

## What can we do?

- Help HIV services, youth services, schools, and mental health services to work together to meet trans youth's needs, including practical supports for housing, income & translation services.
- Reduce transphobia on the streets for sex trade workers by advocating for decriminalization of sex work.
- Advocate for TS/TG workplace rights.
- Involve trans youth in the development of these initiatives
- Work together to raise all these issues & to support justice & anti-transphobia work.

**Who we are:** The Youth Migration Project team includes people who work on queer & trans youth issues from the AIDS Committee of Toronto, Asian Community AIDS Services, Department of Public Health Sciences, University of Toronto, the 519 Church St. Community Centre, Ryerson School of Social Work, Supporting Our Youth, & 2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations. Central Toronto Youth Services also played a key role on our team for the first part of the project.

**How we did this research:** Workers, researchers and activists who were concerned about the situation of migrant trans youth came together in a community-based research project to look at how these youth may be vulnerable to HIV. We wanted to help meet their needs and to help prevent HIV. Confidential individual interviews and focus groups were done with 10 trans youth. We spoke to both male and female transgender and transsexual youth between the ages of 18 and 25. We also did 7 interviews with youth workers, HIV/AIDS workers & policy experts. The interviews were taped & transcribed. Our analysis & recommendations were developed by members of the research team.

Dedicated to the trans youth who shared their stories with us.

*Your knowledge & your courage & strength inspire us!*

Supported by grants from Health Canada and the Wellesley Central Health Corporation—thank you!

Thanks to the Positive Youth's Project zines

Please copy & distribute - for PDF file: [www.actoronto.org/youth](http://www.actoronto.org/youth)

For more info contact: [hcarolo@actoronto.org](mailto:hcarolo@actoronto.org)

Toronto: 2004

Design by Orange Habitat.



# Inadequate Resources

Youth Migration Project: HIV Vulnerability Among Trans Youth

Robb Travers, Kyle Scanlon, Humberto Carolo & Doe O'Brien

**WARNING**  
**Inequality may be dangerous for our health!**

This info sheet provides an overview of some of the systemic issues facing trans youth who have moved to Toronto. It is well known that poverty, racism, access to healthcare, and other inequalities can have a serious impact on people's health. However, most research on youth & HIV focuses on individual behaviours, like condom use. Also, HIV research rarely looks at the particular challenges faced by trans youth. Using quotes from interviews done by the Youth Migration Project, we highlight how trans youth may be at risk for HIV. We also show how youth resist these difficulties - despite the odds! At the end of this info sheet, we offer suggestions for change.

# Transphobia shaped our lives and our decisions to leave...

"In my home town, they're very close-minded. I guess, people never knew...it's actually quite depressing...I had one experience where one guy found out I was a guy and he beat me up. I was close to a bar and some people were watching.....no one cared."

## Toronto - I'm not the only one....

"Coming here was like going to amusement park. You know someone out there and you're not the only one."

"When I saw Church Street, I was like, "Wow, I belong here" ... and, the trans group, we're like family."

## Big needs, few places to turn....

"There's a huge array of needs in an incredibly diverse community and so few resources. Youth have been exploited, they have dreams of futures, and they lack role models and family supports."

"The trans community is not stagnant... it is growing due to migration... and needs can't be met...there's a lack of resources - lack of time from service providers and some youth don't fit clearly into the categories of those who commonly use services because they're not sex trade workers, and not using substances."

## Limited employment opportunities...

"It's hard. There's not a lot of employment that say it doesn't matter if you dress up as a girl or not, it's OK to be dressed as transgender"

"Panhandle, I work the streets....I'm a hooker."

## Housing and shelter problems....

"On the street. I can't really go in the shelter because I'm usually too young or I have to dress in a certain way or negativity between staff and the people stay there....I have to dress as a boy."

"It's too bad you have people living in really shallow homes with crap walls and cockroaches. Oh, my God! Last night, I stayed at this place and it had cockroaches. It was so disgusting. I could not touch anything. It was really disgusting."

"We need young transsexual group housing or something like that.... Because it's very hard to find a good place to stay...It would be more easier for transsexual youth because I guess we're totally separate from the gay community and the straight community because we're not any one of them."

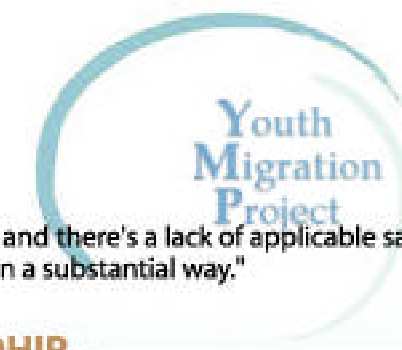
## Inadequate health and HIV resources....

"Most importantly, there's a lack of specific and supportive health professionals and almost all trans youth don't have a doctor. Very few doctors know anything about trans youth and HIV."

"Women who have had genital surgery may be at higher risk for HIV than women that haven't had genital surgery, because they are more likely to be assaulted from johns."

"For those who've had vaginal reconstructive procedures that use pieces of colon it makes the tissues more likely for HIV infection... there is no self lubrication which creates more tears and therefore more likelihood of transmission"

"Sex workers who have not had genital surgery, tuck their penis under their perineum (space between testicles and anus) ... during the process the skin may become irritated and lead to HIV transmission."



## HIV's on the back-burner...

"HIV is not as important and other issues are more pressing like housing, food, etc., and there's a lack of applicable safer sex education materials... AIDS service organizations do not deal with trans issues in a substantial way."

## Transitioning is expensive and surgery isn't covered by OHIP...

"Transitioning is cost prohibitive for most youth, but for low income youth in particular, the tools to transition are not available and I rarely encounter trans youth not in the sex trade... trans youth are more likely to have sex without a condom if the client pays more."

"There is the most profound lack of knowledge among youth about their own bodies and health. There is a lack of information or knowledge about hormones and bigger health issues."

## Adding a "T" onto everything...

"See, this just underscores to me this whole....'let's add a "T" onto everything! Oh, we're queer-positive, so therefore we're trans-positive. People who understand queer issues, do not automatically understand trans issues. It doesn't translate. It just doesn't translate."

"...just because we run a little transsexual program here, doesn't mean we provide housing, food, doesn't mean we can provide financial assistance. But it just goes to show this sense that, 'The transsexuals will deal with the transsexual population and the rest of us don't have to.'

"I had to be very clear with the participant, 'Let's have no illusions about what I can do. I cannot do this. I can't support you. I'm not a case manager, I'm not a counsellor, I'm not even technically a community worker. What I can do is peer support."

# BIG Impact

"... trans youth get upset when accessing the mental health system... trans listed as a disorder/disability ... youth feel disillusioned about this as it affects self worth if you feel like you are a disorder. This can be the beginning of that 'path of mental health problems to street life/homelessness where youth start ping-ponging between services. They can get tired and stop accessing services and supports."

## What's the HIV connection?

**The health status of trans youth is negatively affected through:**

- rejection, or fear of rejection, by their families and communities
- feeling that one doesn't matter and that one's life is unimportant
- the need to survive can lead to sex trade, exploitation and unsafe sex
- transphobia within queer communities, and beyond
- isolation from their own communities and a loss of their identity
- sexual exploitation
- the need to survive can lead to unsafe sex
- barriers to their access to housing, healthcare, youth services & HIV/AIDS services
- mental health issues, like anxiety, depression and suicide.
- barriers to their access to employment and surviving through sex work.
- living in isolation and poverty in a big city.
- criminalization of sex work

See other YMP Info Sheets on refugee/newcomer youth:  
*For English Press 1 and Home Away from Home? and Oh Canada, Why Canada?*  
See also YMP's Info Sheets on Two-Spirit youth *"What Do You Find in the City"*  
and YMP's Info Sheets on Trans youth *"Leaving Normal"*