

Sexual Violence and Transgender Individuals
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Individuals who identify as transgender or transsexual are at high risk of abuse, including sexual assault. However, they rarely come to the attention of anti-violence advocates, law enforcement, or health professionals. I would like to address why this is so, but first here are some important definitions.

Gender identity is different from sexual orientation, a distinction that most people fail to make. Gender identity is how a person identifies—as male or female, neither or both. Transgender is a gender identity category and refers to people who don't conform to the expectations of a cultural binary system (i.e., we are *supposed to be* male or female and this is *supposed to* line up with a male body or female body). Sexual orientation has to do with who we are attracted to for intimacy. We can be homosexual, heterosexual, asexual, bisexual, or queer—a word more people use today to mean attraction to different types of gender identities that go beyond the dichotomy of male and female. In any case, these two categories—gender identity and sexual orientation—are distinct aspects of ourselves and are not necessarily connected. For example, being transgender does not necessarily mean you are gay.

Transgender is widely used as an umbrella category to refer to a variety of gender variations. It's important to note that not everyone is comfortable with the word transgender even though it is widely used. The most common variations are transsexuals, intersexuals, cross-dressers, drag performers, and bi-gendered or other people. I'll give brief definitions here.

Transsexuals are folks who have a gender identity that differs from their physical body and the cultural label and expectation that comes from that body type. So, the person in a boy body who is expected to feel like a boy, do boy things, and grow up to be 'manly' may identify as a girl and want to live life as a girl. Generally transsexuals know when they are quite young that they identify differently than their physical body indicates. Whether they will go through a transition process—and where along that process they go—is quite variable. Some transsexuals take hormones, have surgery, electrolysis, facial reconstruction, and so forth, but there are many reasons to do or not do each step. Finances, health factors, family restrictions, personal inclinations and other issues factor in. Whether they are male-to-female or female-to-male also makes a big difference in what an individual chooses in their transition process. Transsexuals usually want to live their lives as the gender they identify as, and this is a distinction from other transgender people.

Intersexuals are individuals born with genital, chromosome, internal reproductive organ or hormonal variation. This may be discovered at birth, at puberty, sometime later in life, or not at all. Hermaphrodites are one kind of intersexual; they are born with genital characteristics of both males and females. While this is perhaps the best known, it is only about 5% of all intersexuals.

Cross-dressers are generally heterosexual males who enjoy occasionally dressing in female clothing, make-up and hairstyle to express their feminine side. These males do not want to be women. Women who cross-dress in male clothing are not even viewed as “cross-dressers.” This is an interesting commentary on our culture—it is much more noteworthy (and unacceptable) when males dress in female clothing. Drag performers are individuals who dress in the clothes of the other sex for entertainment purposes. It is not an identity, and generally they do not identify as transgender, but some might. Other transgender individuals live their lives outside of the typical binary, not clearly men or women. They might combine characteristics, such as butch, or masculine, women.

The consequence of being transgender if you are sexually assaulted are many. Many transgender individuals deal with some degree of body shame. Some transsexuals go through a period of time when they feel like freaks. Consequently, this is a group of people who do not seek out health care and do not want to put themselves in an exposed or vulnerable position around their bodies. Even purchasing hormones may be done over the Internet rather than through a doctor.

Transgender folks are reluctant to go to law enforcement because there have been some high profile cases of police abuse of transgender people. The trust level is low. Reporting any crime against them is highly unlikely, as they do not want to subject themselves to possible ridicule.

Transgender individuals are sometimes targeted for sexual assault *because* they are transgender. If abusive individuals feel they need to “teach him or her a lesson” because the transgender person doesn’t conform to their ideas of appropriate gender behavior and presentation, they are being targeted. Sometimes the transgender person in an abusive intimate relationship will have their transgender status used against them. The partner may threaten to out them or verbally and psychologically abuse them. They may be physically and sexually abused. The transgender person may feel they have no option but to put up with the abuse in order to be in a relationship at all.

Transgender individuals face a hostile world—few laws include gender identity or gender expression in protection ordinances, most insurance plans do not cover their medical and health needs, and there is no employment or housing protection from discrimination. Daily harassment, loss of family, homelessness, depression and isolation are common issues many transgender people cope with. Sexual violence remains a hidden problem for this community at this time and until there is significant social change it will remain stories told in private, abuses dealt with in silence. The most important steps you can take are to educate yourself and gather some resources and referrals for transgender people. You never know, there might be a transgender child in the classroom you are presenting to and what you say could end some of their isolation.

Please contact the Wingspan Anti-Violence Project (avp@wingspan.org) or the Southern Arizona Gender Alliance (info@sagatucson.org) for more information on transgender people.