

# **Identity-based bullying and mental health: Considerations for supporting the well-being of gender diverse youth**

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**Objectives:** Bullying constitutes repeated acts of peer aggression that occur in the context of a power imbalance. Identity-based bullying is bullying that occurs due to a perceived social identity and is motivated by bias and prejudice (e.g., homophobic name-calling, weight-based social exclusion, physically hurting someone because of their perceived race). Large, nationally representative samples are needed to better understand identity-based bullying amongst trans and gender diverse youth. Using a national sample of Canadian adolescents, we examined 1) the prevalence of identity-based, among students of diverse gender identities in grades 6-10 and 2) the association between bullying victimization and internalizing symptoms.

**Methodology:** The current study uses nationally representative Canadian data from the 2023 Health Behaviours in School-Aged Children survey, which is conducted every four years in collaboration with the World Health Organization. Participants consisted of 26,571 youth in Grades 6-10 from across Canada. The sample consisted of 48.0% cisgender boys, 45.9% cisgender girls, 4.5% gender diverse youth, 1.1% transgender boys, and 0.4% transgender girls. Participants self-reported on their experiences with bullying victimization and internalizing symptoms over the past 6 months.

**Outcomes:** The prevalence of any victimization significantly differed across gender identity groups ( $p < .001$ ). For example, in grades 9-10, 55.7% of transgender boys, 48.6% of transgender girls, 48.8% of gender diverse youth experienced at least one form peer victimization 2-3 times/month relative to 35.6% of cisgender girls and 27.8% of cisgender boys. Experiencing multiple forms of bullying victimization was especially prevalent for gender diverse youth (e.g., 30% of transgender boys and 27% of gender diverse youth experienced 4+ types of peer victimization). Multigroup structural equation modeling was used to examine whether sex/gender identity-based victimization was associated with internalizing symptoms over and above general peer victimization in each gender identity group. For trans and gender diverse youth only, sex/gender identity-based victimization was also positively associated with internalizing symptoms ( $b = .22, p < .001$ ).

**Conclusions:** Results indicate that approximately 1 in 2 trans and gender diverse youth in Canada experience bullying. This high prevalence rate is true across general forms of bullying, as well as identity-based bullying, with both experiences uniquely contributing to a higher rate of internalizing symptoms among trans and gender diverse youth. Results underscore the importance of supporting gender diverse youth living in rural contexts, where they are especially likely to experience increased identity-based stigma, reduced social support, and difficulty accessing healthcare. Recommendations for healthcare providers will be discussed.