

Policy brief

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Suen, Y. T., Chan, R. C. H. and Wong, M. Y. (2016) *Mental Health of Transgender People in Hong Kong*. Transgender Resource Center Hong Kong.

Mental Health of Transgender People in Hong Kong:

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18.4% of the transgender people surveyed (and 24.1% of the sample aged below 30) had attempted suicide

政策簡報

於 2016 年 5 月 14 日 公佈

孫耀東、陳俊豪、黃妙賢 (2016) *香港跨性別人士的精神健康*。跨性別資源中心

香港跨性別人士的精神健康:

63.2% 受訪的跨性別人士(70.4%三十歲以下 受訪的跨性別人士)

曾有自殺念頭。

18.4% 受訪的跨性別人士(24.1%三十歲以下 受訪的跨性別人士)

曾嘗試自殺。

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Background of the study

Transgender people refer to individuals whose gender identity and/or expression of their gender differs from social norms related to their sex assigned at birth.

In many parts of the world, transgender people are subject to debates which are often based on a lack of empirical evidence – this is also the case in Hong Kong. While previous researches in Hong Kong have documented public attitudes towards transgender people (e.g. King, Winter & Webster 2009), fewer studies have documented the lived experiences of transgender people themselves in Hong Kong – and the studies' samples tended to be smaller and such studies were conducted in the 1990s (Ma 1997).

Focus of this study

This study focuses on mental health of transgender people in Hong Kong, because some other previous studies have found alarming figures about transgender people's mental health in other parts of the world. While less than 3% of the US general population reported a lifetime suicide attempt (Baca-Garcia et al. 2010; as cited in Blosnich et al. 2013), the prevalence of attempted suicide was 32% among the transgender population in the US (Clements-Nolle et al. 2006). A recent US national report found that 41% of respondents reported suicide attempt (Grant et al. 2011).

Research methods

Through a local transgender community-led initiative, a total of 190 participants from Hong Kong filled in a community-designed questionnaire. All the participants identified that their

gender identity and/or expression did not conform to the sex they were assigned at birth. The data was collected online between 2014 and 2015. Participants were recruited through the website of the Transgender Resource Center, which is the first organization in Hong Kong providing public education, community services and advocacy for the transgender community. People who expressed initial interest in participating in the study were asked to read the background and purposes of the study. They were required to provide informed consent prior to the commencement of the questionnaire. The data was kept anonymously to protect the confidentiality of the participants. The survey took the form of a cross-sectional web-based questionnaire design.

Survey questions and findings on suicidality

Suicidality was measured with the question, “*Did you ever think of suicide?*”, with 5 response options ranging from (1) *never thought about suicide*, to (2) *having thoughts of suicide*, to (3) *often having thoughts of suicide*, to (4) *having experience of autotomy*, to (5) *having attempted commit suicide*, with higher score indicating an increased risk of suicidality. The response was further recoded into two additional variables, i.e., suicidal ideation and suicidal attempt. All response options excluding (1) *never thought about suicide* were coded as positive for suicidal ideation, whereas an affirmative response to (4) *having experience of autotomy* or (5) *having attempted commit suicide* was coded as positive for suicidal attempt.

Among the 190 transgender respondents, it was found that 63.2% (n=120) had contemplated suicide, and 18.4% (n=35) had attempted suicide.

Table 1: Suicide ideation and suicide attempt, by age group, among transgender respondents in Hong Kong

	Suicidal ideation		Suicidal attempt	
	Yes (%)	Sig.	Yes (%)	Sig.
Age				
below 30	76 (70.4%)	.054	26 (24.1%)	.014
30 – 44	34 (52.3%)		5 (7.7%)	
Above 44	10 (58.8%)		4 (23.5%)	

Result of chi-square test showed that the age differences in suicidal ideation were marginally significant. Fisher's exact test indicated that suicidal attempt varied significantly by age group. Among the transgender respondents aged below 30, 70.4% had contemplated suicide and 24.1% of them had attempted suicide.

Discussion: A call for policy and service responses

The figures that 63.2% of the transgender respondents (and 70.4% of the transgender respondents aged below 30) had contemplated suicide, and 18.4% of the transgender respondents (and 24.1% of the transgender respondents aged below 30) had attempted suicide, are worth noting.

Previous researches on adolescents in Hong Kong found that 42% (Fong 1993), 52% (Lai & McBride 2001) and 47-52.6% (Lee et al. 2006) of the respondents in their respective studies could be considered as suicide ideators. However, the proportion of adolescent suicide ideators is even higher among the transgender respondents in this study. This paper adds to the literature to state that transgender people's suicidality in Hong Kong is consistently high as with what has been observed in other parts of the world.

The findings suggest that policy makers in Hong Kong and service providers need to urgently address the mental health needs of transgender people, particular those who are younger.

Transgender people's mental health is affected by a variety of factors. Such factors include a high level of social exclusion and gender identity-related discrimination that transgender people experience, which has also been recently documented in Hong Kong (Suen et al. 2016).

It is also important that mental health services are culturally sensitive of the needs of transgender people. This is particularly relevant for Hong Kong, as there has been recent evidence of discrimination experienced by LGBTI people when accessing services, including seeking help from social worker and counsellors (Suen et al. 2016).

Transgender Resource Center is the first organization in Hong Kong providing public education, community services and advocacy for the transgender community.

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