

**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, HIV Studies Unit, University of Toronto, the 519 Church St. Community Centre, Ryerson School of Social Work, Supporting Our Youth, & 2-Spirited People of the First 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 Two-spirit youth who have moved to Toronto, 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 13 Two-spirit youth. These youth were between 18 and 25 and 90% had moved to Toronto within the last 5 years. We also did 8 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 Two-spirit youth who shared their stories with us.

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

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Thanks to the Positive Youth Project's zines!

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Youth  
Migration  
Project

# Two-Spirit Youth Talk About Coming to Toronto "What Do You Find in the City?"

Youth Migration Project: HIV Vulnerability Among Two-Spirit Youth

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**WARNING**  
**Inequality may be dangerous for our health!**  
This info sheet provides an overview of some of the systemic issues facing Two-Spirit 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 Two-Spirit youth. Using quotes from interviews done by the Youth Migration Project, we highlight how Two-Spirit youth may be at risk for HIV. At the end of this info sheet, we offer suggestions for change.

What do Two-Spirit youth say about

# Leaving home?

## We left to find opportunities...

"You're a Two-spirit person and you're dealing with homophobia. You're a young person, there's no jobs in your community, it's boring, there's nothing to do so you may take off for the city."

## Many of us left because the "street is safer than home"....

"...some kids are leaving for really legitimate reasons. It's not because they want to come and party, it's not because they're idiots, it's because they need to survive. The street is safer than home."

"Homophobia creates low self-esteem in the individual - they arrive in the city already damaged, sometimes abused."

"Sometimes sexuality is not the reason for leaving. Sometimes it's the home environment. But most often they leave because of the poverty and abuse"

## We left to find a place that would accept us...

"Homophobia drives youth away from reserves and other rural communities."

"Sometimes they are kicked out for whatever reason, then they find their sexuality down here.  
"youth move to city to 'hide' and end up isolating themselves."

## What do Two-Spirit youth say about life in Toronto?

### We're not prepared for city...

"The city becomes a place of acceptance...yet they have no skills, money or resources to deal with the city."

- It's expensive - rents are high
- Landlords discriminate and won't rent to Two-Spirit youth
- We left school early and don't have job skills
- Sex trade can be the only source of income
- Addictions are common

"What do you find in the city? Is it ever fun there but it costs money. How do you live? You get street-involved, you work in the sex trade for a while, maybe you get into some drugs. Then boom, you're HIV-positive. That is such a common story for young people coming to Toronto or any other urban centre from a smaller place, that it's terrifying."

### We're not welcome here...

- they turn to agencies and encounter homophobia both among staff and other clients

"...either the non-Aboriginal culture is discriminating against you on the basis of your culture. The Aboriginal culture is discriminating against you on the basis of what they think are your activities or behaviors."

### racism and gay community

"What I needed to do was that I needed to go out and find a community. So I found a community. But I found a community that was extremely unhealthy. I went into a gay community that revolved around alcohol and drugs. Of course, what's going to happen when you get involved in that? You're looking at acceptance. So you're looking at a new family. You're finding out about the hierarchy of the community. And if you don't fit into within those particulars specifics, then you're fucked even more. The gay community is even more critical. If you're not wearing Calvin Klein underwear than you're fucked. So you open yourself up to even more criticisms, and more at risk behaviors."

### exploitation ...

"Bar scene, bar scene. The young pretty Native guys...the chicken hawks...how many times do I see some older guy going out with some twenty year old Native kid because they've got ... money, they got a place, they got a car, and resources...It's looking for that love where it isn't."

## What's the HIV connection?

**The health status of Two-Spirit youth is negatively affected through:**

- rejection, or fear of rejection, by their families and communities
- feeling that you don't matter and that your life is unimportant
- isolation from their own communities and a loss of their identity
- sexual exploitation
- the need to survive can lead to unsafe sex
- racism and colonialism within the gay community, and beyond
- problems with drugs and alcohol

### What can we do?

- "I want youth workers at the bus station, train station....the places where they come when they first get there. So the first person they don't see is a dealer or some pimp."
- Encourage LGBT organizations to work together to address the urgent issues faced by Two-Spirit youth.
- Advocate for addictions counselling programs that are geared toward the needs of Two-Spirit youth.
- Advocate for literacy and employment programmes for 2-spirit youth.
- Support LGBT groups to work with organizations in the Aboriginal communities in Toronto.
- Offer support to groups and spaces for Two-Spirit youth to meet each other.
- Support Two-Spirit groups to work with organizations in Aboriginal communities.
- Advocate for Two-Spirit youth's needs for practical support like income, housing & counselling services.
- Involve Two-Spirit youth in the development of these initiatives.
- Work together to raise all these issues & to support justice & dignity for Two-Spirit youth.



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 trans youth "Leaving Normal" and "Inadequate Resources"