

# Mental Health

# and Psychological

# Wellbeing

**Trans Women Living with HIV in Canada**

Findings from CHIWOS:  
A national, community-based research project



# Mental Health and Psychological Wellbeing of Trans Women Living with HIV

## STUDY OVERVIEW

Mental health is an important aspect of overall wellbeing, and is also closely linked to other aspects of health and wellbeing (e.g. sexual health, physical health, etc.). Stigma around mental health still remains a reality in many communities and when combined with the layers of stigma around gender, as well as HIV status, trans women living with HIV face a unique set of challenges when navigating their life journey.

### Study Design

This analysis draws on data from a longitudinal, community-based research project called the Canadian HIV Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health Cohort Study (CHIWOS). The study includes 1422 individuals living with HIV living in Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia, including 54 trans women.

### Study Objectives

To characterize the prevalence of mental health conditions among trans women living with HIV in CHIWOS; to assess for associations between individual, social, clinical and structural factors and mental health outcomes for this population.

### Methods of Analysis

We cross-sectionally assessed mental health characteristics including depressive symptoms, post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms (PTSD symptoms), and mental health-related quality of life (MH-QoL) of 54 trans women living with HIV (aged  $\geq 16$ ) enrolled in CHIWOS from 2013 to 2015 in British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec. Outcome measures included:

#### Depressive symptoms:

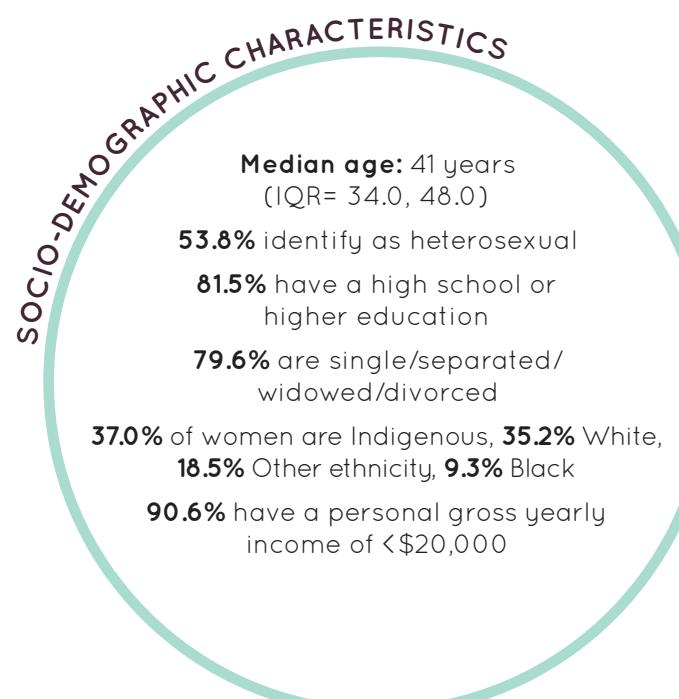
10-item Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression (CES-D) Scale (range=0-30, scores  $\geq 10$  indicate clinically significant depressive symptoms);

#### PTSD symptoms:

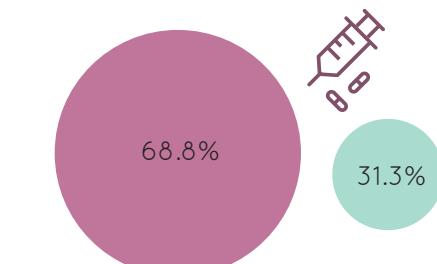
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Checklist Civilian (PLC-C) form ( $\geq 14$  indicate clinically significant PTSD symptoms, range=6-30);

**MH-QoL:** SF-12 Mental Health Scale (range=0-100; higher score=better mental health;  $< 50$  = below average)

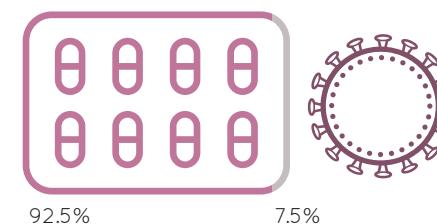
**Analysis:** Univariate linear regression



## GENDER-SPECIFIC



## HIV-SPECIFIC



92.5% of participants are currently taking their antiretroviral medications; 7.5% of trans women are not

## POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER SYMPTOMS

The presence of PTSD symptoms were associated with:

- Lower levels of resilience;
- Higher substance use (alcohol & injection drug use);
- Lower levels of social support;
- Higher levels of HIV stigma (overall and internalized)

**Participants' resilience scores were high**  
(median=65.5, IQR=60.0, 70.0, max. possible score = 70.0)

## DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS

### Housing stability

Depressive symptoms were associated with difficulties meeting housing costs.

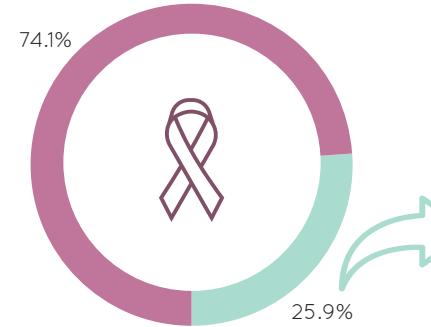


### Power in relationships



**Higher relationship power = Less depressive symptoms**

### Domestic violence



**74.1%** of trans women in the study reported ever experiencing domestic violence

18.5% did not experience domestic violence; 7.4% didn't know or preferred not to answer

### Support



**Experiences of domestic violence = More depressive symptoms**



## DEFINITIONS

**Transgender (trans):** An umbrella term referring to people with diverse gender identities and expressions that may differ from stereotypical gender norms.

**Cisgender (cis):** This is when someone's gender identity aligns with their sex assigned at birth.

## TRANS STIGMA



**61.4%** have experienced some form of police harassment for being trans sometimes or many times



**72.8%** have had to pass as cis to be accepted sometimes or many times



**72.8%** feel that being trans hurt/embarrassed their family sometimes or many times



### HIV Stigma

Higher HIV stigma was associated with higher depressive symptoms, PTSD symptoms, and lower MH-QoL.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE DATA

Overall, approximately 50% of trans women in CHIWOS reported high levels of depressive symptoms, high levels of PTSD symptoms, and/or lower MH-QoL despite high overall levels of resilience. High resilience and ample social support were both significantly associated with lower levels of depressive symptoms; having social support was also significantly associated with lower levels of PTSD symptoms. This highlights the need for broader social change – we need to support trans women!

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Consider mental health to be an important part of trans women with HIV's overall health and wellbeing
- Advocate for increased housing support in ways relevant to your profession
- Recognize the high rates of violence and practice from a trauma- and violence-aware care lens
- Develop and/or refer to social support programs that link trans women together and build community connections
- Work to reduce stigma at multiple levels (e.g., professional and personal)
- Develop policies and practices that are inclusive of trans women living with HIV (and involve trans women in the development)
- Recognize your own assumptions and biases and educate yourself, or seek out opportunities to unlearn these biases
- Work to increase trans women's self-love through individual and/or group psychosocial support

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Persad, Y., Soor, J., Lacombe-Duncan, A., Underhill, A., Warren, L., Logie, C., Butler-Burke, N., Kazemi, M., Kaida, A., de Pokomandy, A., Loutfy, M., & the CHIWOS Research Team. (2019). Mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of trans women living with HIV in Canada. Trans Women HIV Research Initiative Research and Practice Conference 2019, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.