

Sexual & Gender Minority Youth Access to Services in Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic (S.M.A.S.H COVID)

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Objectives

1. Identify the key unmet mental health and substance use care needs for gender and sexually diverse youth and young adults (16-29) during the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada.
2. Develop a risk prediction tool linking baseline characteristics with poor mental health and substance use outcomes (e.g. anxiety, depression, suicidality, substance use) through a 1 year follow up survey among gender and sexually diverse youth in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Based on unmet mental health and substance use care needs and risk factors, co-design with youth transformations of virtual and in-person mental health and substance use care for gender and sexually diverse youth in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic

Longitudinal Survey

The sample of COVID-related outcomes will be a supplement added to OTRU's Campaign on Tobacco use and its Culture's cohort of 1500 2SLGBTQI+ youth and young adults (ages 16-29) who have agreed to be re-contacted for additional studies (<https://www.otru.org/studies/lgbqtobacco.html> for questionnaires and other details).

This study will leverage the existing network of partner organizations, community working groups and advisories including young adults. It will leverage the cohort infrastructure and add additional questions pertaining to COVID-19 and access to care at baseline and develop a special 1 year follow up to focus on COVID-related changes to mental health and substance use. The cohort, developed with base funding by PHAC, was created to assess substance use and mental health among LGBTQ2S youth and young adults in Canada, with a focus on commercial tobacco use.

This project and campaign are informed by existing Community Working Groups with national representation and a Young Adult Advisory Committee who will both participate in all decision making and project development. Members include the Canadian Cancer Society, Egale Canada, Toronto Public Health, NorWest CHC, The 519, ASAAP, Black CAP, Lumenus, REX Pride, Montreal LGBTQ+ Community Centre and REZO.

Background

The recent pandemic outbreak of COVID-19 is straining the mental health of gender and sexually diverse people, especially among those with pre-existing mental health issues. Gender and sexually diverse youth and young adults are at higher risk of developing several mental health conditions, suicidal attempts and substance use disorders and have unique health needs that may not be met by existing health care services. These folks may delay or avoid seeking services because of past discrimination, perceived homophobia, and accessibility due to their ethnicity, socio-economic status, geographic isolation, and immigration status. A US-based cross-sectional study among men who have sex with men (MSM) conducted in April 2020 reported that large proportions of the respondents had decreased quality of life; increased anxiety; decreased quality of sleep; and reduced connections to friends and family due to COVID-19. In addition, 10% of the participants had increased use of recreational drugs and 25% had increased alcohol consumption. A Canadian study conducted by Egale Canada and INNOVATIVE Research Group, found that a higher proportion (47%) of LGBTQ2S participants expressed that COVID-19 was having significant negative impact on their mental health, compared to 26% of the general public.

	Physical Health		Mental health		Household Finances		Overall Quality of Life	
	No/minimal impact (0-3)	Significant impact (7-10)	No/minimal impact (0-3)	Significant impact (7-10)	No/minimal impact (0-3)	Significant impact (7-10)	No/minimal impact (0-3)	Significant impact (7-10)
National n=1,500	53%	17%	42%	26%	45%	25%	35%	29%
LGBTQ2S n=500	42%	25%	26%	47%	49%	27%	27%	37%
BIPOC LGBTQ2S n=146	40%	33%	29%	47%	43%	32%	31%	42%

Impact of COVID-19 on Canada's LGBTQ2S Community



Knowledge Mobilization

This project will employ an integrated approach to knowledge mobilization, whereby key stakeholders, including youth and young adults with lived experience and service providers, will be involved at each stage of the research process throughout its entirety. We will accomplish this primarily through the inclusion of a Community Advisory Board and Youth Advisory Board. The boards will meet four times over 12 months and will advise on all aspects of the project and play a critical role in the research team. We have strong links to services providers and the ability to directly affect care for youth at CAMH and other organizations across the country. Our primary knowledge user, Rainbow Services, is committed to using the results of this project to refine existing services, to co-ordinate with other existing services that need adaptation for the sexual and gender minority population (such as Child and Youth services) or existing online apps or services, and to explore the development of new programming nationally and internationally. Our knowledge mobilization approach will incorporate a design thinking perspective throughout, in that knowledge and content development will be a collaborative process with community members including graphic design, marketing, communications, and dissemination, with the goal of increasing the research impact including peer review journal articles, plain language reports and webinar for national stakeholders, and a research brief for policy makers.

Components

Risk Prediction Model:

We will then develop a risk prediction model using baseline characteristics (demographics, geography, history of mental health and substance use, housing factors, community connectedness, experience with discrimination, sexual orientation, gender identities) to predict poor outcomes at the 1 year follow up survey. We develop separate models for each issue identified as a priority in. Potential priority issues (and model outcomes) could include meeting clinical criteria for validated scales for depression, anxiety, stress, suicidality and substance use disorders (alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, opioids) at the 6 month follow up. This outcome corresponds to a binary classification task in the context of machine learning.

Design Charette:

40 youth and young adults representing a diversity of the Canadian gender and sexually diverse population will be engaged in the co-design of concrete adaptations to an existing mental health and substance use program that takes into account the unmet needs of gender and sexually diverse youth in Canada. This co-design will focus on virtual services offered by CAMH and other youth-focused organizations and will be accomplished using an innovative design charrette process. Through a series of intensive online sessions, participants will identify mental health and substance use challenges and factors that affect their ability to access care and make positive changes over time.

From this, participants will engage in a structured process to develop and iteratively prototype ideas and produce a workable program design. We have previously successfully utilized an online design charette during COVID-19 (May 2020) to develop a youth vaping cessation app. A planning committee formed to design the program comprised of youth, young adults, and service providers. Design students and professionals with related experience have been connected through OCAD University, recruited and contracted to plan, facilitate and interpret the program findings. They will also support efforts in knowledge mobilization.