

# REFLECTIONS ON GENDER IDENTITY AND EXPRESSION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



Findings from community-based research with the 2SLGBTQIA+ community in Western Canada

# Hello!

Investigaytors is a queer research mentorship program that conducts research by the community for the community. We, the creators of this zine, are a group of community-based researchers in the Investigaytors program working primarily in amiskwaciwâskahikan (Edmonton), in Treaty 6 territory\*. The Investigaytors program was created in 2011 by the Community-Based Research Centre (CBRC) to address gaps in queer health research as well as barriers experienced by queer and trans folks interested in becoming involved with this type of research. Investigaytors started in Vancouver but has since expanded across the country. The program originally worked with gay, bi, trans, Two-Spirit, and queer men but has since broadened to the larger 2SLGBTQIA+ community in multiple locations, including Edmonton.

The Edmonton Investigaytors program is run through a partnership between the CBRC and the EMHC. Our cohort ran from May-December 2020 and was made up of queer folks of various identities who usually reside in Alberta. We completed learning modules on community-based research, ethics, and research methods. After finishing up

our modules, we split into two teams: one that conducted qualitative research, which involved talking to folks to hear their stories, (us!) and another that conducted quantitative research, who conducted statistical analysis on data from the Sex Now Survey. We then worked together to determine what our research project was going to look like and spent the remainder of the year collecting, analyzing, and sharing our data.

We are so excited to share our research with you. Thanks for checking it out!

The Edmonton Investigaytors Qualitative Team, Brynn, Finn, Rachel, Sammy, and Shafir

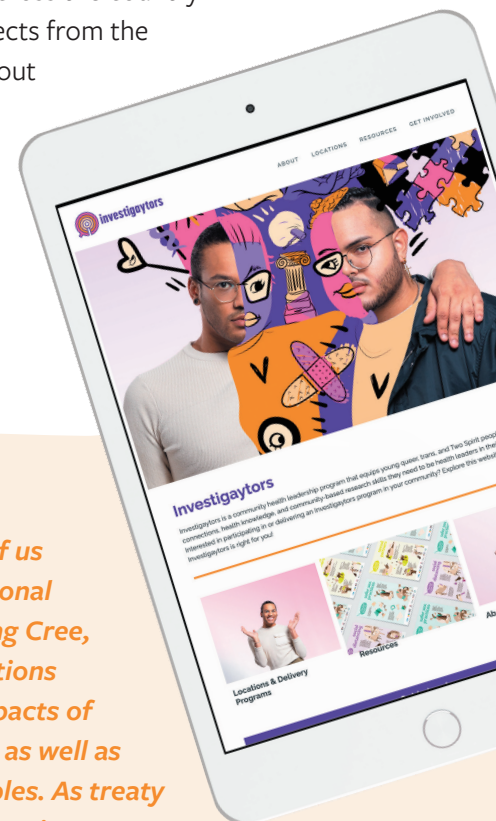
PS. If you'd like to check out what other Investigaytors programs across the country are up to (and to see projects from the quantitative team), check out

[Investigaytors.ca!](https://investigaytors.ca)

And if you have any questions you can reach Brook at

[brook.biggin@cbrc.net](mailto:brook.biggin@cbrc.net).

*\*The Investigaytors program runs across Turtle Island. Today, the majority of us are coming to you from amiskwaciwâskahikan, in Treaty 6 territory, a traditional meeting ground and home of many Indigenous peoples and nations, including Cree, Dene, Saulteaux, Blackfoot, and Nakota Sioux, as well as Métis, Inuit, and nations not represented by the treaty. We acknowledge the historic and ongoing impacts of colonization on Indigenous peoples in Canada, including countless lives lost, as well as racist systems and institutions that continue to marginalize Indigenous peoples. As treaty people we commit to engaging in an ongoing process of decolonization, and strive to conduct our research in an anti-oppressive way, working towards equity and inclusion for all Two Spirit, queer, trans, and non-binary people.*



# What did we research and why?

When we were chatting about what we wanted to research, we realized that some of us had started reflecting on our gender identity and expression in new and interesting ways since the beginning of the pandemic. And because all of us had noticed this happening for at least some of the folks around us, too, we realized this was something a lot of people within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community were experiencing. We wanted to figure out, what is it about our lives in this COVID-19 world that has caused so many of us to think about our gender in new or deeper ways? We started digging into the literature to see if anyone else had done similar research and we really couldn't find anything. This was an unexplored area and one we were eager to dive into!

We came up with the research question:

**HOW HAVE THE CIRCUMSTANCES RELATED TO THE PANDEMIC FOSTERED REFLECTION ON GENDER IDENTITY AND EXPRESSION WITHIN THE 2SLGBTQIA+ COMMUNITY?**

We broke this question down into three main ideas that guided our interviews with community members:

## THE CIRCUMSTANCES

We wanted to know how day-to-day life had changed, whether in relationships, work, interactions with other people - any changes really!

▶ **We asked, "How has life changed for you during the pandemic?"**

## THE REFLECTION

We wanted to understand what reflections about gender identity and expression looked like. Were people reflecting by themselves, talking to other people, turning to online resources? Were they making changes in their lives because of these reflections?

▶ **We asked, "In what ways have you been thinking about your gender identity or expression during the pandemic?"**

## THE CONNECTION

Finally, we wanted to understand, why now? How do these circumstances, and the way our lives have changed because of them, link to the new or different reflections that so many of us are experiencing?

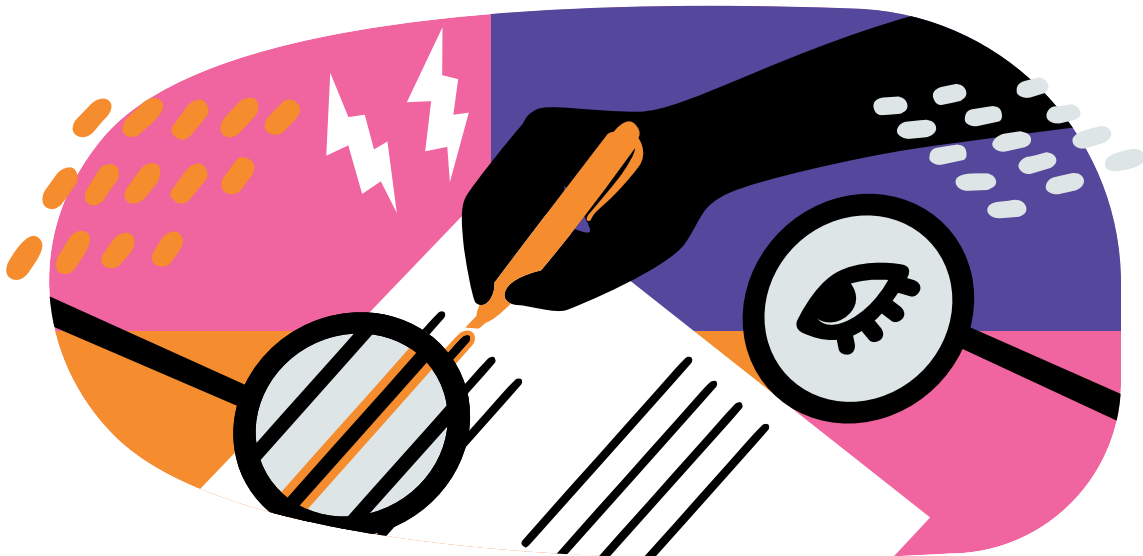
▶ **We asked, "Why do you believe these thoughts and reflections are coming up for you during the pandemic?"**

# How did we do it?

We recruited through social media by sharing a poster within our existing networks. A handful of organizations within Alberta shared it further and we recruited our ten participants within a couple of days. We did ten **semi-structured interviews** over Zoom throughout September 2020. Interviews ranged from twenty to sixty minutes in length. We had the interviews professionally transcribed and then began the data analysis process.

We analyzed our data through a process called **thematic analysis**<sup>1,2</sup>. We carefully read through each transcript, highlighting and making notes about anything that stood out to us. We started assigning each of these ideas a code - a word or short phrase that captured the bigger idea we saw in the quote. We worked together to build a collaborative codebook, which was essentially a big dictionary with all of the codes we developed and examples of where and how to label other quotes. We then grouped our codes into categories, which formed the themes you can read about in the “What did we learn?” section.

A couple of things make our research process unique. Because we aren’t associated with an institution like a university, we didn’t have an institutional ethics board to look over our research plan. It was really important to us that we conducted ethical research and that we were accountable to our community, so we sought **community oversight** from the research subcommittee of the EMHC’s board of directors. As a non-hierarchical team of community-based researchers, it was also important for us to work collectively. We had ongoing debriefs throughout our learning process, data collection, and data analysis. We recognized and drew upon one another’s strengths. Most importantly, we centred **relationality** in our work, within our team and when engaging with the greater queer community.



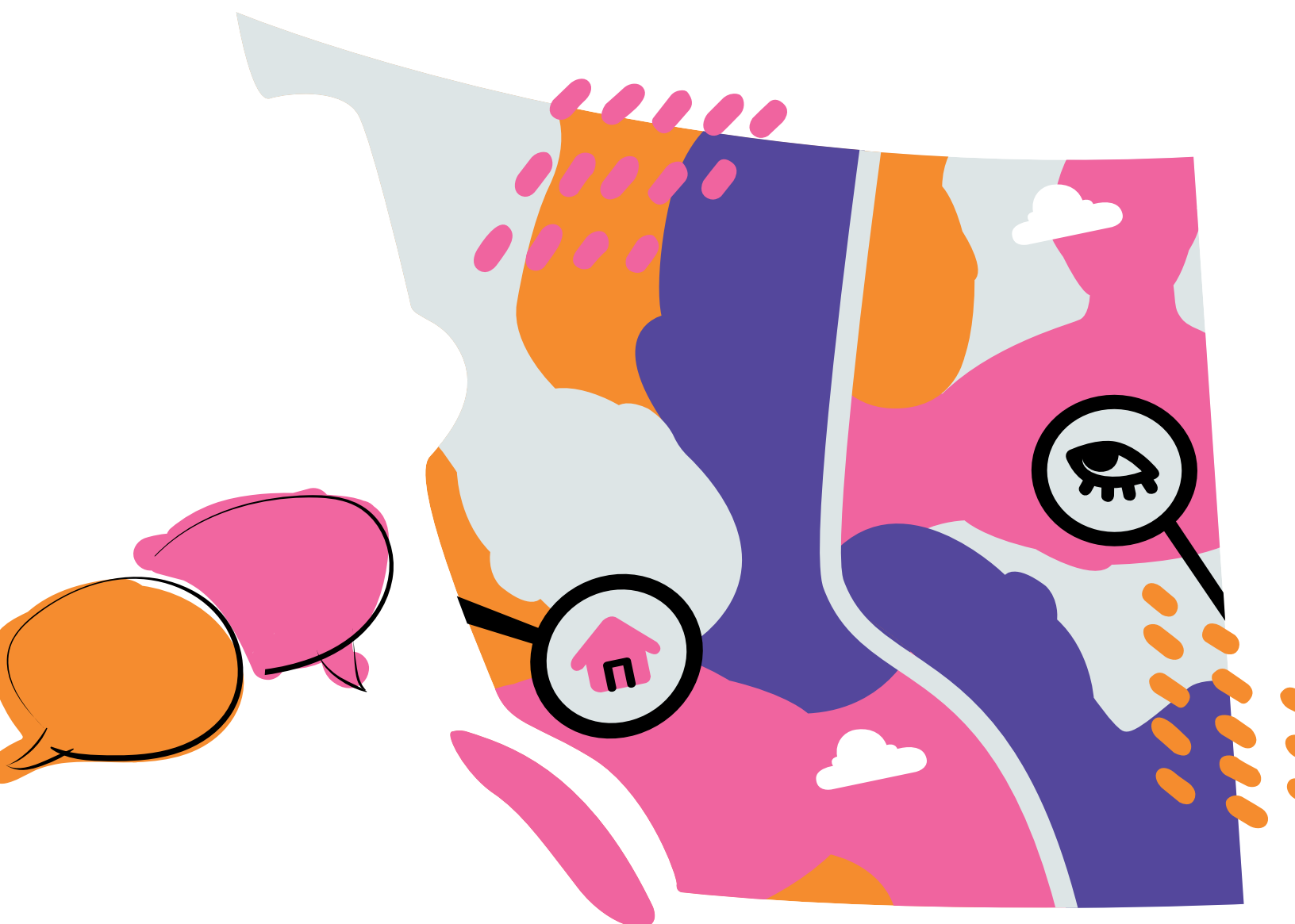
1 Carl Auerbach, and Louise B. Silverstein. 2003. Qualitative Data : An Introduction to Coding and Analysis. Qualitative Studies in Psychology. New York: NYU Press.

2 Virginia Braun & Victoria Clarke (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology, Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3:2, 77-101, DOI: 10.1191/1478088706qpo630a

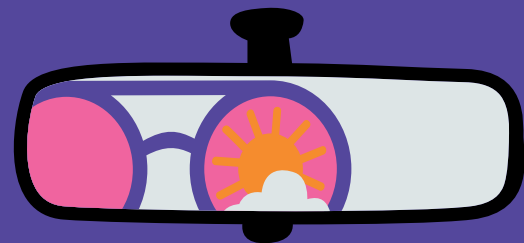
# Who did we hear from?

Our ten interviewees lived in either Alberta or British Columbia and were located in mostly urban areas, with one person living rurally. We talked to folks with a wide range of ages, from 19 to 63. Some had been reflecting on gender identity and expression for a long time, and for others these reflections were quite new.

We also invited folks to share any other aspect of their identity they wanted us to know about or felt was important to understanding their experiences of reflection. Some folks had a specific label they identified as and others were at a place of uncertainty around their gender identity and expression. Some of the identities shared with us included queer, trans, and non-binary. Interviewees also came from different working backgrounds: from unemployed, to completing coursework as students, to working more directly in academia. We heard a lot about folks experiencing mental illness and the ways in which that was complicated or heightened by the pandemic.



# What did we learn?



## What did reflection during the pandemic look like?

Understanding what reflection around gender identity and expression looked like during the pandemic, and how people felt supported and affirmed during their process of reflection, gives us an idea of how to create spaces that encourage and support reflection in the future. This has potential implications for service providers, community organizers, clinicians, and even 2SLGBTQIA+ community members as we come together to support one another. Fostering environments that allow for deep and intentional reflection can empower us to discover and express ourselves authentically.

### HOW DID PEOPLE REFLECT? WHAT RESOURCES DID THEY TURN TO?

- Nearly everyone we spoke to had gone through some process of individual introspection, whether that was lying awake in bed thinking, journaling, or doing more structured mood-tracking.
- Folks connected (usually virtually) with other queer folks including friends, partners, and strangers to discuss, reflect, and explore.
- Reflection was supported by accessing various forms of affirming media, such as trans-specific online resources, accessing Facebook groups, watching YouTube and TikTok videos, and enjoying affirming books and TV shows (shout out to She-Ra!).
- Mental health supports, such as psychologists, were valuable resources when accessible.

### HOW DID REFLECTING MAKE PEOPLE FEEL?

Reflection was sometimes really exciting and sometimes really scary! Here are some of the things we heard about the way reflecting felt:

- Processing shifts in identity could be daunting or overwhelming, especially in situations where these shifts might impact the way people accessed community.  
*☞ I belong to a women's group and I've been a member... for 20 years now and I know that if I come out as trans, that I have to leave that group. It doesn't mean that my friendships end, but I'm not part of the group anymore. So, like, knowing that I have to sever those ties, I'm still reluctant to do that.*
- Uncertainty and self-doubt were common throughout reflection.  
*☞ Yeah, I kept going back and forth several times of whether that was - maybe I made a mistake, I should go back to he/him, maybe I'm taking up space that... doesn't belong to me. Definitely a lot of doubt about it, for sure.*
- Having a gender-validating experience - and all the positive feelings that came with it - helped to reinforce ongoing reflections.
- Seeing others reflect on gender identity helped to normalize the process.  
*☞ There's a few TikToks that I saw where it was, like, you know, cis straight people don't sit around for hours mulling about their gender [laughs], right? And I was like, "Oh, OK! So, that makes a lot more sense then."*

## What were some of the outcomes of reflection?

We thought it was important to capture what sorts of changes and shifts had occurred for folks as a result of their reflections during the pandemic. The outcomes of reflecting on gender identity and expression underscore why it's so important to support these processes.

### PEOPLE EXPERIENCED SHIFTS IN THEIR SENSE OF SELF

Some of the changes people experienced were internal. For many, the process of reflection led to profound changes, including:

- Increased confidence, self-worth, and body acceptance
- Increased self-awareness, and
- Shifts in political ideology and rejection of normativity.

### REFLECTION LED TO REAL-WORLD CHANGES

Some of these changes resulted in people taking tangible actions. Most of the folks we spoke to expect these changes to continue beyond the current pandemic circumstances. We heard about folks doing the following:

- Using a new name with friends or at work,
- Using different pronouns,

*☞ Like during the lockdown, I asked most of my friends to start using a different name for me. I was out to a couple friends beforehand who were using they/them pronouns for me, and [now] all of my friends do and I'm really open about that.*

- Identifying with a new gender term or label, and
- Changing or experimenting with their gender expression.

### SOME OF THESE REFLECTIONS LED TO FOLKS SEEKING TRANSITION-RELATED SERVICES

- For some, there was an increased need or urgency for medical transition.
- The pandemic resulted in some additional barriers to accessing transition, such as increased surgical wait times, difficulty accessing appointments, and changes in the way people accessed care. People also experienced challenges accessing services that were closed during portions of the pandemic, such as Service Canada to update SIN information.
- On the other hand, there were some unexpected facilitators of transitions. Telehealth increased the accessibility of medical appointments for some, especially for those accessing out-of-province physicians. Working from home also allowed increased flexibility to continue working while recovering from surgery.

“MY BODY'S STILL THE SAME, RIGHT? I HAVEN'T GAINED OR LOST A BUNCH OF WEIGHT OR GONE TO THE GYM A WHOLE BUNCH OR ANYTHING. BUT, THAT CHANGE HAS BEEN HUGE, THE WAY THAT I LOOK AT MYSELF IN THE EYES IN THE MIRROR AND SEE ME AND RESPECT - WITH SELF-RESPECT. SOMETHING I PROBABLY NEVER FELT IN MY LIFE.

“...THE REALIZATION THAT, YEAH, I DO NEED TO TRANSITION AND IT'S NOT JUST SO THAT OTHER PEOPLE PERCEIVE ME [CORRECTLY], IT'S SO THAT I CAN LOOK IN THE MIRROR AND I CAN BE HAPPY WITH WHAT I SEE, AND WHAT I HEAR.

## Why now?

Lastly, we wanted to make the connection between the circumstances of the pandemic and the reflections that folks are having to understand why these reflections are happening now.

Overall, we learned that the circumstances of COVID-19 helped deepen existing reflections and sparked new reflections for many of our participants. However, we also heard that COVID presented some obstacles for both reflection and expressions of gender and identity. By better understanding these connections, we hope to gain a better understanding of the specific needs of folks questioning their gender identity and expression during the pandemic.

### PEOPLE FELT THAT COVID GAVE THEM PERMISSION TO BE THEIR TRUE SELVES

The uncertainty during these #unprecedentedtimes meant folks felt less restricted by the expectations of their “normal” lives.

- They could reject the idea of who or what they felt they “should be.”
- They now had the chance to explore and express truer versions of themselves.

👉 *I bought some dangly earrings, because I've always kind of liked those and now I'm giving myself permission to ... to wear them and to live in that space a little bit more.*

### FOR MANY, THE PANDEMIC HELPED DEEPEN AND SPEED UP REFLECTIONS THAT WERE ALREADY TAKING PLACE

- Some folks felt that they would have reached these new reflections and thoughts on gender eventually, while others believed that these changes never would have taken place without the circumstances of the pandemic.
- Although these reflections led to changes in gender identity and expression for some, others told us that this chance to reflect gave them a greater sense of confidence and understanding of their current identity and expression.

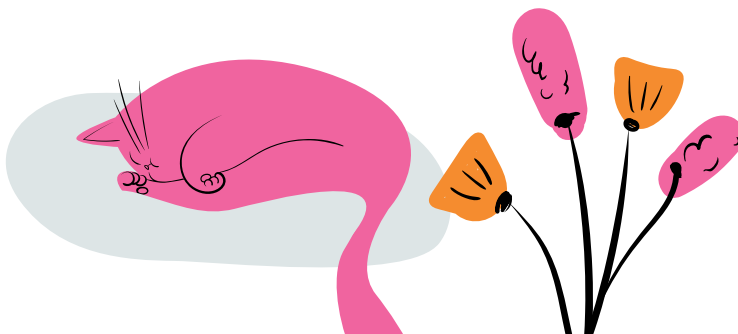
👉 *That's how I define myself now. The same way but with a lot more backstory.*

### THE PANDEMIC CREATED MORE SPACE AND TIME FOR REFLECTION

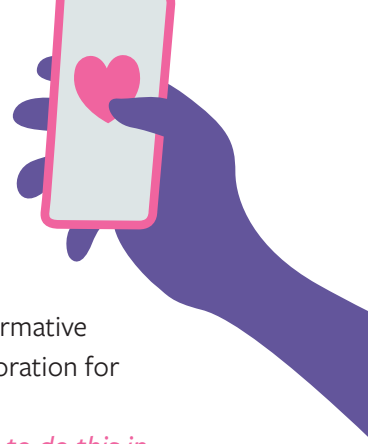
- Being stuck at home and away from others led to fewer distractions and more opportunities to think and reflect deeply.

“ I THINK THE PANDEMIC WAS A DISRUPTOR THAT MEANT IT HAPPENED NOW. I THINK I WOULD HAVE COME TO THIS CONCLUSION OR THESE THOUGHTS OR WHATEVER AT SOME POINT, BUT NOT RIGHT NOW.

“ PRIOR TO THE PANDEMIC, I COULD GO AND DO ALL THESE THINGS AND I COULD KIND OF FORGET THAT I WAS MYSELF. BUT THEN, WHEN YOU'RE ALONE AND YOU'RE BY YOURSELF, OR YOU'RE JUST WITH A COUPLE OTHER PEOPLE, IT'S A LOT HARDER TO FORGET THAT YOU'RE YOU.







## PEOPLE WERE MORE ISOLATED AND THIS CHANGED THEIR SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

- There were fewer opportunities for gender expression.
- We've had less exposure to people's judgments including cisnormative and heteronormative expectations placed on us by society. This brought a new sense of freedom and exploration for many people.

☞ *There's just something about being able to be in my own space and being able to do this in a way where I don't feel like there's judgment or scrutiny from other people, that has made me feel [...] more at home in my own body now than I probably ever have. And that has been an extremely freeing feeling for me.*

- We've had more control over when and how we're seen by other people.
- Distance from family and other judgmental influences allowed reflection and new expression to flourish.

## THE PANDEMIC HAS BEEN A TIME OF SHARED VULNERABILITY

- Some people experienced a collective sense of solidarity or shared vulnerability that fostered the courage to explore uncomfortable reflections and to turn to one another for support during those reflections.

☞ *People just also seem to be in a really vulnerable, and honest and courageous place right now. Like people who I would never have anticipated saying, I'm having a really hard time, are putting their hands up and saying I'm having a really hard time.*

“EVEN THE SHEER FACT OF NOT SEEING AS MANY PEOPLE AS OFTEN, RIGHT? IF MONDAY NIGHT I DECIDE TO PAINT MY NAILS, I DON'T NEED TO TAKE IT OFF ON TUESDAY MORNING TO GO TO WORK. MY CATS DON'T CARE ABOUT MY GENDER.”

## THE PANDEMIC HAS PUT THINGS INTO PERSPECTIVE

- Some folks felt prompted into a reordering of priorities.
- Others experienced an increased sense of mortality and felt encouraged a desire to live as one's authentic self.

☞ *...like a personal reckoning with our own mortality, so why the @\*%#! am I like going to waste time not being myself. [...] We all may die at any moment so like, you know, let your freak flag fly.*

## BUT...THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ALSO MADE REFLECTION HARDER IN SOME WAYS

There were...

- Fewer opportunities for gender expression in public settings,
- Logistical and bureaucratic barriers due to shutdown, and
- Disconnection from in-person 2SLGBTQIA+ community connection.

☞ *“But [COVID] also made it a lot harder, because I can't go out to the social groups – or the social meet-ups and talk to other people in person. Or even just the interaction between other people who are also questioning, like that kind of stuff I do miss.”*

# TLDR: The key takeaways...

Having a proper distraction-free space and enough downtime were key for having deep and meaningful reflections.

During the pandemic, queer folks have been able to tap into existing and new services and support systems (ex: online counselling services, supportive and affirming social media groups) to help their well-being and process of reflection around gender

- Having access to queer-specific resources, affirming media, community connections, and mental health supports was valuable in supporting reflection and exploration.

Some of the specific barriers to reflection and changes of gender identity and expression identified by our participants included:

- Fewer opportunities to directly interact with other people who are questioning their gender,
- Being unable to access usual supports (ex: therapist, psychiatrist) in person,
- Longer waitlists for physician visits and surgeries for transitioning, and
- Difficulty accessing governmental services for a name change process.

Identifying these consistent barriers will hopefully help with recognizing, targeting, and reducing or eliminating them moving forward.

Ultimately, our queer community has shown an incredible amount of resiliency and strength during this pandemic, which should be recognized and celebrated!



# Impact on participants

Some folks we spoke with shared what participating in the project meant to them.

- Knowing that others were having similar experiences of reflection during the pandemic was validating.
- The interview process was helpful for them as it created a space where they could gather some of their thoughts and reflections - the process of talking about it was valuable for self-exploration.

🗨️ *I find also talking to someone is often a way that I reflect on my own stuff. Just saying it out loud is usually the kind of best way to ... figure this stuff out for myself.*

- They enjoyed being involved with a queer-led, community-based research project.

“ EVEN THE FACT THAT THERE IS A STUDY ON THIS EXACT TOPIC RIGHT NOW WAS, LIKE, SUPER VALIDATING TO BE, LIKE, 'OH, THIS IS A TOPIC OF INTEREST, WHICH MEANS THAT THERE'S A POOL OF PEOPLE THAT THIS IS HAPPENING TO, WHICH MEANS THAT I'M NOT ALONE.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank our generous funders, the Public Health Agency of Canada and the Edmonton Community Foundation, who made this project possible. We also want to thank Joshua Armstrong, the Research Sub-Committee of the EMHC Board of Directors, Ben Klassen, Nathan Lachowsky, and Harlan Pruden, for their invaluable support, guidance, and wisdom throughout this project.

We are beyond grateful to the community members who trusted in us to hold and amplify their stories. Thank you.



