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Mental health and barriers to care in the transgender community

Hillary Gleason, BA

OBJECTIVES: Transgender individuals are at heightened risk for a variety of mental health concerns due to compounding experiences of stigma, discrimination, and victimization. Increasingly, researchers and practitioners are recognizing transgender individuals' mental health needs beyond the Gender Dysphoria diagnosis. Nonetheless, most existing research focuses on anxiety, depression, and substance use in localized transgender samples, yielding disparate results. This review aims to synthesize prevalence rates of mental illness, determine barriers to mental health care, identify gaps in the literature, and recommend further exploration regarding mental health in the transgender community.

METHODS: A systematic review of the transgender mental health literature was conducted in PsychInfo and PubMed databases for relevant articles published during or after 2000. Thematic analysis was employed to organize and interpret results. Results were limited to studies that either explicitly focused on transgender participants or ran separate analyses for their transgender sample; search terms will be explained.

RESULTS: A total of 24 empirical research articles concerning prevalence of mental illness symptoms were found. Studies reporting on depression, anxiety, substance use, and suicidality all supported increased prevalence in comparison to the cisgender population; however, prevalence estimates ranged widely. Few studies reported on post-traumatic stress disorder ($N = 2$), eating disorders ($N = 2$), somatic symptom and related disorders ($N = 2$), dissociative

disorders ($N = 1$), and autism ($N = 1$); there were no studies found examining other mental health diagnoses. Psychological distress was frequently mediated by experiences of transphobia and victimization. Twenty-two review and empirical research articles explored barriers to mental health care; among the most referenced hindrances were discrimination, stigmatization, lack of provider knowledge, and inadequate facility infrastructure.

CONCLUSION: Researchers repeatedly suggest that mounting stigmatizing experiences may exacerbate psychological distress for transgender individuals. Furthermore, stigma and erasure within the health care system may pose significant barriers to accessing needed mental health services. Nonetheless, more research is needed to fully understand these mental health disparities in light of a rapidly changing sociopolitical climate. Future research directions and implications for community advocacy will be discussed.