

Improving Access to Gender-Affirming Care for Two-Spirit, Transgender, and Nonbinary (TTNB) Youth

Executive Summary

Access to gender-affirming care is vital for the physical and mental health of Two-Spirit, transgender, and nonbinary (TTNB) youth. Research consistently shows that affirming primary care, mental-health supports, and medical interventions (puberty blockers, hormone therapy, surgeries) dramatically reduce depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicidality while boosting self-esteem and life satisfaction to levels comparable with cisgender peers. Yet TTNB youth face a web of barriers—few trained providers (especially outside urban centers), knowledge gaps among clinicians, outright denials or referral refusals, fear of discrimination, past negative experiences, and logistical or financial hurdles—that prevent timely access to care. To close these gaps, coordinated action is required across policy, education, clinical practice, community support, research, and public outreach to ensure every TTNB young person can receive respectful, comprehensive, and affordable gender-affirming health services.

Key Recommendations

- **Adopt Equitable Health Policies:** Mandate full insurance coverage for puberty blockers, hormone therapy, surgeries, and related mental-health supports for TTNB youth without discriminatory prerequisites.
- **Enhance Provider Education & Training:** Require all medical and allied-health programs (and their continuing-education curricula) to include evidence-based modules on gender diversity, affirming language, and TTNB care pathways.
- **Expand Service Availability:** Establish incentive programs and telehealth networks to increase the number of trained gender-affirming clinicians—especially in underserved regions—and reduce travel and wait-time burdens.
- **Strengthen Community Engagement & Support:** Fund community-based TTNB peer-support and caregiver-education initiatives that are guided by youth advisory councils to ensure culturally relevant, affirming services.
- **Invest in System Improvements & Data:** Allocate dedicated health-system resources for real-time monitoring of TTNB care pathways and commission longitudinal research to refine best practices and inform policy evolution.
- **Lead Public Awareness Campaigns:** Roll out multi-channel, youth-driven education initiatives to dispel myths about TTNB identities, normalize gender diversity, and reduce stigma across schools, clinics, and communities.

Introduction

Access to affirming and supportive healthcare is vital for the overall health and well-being of Two-Spirit, transgender, and nonbinary (TTNB) youth.^{i,ii} Gender-affirming care encompasses a comprehensive approach that respects and acknowledges an individual's gender identity and expression, providing essential services such as primary care, mental health support, and medical interventions like puberty blockers and hormone therapy.ⁱⁱⁱ

This policy brief examines the importance of access to gender-affirming care for TTNB youth, outlines current barriers to access, and proposes actionable recommendations to enhance healthcare access for TTNB youth.

The Importance of Gender-Affirming Care for TTNB Youth Well-Being

The provision of gender-affirming care is important for the overall well-being of TTNB youth and can be life saving. Extensive research indicates that gender-affirming care, including psychosocial and medical support that enables individuals to live in accordance with their gender identity, significantly reduces rates of depression and anxiety, lowers suicide and self-harm risks, boosts self-esteem, and improves overall mental health outcomes.^{iv}

The link between access to gender-affirming primary care and improved health outcomes for TTNB youth is well-documented. Studies indicate that TTNB youth who receive care from providers who respect and affirm their gender identities report markedly better physical and mental health outcomes than those who do not have access to such care. Conversely, the lack of supportive care is associated with detrimental health outcomes.ⁱ

Access to gender-affirming mental health care is equally crucial, as it plays a fundamental role in affirming the lived experiences of TTNB youth. Affirming approaches have been shown to contribute positively to the well-being of these youth, while non-affirming approaches—or those aimed at changing a person's gender—can cause harm.^{v,vi} Current research highlights the critical role that both TTNB youth and their parents/caregivers place on affirming mental health care as a foundation for overall well-being.^{vii}

The availability of gender-affirming medical interventions, including puberty blockers, hormone therapy, and surgeries, is also linked to significant mental health improvements for TTNB youth. Access to these interventions can reduce depression and anxiety^{viii-x}, with access to puberty blockers and hormone therapy shown to decrease the likelihood of suicidality.^{viii,x,xi} TTNB youth with access to these medical interventions report levels of life satisfaction and happiness comparable to their cisgender peers.^{Error! Bookmark not defined.} Additionally, older TTNB youth who have undergone gender-affirming surgeries experience notably better mental health outcomes compared to those who have not had access to such care.^{xii}

TTNB Youth Experience Barriers in Accessing Healthcare

While the benefits are well-documented, TTNB youth often encounter numerous barriers in accessing gender-affirming care. This can significantly impact their health and well-being. These barriers are multifaceted and often interconnected, creating a complex landscape for TTNB youth seeking essential healthcare services.

Limited Availability of Gender-Affirming Care Providers

A major challenge for TTNB youth is the limited availability of healthcare providers who offer gender-affirming care, particularly in certain geographical areas. This scarcity leaves many young people without access to care or necessary treatments.^{i,vii, xiii,xiv} The difficulty in finding providers who are capable of assessing and prescribing gender-affirming hormone therapy is particularly pronounced.ⁱⁱ Parents/caregivers of TTNB youth have also identified the lack of available providers as a substantial barrier to accessing care for their children.^{xiii}

Healthcare Provider Knowledge Gap

The inadequate education and understanding of gender-affirming care among healthcare providers pose a substantial obstacle. This knowledge deficit can lead to suboptimal care experiences for TTNB youth and may deter them from seeking future medical attention.^{xv} The overall lack of healthcare provider education on youth gender-affirming care contributes to this problem.^{xiii}
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Denial of Care and Referrals

TTNB youth often face outright denial of gender-affirming care or referrals to specialists. This denial may stem from discrimination or a lack of knowledge on the part of healthcare providers.^{xviii-xx} Some youth report being refused hormone therapy, including prescription refills, when seeking care.^{i,xx} Additionally, primary care providers may feel uncomfortable making referrals for gender-affirming care, further limiting access to specialized treatment.^{ii,viii}

Fear of Discrimination

The anticipation of discrimination can prevent TTNB youth from seeking necessary healthcare.^{ii, xix} Many young people worry about how they will be treated by both staff and healthcare providers, leading to delayed or avoided care.^{xix} Research indicates that those who anticipate facing stigma in healthcare settings are more likely to postpone accessing essential medical services.^{xxi}

Negative Healthcare Experiences

Previous negative experiences in healthcare settings can discourage TTNB youth from seeking future care. Feeling uncomfortable with a primary care provider has been linked to TTNB youth not pursuing needed mental health care.ⁱ These negative experiences may include disrespectful treatment by staff and other patients, as well as breaches of confidentiality.^{xxii, xxiii} The lack of knowledge about and comfort with gender-affirming care among healthcare providers contributes significantly to these adverse experiences.^{i,xxii}

Logistical and Financial Barriers

TTNB youth face additional obstacles in accessing care, including:

- Transportation issues: Many young people struggle to attend appointments due to travel distance or lack of family support.^{i,vii,xix,xxii}
- Financial constraints: The cost of gender-affirming care, particularly medications, can be prohibitive for many TTNB youth and their families.^{i,ii,vii,xxii,xxiii}
- Long wait times: Extensive delays in seeing health care providers, especially for specialist care, can be frustrating and potentially harmful to the health of TTNB youth.^{ii,iv,xxii}

Key recommendations for healthcare administration

The multifaceted barriers faced by TTNB youth in accessing gender-affirming healthcare highlight the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to enhance both the availability and quality of care for TTNB youth. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from healthcare providers, policymakers, and society at large to create a more inclusive and supportive healthcare environment for this vulnerable population.

- **Comprehensive Healthcare Policies:** Healthcare policies should ensure equitable access to gender-affirming healthcare and gender-affirming interventions for TTNB youth. Additionally, policies should eliminate financial barriers to accessing gender-affirming care for TTNB youth.
- **Inclusive Education and Training:** Inclusive education and training programs should be provided to healthcare providers, educators, and policymakers to enhance understanding of TTNB identities and combat misinformation. These programs should cover topics such as gender diversity, affirmative language, and the impact of discrimination on health outcomes. By promoting cultural competency and sensitivity, healthcare providers can create affirming environments that support the well-being of TTNB youth.
- **Community Engagement and Support:** Allocate resources for community-based organizations and support networks that provide advocacy, peer support, and resources tailored to the unique needs of TTNB youth and their families. These organizations play a crucial role in promoting social inclusion, providing affirming spaces, and advocating for policy changes to improve the lives of TTNB individuals.
- **Healthcare Systems Improvement:** Increase availability for gender-affirming healthcare services and supportive initiatives focused on TTNB youth. Addressing disparities in access and promoting health equity requires sufficient investment in affirming care, professional training, community support services, and data collection efforts.
- **Data Collection and Research:** Expand data collection efforts and research studies to better understand the health needs, experiences, and outcomes of TTNB youth in Canada. By collecting comprehensive data on healthcare utilization, health outcomes, and experiences, policymakers can enhance existing evidence-based policies that address the unique needs of TTNB individuals.
- **Public Awareness and Education Campaigns:** Launch public awareness and education campaigns to counter misinformation, challenge stereotypes, and promote acceptance and affirmation of TTNB people/youth. These campaigns should utilize evidence-based messaging, engage diverse end users, and leverage multiple communication channels to reach a wide audience, fostering a more inclusive and supportive society for TTNB individuals.

Financial contribution:

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