

# Conversion Therapy

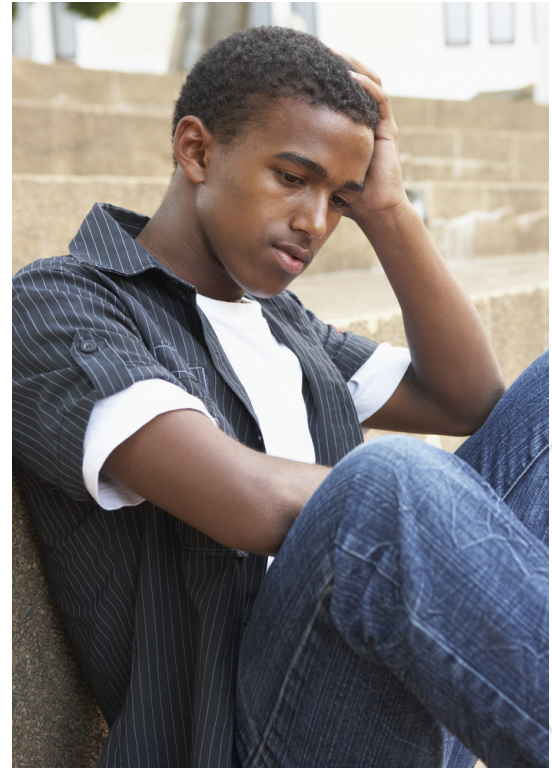


## What is conversion therapy?

The *Criminal Code* defines conversion therapy as any practice, treatment or service, or any formalized intervention generally offered to the public, or a segment of the public, that is designed to make a person conform to heteronormative or cisnormative standards, provided that the intervention is based on the false assumption that a particular sexual orientation, gender identity or gender is preferable.

It does not include practices and treatments that help people with gender transitions or exploring their gender identity.

Conversion therapy has been discredited by medical professionals around the world, the UN, WHO, and Amnesty International. In Canada it is illegal to provide, promote, advertise, or profit from conversion therapy.



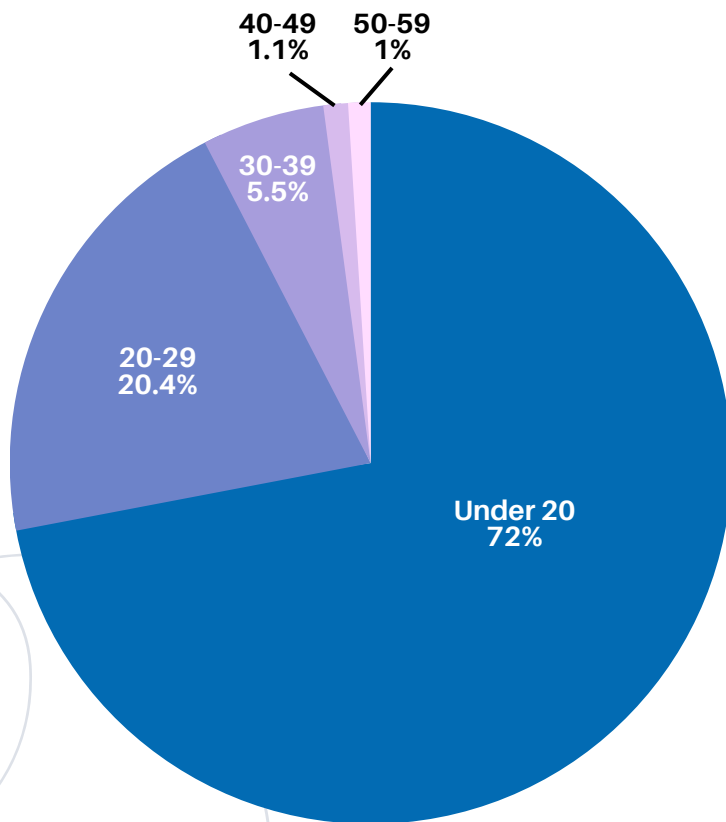
## What does conversion therapy look like?

Conversion therapy is not a scientific practice. It can take many different forms. In the past, doctors and psychologists tried to suppress homosexuality with lobotomies (cutting the connection between parts of the brain), chemical castration (reducing hormones with drugs), and aversion therapy techniques such as electrical shocks or drugs that caused nausea whenever a “homosexual tendency” was shown. These methods were controversial even when they were being used. They are not as common today.

Modern conversion therapy is sometimes more subtle. It may look like a normal therapy session, with a practitioner having a one-on-one session with a client, or group session with several clients. Like other forms of therapy, it may involve talking about feelings and working on changing thought patterns. However, these sessions will focus on the idea that being attracted to the same gender or not identifying with your birth gender is unnatural, wrong, or undesirable. The client may be taught to suppress their feelings or urges. They may be bullied into feeling worthless or broken.

Many conversion therapy programs are religion-based. Religious conversion therapy may include practices like exorcism, ritual cleansing, self-harm as a form of penance, or calling on a higher power to change thoughts or desires (sometimes called “praying the gay away”).

In more severe cases, people undergoing conversion therapy may be starved, isolated from other people, or assaulted.



**Age at first conversion effort**

## Who does it impact?

A recent Canadian study\* found that nearly 10% of non-heterosexual people who identified as men, non-binary, or Two-Spirit had experienced conversion therapy at some point in their lives. (Other informal attempts to change sexuality or gender identity, for example by a parent or community leader, were experienced by over 20% of the study's participants.)

Conversion therapy experiences were found to be more common among people with lower incomes, among non-binary and transgender people, and among racialized minorities. Of the people who had experienced conversion therapy, 72% had first experienced it before age 20.

*\*"Experiences with sexual orientation and gender identity conversion therapy practices among sexual minority men in Canada, 2019-2020", Travis Salway et al.*

## What are the effects of conversion therapy?

There is no reliable evidence to suggest that conversion therapy is effective. Several studies around the world suggest that trying to change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity simply does not work.

Most studies also show that conversion therapy actually causes psychological damage to people who are subjected to it. This includes:

- an increased risk of suicidal thoughts and attempts,
- higher rates of depression and anxiety,
- increased drug or alcohol abuse, and
- sexual problems.

## What does the law say about conversion therapy?

Sections 320.101 - 320.104 of the Criminal Code make conversion therapy illegal in Canada.

Under these sections, you can be charged for providing conversion therapy. You can also be charged for causing someone to undergo conversion therapy, even if you are not the one actually providing the services.

You can be charged for promoting conversion therapy (that is, for encouraging people to do it). You can be charged for advertising conversion therapy services, even if you are not actually suggesting anyone do it.

You can also be charged for profiting from conversion therapy, which means receiving some kind of benefit from it. This could be money or something else, like a job promotion.

Promoting, advertising, or profiting from conversion therapy can lead to a maximum sentence of two years in prison. Providing conversion therapy can lead to a sentence of up to five years in prison.

Section 164 of the Criminal Code allows the court to issue warrants that allow police officers to seize any materials that are believed to advertise or promote conversion therapy. This includes written materials, audio or video recordings, and photographs. This section also gives police the power to seize a copy of these materials if they are stored on a computer system, and to make the materials unavailable to anyone else.

Section 273.3(1) of the Criminal Code makes it illegal to take a person under 18 years of age out of Canada for conversion therapy. Doing this could lead to a prison sentence of up to five years.

## What can I do about it?

If you or someone you know is being pressured into conversion therapy, you can file a report with the police.

**Klinic** offers a free, 24/7 confidential crisis line: 204-786-8686 in Winnipeg, or toll-free outside Winnipeg at 1-888-322-3019.

You can call this number for support, or to find a referral to another service that better suits your needs.

**Trans Lifeline** has a support hotline for (and staffed by) transgender people: 1-877-330-6366.

**Rainbow Resource Centre** offers support groups and counselling for LGBTQ+ people. Visit [rainbowresourcecentre.org](http://rainbowresourcecentre.org) for more information.

CLEA's **Law Phone-In & Lawyer Referral Program** - 204-943-2305 in Winnipeg, or toll-free outside Winnipeg at 1-800-262-8800.



**Community Legal Education Association**  
**[communitylegal.mb.ca](http://communitylegal.mb.ca)**

*Project funded by Justice Canada - Victims Fund*