

The Importance of Gender-Affirming Care for Medicaid-Enrolled Youth

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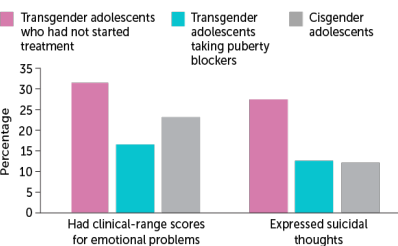
Abstract

Access to gender-affirming care (GAC) is crucial for the mental and physical well-being of transgender and gender-diverse youth. Unfortunately, many barriers exist to obtaining these services, including state-imposed restrictions and insufficient insurance coverage (Dawson et al., 2022). Given the positive mental health outcomes associated with GAC and the significant health disparities faced by low-income transgender individuals compared to their wealthier counterparts (Mann et al., 2022), it is essential for states to implement comprehensive Medicaid policies that cover GAC. This project will explore the importance of GAC for youth and examine the current political landscape affecting access to this care.

Objectives

To answer the following:

1. What is known about the health impacts of gender-affirming care for transgender and gender-diverse youth?
2. How can Medicaid policies around gender-affirming care impact health inequities?



(Gender-Affirming Care Improved Mental Health for Transgender Youth 2021)

TABLE 2

Mental Health Outcomes Among Those Who Received Pubertal Suppression

	Univariate Analyses		Multivariable Analyses	
	OR (95% CI)	P	aOR (95% CI)	P
Suicidality, past 12 mo				
Ideation	0.6 (0.4-0.8)	.006†	0.6 (0.3-1.1)	0.09
Identification with plan	0.9 (0.5-1.6)	.73		
Identification with plan and attempt	1.2 (0.6-2.3)	.64		
Attempt resulting in inpatient care	2.8 (0.8-9.4)	.09		
Suicidality, lifetime				
Ideation	0.3 (0.2-0.5)	<.001*	0.3 (0.2-0.6)	0.001*
Attempts	0.7 (0.4-1.0)	.08		
Mental health and substance use				
Past-month severe psychological distress, K6-13	0.5 (0.3-0.8)	.001†	0.4 (0.4-1.4)	0.38
Past-month binge drinking	0.3 (0.8-2.0)	.29		
Lifetime illicit drug use	1.1 (0.7-1.8)	.67		

(Turban et al., 2020)

Background

Gender-affirming care (GAC) is healthcare designed to affirm individuals' gender identities" (Sakay, Yasemin Nicola, 2022). This range of gender-affirming services includes: hormone therapy, surgery, social affirmation, and behavioral health services.

Terms to understand:

- Gender: "One's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither – how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves" (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.).
- Transgender: "Someone whose gender identity differs from the one that was assigned to them at birth. Many transgender people identify as either male or female" (It Gets Better Project, 2021b).
- Gender diverse: "[a]n umbrella term for a person with a gender identity and/or expression broader than the male or female binary" (Office of Population Affairs, n.d.). Cisgender: "A person whose gender identity matches the gender they were assigned at birth" (It Gets Better Project, 2021a).

Methods

Examined research on the health impacts of gender-affirming care on transgender and gender-diverse youth to determine if Medicaid programs should prioritize coverage of these services.

Keywords used in searches: Gender-affirming care, Medicaid, transgender youth, health disparities, gender-diverse youth, mental health, insurance policies, gender-affirming care bans, gender-affirming care laws, gender-affirming care access

Results

Access to gender-affirming care (GAC) significantly reduces negative mental health events and frequent mental distress among low-income transgender individuals. Transgender and gender-diverse youth, who disproportionately experience anxiety, depression, and suicidality compared to their cisgender peers, show markedly improved mental health outcomes when they receive GAC.

Children covered by Medicaid are typically from lower socioeconomic backgrounds compared to those with private insurance. Ensuring that this vulnerable population has access to comprehensive care, including GAC, is crucial as it constitutes a significant portion of transgender and gender-diverse youths' health needs. Guaranteeing access to these services is essential to prevent exacerbating existing mental health disparities based on gender identity and socioeconomic status.

Despite these findings, more research is needed specifically on transgender youth enrolled in Medicaid, as most studies focus on transgender adults on Medicaid or transgender youth without considering their insurance status.

Conclusions

Research consistently demonstrates the positive health impacts of gender-affirming care (GAC), with no substantial evidence indicating harm from such care. Despite this, there is currently no federal policy explicitly protecting access to GAC. GAC services are life-saving for transgender and gender-diverse youth (Kidd et al., 2021), and the lack of access to these services poses a significant public health issue. States must develop inclusive Medicaid policies that prohibit gender-based healthcare discrimination, ensure access to essential GAC services, and provide training for pediatricians on delivering GAC. Additionally, these policies should offer protection for patients, caregivers, and providers. Implementing such measures will reduce negative mental health outcomes for transgender and gender-diverse individuals covered by Medicaid, addressing a crucial aspect of public health equity.

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