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# An Assessment of the Health Needs of the Transgender Community in Montana

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#### Introduction:

Transgender people are highly stigmatized. According to the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS (2012), transgender individuals confront discrimination in a wide array of settings including healthcare, housing, employment, education, and legal recognition. While issues regarding stigma and discrimination are well documented in the literature, most of the information about transgender people has been gathered in urban settings. In fact, information about the lives of transgender people living in rural areas is rare. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to explore factors that influence quality of life and risk of infection with HIV/HCV/STD's among transgender people living in Montana. This information will help create awareness of the issues facing the transgender population so that health programs can be tailored to meet their needs. Prior to implementation, this study received approval from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Montana.

#### Methods:

This study represents the second phase of a two-phase study aimed at assessing quality of life issues and HIV/HCV/STD prevention needs among transgender people living in Montana. The first phase of the study utilized a grounded theory approach (in-depth interviews and Photovoice methods) to establish the framework for the second phase which is described below.

This second phase of the study involved the development of a questionnaire and utilized a cross-sectional design. Cross sectional studies typically use a one-time data collection effort and a self-report format. This design was chosen because it can be used to assess the burden of disease or health needs of a population- in this case, the needs of the transgender population in Montana, and is particularly useful in informing the planning and allocation of health resources.

The questionnaire was developed after a thorough review of the literature, a review of existing surveys, and careful consideration of the qualitative information gathered during phase one of this study. The final draft of the questionnaire consists of six sections. The sections include:

demographic information, HIV/HCV/STD status and testing information, transition experience, perceptions of stigma and discrimination, mental health status and access to culturally competent health care. The questionnaire was reviewed by a panel of experts and pilot tested with a small sample of the transgender population. After multiple revisions, the questions were entered into an online survey platform called Qualtrics. Qualtrics ensures that the participants of this study remain anonymous. The link to the questionnaire was sent to various social media websites- Twitter, Tumblr, Google +, Facebook and Pink Essence. It was also posted on the Gender Expansion Project website, as well as the Gender Expansion Conference website, the Gay Men's Task Force website, the Western Montana Community Center website, the FTM Magazine website, the WPATH listserv, the Ingersoll Gender Center listserv and website, and the Centerlink listserv and website. In addition, the questionnaire link was sent out in an email to individuals who are either transgender, or work in communities with transgender people.

Two types of analyses will be used in this study- descriptive and analytical. A descriptive analysis will be used to describe the demographic characteristics of the participants, assess the frequency and distribution of specific risk behaviors, describe the prevalence of health related conditions such as HIV/STDs/HCV, and examine perceptions regarding stigma and discrimination. An analytical cross-sectional approach will be used to investigate the association between risk factors and specific health outcomes.

#### Results:

Data collection is on-going and anticipated to be completed by March 31<sup>st</sup>. Data will be analyzed using SPSS. We will report basic descriptive statistics, frequencies, and measures of central tendency. The Pearson's r correlation will be used to test the relationship between two common variables. In this study, we will focus on the relationships between participants' HIV/HCV/STD status and their sexual behaviors, substance abuse behaviors, mental condition and access to culturally competent health care providers. Information obtained will be widely distributed via websites listed above, conference and professional meeting presentations and scholarly publications in an effort to increase understanding and awareness of the challenges faced by transgender people living in rural states like Montana.

**Conclusion:**

Results from this study will provide a first glimpse into the lives of transgender people living in Montana. The Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services and other health care organizations will use this information to create interventions that are tailored to the unique needs of this population.