



What role do age and mental health play in substance use among lesbian, gay and bisexual people?



A number of studies in Australia and overseas have shown that drug, alcohol and tobacco use by lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people are higher than in the heterosexual population but there are few Australian studies using national, probability-based data.

Method

The National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) is Australia's largest and most comprehensive survey on drug use. The NDSHS introduced a question on sexual orientation in 2007, making it one of Australia's largest data sources to include this information.

The 2013 survey had 23,855 participants, 579 of whom answered either 'Homosexual (gay or lesbian)' or 'Bisexual' to the question 'Do you think of yourself as...?'

Using 2013 NDSHS data, the interactions between substance use, age and mental health were explored in comparisons between the LGB and heterosexual populations.

Results

Age

The 2013 NDSHS shows that those aged 18–30 have the highest rates of recent illicit drug use and single occasion risky drinking. They also have among the highest rates of drinking at levels that put them at risk of harm over their lifetime.

The LGB population is significantly younger than the heterosexual population. But this younger age profile only partially explained the higher rates of alcohol risk and drug use, as LGB people had consistently higher illicit drug use and risky drinking rates across all age groups compared with their heterosexual peers.

Mental Health

In 2013, those who were treated and/or diagnosed with a mental illness in the previous 12 months were more likely to have used illicit drugs, smoked and drank at risky levels than those without a mental illness.

Likewise, those who reported high or very high psychological distress on the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), also had higher rates of substance use than those who reported low psychological distress.

In 2013, LGB people were more than twice as likely as heterosexual people to report having been diagnosed or treated for mental illness in the previous 12 months or to report high or very high psychological distress.

When only those who reported that they had been treated or diagnosed with a mental illness were compared, LGB people still had higher rates of smoking, risky drinking and illicit drug use.

Similarly, when only those with high or very high psychological distress were compared, twice as many LGB people reported smoking or illicit drug use as heterosexual people. They were more likely to drink at levels that put them at risk of lifetime and single occasion harm than heterosexual people who also reported high or very high psychological distress.

Discussions and conclusions

The 2013 NDSHS shows that LGB people in Australia had higher rates of substance use than heterosexual people, even when age, psychological distress and mental illness treatment and/or diagnosis were accounted for.

Further exploration of these data in the NDSHS and the inclusion of sexual orientation in other national datasets would improve understanding of this issue.

Next steps

For the first time, in the 2016 NDSHS, participants are able to write in their gender if the male and female options do not reflect their identities. This means that future research can potentially explore the substance use patterns of trans, intersex, genderqueer and other people who do not identify as either male or female.

Contact

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46.6	Mean age (years)	37.2
9.3%	High or very high psychological distress (K10)	22.6%
13.5%	Diagnosed or treated for mental illness in the past 12 months	27.5%
16.0%	Current smokers	30.6%
14.3%	Recent illicit drug users	39.8%
19.4%	Average of more than 2 drinks per day	30.6%
27.8%	More than 4 drinks a session at least monthly	44.5%

Note: People aged 18 or older.

Substance use measures

Recent illicit drug use

Use at least 1 of 17 illicit substances and/or licit substances for non-medical purposes as captured in the NDSHS.

Smoking

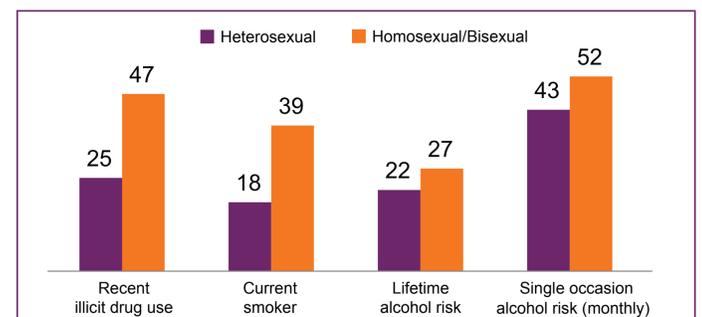
Currently smoke cigarettes, pipes or other tobacco products daily, weekly or less than weekly.

Lifetime alcohol risk

Drink more than 2 standard drinks on any day, on average.

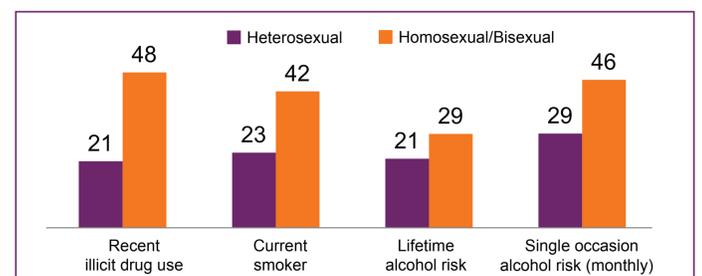
Single occasion alcohol risk

Drink more than 4 standard drinks on a single occasion of drinking, at least once a month.



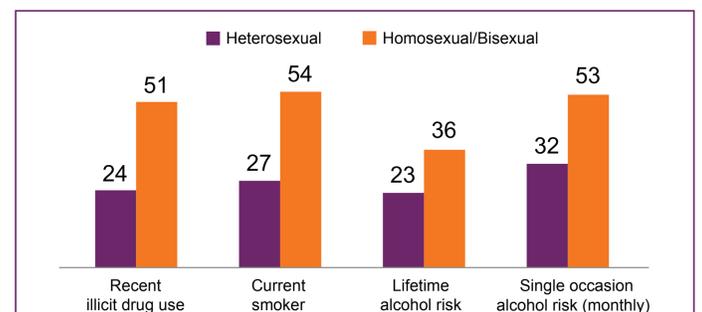
Source: AIHW analysis of 2013 NDSHS data.

Figure 1: Illicit drug use, smoking and alcohol risk by sexuality, people aged 18–30, 2013



Source: AIHW analysis of 2013 NDSHS data.

Figure 2: Illicit drug use, smoking and alcohol risk by sexuality, people treated or diagnosed with a mental illness, aged 18 years and older, 2013



Source: AIHW analysis of 2013 NDSHS data.

Figure 3: Illicit drug use, smoking and alcohol risk by sexuality, people with high or very high psychological distress, aged 18 years and older, 2013