health care in Ontario. Participants completed their surveys either online or via paper copy. Participants indicated that they fit under the broad umbrella term of "trans", identified with a range of gender identities, and were not required to have begun a social or medical gender transition. More details about our methods are available elsewhere.⁵

Key Findings

Overall, about two-thirds of trans Ontarians reported that they had avoided any of the specified spaces or situations because of a fear of harassment, being "read" (perceived as trans), or outed. About half had avoided three or more spaces or situations. Washrooms were the most commonly avoided space (57% had ever avoided a public washroom).

Because of a fear of being harassed, being read as trans, or being outed, have you avoided:	Total (n=409) %
Public transit	23
Grocery store or pharmacy	14
Malls or clothing stores	36
Schools	19
Travelling abroad	26
Clubs or social groups	32
Gyms	44
Church/synagogue/temple or other religious institution	16
Public washrooms	57
Public spaces	15
Restaurants or bars	23
Cultural or community centres	13
None of these spaces	33

Please note: These represent statistical estimates that have a margin of error, please use caution when interpreting these numbers.

The proportions of female-to-male (or transmasculine) and male-to-female (or transfeminine) spectrum trans persons who reported avoiding spaces were very similar across each category (results not shown). However, the number of places that trans people avoided depended on social and medical gender transition status and past experiences of violence. About one-quarter of those who had not begun social or

medical transition had avoided at least one space, while among those who had begun or completed transition, 83% had avoided at least one space. Sixty-three percent of trans Ontarians who had transitioned reported avoiding three or more spaces or situations to avoid harassment, being read, or being outed.

Among trans Ontarians overall, 46% reported that they had never experienced violence due to being trans, while 34% experienced verbal harassment or threats only, and 20% experienced physical or sexual violence (potentially in addition to verbal harassment).⁶ While 34% of those who had not experienced transphobic harassment or violence reported avoiding any spaces, the overwhelming majority of those that had experienced violence, whether verbal or physical, avoided at least one space (94% and 97%, respectively). In addition, 94% of those who had ever experienced physical and/or sexual violence reported avoiding at least three spaces, with one-third having avoided more than half of the specified spaces.

Limitations

Avoidance of spaces and experiences of violence were both measured across the lifetime, and it is possible that experiences of violence occurred after reported instances of avoiding public spaces, though it is more plausible that avoidance was a consequence of violence. Finally, these figures represent statistical estimates that have a margin of error, thus caution should be used when interpreting these numbers.

Implications

The majority of trans Ontarians had avoided using a public washroom due to being trans. Although trans Ontarians have the legal right to use the washroom that aligns with their gender identity, trans people may experience gender policing, inappropriate questions or comments, harassment, physical or sexual assault, and negative encounters with security personnel when using gender-segregated washrooms.

	Total (n=409) %	No transition (n=74) %	Began or completed^a transition (n=328) %
Ever avoided public spaces or situations*			
No spaces	33	74	17
One to two spaces	16	6	20
Three to six spaces	34	15	41
Seven or more spaces	17	6	22

^a Includes those who are living in their felt gender full-time, or part-time and taking other steps to socially transition (e.g. using new name or pronoun), regardless of medical transition status.

*Percentages have been rounded and will not add up to 100%.

Please note: These represent statistical estimates that have a margin of error, please use caution when interpreting these numbers.

	No transphobic violence (n=150) %	Verbal harassment or threats (n=154) %	Physical or sexual violence (n=105) %
Ever avoided public spaces or situations*			
No spaces	66	6	3
One to two spaces	14	25	3
Three to six spaces	12	48	61
Seven or more spaces	8	21	33

*Percentages have been rounded and may not add up to 100%.

Please note: These represent statistical estimates that have a margin of error, please use caution when interpreting these numbers.

Avoiding washrooms can have negative health consequences, and can force trans people to avoid other public spaces because the washrooms are unsafe (e.g. schools). Additional private, gender-neutral public washroom facilities are urgently needed. A high proportion of trans Ontarians (44%) had avoided going to a gym due to being trans. Physical fitness programs require trans inclusion policies and staff training, gender-neutral or private changing facilities, and perhaps trans-specific programs to ensure that trans people have access to the facilities they need to maintain health and well-being.

Approximately one-fifth of trans Ontarians had avoided schools due to being trans. This fits with the results of a recent national survey of Canadian high school students, which found that trans students reported high levels of harassment and violence, and that most felt unsafe using gender-segregated school facilities.⁷ As may be self-evident, being unable to safely complete an education profoundly limits one's future life chances. Avoidance of many public spaces was especially high among those who had experienced violence related to being trans. Preventing transphobic verbal, physical, and sexual violence is therefore critical for increasing social participation among trans people. As many trans people have already experienced such violence, it is urgent that all anti-violence services develop clear trans-inclusion policies and train staff to be able to provide these vital services to trans communities.

More broadly, these results draw attention to the wide-ranging impacts that fears of harassment and violence have in trans peoples' everyday lives, particularly for those who have begun or completed a social or medical transition. Most trans Ontarians had avoided at least one space due to fears of harassment, being perceived as trans, or being outed. Seventeen percent had avoided the majority of spaces we asked about. Access to public spaces is foundational for well-being, including access to food, physical activity, and social interaction, and is necessary for accessing community services, health care, and education. Trans persons who are avoiding multiple public spaces may be socially isolated, lacking needed health care, and missing out on opportunities for just inclusion in social life. Action is needed to fully realize the Ontario Human Rights Code protections for trans people, and to prevent transphobic violence, to ensure that trans people are able to access public spaces, without fear of discrimination or violence.

References

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