

What is the Rate of Transgender Suicide in Canada?

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This poster displays information on my preliminary research into the rate of transgender suicide in Canada and my ongoing literature review on studies published in this area. This research will satisfy the thesis requirement of my Master of Social Work program.

There are many reasons for conducting this research. As a female to male, transgender man, I am particularly interested in investigating this area, as it is one that pertains to me personally. As well, although research in this area is increasing, there are still many knowledge gaps and existing studies have utilized a variety of methodologies and measures, making the studies difficult to compare. Also of note is the lack of Canadian research, particularly in comparison to the United States.

There is an increasing amount of research into transgender suicide, however, a great deal of this research is based on American samples. There have been studies on transgender suicide, in particular needs assessments, carried out in a variety of major American urban centers (i.e. Los Angeles and Chicago, among others). In fact, Grant et al (2010), conducted the *National Transgender Discrimination Survey*, which investigated transgender discrimination across the United States, including suicidality.

In contrast, I have been able to identify only two studies, to date, that have taken place in Canada, one based on the transgender population in Manitoba and Northern Ontario and one based on the transgender population in Ontario. This partially accounts for the transgender populations of major urban centers, such as Winnipeg, Ottawa and Toronto, as well as rural areas in Ontario and, to a lesser extent, Manitoba. The rest of Canada, however, remains largely uninvestigated.

There also seems to be quite a bit of confusion, regarding the rate of suicide, within the transgender community itself. It is thought and often-repeated, in the transgender community, that the rate of suicide, among our population, is approximately 50%. For example, a popular site for transgender people, Laura's Playground (www.lauras-playground.com/transsexual_transgender_suicide_memorial.htm), states that the "transgender transsexual suicide rate is 31% [and that] over 50% of transsexuals will have had at least one suicide attempt by their 20th birthday". Although this site offers no information to support this claim and it's accuracy is therefore suspect, it is notable for the articulation of a wide-spread belief and for evidencing the transgender community's concern. Due to the fact that the transgender community generally lacks access to scientific journals, these assumptions are largely based on personal and communal experiences, buttressed by free online abstracts. It is also important to note that, because the rate of transgender suicidal ideation and attempts vary widely, it is difficult, even for a suicide researcher, to pinpoint a relatively precise figure.

Defining Transgender

Transgender is a notoriously difficult term to define. The various studies and literature, discussed in this presentation have all taken very different paths in reaching this definition and ultimately, the definition of transgender, herein, will affect the direction of my research and will determine it's degree of generalizability.

I have borrowed from Haas, Eliason, Mays et al (2011) in defining "Transgender [as] an umbrella term that is broadly used to describe people with gender identities, expressions or behaviors which differ from their biological sex at birth (p. 15)". All those who feel that their gender identify differs from their natal sex are welcome and invited to participate in this research and, indeed, to make suggestions as regards it's outcome and performance, regardless as to whether they identify as genderqueer, transsexual, transgender, FTM, MTF or any other label under the transgender umbrella.

Goals

Please note that the first three goals are adapted from Haas, Eliason, Mays et al (2011, p 15).

1. Summarize what is currently known about completed suicide, suicide attempts and suicide risk, in Canadian transgender individuals, across the lifespan.
2. Identify those knowledge gaps that are most in need of future research and make recommendations for how they can be addressed.
3. Offer recommendations for applying what is already known to reduce suicidal behavior and suicide risk among Canadian transgender individuals, particularly those changes which can improve social work practice.
4. Continually strive to make this research meaningful, relevant and accessible to the transgender community.
5. Seek out and include the participation and input, of transgender individuals.
6. Insure that this research meets the highest possible academic and statistically rigorous standards.
7. Actively recruit participants from throughout the Transgender identity spectrum In particular, insure that this research includes samples representative of this diversity.
8. Actively seek to include participants from a diversity of ethnicities. In particular, seek to recruit participants who are First Nations and Metis.

Suicide and Suicidal Ideation Among the General Population

Unfortunately suicidal ideation and attempts, not resulting in death, are more commonly investigated in relation to minority populations than in the general populace as a whole. In addition to this, research pertaining to transgender suicide attempts, resulting in death, is relatively scarce. The lack of sufficient data, on both transgender suicide attempts, resulting in death and suicide attempts in the general populace, not resulting in death, makes it difficult to contrast these phenomena. I have therefore limited myself to describing the known quantities, such as transgender suicidal ideation and attempts, not resulting in death, as well as a brief overview of suicide and suicide attempts in the general population.

In Canada

According to Statistics Canada, the age-specific mortality rate has varied between 10.8/100,000 and 11.9/100,000, between the years 2000 and 2007. In 2007, the age-specific mortality rate was 11.0/100,000.

The Canadian rate of suicide, according to another Statistics Canada dataset, varied between 10.8/100,000 and 11.4/100,000 (crude mortality rate) between 2000 and 2007. In 2007, the rate of suicide was 10.2/100,000 for both sexes, 16.7/100,000 for males and 5.3/100,000 for females.

Although this series was terminated after 2000/2001, Statistics Canada's 2000/2001 Canadian Community Health Survey investigated the rates of suicidal thoughts and attempts for the Canadian population (population over 15 who reported suicidal thoughts or attempts in the 12 months preceding the survey). According to this data 23/100,000 Canadians considered suicide, while 4.3/100,000 attempted suicide. Please note that this data is missing several data series from different provinces. It should therefore be used with extreme caution and taken as a potential indicator, rather than a reliable statistic. This survey was the only Statistics Canada dataset I could locate that referred specifically to suicide ideation ("Considered Suicide").

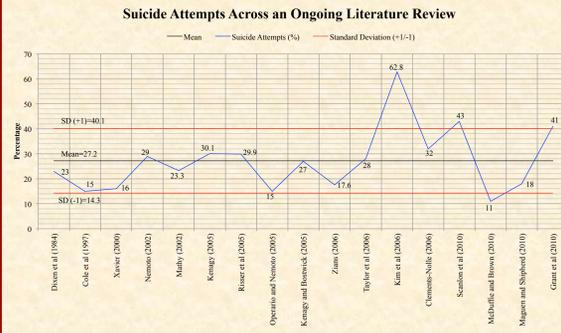
In the United States

The website of the National Institute for Mental Health (www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/suicide-in-the-us-statistics-and-prevention/index.shtml) states that "in 2007 [suicide was] the tenth leading cause of death in the U.S., accounting for 34,598 deaths [and that] the overall rate was 11.3 suicide deaths per 100,000 people", which translates to approximately 0.2%.

A brief review of the available literature located several articles referring to suicidal ideation among specific populations (i.e. the drinking population, by rate etc.), but little information pertaining to the general rate of suicidal ideation. This is not surprising, given the difficulty of defining and assessing suicidal ideation. The research definition may in fact include various elements, such as depression, thoughts of suicide over the lifetime and persistent thoughts of suicide over the past year.

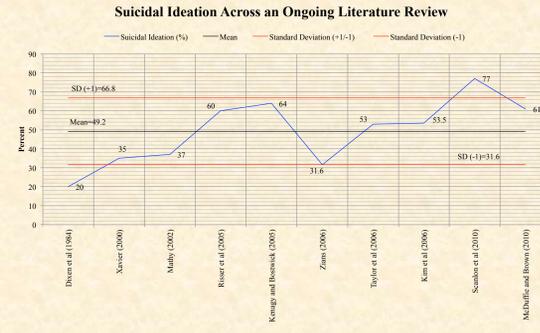
Analysis of Known Suicide and Suicidal Ideation Across Research Studies, Based on an Ongoing Literature Review

The following two charts illustrate the high degree of variation between the rates of suicide and suicidal ideation among different studies. This variation seems to be partially attributable to differences between studies and the methodologies used, as well as sample sizes, geographical locations of the studies, including the fact that some of these studies took place outside of North America, as well as the increasing number of studies, which include the participation of transgender individuals and, in some cases, are enacted by the transgender community. Both charts are based on the results of my ongoing literature review and help to illustrate the direction of my own research will take and hopefully, my own eventual results.



The following notes will help in interpreting these charts;

1. Special thanks to Richard F. Ramsey of the University of Calgary, whose web-based amalgamation of different studies on transgender suicide made this task much easier.
2. Studies involving youth are not included in these charts, as the rates of suicide ideation/attempts among youth are generally much higher than for adult transgender individuals. To date, I have located two such studies, one by Grossman and D'Augelli in 2007 and one by Clements-Nolle et al in 2006. The studies above do, in some cases, include youth in their samples, however, the rates of youth response have typically been quite low.
3. Taylor et al (2006) and Scanlon et al (2010) are both Canadian needs assessments.



4. Kim et al (2006) is a South Korean study on required military service inductees, deferred for transsexualism.
5. The studies are labeled by author and arranged by year published. I would have liked to arrange the studies by the rigor with which they were conducted, however, due to the diverse methods used and the current stage of my literature review, this will remain a goal for the future.
6. Notably, studies that discussed LGBT suicide, as one homogenous group, were excluded, given the specific needs and suicidality of transgender people specifically.

Proposed Research Methods

Prior studies have approached measurement of this issue through a variety of means, for example, quantitative, qualitative, historical and ethnographic methodologies. Of particular note is the increasing utilization of participant action research and similar methodology, particularly where needs assessments are employed.

Both Canadian studies employed needs assessments. Scanlon et al (2010) continues to employ qualitative and quantitative methodology, in addition to being driven by the Ontario transgender community. Taylor et al (2006) was primarily a qualitative study, involving in-depth interviews with participants and participant observation.

As a transgender community 'insider' I will be using an emic account and will be "immersing myself in the points of view that I am studying [and will] ultimately, adopt the points of view of my participants as true (Rubin and Babbie, 2011, p. 461-462)".

Additionally, in an attempt to gather as large a sample size as possible, I will be utilizing surveys, consisting of demographic and adapted suicidality scales and as such, my research will be largely quantitative. I also hope to include the participation of the transgender community, however, as this research is connected to a thesis requirement, participatory action research may prove impractical.

Finally, I plan to conduct the surveys online, although, funding permitting, I would like to include face to face interviews and focus groups in situ. Online surveys have been well-supported in the literature and seem to provide response rates comparable to more traditional methods, such as mail surveys. Of particular relevance, the transgender community has shown itself to be quite active on the internet and I believe that online surveying will encourage the widest possible response, especially if I am able to utilize online surveying in conjunction with traditional survey methodology.

Prospective Research Limitations

Although this synopsis is non-exhaustive, there are three prospective research limitations that are of particular note.

1. Online surveying, while a very promising research tool, is also a very new one. Possible issues include representativeness, accessibility and the ability to ensure that surveys are only completed by each respondent once. For example, "People who are most apt to respond to online surveys are likely to be younger, more affluent, and more highly educated than the rest of your target population (Rubin and Babbie, 2001, p. 397)".
2. The transgender community is wary of academic research, which, in my experience, stems from two major concerns. One concern is that, historically, research into this community has sometimes been exploitative and seemed to have had few practical benefits for the participants or the community at large. More recently, the community seems to have been overwhelmed with requests for research participants, which may have led to "research burnout". I am concerned that this will make it difficult to recruit participants and a key component of my research is to develop trust with the community at large and to ensure that this research has practical benefits for the community.
3. Prior research has found it difficult to define transgender, as well as suicide ideation. Some studies have approached this research with definitions of transgender that excluded particular components of the overall community, which led to results which, while valid for that particular sub-group, were not generalizable to the larger community. With this in mind, my research will define transgender as widely as possible.

Potential Benefits for Social Work and the Transgender Community

As with the research limitations, this synopsis is also non-exhaustive, however, the following benefits are important to mention.

1. This research will be presented in an accessible and non-academic format to the transgender community, in addition to my more academic-oriented thesis.
2. While there is an increase in the amount of American transgender suicide research, Canadian transgender suicide is largely unexplored, particularly on a national scale. It is possible that factors attributing to Canadian transgender suicide and the rates thereof, differ from our American counterparts. This research will attempt to investigate this.
3. While this research will provide limited insight into the reasons why transgender Canadians attempt and contemplate suicide, it will provide the groundwork for doing so and hopefully, for advocating for specific services delivery to address this public health concern.

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