



ADVANCING EXCELLENCE IN TRANSGENDER HEALTH

Family Systems of Transgender Youth

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Conflict of Interest Statement

- I have no conflicts of interest to disclose



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- K99/R00 mentorship team
- Collaborators
- Research staff
- Study participants

Outline

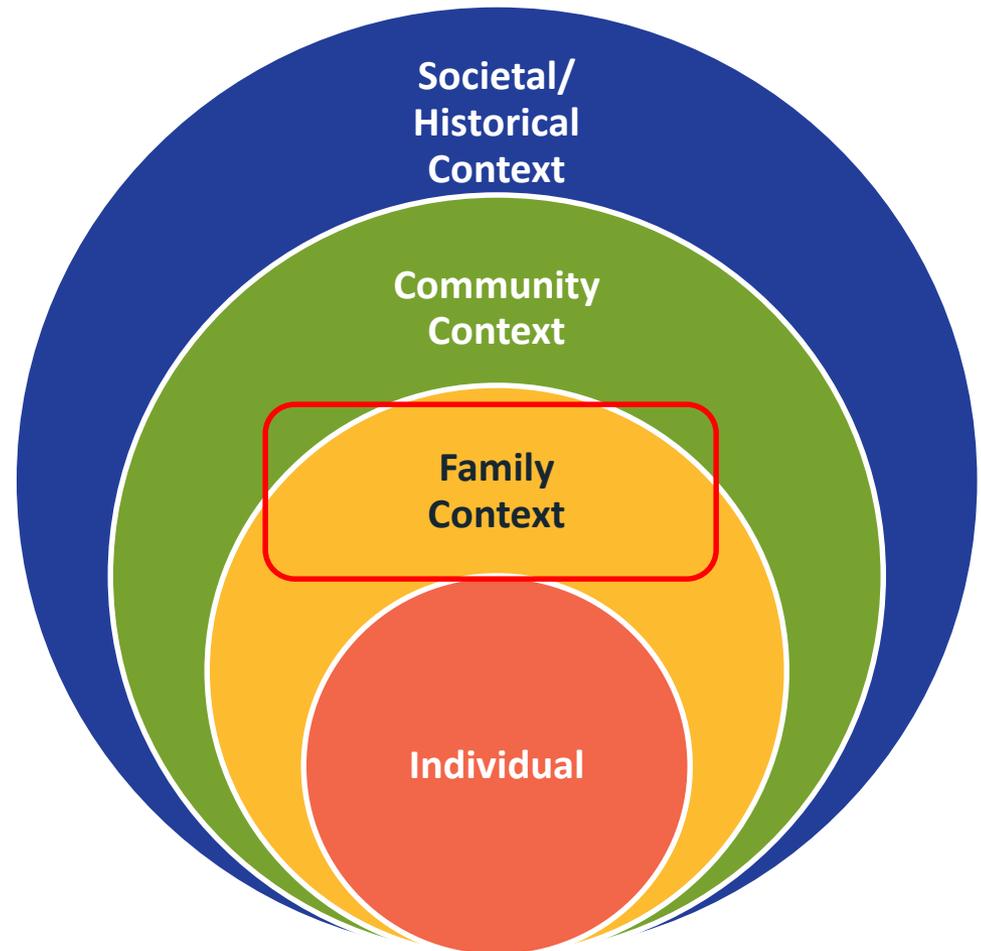
1. Family systems and minority stress
2. STUDY 1: Findings from the Trans Youth Family Study
3. STUDY 2: Findings from the Trans Teen and Family Narratives Project
4. Implications for practice

Thought Exercise

- Take a moment to imagine a family with a trans youth who you've worked with recently...
 - What are family relationships like in this family?
 - Do family members support the trans youth? If yes, how?
 - How might the trans youth's mental health be related to their family relationships?

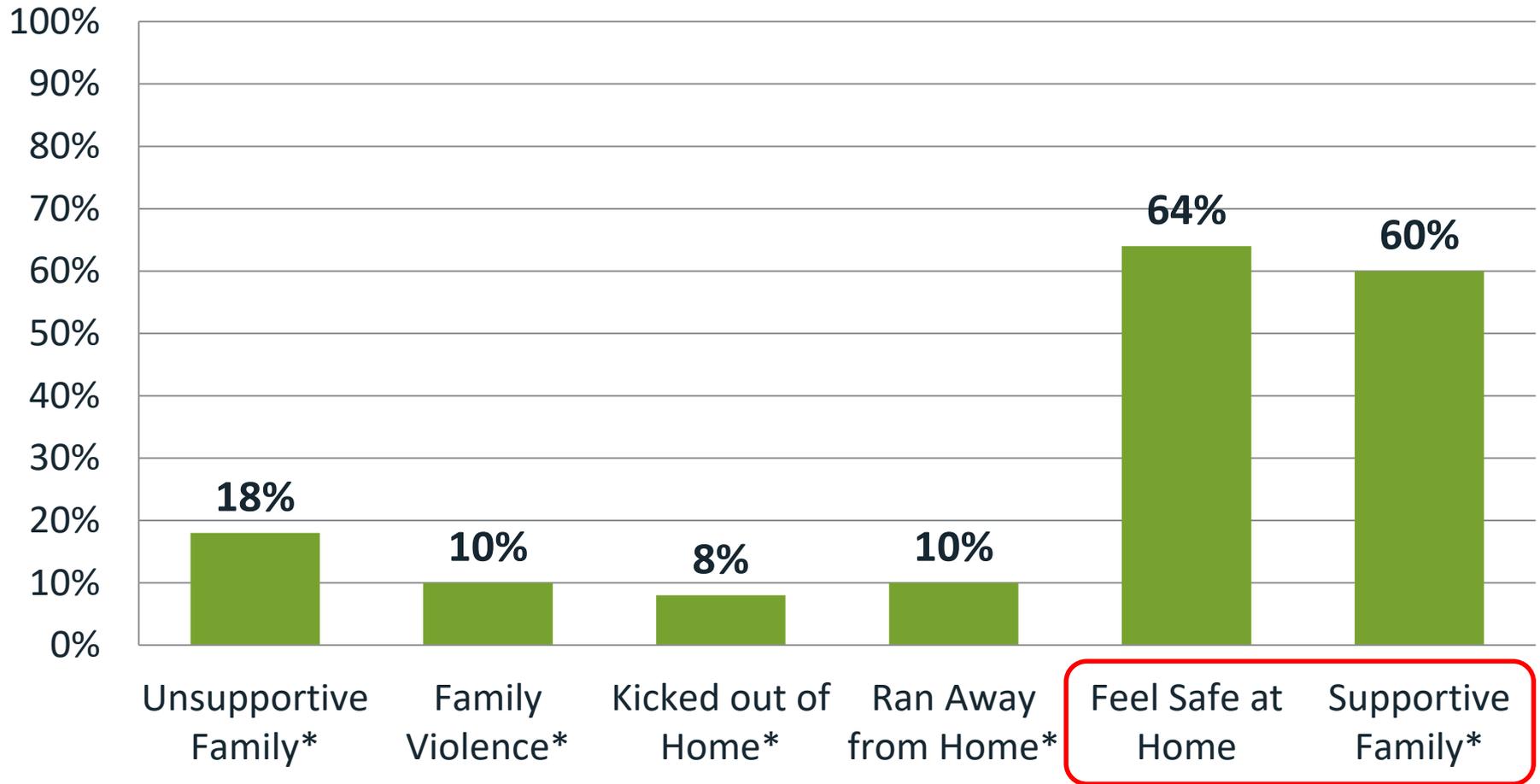
Family Systems Theory

- Family members are interdependent
- Individual experiences must be considered within functioning of family system
- Transition for one family member challenges entire family system



Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1985

Trans Experiences with Family



*2015 U.S. Trans Survey (adults); 2017 Canadian Trans Youth Health Survey (youth)



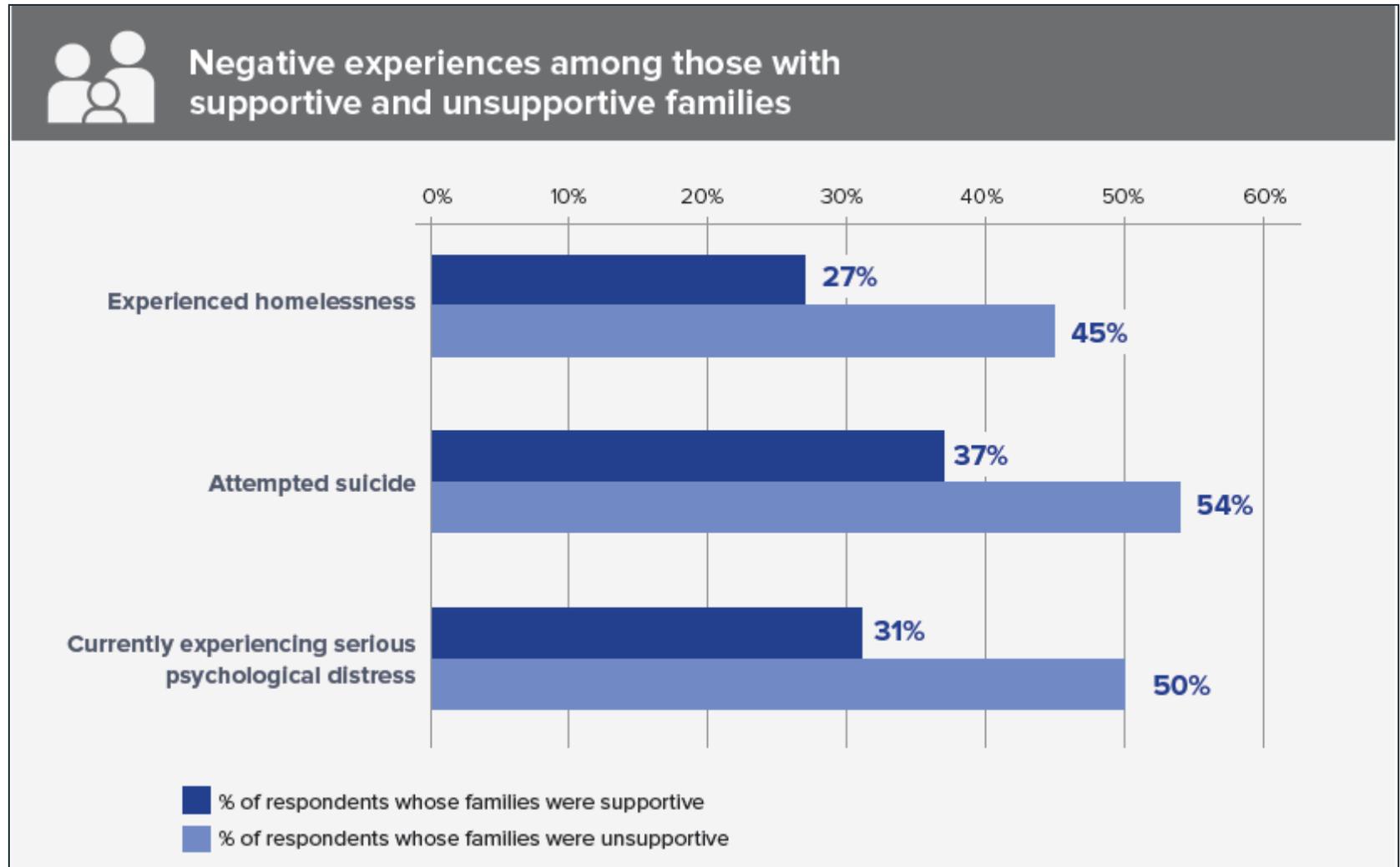
Protective Role of Family

- Socially transitioned trans children who are supported in their gender identities have normative levels of depression
- Parental support is associated with higher life satisfaction, lower perceived burden of being trans, fewer depressive symptoms, less suicidality among trans adolescents
- Trans youth with higher levels of family support and connectedness report better health

Olson et al., 2016; Saewyc et al., 2017; Simons et al., 2013; Veale et al., 2015



Protective Role of Family



STUDY 1: Trans Youth Family Study (TYFS)



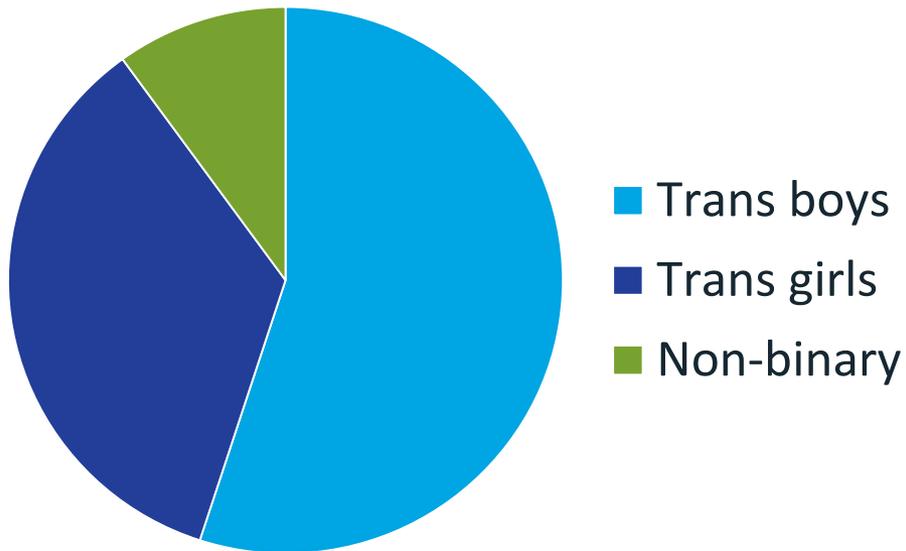
Research Question

- How do trans youth and caregivers describe their relationships within the family?

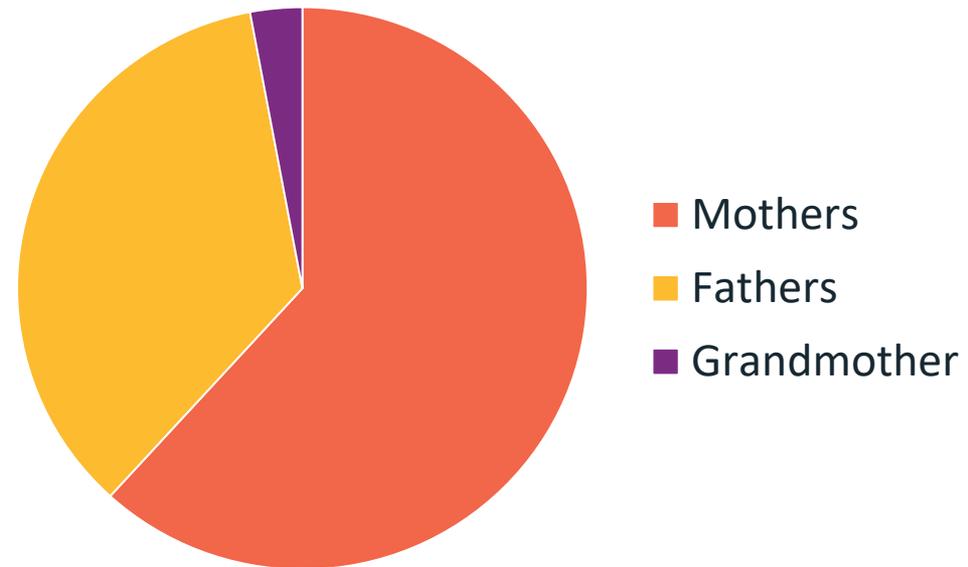
Sample

- 20 families (54 family members)

Trans Youth (n = 20)



Cisgender Caregivers (n = 34)



Other Sample Characteristics

- Age range
 - Trans youth: 7-18 years
 - Caregivers: 34-63 years
- Race/ethnicity
 - Trans youth: 80% White
 - Caregivers: 97% White
- Education
 - Caregivers: 38% had graduate degree

Study Design & Procedures

- Longitudinal
 - Baseline
 - 6-month follow-up
- Mixed methods
 - Qualitative interviews with each family member
 - Brief survey with each family member
- Participants recruited from support networks in northeastern, midwestern, and southern U.S.

Themes Related to Relationships

Youth-Caregiver

- Closeness
- Movement to acceptance
- Conflict

Caregiver-Caregiver

- Proactivity between caregivers
- Discordance in parenting
- Support

Contextual Factors

- School
- Extended family

Bhattacharya et al., under review

Themes Related to Relationships

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- Closeness
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Bhattacharya et al., under review

Youth-Caregiver: Closeness

“[With] my mom, I think it’s gotten us a little closer, because we have deeper conversations and we talk more. But with my dad, it's like there is a mini-elephant in the room. Not like a huge one but just a little one.”

Trans boy, age 15 years



Youth-Caregiver: Movement to Acceptance

“I think any parent would have to say there is some level of disappointment. I think you develop expectations of ‘this is what I want to do with my child’ and, again, there are stereotypical girl things, there are stereotypical boy things and wanting to share those with your child... You have to find different things that you can share together. So there is an adjustment period there and, probably, a continuing adjustment.”

Father of a girlish boy, age 8 years



Youth-Caregiver: Conflict

“[P]eople would ask me, oh, are you on testosterone? And I’d have to explain to them, no, my dad doesn’t accept [my gender identity].”

Trans boy, age 18 years

Themes Related to Relationships

Caregiver-Caregiver

- Proactivity between caregivers
- Discordance in parenting
- Support

Bhattacharya et al., under review

Caregiver-Caregiver Relationships: Proactivity Between Caregivers

“I'm still more proactive... I'm the one who did the name change, went to court...[I] took him for his social security card. So, none of that would be done had it been left to my husband but, again, to me, that's just kind of the man-woman thing. I don't know, I just take charge.”

Mother of a trans boy, age 16 years



Caregiver-Caregiver Relationships: Discordance in Parenting

“[A]t the time, my husband and I had very different ideas on how to raise a child like this... It was one opinion against another opinion. As easy as that. That became very troublesome for many different reasons... We weren't giving each other support because we didn't believe what the other one thought we should do, and so we were at constant odds [about] how to even address a child like this.”

Mother of a gender-fluid boy, age 9 years



Caregiver-Caregiver Relationships: Support

“We would be going to see my family, and I would be freaking out. I’d get real stressed out and worried, like, ‘What is this gonna be like? How is this gonna go?’ And that’s where [my husband] would come and support me, and help me through it, and try to see my way through it.”

Mother of a trans girl, age 8 years



Themes Related to Relationships

Contextual Factors

- School
- Extended family
- Religion

Bhattacharya et al., under review

Contextual Factors: School

“They were really, really supportive. And I think, you know, that helped a lot, even in the first month or two. They just set the tone, I think.”

Father of a trans boy, age 18 years

“We offered a lot of professionals to come to the school, and offered things to other parents, if they were curious. We offered things to the teachers, and our school was just absolutely not supportive in that.”

Mother of a trans girl, age 11 years

Contextual Factors: Extended Family

“My dad...said, ‘I just don’t understand, at what point are you going to make him play with gender-appropriate toys?’ So, I just lost it. And I just said, ‘This is who he is, this is what he likes to play with, and I’m not going to tell him that it’s wrong.’...My husband said to me, ‘I’ve never heard you yell at anyone like that! I’ve never seen you have a fight.’ It was the biggest fight of my life.”

Mother of a girlish boy, age 8 years



Contextual Factors: Religion

“The kids that go to them, they kind of practice... radical acceptance, ‘Oh my gosh, you’re different, that’s the best thing ever!’”

Trans boy, age 17 years

TYFS Summary of Findings

- Family relationships are complex with differing levels of closeness and conflict
- Contextual factors from outside the family affect relationships within the family
- Themes highlight importance of healthy relationships among family members for trans youths' well-being

STUDY 2: Trans Teen and Family Narratives Project (TTFN)



SHARE YOUR STORY

in the Trans Teen and Family

Narratives Project

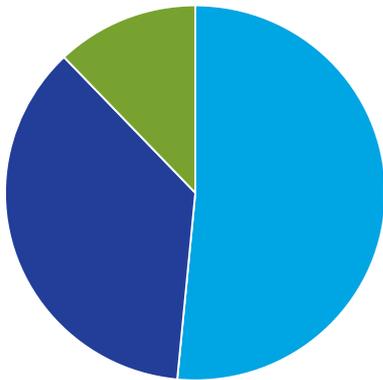
Research Questions

1. What is the mental health of trans youth in a community-based sample of families?
2. How is family functioning associated with trans youths' mental health?

Sample

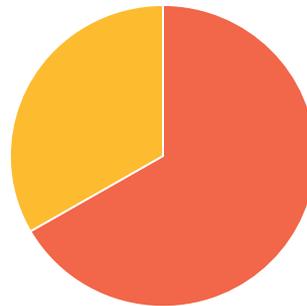
- 33 families (96 family members)

Trans Youth (n = 33)



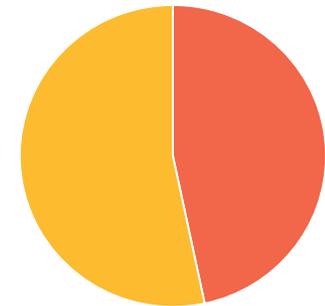
■ Trans boys ■ Trans girls
■ Non-binary

Cisgender Caregivers (n = 48)



■ Women ■ Men

Cisgender Siblings (n = 15)



■ Girls ■ Boys

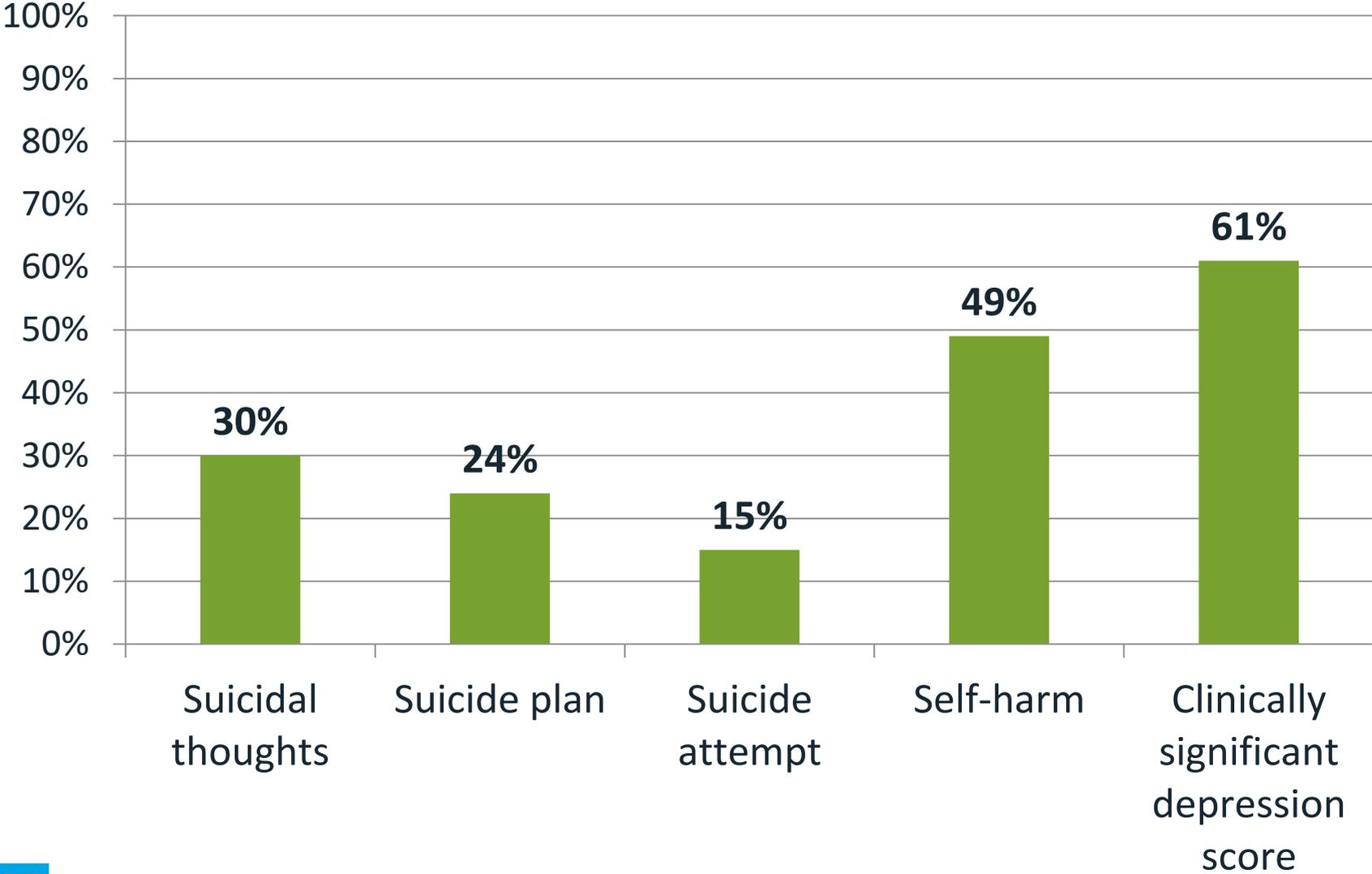
Other Sample Characteristics

- Age range
 - Trans youth: 13-17 years
 - Caregivers: 37-69 years
 - Siblings: 14-24 years
- Race/ethnicity
 - Trans youth: 73% White
 - Caregivers: 92% White
 - Siblings: 73% White
- Education
 - Caregivers: 40% had graduate degree

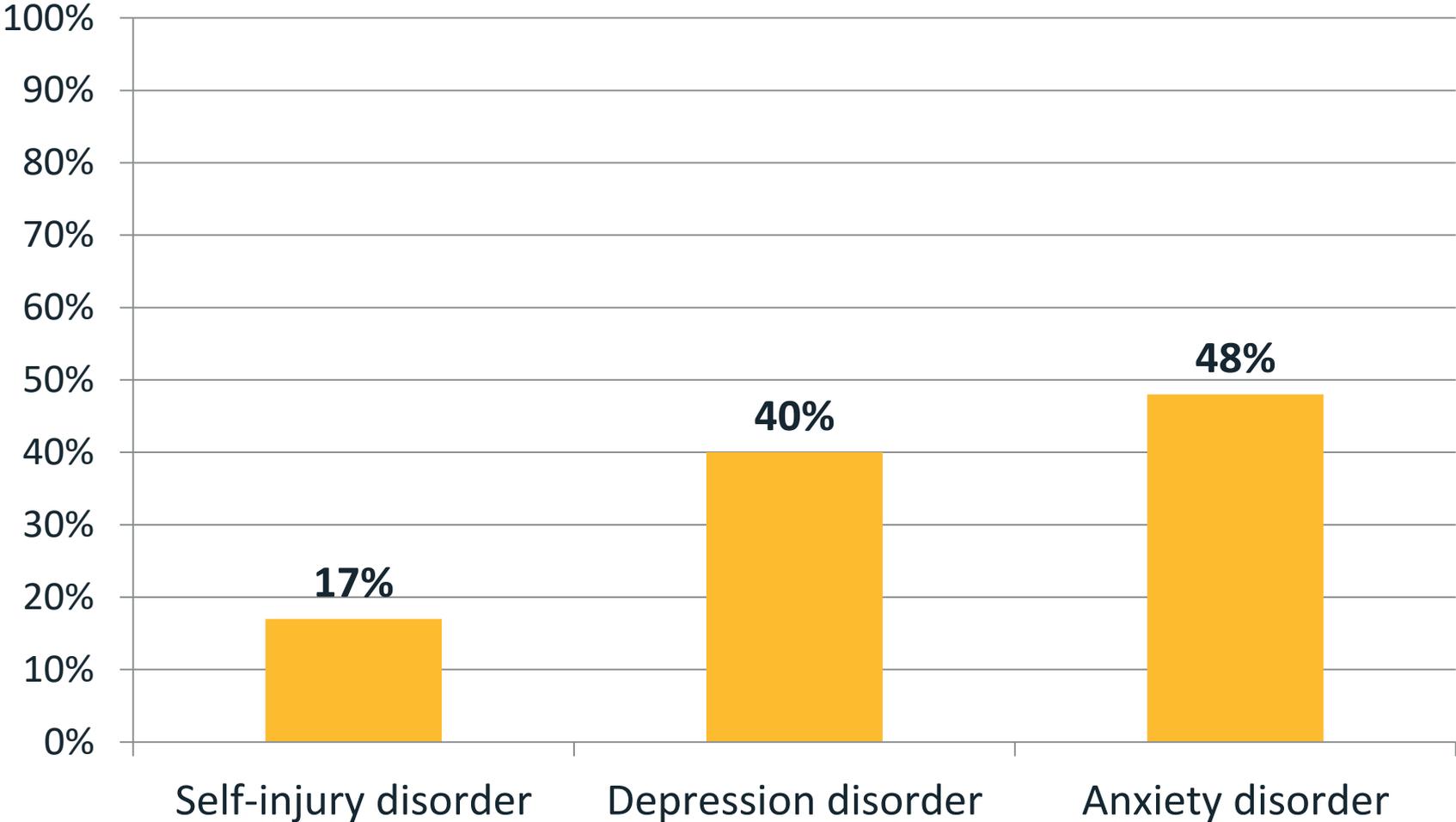
Study Design & Procedures

- Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach
- Longitudinal
 - Wave 1 of 5 waves across 2 years
- Mixed methods
 - Qualitative interviews and surveys with each family member
- Participants recruited from multiple sources across New England to obtain diverse range of experiences

Trans Youths' Mental Health (Youth Report)



Trans Youths' Mental Diagnoses (Caregiver Report)



Family Functioning & Trans Youths' Mental Health

- Trans youth who reported better family communication had:
 - Lower depressive and anxious symptoms
 - Higher self-esteem and resiliency
- Trans youth who reported higher family satisfaction had:
 - Less self-harm
 - Lower depressive and anxious symptoms
 - Higher self-esteem

Family Functioning & Trans Youths' Mental Health

- Caregivers' and siblings' reports of family functioning were not significantly related to trans youths' mental health

TTFN Summary of Findings

- Trans youth in this sample have alarming rates of mental health concerns, even though families are supportive enough to participate in research together
- Better family functioning (from trans youths' perspective only) was associated with better mental health outcomes among trans youth

TYFS and TTFN Limitations

- TYFS did not include siblings
- TTFN families were from New England only (primarily MA)
- Families were largely supportive (though not always initially)
- Families were primarily White with higher caregiver education

Implications for Practice

- How might the findings inform your own practice with trans youth and families?

Implications for Practice

- Family systems approach is necessary for caring for trans youth
 - All family members should be involved in trans youth's care, while recognizing that trans youth are the experts about their own experience
- Trans youths' own perception of family functioning may be most relevant for their mental health and should be prioritized

Case Discussion



Case 1 Description

- Background:
 - Assigned female/male-identified trans teen, age 15 years, White race/ethnicity
 - Recently started using they/them pronouns around trans friends and contemplating being “more non-binary than male”
 - Older sibling thinks the trans teen’s coming out was a “cry for attention” in the household
 - Mom supports trans teen’s medical transition after initially calling it a phase, saying “I’ve always wanted a son”
- Teen wants to talk with a medical provider about lowering their dosage of testosterone

Case 1 Questions

1. How might family dynamics influence the teen's decision to discuss hormone treatment with their medical provider?
2. What are some stressors for the teen? What are some sources of support?
3. How do family dynamics impact the health and wellbeing of trans teens inside and outside the clinic?

Case 2 Description

- Background
 - Assigned male/female-identified trans teen, age 16 years, Asian American race/ethnicity
 - Lives with dad and grandmother in a rural town
 - After the 2016 presidential election, family members have frequently fought over politics in the household
 - Dad voted for Donald Trump and supported an anti-trans bathroom bill in their state, saying “It’s not for people like you, it’s for the weirdos, the bearded ladies”
 - Grandmother voted for Hillary Clinton and adamantly supports the teen’s gender identity
- The teen presents with depression and anxiety and harbors resentment toward her father

Case 2 Questions

1. How might the differing political opinions of family members impact the mental health of the trans teen?
2. What social support is available for the teen? What stressors are present?
3. What are some ways providers can support the trans teen and promote familial coherence?

Thank you!

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