



## Opinion

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As the private lives of trans people are dragged into public debate, it's time for facts

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It feels good to have more data than ever behind us while fighting damaging narratives at work, in courtrooms and parliaments around Australia

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sex and romance are significant aspects of most people's lives, from the ways we live, love others, the media we buy and consume, our dreams and fantasies, and to how we think about and engage with our sexual

**S** health. If you know, love or are intimate with trans and gender-diverse people, it's no secret that we have sexual and romantic lives just like anyone, and yet until now very little research has been done about how these are expressed and experienced.

In response to this lack of research, the [2018 Australian Trans and Gender Diverse Sexual Health Survey](#) was initiated late last year, in an online survey hosted by the Kirby Institute at the University of New South Wales and conducted in collaboration with community advocates, clinicians and researchers from around Australia.

We wanted to find out more about the role of sex, romance, sexuality and sexual health in the lives of trans and gender-diverse people, who are estimated to make up 1-2%\* of the population, and so we asked them - 1,613 of them to be exact.

Never before has a study this size been conducted by so many members of the trans and gender-diverse community, and the results of that level of involvement are clear, not only in the number of participants but in the generosity of information and stories entrusted to us. Our community shared their hopes, fears and satisfaction about and access to gender affirmation, the highs of gender euphoria and the alarming levels of sexual violence and coercion. We also learned so much about how trans and gender-diverse people access (or don't access) sexual healthcare, the types of sex they're having and with whom.

Although Australia boasts a number of large health studies that feature trans and gender-diverse people, their focus has mainly regarded mental and physical health, or when sex and sexuality are looked at, the inclusion of trans lives and bodies leaves much to be desired, if it's included at all.

A key statistic arising from our survey is that even though most participants reported realising in their mid-teens that their gender was different to what had been presumed for them at birth, it took an average of eight years for them to tell anyone else about that experience. That means that most trans and gender-diverse people may be negotiating the secrecy and confusion that often comes with a lack of disclosure for upwards of a decade. Trans and gender-diverse people deserve to feel seen, supported and able to exist on their own terms and in a form that affirms them, without fear of violence or judgment. We hope the findings of this and future research will continue to do that work and break down barriers.

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The survey also included a brief and optional section asking about sexual violence. Of those who chose to answer this section, we found that 53% of participants had experienced sexual violence or coercion, compared with 13% of the general Australian population, with over 60% of them having experienced it more than once. These findings are corroborated by similar findings from North America and Europe, and speaks to the critical and largely unaddressed issue of sexual violence being perpetrated against transgender people around the world.

We also found that a majority of participants who'd accessed medical gender affirmation processes were satisfied or very satisfied with the results, with a minority reporting being unsatisfied or very unsatisfied, and with a number of participants reporting they had been able to alter their hormonal regimens as they required, often to positive effect.

It's our belief that this survey fills a gap in existing research, honestly reflecting the lives of those who contributed, the trust people gave to us, and illuminating issues that need to be addressed in order to improve the sexual health and wellbeing of trans and gender-diverse people across Australia. We hope the

survey findings will increase clinical, academic and public literacy about trans and gender-diverse lives, but also increase awareness within the community, helping trans and gender-diverse people become more aware of each other's experiences.

There couldn't be a more important time for this research to be published. The political and media storm of transphobia and misinformation that has swept the world in recent years has now reached Australian shores, as the private lives of trans and gender-diverse people are interrogated, dragged into public debate and positioned as shameful and perverse. We have always known that these ideas could not be further from the truth, but it feels good to have more data than ever behind us while fighting these narratives at home and at work, in doctors' offices and courtrooms, and in parliaments around the country.

This report is a call for policymakers, health promoters and service providers to take note of these findings, and to take action.

No research, and no researcher, is entirely separate from the subjects of that work, and studies designed and conducted entirely by cisgender people is not a neutral act, and instead will inevitably reflect the perspectives and prejudices of those researchers. With the launch of this report, and with future publications and discussion of the survey, we hope to shift this perspective and show it's not only essential, but deeply valuable for any research to name those perspectives, and in the process involve and be led by community members.

As with any research project, invariably we come out of this process with far more questions than answers, but what we have been able to learn is incredible and entirely thanks to the generosity and care of the community we serve. There is still so much we don't know about the sex lives, sexuality and sexual health of transgender and gender diverse people, but we're glad to be starting to piece the puzzle together and help to make our lives - in and out of the bedroom - more visible than ever before.

\* Sources from Australian, UK and US research vary from between 0.2-3%

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