

Transgender Children in Canada
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Introduction

I have three children, the eldest of whom is transgender. I am speaking to you today as a parent, a scholar, and as an advocate.

Florence was four years old when we realized that her gender expression was not a phase, as some people kept telling us, but rather something more central to her identity. As we began to prepare her for kindergarten we realized that we would need additional help and support to keep her safe. Fortunately, we lived in one of the few cities in 2010 that had support for families like ours: Montreal.

We also had the advantage of tremendous resources at our disposal: good incomes that allowed us to move to an expensive neighborhood so that my daughter could get access to an alternative school setting, academic skills and connections that could be mobilized to generate new research and forms of support, a strongly supportive faith community (Montreal's Christ Church Cathedral), and the privilege of whiteness. Indeed, although we experienced some very real challenges, these challenges cannot compare to those struggling at the margins of poverty and/or those facing the combined oppressions of transphobia and racism.¹ Despite the fact that trans youth of colour experienced a "slightly higher sense of belonging to their local community," discrimination is a lived reality for many: specifically, 10-13% of trans youth experienced discrimination on the basis of their race or colour, and 18-25% experienced discrimination on the basis of a disability.²

These and the following statistics, drawn from a survey of 923 trans youth in Canada, illustrate just how wide the gap is between my daughter's experience and the experience of many trans youth in Canada today:

Food

Whereas Florence has at least three regular meals each day, significant numbers of transgender youth in Canada have experienced hunger. According to a recent study: 38% of trans youth reported ever going hungry, 26% reported losing weight, and 22% reported not eating for a whole day because they could not afford food.³

Education

Florence has never been bullied. She has strong relationships with her peers and teachers and is thriving academically. By way of contrast, "more than half of trans youth surveyed had

been bullied once or more (55%). Just under 1 in 4 (24%) reported being bullied 1 to 3 times, and 13% had been bullied 12 or more times in the past year.”⁴

Health Care

Florence has a supportive family physician and a supportive pediatrician who specializes in childhood gender diversity. By way of contrast, “nearly half of older (Canadian) youth (47%) and one third of younger youth (33%) had not received physical healthcare when they needed at some point during the last year.” Moreover, “only 15 per cent of youth with a family doctor felt “very comfortable” discussing their trans-specific health care needs.”⁵

Who are transgender children?

Prior to coming to terms with my own child’s gender nonconformity, I had never before considered the possibility that a child could be transgender (and this is despite the fact that I taught Gender and Politics at the graduate level). I thus understand why for some the idea of transgender and gender nonconforming children may seem perplexing.

In brief, transgender children are children whose gender identity does not align with the gender that they were assigned at birth. Although many transgender children know themselves to be a girl or boy, some are more fluid in their presentation and understanding of self. At present a wide range of terms are used to refer to the broad spectrum of gender identities being expressed by young people, including, for example: gender independent, gender diverse, gender nonconforming, gender variant, gender creative, and gender queer. It is important to note that among some First Nations People, the term “Two-Spirit” is frequently used to refer to traditional spiritual roles that span gender and sexual categories.⁶

Why are there transgender children?

All facets of human experience have complex origins, interweaving threads of biology and environment. However, research involving genetics, neuroanatomy, and studies of intersex diversity provide solid evidence that the biological basis of gender identity is strong. It is part of our very personal, profound, and intimate knowledge of ourselves.⁷ In fact, the gender identity of even very young transgender children (3-5 years of age) is consistent with those of cisgender (non-transgender) children – meaning that they know who they are just as cisgender children do.⁸ Although (and as with the origins of sexual identity) we cannot pinpoint exactly why a child may assert a gender identity that is different from what they were assigned at birth, it is now clear that poor parenting is not a determining factor. In fact, recent research suggests just the opposite: the anxiety levels of transgender children and youth who have strongly supportive parents are far lower than transgender children and youth without such support, and are on par with their cisgender peers.⁹ Overall, parenting connectedness is “key for the well-being of trans youth.”¹⁰

How many transgender children and youth live in Canada today?

At this point accurate figures for Canada are difficult to come by. One recent New Zealand study suggests that approximately 1.2% of high school students identify as transgender.¹¹ Moreover, the number of “out” transgender children and youth are rapidly increasing:

- Between 2009 and 2015, annual referrals to nine major Canadian clinics supporting gender diverse children and youth increased more than 12-fold, from 43 to 546.¹² Dr. Margaret Lawson, a Pediatric Endocrinologist at CHEO, estimates that these numbers increased by at least another 25% in 2016. Moreover, new clinics have opened since figures were collected in 2015, including in London, Hamilton, and St. John’s.¹³
- Participation in the activities of the Montreal-based Gender Creative Kids Canada/Enfants transgenre Canada grew by 450% (parents) and 766% (children) between 2015-2016.¹⁴
- The online support group “Canadian Parents of Trans and Gender Diverse Children / Parents canadiens d’enfants trans” now has over 600 members from across the country.¹⁵

Why so many transgender children and youth now?

Until very recently transgender identities were pathologized and considered a form of mental deviation. It is thus not surprising that parents were unwilling to allow their children to express any form of non-conforming gender identity; and, indeed, no degree in gender studies is required to understand that “sissy boys,” in particular, have long been a target for abuse by peers and adult authority figures. Over the past five years, however, attitudes toward childhood gender diversity in Canada and the United States have shifted. We are now seeing an increasing number of professional associations, including the Canadian Association of Social Workers and the Canadian Psychological Association, that have issued statements urging respect for childhood gender diversity.¹⁶

Why should Bill C-16 be passed?

The Senate should pass Bill C-16 *unamended* for three major reasons: Affirmation, Access, Autonomy.

1) Affirmation

As a parent I want my child to be seen as who she fully is – I want her to have the dignity that should be afforded to all people who reside in Canada. While I recognize that passing Bill C-16 does not guarantee that my child will be respected, I do know that law has a powerful role to play in changing public consciousness. Indeed, recent changes at the provincial level have proven transformative for many families, not only because they require schools and medical care providers to see our children as they are, but because “naming injustice and claiming rights serves as an important tool to realize broader social change.”¹⁷

As Senators, you have an opportunity to “bend the arc of history.” At this moment of rising Anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, racism, sexism, and transphobia, you can offer not just my kid,

but all kids in Canada a chance to expand their understanding of and appreciation for the diversity of human experience.

2) Access

I want Canadian children, regardless of their gender identity, to have full and safe access to all public institutions and public space. Bill C-16, if passed as is, can help ensure that gender diverse children and youth, have affirming access to public space, including bathrooms, social services, and shelters.

Bathrooms

Currently, one of the spaces where the health and well-being of transgender people can quickly be compromised, are bathrooms. According to the 2015 US Transgender Survey:

Nearly one-quarter (24%) of respondents said that someone had questioned or challenged their presence in a restroom in the past year.

Nearly one in ten (9%) respondents reported that someone denied them access to a restroom in the past year.

One in eight (12%) respondents were verbally harassed, physically attacked, or sexually assaulted when accessing or using a restroom in the past year.

More than half (59%) avoided using a public restroom in the past year because they were afraid of having problems.

Nearly one-third (32%) limited the amount they ate or drank to avoid using the restroom in the past year.

Eight percent (8%) reported having a urinary tract infection, kidney infection, or another kidney-related problem in the past year as a result of avoiding restrooms.

Trans people little better off in Canada: according to the Ontario Trans PULSE survey, 57% of trans Ontarians have avoided using public washrooms due to fear of “being harassed, being read as trans or being outed.”¹⁸

Racism compounds all of these experiences: according to the results of the U.S. survey, “American Indian (18%), Asian (13%), and Middle Eastern (12%) respondents were more likely to report that someone stopped them from entering or denied them access to a restroom in the past year.¹⁹ In Canada, 40% of trans youth rarely or never feel safe in school washrooms.²⁰ It does not have to be this way: Florence attends a primary school in which student and staff washrooms are all-gender. As a consequence of the all-gender washroom environment and a school commitment to honor and protect all children, Florence has never felt unsafe in a school bathroom. By passing this Bill unamended, the Senate has the opportunity to make public spaces like bathrooms safe for more Canadians.

Shelter

Not all trans children and youth have the support of their caregivers. In fact, the majority do not. Many trans youth who come out to their parents (and not all do) experience a negative reception.²¹ At best parents may merely tolerate their child's gender nonconformity, at worse they may subject their children to ridicule, reparative therapy, and physical abuse. It is thus not surprising that many transgender youth find themselves in care or on the streets, trying to fend for themselves. While data is difficult to come by, we do know that as many as 40% of street youth in Canada are LGBTQ youth.²² Moreover, research from the United States suggests that 19% of youth in care in Los Angeles are LGBTQ, that youth in care are 1.5-2 times more likely to be LGBTQ than those not in care, and that the majority are racialized.²³

One of the reasons data on homeless and fostered transgender youth is so hard to find is because, until very recently, very few public agencies in Canada thought to ask young people about their gender identity. This oversight has only served to exacerbate the precarious state of an already vulnerable population.²⁴ Indeed, most shelters are unprepared for transgender youth and continue to discriminate against them. According to Dr. Alex Abromovich, an independent scientist at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, "Trans youth, especially young trans women of colour are among the most discriminated against groups of people in the shelter system. Trans people continuously experience transphobic violence and erasure in shelters and housing programs across Canada."²⁵

Like so many of the challenges faced by transgender people in Canada, access to safe and affirming shelter cannot be fixed by the passage of Bill C-16 alone. But passage of Bill C-16 is an important step in the effort to provide trans youth with much needed support. Most importantly the passage of Bill C-16 will signal to agencies, shelters, and caregivers that all children and youth have the right to be affirmed, protected, and cherished.

3) Autonomy

Two years ago Florence and I travelled to Ottawa to participate in a protest against the amendments that had been introduced by this committee to Bill C-279. This protest was organized by Anne Lowthian and her daughter Charlie, pictured with Florence below. When critics argue that Bill C-16 is being "rammed through" without due process, I want you to remember that two years in the life of a child is the equivalent of ten (and, of course, variations of this bill have been introduced since 2009). I also want you to think about the great risks that transgender activists and families have taken when they have organized protests, spoken with the media, and lobbied to get this bill passed unamended. Transgender children and youth, especially racialized and impoverished transgender children youth, are among the most vulnerable people living in Canada today. By passing this bill unamended, the Senate can help ensure that more young people have a chance to express their unique selves and thrive. As Florence herself says, passing this Bill is "just being respectful."

Do not compromise the Bill. Do not compromise trans youth. Let Bill C-16 come to a vote.



Charlie and Florence, April 27, 2015.

¹ Manning, Kimberley. (forthcoming 2017). Attached Advocacy and the Rights of the Trans* Child. *Canadian Journal of Political Science*; Lee, Edward Woo Jin. Forthcoming 2017. “Trans Youth of Color: Knowledges, Realities, Practices.” In *Supporting Transgender and Gender Creative Youth: Schools, Families, and Communities in Action*, edited by Elizabeth J. Meyer and Annie Pullen Sansfaçon. New York: Peter Lang (2nd Edition).

² Veale J, Saewyc E, Frohard-Dourlent H, Dobson S, Clark B & the Canadian Trans Youth Health Survey Research Group (2015). *Being Safe, Being Me: Results of the Canadian Trans Youth Health Survey*. Vancouver, BC: Stigma and Resilience Among Vulnerable Youth Centre, School of Nursing, University of British Columbia, p.62.

³ Ibid, p.29.

⁴ Ibid, p. 57.

⁵ Ibid, p. 33.

⁶ For a full discussion, see the “RHO Fact Sheet: Supporting Gender Independent Children and their Families” http://www.rainbowhealthontario.ca/wpcontent/uploads/woocommerce_uploads/2012/10/RHO_FactSheet_GIC_E1.pdf, Accessed April 26, 2017.

⁷ Saraswat, A. et al. (2015). Evidence supporting the biologic nature of gender identity. *Endocrine Practice*. 21(2): 199-204.

⁸ Fast, Anne A. and Kristina R. Olson (forthcoming 2017). Gender Development in Transgender Preschool Children. *Child Development*.

⁹ Olson, K. R., Durwood, L., DeMeules, M., & McLaughlin, K. A. (2016). Mental health of transgender children who are supported in their identities. *Pediatrics*, peds-2015. See also, Transpulse research

¹⁰ Veale J, Saewyc E, Frohard-Dourlent H, Dobson S, Clark B & the Canadian Trans Youth Health Survey Research Group (2015). *Being Safe, Being Me: Results of the Canadian Trans Youth Health Survey*. Vancouver, BC: Stigma and Resilience Among Vulnerable Youth Centre, School of Nursing, University of British Columbia, p.65.

¹¹ Clark, T. C., Lucassen, M. F., Bullen, P., Denny, S. J., Fleming, T. M., Robinson, E. M., & Rossen, F. V. (2014). The health and well-being of transgender high school students: Results from the New Zealand adolescent health survey (Youth'12). *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 55, 93–99.

¹² Dr. Greta Bauer, Associate Professor and Graduate Chair Epidemiology and Biostatistics Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry, Western University. Email Communication, April 26, 2017.

¹³ Email Communication, April 27, 2017.

¹⁴ “Rapport d’activités 2016,” Enfants transgenres Canada, p.7

¹⁵ www.facebook.com/canadianparentsoftranskids , Accessed April 27, 2017.

¹⁶ <http://www.casw-acts.ca/en/joint-statement-affirmation-gender-diverse-children-and-youth> (Accessed May 16, 2015).

http://www.cpa.ca/docs/File/Publications/FactSheets/PsychologyWorksFactSheet_GenderDysphoriaInChildren.pdf Accessed May 2, 2017. See also the American Academy of Pediatrics, the official association of 64,000 American Pediatricians, for their statement on the necessity of supporting, nurturing, and caring for transgender youth: <https://www.aap.org/en-us/about-the-aap/aap-press-room/Pages/AAP-Statement-on-Protecting-Transgender-Youth.aspx> Accessed April 28, 2017.

¹⁷ Manning, Kimberley. (forthcoming). Attached Advocacy and the Rights of the Trans* Child. *Canadian Journal of Political Science*; McCann, Michael W. *Rights at Work: Pay Equity, Reform and the Politics of Legal Mobilization*. Chicago Series in Law and Society. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

¹⁸ <http://transpulseproject.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Trans-PULSE-E-Bulletin-8-English.pdf> Accessed May 2, 2017.

¹⁹ James, S. E., Herman, J. L., Rankin, S., Keisling, M., Mottet, L., & Anafi, M. (2016). *The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey*. Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality, p.224. For a full discussion of the threat that recent “bathroom bills” pose to transgender people in the United States, please see the following brief published by the National Center for Transgender Equality:

<http://www.transequality.org/issues/resources/transgender-people-and-bathroom-access>

²⁰ Veale J, Saewyc E, Frohard-Dourlent H, Dobson S, Clark B & the Canadian Trans Youth Health Survey Research Group (2015). *Being Safe, Being Me: Results of the Canadian Trans Youth Health Survey*. Vancouver, BC: Stigma and Resilience Among Vulnerable Youth Centre, School of Nursing, University of British Columbia, p.58. See also, Porta C, Gower A, Mehus C, Yu X, Saewyc E, Eisenberg, M (2017). “Kicked out”: LGBTQ youths’ bathroom experiences and preferences. *Journal of Adolescence*. 56 (2017): 107-112.

²¹ Arnold H. Grossman, Arnold R. D’Augelli, and John A. Frank. 2011. “Aspects of Psychological Resilience among Transgender Youth.” *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 8:103–115.

²² Josephson, G., & Wright, A. (2000). Ottawa GLBT wellness project: Literature review and survey instruments. Toronto: The Homeless Hub.

http://homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/Literature_Review_and_Survey_Instruments.pdf

Accessed May 2, 2017.

²³ Wilson, B.D.M., Cooper, K., Kastanis, A., & Nezhad, S. (2012). Sexual & gender minority youth in Los Angeles foster care: Assessing disproportionality and disparities in Los Angeles. Los Angeles: The Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law.

²⁴ See, for example: <http://fivefourteen.ca/> Accessed May 2, 2017.

²⁵ Email Communication, May 2, 2017. Please see also: Alex Abromavich, “Preventing, Reducing and Ending LGBTQ2S Youth Homelessness: The Need for Targeted Strategies” *Social Inclusion* 2016, Volume 4, Issue 4, pp. 86–96.

TRANS & NON-BINARY YOUTH ACCESSING SHELTERS

TRANS & NON-BINARY YOUTH

face more discrimination than any other youth group and frequently report great difficulty accessing shelters.

They often avoid shelters altogether.



Shelters are often segregated by “male” and “female” floors.

TRANSPHOBIA

HAPPENS WHEN YOUTH ARE SEGREGATED BASED ON HOW SHELTER STAFF PERCEIVE THEIR GENDER, INSTEAD OF HOW YOUTH ACTUALLY IDENTIFY.

Forcing a trans individual to classify themselves as a gender with which they do not identify is transphobic. This is emotionally, psychologically, mentally and physically harmful, and can lead to suicide.



REJECTED BY SHELTERS

Shelters are supposed to be accessible to trans, non-binary and two-spirit residents, in their self-defined gender. However youth are often rejected by shelters and are regularly not permitted to access the shelter that matches their gender identity because shelters do not feel equipped to support trans, non-binary, or two-spirit youth.



67% TRANS YOUTH REPORTED SELF-HARM

25% TRANS YOUTH REPORTED RUNNING AWAY FROM HOME

55% OF TRANS PEOPLE HAVE DIFFICULTY MEETING HOUSING-RELATED COSTS

DIFFERENT NEEDS



Help getting ID and legal name changes



Access to hormones or surgery



The complexity of these needs intensifies when youth are **homeless**, have **no money** and **no health card**. This can result in the use of **unmonitored street suppliers** to meet these needs, and can lead to severe health complications.

WHEN TRANS & NON-BINARY YOUTH DO NOT SEE THEMSELVES REFLECTED IN SERVICES, THEY FEEL LIKE THEY DO NOT BELONG. WHEN PEOPLE FEEL LIKE THEY DO NOT BELONG, THEY AVOID SERVICES.

Written by Dr. Alex Abramovich (2016) SOURCES: Abramovich, A. (2013). No Fixed Address: Young, Queer, and Restless. In Gaetz, S., O'Grady, B., Buccieri, K., Karabanow, J., & Marsolais, A. (Eds.), Youth Homelessness in Canada: Implications for Policy and Practice. Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press; Bauer GR, Scheim AI, for the Trans PULSE Project Team, Transgender People in Ontario, Canada: Statistics to Inform Human Rights Policy. London, ON; Mottet, L., & Ohle (2015). Transitioning Our Shelters: A Guide to Making Homeless Shelters Safe for Transgender People. New York: The National Coalition for the Homeless and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute.; Vesle J, Sawyyc E, Frohard-Dourlent H, Dob Clark B & the Canadian Trans Youth Health Survey Research Group (2015). Canadian Trans Youth Health Survey. Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia.

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