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Modifiable Factors Associated with Suicide Risk Behavior Among Trans and Gender-Diverse Youth: A case-control study in the Youth Risk Behavior Survey 2023

Background: Trans and gender-diverse (TGD) youth experience higher rates of suicide ideation (SI) and attempts (SA). Nationally representative data has only recently included measurements of gender identity. This study identified modifiable factors among TGD youth experiencing SI and SA to inform prevention targets.

Methods: This case-control study used data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey 2023 from self-identified TGD youth (n=612), a national study of high school students. The outcomes were SI and SA in the past 12 months with exposures of interest being substance use, sexual/dating violence, poor subjective mental health, peer connectedness, guardian monitoring, and basic-needs fulfillment. Survey-weighted Poisson regression identified factors associated with increased odds of SI and SA.

Results: Within the sample, 53.8% reported SI and 25.7% SA in the past year. SI and SA were associated with poor subjective mental health ($p<.0001$; $p=.012$) and a history of forced sex ($p<.001$). SA, but not SI, was linked to guardian neglect ($p=.02$), sexual violence ($p<.001$), and past 30-day substance use (alcohol, marijuana, and nicotine; $p<.001$). SI, but not SA, was associated with low school attachment ($p=0.49$). Forced sex significantly increased odds of SI (IRR=1.64, $p<.001$) and SA (IRR=2.95, $p<.001$).

Discussion: The sample SI and SA prevalence align with previous literature. The Interpersonal Theory of Suicide posits suicide capability (lowered fearlessness of death and increased pain tolerance) facilitates ideation to action. Our results reinforce this, as SA was associated with previous sexual violence and substance use which habituate self-injurious behavior and lower fear, respectively. Given the high prevalence, we recommend regular assessments for suicidality and risk factors in TGD youth during care visits and school. Future surveys should include histories of self-injurious behavior and prior SA, as these are known to increase risk through increased capability.