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Coronavirus Research by the European Children's Rights Unit

The Impact of COVID-19 on Young Trans People



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Coronavirus (COVID-19) #LivUniCOVID
Research and response

Briefing Paper #10

Hannah Hirst

The Impact of COVID-19 on Young Trans People – Hannah Hirst

1. Introduction

On the eve of this year's [International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia](#) a group of [international human rights experts](#) called on States and other stakeholders to urgently take into account the impact of COVID-19 on LGBTQ individuals when creating, assessing, and implementing measures to combat the pandemic. Although the number of gender non-conforming youth is difficult to quantify, [2,728](#) young people were referred to the Gender Identity Development Service in England between 2019-2020. This equates to around 52 referrals per week. The [closure](#) of English gender identity clinics specialising in the treatment of children and adolescents, as well as GP surgeries, pharmacies and schools in April 2020 has, and will continue to have, a profound and long-lasting effect on young individuals and the implementation of their rights. During these closures, the Chairwoman of the Women and Equalities Committee [outlined plans](#) to prohibit individuals under eighteen accessing medical transition services making 2020 an even more uncertain and challenging year for trans youth.

2. Access to Gender Identity Development Services (GIDS) and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) during the pandemic

Established in 1989 by Domenico Di Ceglie, the Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS) for children and adolescents in England is one of the longest standing services for trans youth in the world. Two clinics, located in London and Leeds, provide [a range of therapeutic treatments](#) for young people diagnosed by gender identity experts as trans. In the absence of a legal framework the regulation of these treatments is overseen by [NHS England](#).

Along with many other health facilities managed by the NHS, the Tavistock and Portman Foundation Trust announced in March that it would substitute young patients' face-to-face appointments with clinicians for virtual meetings. This step follows COVID-19 policy laid out by the government in section 10 of the [Coronavirus Act \(2020\)](#): 'The Act allows NHS providers to delay assessment of a patients' need for ongoing nursing care before discharging.' Although it is unclear how this change to appointments will impact those referred to GIDS by a GP, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services or a school, reports indicate that it has resulted in prolonged patient waiting times and delayed prescriptions. This follows [criticism](#) of GIDS lengthy waiting times prior to the pandemic. Time is a delicate matter for those undergoing or wishing to go through medical transition; [research](#) indicates that a young person's suffering increases as their puberty advances. Cancelling in-person appointments will inevitably lead to delays in young patients receiving their hormone prescriptions and physical examinations from gender identity experts. Hannah Simpson [points out](#) that interrupting hormone use can impact the progress of physical transition and cause trans people to experience withdrawal symptoms, including hair growth, breast development, mood swings, anxiety, and depression. It is, therefore, unsurprising that there has been a [surge](#) in young people taking charge of their own care by accessing hormones online through unregulated gender clinics.

As a group, young trans persons are proportionately more reliant than cis individuals on CAMHS, as they frequently [experience](#) mental health difficulties that can manifest in suicidal ideations and self-harm. In April 2020 the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child stated, in two of its [eleven COVID-19 recommendations](#), that countries' governments must maintain the provision of basic services for children, including mental health support. In a similar vein to GIDS, CAMHS moved to virtual appointments in March. This has proven to be problematic for mental health patients and professionals alike, '[since mental health interventions depend upon seeing a person and understanding what is said without words](#)', and led mental health professionals to call on the government for clearer instructions and more resources to fund creative ways of reaching out to young people. Another consequence of the pandemic on CAMHS has been the plummet in post-lockdown referral rates. This reduction has been

attributed to young people and their families failing to attend hospital or a GP surgery during a mental health crisis because of fears related to coronavirus. [Reports](#) also suggest that there have been no referrals from schools in England since lockdown in March.

Although the temporary closure of GIDS and CAMHS in-person appointments has impacted young peoples' right to access health facilities it must, nevertheless, be balanced with the harms of coronavirus exposure. [Medical papers](#) published earlier this year emphasise that COVID-19 can be easily transmitted in healthcare venues, and that the Kawasaki disease can be fatal among children and adolescents. Furthermore, Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) requires State Parties' 'to combat disease within a primary healthcare framework and through, inter alia, the application of readily available technology.' Measures laid out in the Coronavirus Act (2020) and NHS Track and Trace App have, to a very limited extent, tackled transmission of the coronavirus and Kawasaki disease.

3. Tackling transphobic discrimination, prejudice and abuse

Many young trans individuals report suffering discrimination, prejudice, and abuse related to their gender identity in England. This is despite section 13 of the Equality Act (2010) prohibiting the direct discrimination of a person because of a protected characteristic. The Act incorporates gender, sex and gender reassignment as protected characteristics under sections 5,7, and 11 respectively. Alarming, transphobic behaviour is often exhibited by those who are close to a young trans person, including peers, parents and family members. School closures throughout the pandemic have led to a rise in [complaints](#) that young trans individuals are experiencing transphobia at home. Akin to GIDS and CAMHS, schools represent a lifeline to many young people, as they provide a range of resources and specially trained staff to counsel trans youth and deal with incidents of discrimination. Article 2 of the UNCRC (1989) obliges State Parties' to not only respect a young person's rights irrespective of their sex, but also to take all appropriate measures to ensure a child is protected against

discrimination. Research indicates that transphobic abuse and bullying increases the likelihood of a young person self-harming or experiencing suicidal ideations. Indeed, a [study](#) conducted by Stonewall reported 84% of its young respondents have self-harmed, and 45% have attempted suicide. There is, therefore, an urgent need for young people studying at home to be supported and cases of discrimination to be challenged.

4. What support is currently available for young trans people?

COVID-19 has been a challenging time for trans youth and their families. A lack of in-person support from medical professionals and prolonged waiting for treatment has increased the distress young people experience because of conflict between their gender identity and biological sex. Despite this, mechanisms and advice for coping with difficulties related to coronavirus and transgenderism are available through LGBTQ organisations' webpages. Advice related to health and trans practices, such as binding,¹ may be particularly useful to some young people. Organisations, including the [Trans Education Network of Texas](#), note that the restriction of wearing a binder can exacerbate symptoms of the coronavirus, since it is a respiratory illness. As such, TENT recommends trans people take a break from wearing a binder if they begin to feel unwell and/or show symptoms of COVID-19. Mermaids, a UK charity specifically created to help gender diverse youth, provides a free [helpline](#) and [web chat](#), Monday to Friday 9-5pm and [text chat](#) 24/7, for any young person struggling with the impacts of COVID-19 on their trans identity. There has also been a surge in '[community led](#)' support. This type of assistance involves trans individuals supporting other gender non-conforming people through [online discussion](#) about their distress and transition. A positive outcome of the pandemic has been the increase in this type of resource for gender diverse youth. A full list of online support for young

¹ Binding is a technique used to minimise the appearance of a MtF person's breasts. Trans men and gender-nonconforming individuals use binders to bind their breasts to their body, creating a flatter and more male like chest. For more information regarding binding please see: A. Lee, P. Simpson and B. Haire, 'The binding practices of transgender and gender-diverse adults in Sydney, Australia' (2018) *Culture, Health & Security* 21 (9), pp. 969-984.

trans people can be found attached to this briefing paper.

5. Conclusion

The pandemic has exacerbated many of the challenges trans youth face in overcoming discrimination and receiving adequate support from GIDS, CAMHS and schools to deal with the distress they experience because of conflict between their biological sex and gender identity. Nevertheless, coronavirus and Kawasaki disease present a substantial risk to the health and welfare of young trans individuals and their families. As these illnesses can be transmitted through physical contact and droplets in the air, it is in the best interests of trans youth for in-person appointments at GIDS and CAMHS to be temporarily cancelled, pending review. It is vital, however, that young trans people be supported through their experiences of distress and discrimination. At this time gender-diverse children, as well as their families and teachers, can turn to LGBTQ organisations for online support, guidance and signposting.

6. Online resources for trans youth affected by COVID-19

Young people

- Gendered Intelligence, [*Online Youth Groups*](#)
- Gov.UK, [*Advice and Support for LGBT People*](#)
- Mermaids, [*Virtual Services*](#)
- TransUnite, [*Transgender Support Groups*](#)
- Young Stone Wall, [*Get Support*](#)

Families

- Action for Children, [*Everyone's Welcome A Guide to Supporting Children and young People with their Gender Identity*](#)
- Family Education, [*Six Tips for Understanding and Raising a Transgender Child*](#)
- Gendered Intelligence, [*Support Groups for Parents and Carers*](#)
- Scottish Trans, [*Youth and Family*](#)
- The Atlantic, [*When Children Say They're Trans*](#)
- The Huffington Post, [*A Parent's Guide to Supporting Transgender Youth*](#)
- Young Minds, [*Supporting Your Child with Gender Identity Issues*](#)

Educators

- Human Rights Campaign Foundation, [*Supporting and Caring for Transgender Children*](#)
- J. C. Luecke, 'Working with Transgender Children and Their Classmates in Pre-Adolescence: Just be Supportive' (2011) *LGBT Youth* 8(2), pp.116-156.
- M. Mangin, [*Supporting Transgender and Gender-expansive Children in School*](#)
- Schools Week, [*Supporting Gender Non-conforming and Trans-identified Students in Schools*](#)
- Stonewall, [*Supporting Schools and Families*](#)



Hannah Hirst

Hannah is a PhD student and Graduate Teaching Assistant at the University of Liverpool, School of Law and Social Justice. Hannah's PhD is titled: *Eligible and Ready? A children's rights perspective on hormonal treatment for trans youth*, and her wider research interests lie predominantly in medical law, gender theory, and children's rights.