

Where Pandemics Collide: Mental Health and Substance Use Among LGBTQIA+ College Students in Missouri Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Partners in Prevention (PIP) is Missouri's higher education substance misuse consortium dedicated to creating healthy and safe college campuses. The coalition is comprised of 24 public and private colleges and universities in the state working to address the critical health behaviors of college students using evidence-informed interventions. To measure progress and obtain data needed for the implementation of programs, PIP created the Missouri Assessment of College Health Behaviors (MACHB) Survey. The MACHB is an annual, online survey that has been implemented each spring since 2007. The survey assesses the roles that alcohol, drugs (illicit and prescription), tobacco/nicotine, interpersonal violence, and mental health have on student health and wellness. This brief will evaluate the impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the mental health, suicidal ideation, and substance use of LGBTQIA+ college students in Missouri by comparing the results from the 2019, 2020, and 2021 MACHB.

LGBTQIA+ Community: Unmet Mental Health Needs

The number of students, who participated in the 2019, 2020, and 2021 MACHB surveys and who identify as LGBTQIA+ (gay, bisexual, lesbian, queer, questioning, asexual, pansexual, transgender, and/or gender queer), have increased steadily over time. About 15% of participating students identified as LGBTQIA+ in 2019 while 18% of participating students did in 2020 and 20% of participating students in 2021. A significant percentage of students identify as LGBTQIA+, which indicates that future support and prevention programs need to directly address the specific needs of this population.

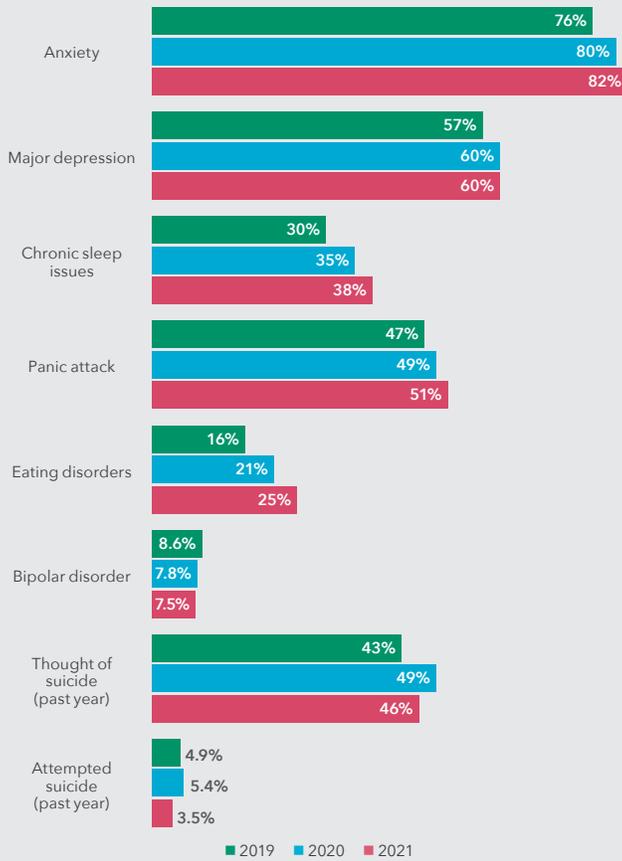
The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the mental health concerns for LGBTQIA+ students, as the prevalence of mental health concerns and suicidal ideation significantly increased in 2020 and further in

2021. From 2019 to 2021, the mental health concerns that had the largest increases were anxiety, chronic sleep issues, eating disorders, and panic attacks.

Chart 1 demonstrates the increases of mental health concerns from 2019 to 2021. As demonstrated by the graph below, mental health concerns are steadily increasing for LGBTQIA+ students and need to be prioritized in future campus support efforts.

In 2021, about 3.5% of LGBTQIA+ students reported attempting suicide in the past year. While this value is lower than the percent of LGBTQIA+ students who reported suicide attempts in the 2020 data (5.4% of students reported suicide attempts in 2020), it still is of concern since it is significantly larger than the prevalence of suicide attempts among non-LGBTQIA+ students in 2021 (1.0% prevalence). Similarly, while thoughts of suicide among LGBTQIA+ students also peaked in 2020, about 46% of LGBTQIA+ students reported thoughts of suicide in 2021. This value is

Chart 1: Mental Health Outcomes of LGBTQIA+ Students Before and After the COVID-19 Pandemic*



*These mental health concerns were self-reported, not diagnosed.

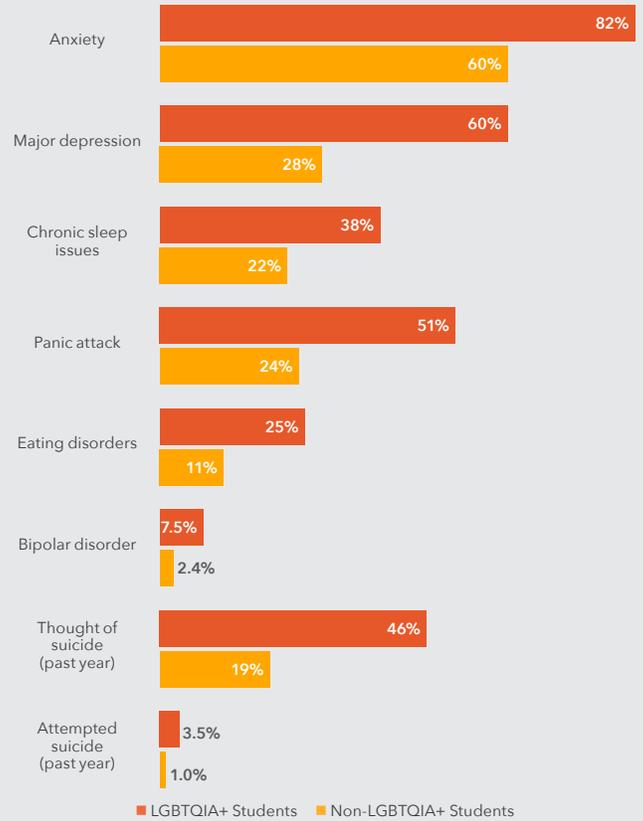
again significantly higher compared to students who do not identify as LGBTQIA+ (19% prevalence).

As demonstrated by Chart 2, mental health concerns are more prevalent among LGBTQIA+ students compared to their non-LGBTQIA+ counterparts making LGBTQIA+ students a priority target for campus mental health interventions.

Substance Misuse Among LGBTQIA+ Students

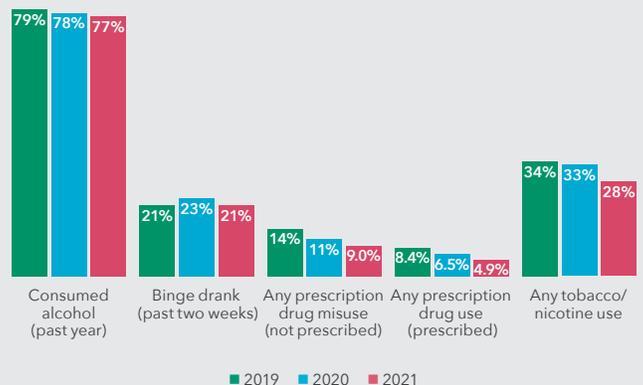
While the data suggests that substance use has decreased among LGBTQIA+ students from 2019 to 2021, rates of substance use are still high for LGBTQIA+ students. Additionally, there are specific substances that should be targeted when developing programs for LGBTQIA+ students. These substances include prescription drugs and tobacco since these usage rates were significantly higher than the rates of non-LGBTQIA+ students.

Chart 2: Comparing the Mental Health Outcomes Between LGBTQIA+ Students and non-LGBTQIA+ Students in 2021



As Chart 3 suggests, the substance misuse behaviors of LGBTQIA+ students have decreased from 2019 to 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, but rates of alcohol consumption, prescription drug misuse (prescribed and not prescribed), and tobacco/nicotine use are still higher than non-LGBTQIA+ students (shown in Chart 4).

Chart 3: Substance Misuse of LGBTQIA+ Students Before and After the COVID-19 Pandemic

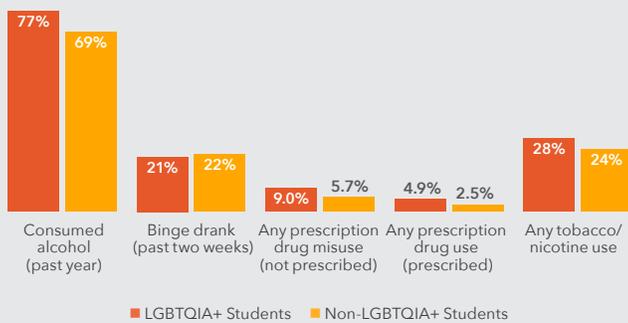


*Binge Drinking is defined as consuming 5+ drinks within 2 hours

For more information, visit mopip.org

Funded by the Missouri Department of Mental Health, Division of Behavioral Health

Chart 4: Comparing the Substance Misuse Behaviors Between LGBTQIA+ Students and Non-LGBTQIA+ Students in 2021



Implications

Even before the pandemic, LGBTQIA+ students were burdened with higher rates of poor mental health and suicidality compared to students who did not identify as LGBTQIA+. From 2019-2021, mental health concerns, suicidal thoughts, and suicide attempts have increased among LGBTQIA+ college students in Missouri, indicating that the COVID-19 pandemic likely exacerbated the mental health concerns of LGBTQIA+ students. There is an urgent need to address the mental health of LGBTQIA+ students as it has worsened since the COVID-19 pandemic, as demonstrated in the 2021 MACHB survey data. The declining mental health of LGBTQIA+ students could be caused by the fact that students had to move back home to less accepting environments with family or had to move away from their “chosen family”. While this may just be one reason among many, it is important to hypothesize and address factors specific to the isolation and disruption of daily life caused by the COVID-19 pandemic that has contributed to an increase in mental health concerns.

With suicide remaining the second leading cause of death among 15-24-year-old LGBTQIA+ youth, it is imperative to identify poor mental health and suicidality among Missouri LGBTQIA+ college students and develop relevant strategies that save lives and better overall health.

While most substance misuse behaviors peaked in 2020 and have decreased in 2021, it is important to highlight that the misuse of some substances, such as prescription drugs and tobacco, were significantly higher for LGBTQIA+ students compared to non-LGBTQIA+ students in 2021. This provides us the opportunity to develop targeted programs and interventions that prevent specific substance use behaviors among LGBTQIA+ students.

Campuses should identify and address the specific factors to their school that influence the mental health, suicide ideation, and substance use behaviors of LGBTQIA+ students by developing support programs or initiatives that are led by LGBTQIA+ students themselves. Additionally, campuses should continue to provide support tools for students to mitigate the negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Resources

The Trevor Project is a national online resource for LGBTQ+ youth. On their website, you can easily reach a counselor if you are struggling, want more information, or want to be referred to resources near you. The Trevor Project also has a variety of resources on topics such as sexual orientation, mental health, gender identity, and suicide. Visit thetrevorproject.org for more information.

The Trans Lifeline is a trans-led organization that provides a peer support network for the trans community and connects trans people to support and resources through their hotline. Visit translifeline.org for more information.

National Queer & Trans Therapists of Color Network is a healing justice organization that supports and benefits the mental health of queer and trans people in North America. Through this organization, the capacity of QTPoC (queer and trans people of color) mental health practitioners is built and access to healing justice resources is increased. Visit nqttcn.com/en for more information.

The Safe Zone Project is a free online resource that promotes LGBTQ+ awareness and ally training workshops. This resource is for educators facilitating Safe Zone trainings and for learners who are

hoping to explore more of these concepts. Visit thesafezoneproject.com for more information.

Contact Partners in Prevention at (573) 884-7551.

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