The Trevor Project Research Brief: Digital Support for Youth in Crisis
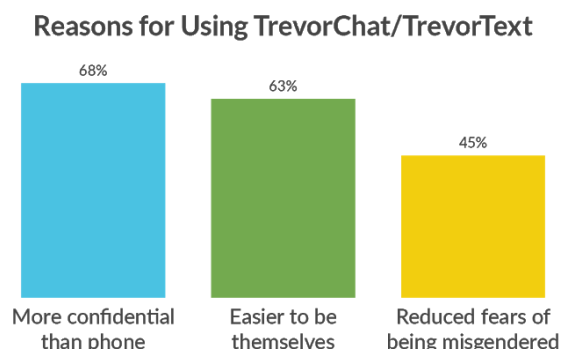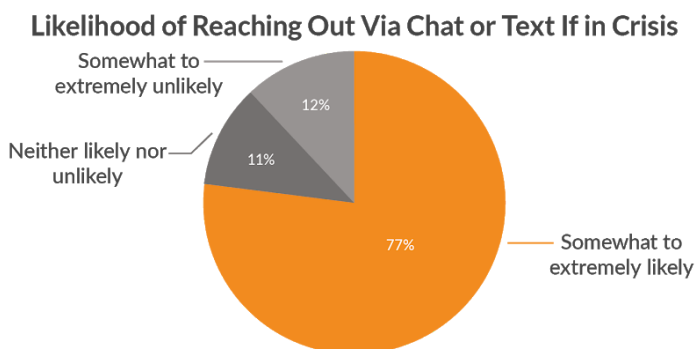
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Summary

As technology continues to rapidly shift in the U.S., youth are often at the forefront of its adoption. A Pew Research Center Survey (2018) found that 95% of teens had, or had access to, a smartphone; this rate was similar across race, gender, ethnicity, and income. LGBTQ youth in particular often choose digital resources when exploring their identities and forming relationships (Craig & McInroy, 2014). Research examining online and text message-based crisis services suggest that youth may prefer texting or chat platforms for crisis interventions compared to in person or phone platforms (Nesmith, 2018). However, despite their increased rate of suicide, published research has yet to explore crisis intervention preferences specifically among LGBTQ youth. This research brief used data from The Trevor Project's 2018 National Survey of LGBTQ Youth and a 2017 formal evaluation to explore youth's likelihood of reaching out during a crisis across modalities as well as reasons for their preferences.

Results

More than three-quarters of youth reported being somewhat to extremely likely to reach out via text, chat, or instant message (i.e., digital services) if they were in a crisis. This rate is almost double the percentage of youth who indicated that they would be somewhat to extremely likely to reach out via phone (43%). Transgender and gender diverse youth were more likely to report being somewhat to extremely likely to use digital services (80%) compared to cisgender LGBQ youth (75%).

Youth pointed to factors around authenticity and privacy as their reasons for preferring digital outreach. Confidentiality (68%), ease of being oneself (63%), and reduced fears of being misgendered for transgender youth (45%) were listed as primary reasons for digital service preferences.

Likelihood of Reaching Out Via Chat or Text If in Crisis

- Somewhat to extremely unlikely — 12%
- Neither likely nor unlikely — 11%
- Somewhat to extremely likely — 77%

Reasons for Using TrevorChat/TrevorText

- More confidential than phone — 68%
- Easier to be themselves — 63%
- Reduced fears of being misgendered — 45%

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Methodology

National Survey Data. A quantitative cross-sectional design was used to collect data using an online survey platform between February and September 2018. A sample of LGBTQ youth ages 13–24 who resided in the United States were recruited via targeted ads on social media. A total of 34,808 youth consented to complete the online survey, with full results to be released this year. Youth were asked about a variety of issues related to their mental health and support. Questions reported on in this brief asked youth, "If you needed to reach out to a crisis intervention organization for support, how likely are you to reach out via" with responses relating to phone, chat/instant messaging, and text messaging.

Evaluation Data. The Trevor Project's formal evaluation took place between September 2015 and April 2017. Eligible youth were referred to the evaluation project one to two weeks after their initial crisis service contact. Several hundred youth served by The Trevor Project's Lifeline and several hundred youth served by The Trevor Project's text and chat counseling services, TrevorText and TrevorChat, completed the evaluation. This sample of youth was found to be representative compared with the broader population served by The Trevor Project (e.g., in terms of suicide risk, age, gender identity, and race/ethnicity). Our representative sample allows for a nuanced evaluation of Trevor's crisis services, and provides valuable insights about the LGBTQ youth that Trevor serves. Youth who reached out via TrevorChat/TrevorText were asked why they chose to use those platforms, rather than the phone. Youth were able to select multiple reasons, so results are not mutually exclusive. Findings related to fear of being misgendered were analyzed separately for transgender youth.

Looking Ahead

National studies find that the majority of youth are accessing digital spaces to meet diverse needs. Given the more than 1.5 million LGBTQ youth who are at risk for suicide in the U.S. each year, reaching youth where they are and in ways that they want to interact is vital for prevention. The Trevor Project is filling this need by expanding our services to include 24-hour chat and text support for youth whenever and wherever they are in need. Going forward, it is vital that Trevor and other organizations serving vulnerable populations engage in continuous quality improvement by conducting needs assessments and evaluations of service preferences. By tailoring services to match connectivity trends, caregivers and providers can best support vulnerable populations.

References

Craig, S. L., & McInroy, L. (2014). You can form a part of yourself online: The influence of new media on identity development and coming out for LGBTQ youth. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health, 18*(1), 95–109.

Nesmith, A. (2018). Reaching young people through texting-based crisis counseling: Process, benefits, and challenges. *Advances in Social Work, 18*(4), 1148-1164.

Pew Research Center (2018). Teens, Social Media & Technology 2018, Washington, DC.

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