

# Critical Health Needs for MTF Transgenders of Color

## Preliminary Findings

**Summary:** An investigation of HIV risk in the lives of MTF transgenders of color. We interviewed over 300 African Americans, Asians & Pacific Islanders (APIs), and Latinas from the San Francisco community. Participants discussed numerous risk behaviors that contribute to HIV risk—including unprotected sex, drug use, and sharing injection needles—and how their social environments increase HIV risk throughout the community. Based on our findings, we have developed two programs to address substance abuse and mental health needs in the MTF transgender community.

### **Main Findings**

- Distressing HIV rates throughout the MTF transgender community. Overall, 26% of our sample reported being HIV positive: 42% African Americans, 23% Latinas, and 13% APIs.
- Other serious health risks impact the transgender community, including high rates of Tuberculosis, Hepatitis C, and STDs.
- Systems of social oppression contribute to health risk, such as racism, transphobia, economic hardship, and lack of socioeconomic resources.
- Health care systems must address high levels of substance abuse throughout the community.
- Psychological service providers must address unmet mental health needs in the transgender community.

#### ***Project Team:***

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## Procedures

Between November 2000 and July 2001, outreach staff conducted individual interviews with 332 MTF transgenders from San Francisco.

To be eligible, participants had to:

- Self-identify as an MTF transgender (pre- or post-operative status),
- Self-identify as African American, API, or Latina,
- Have a history of commercial sex work,
- Be 18 years or older.

Respondents were identified from community locations, or were referred from collaborating community agencies. Latina respondents were interviewed in either Spanish or English. Upon completion of the interview, respondents received \$50, safer sex supplies, and referrals to different service agencies.

## Participant Characteristics

Total of 332 MTF transgenders completed interviews: 112 African Americans, 110 APIs, and 110 Latinas.

Ages ranged between 18 and 60 years; average age was 34. More than half (58%) were foreign-born. Other notable demographic characteristics:

- 37% had less than a high school education
- 53% made less than \$1,000 per month
- 51% did not have permanent housing

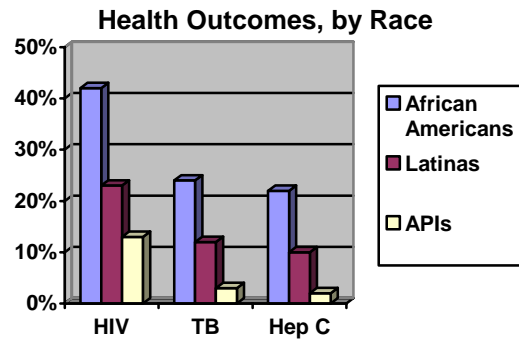
## Health Outcomes

HIV remains a constant threat in the MTF transgender community. Levels of HIV status obtained in our study match levels obtained in studies from other parts of the nation.

Overall, 26% reported being HIV positive, with African Americans reporting the highest rates overall (42%, compared with 23% Latinas and 13% APIs). Alarming levels of Tuberculosis and Hepatitis C were also reported throughout the sample.

Levels of health care utilization remain below ideal levels. During the past year 55% had an HIV test, 58% had an STD screening, and 44% had a TB test. Latinas reported the highest levels of HIV, STD, and TB testing, with APIs reporting the lowest.

Overall, only 17% reported receiving substance abuse treatment services.



## High-Risk Sexual Behaviors

Frequent high-risk sexual behaviors were reported in the sample. Despite HIV prevention campaigns throughout the city, rates of unprotected receptive anal sex remain high. During the past 30 days:

- 41% had receptive anal sex with primary private partners, and 36% of them never used condoms;
- 26% had receptive anal sex with casual partners, and 14% of them never used condoms;
- 30% had receptive anal sex with customers, and 5% of them never used condoms.

APIs were most likely to not use condoms with private partners during anal sex, and African Americans were most likely to not use condoms with casual and commercial sex partners during anal sex.

Commercial sex work was a survival necessity for many participants. During the past week, participants reported an average of 2.5 customers. On average, Latinas had 3.8 customers, African Americans had 2.4 customers, and APIs had 1.3 customers that week.

In light of these findings, we must rethink HIV prevention campaigns to diminish these levels of HIV and HIV risk—which persist despite ongoing efforts. Transgender-specific HIV prevention campaigns are urgently needed.



*The triangle and interconnected gender sign was developed by the International Foundation for Gender Education (IFGE) to symbolize transgendered individuals and their allies.*



### **Substance Use**

Substance use is a common behavior within the MTF transgender community. For participants in our sample, the most frequently used substances during the past 30 days were:

- Alcohol (56%)
- Marijuana (38%)
- Amphetamines, non-injection (24%)
- Crack (13%)
- Ecstasy (9%)

Overall, 23% reported a history of injection drug use (IDU). Highest IDU history rates were for African Americans (37%), yet still reach distressing levels among Latinas (22%) and APIs (12%).

Our findings indicate urgent needs for transgender-specific substance abuse treatment programs. In addition, harm-reduction campaigns are necessary to educate the transgender community about the health consequences of drug use, and to minimize any dangers associated with drugs.

### **Sex while under the influence**

Having sex under the influence of drugs or alcohol is dangerous for many reasons. Drugs and alcohol cloud people’s judgments and sometimes contribute to regretful decisions regarding sexual behaviors and sexual partners. While under the influence of drugs and alcohol, people sometimes lose their sense of control, which leads them to engage in behaviors they

would not otherwise do. Thus, high-risk sex may result from using drugs or alcohol before sex.

In our study, MTF transgenders participants reported high rates of having sex while under the influence of drugs or alcohol:

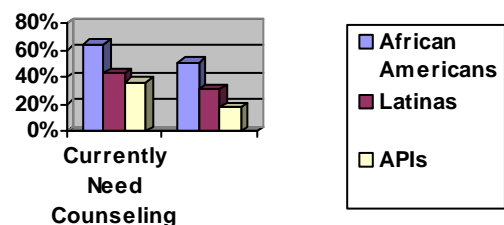
- Among participants with a primary partner, 54% had sex while under the influence. African Americans reported the highest rates of sex with their primary partners while under the influence (84%), although rates for Latinas (33%) and APIs (26%) were also high.
- Among participants with casual partners, 24% had sex while under the influence. Latinas reported the highest rates of sex with casual partners while under the influence (32%), with African Americans (23%) and APIs (18%) also reporting high rates.
- Among participants who had sex with customers, 28% reported sex while under the influence. Again, Latinas (39%) reported the highest rates, followed by African Americans (27%) and APIs (17%).

### **Mental Health**

Urgent mental health needs abound among MTF transgenders of color. Due to social oppression, discrimination, and multiple other forces, MTF transgenders are vulnerable to psychological difficulties that must be addressed.

In our study, roughly one-half (58%) of the sample revealed some level of depression during the prior week. Equally alarming, almost half of the MTF transgenders of color (48%) had ever contemplated suicide, and of those, 66% actually attempted suicide. Participants also reported strong needs for mental health counseling.

**Mental Health Outcomes, by Race**



### Future Steps

With Walden House Recovery Services—a treatment facility in San Francisco—we have developed the **Transgender Recovery Program**. This substance abuse treatment program is staffed by transgender counselors and therapists, and offers services specific to the alcohol and drug recovery needs of MTF transgender clients. Transgender staff provide sensitivity training to all Walden House staff and clients, in an effort to create a trans-positive agency.

With Castro-Mission Health Center—a public health clinic funded through the City of San Francisco—we have developed the **Transgender Life Care** program. This program offers an array of medical health services to transgender clients at the Castro-Mission clinic. Medical staff are specially trained in working with transgender clients.

Finally, we run the **Transgender Resource and Neighborhood Space** (TRANS), which is a beautiful new drop-in space for the MTF transgender community. We offer a series of educational workshops, support groups, and referral services, staffed by a team of transgender professionals. Our living room provides a space where MTF transgenders can relax and enjoy each other's company, and a shower facility is provided for those who would like to refresh themselves.

### Contact Information

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#### **Transgender Recovery Program**

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#### **Transgender Life Care Program**

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#### **Collaborating Agencies**

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New Village/Black Coalition on AIDS  
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#### **TRANS Community Advisory Board:**

Arianna Avila, Carla Clynes, Jeanna Eichenbaum, Prado Gomez, Tamika Gonzales, Jaime Hyatt, Andrea Pasillas, Lacey Prowell, Sally Ramon, Andre Robertson, Claire Skiffington, Adela Vasquez

*The astrological sign of Mercury is another symbol of transgendered people. According to Greek mythology, Hermes (the Greek version of the Roman god Mercury) and Aphrodite (the goddess of love) had a child named Hermaphroditus. Hermaphroditus possessed both male and female sexual organs.*

