

# Individuals who are victimized -- especially in childhood -- likely to abuse alcohol and other drugs

17 December 2010

(PhysOrg.com) -- A new study finds strong associations between victims' experiences -- such as unwanted sexual activity, neglect and physical violence -- and substance use disorders.

Substance use disorders and victimization experiences were more prevalent for gays, lesbians and bisexuals than heterosexuals, according to researchers from the University of Michigan, University of Illinois at Chicago and University of North Dakota.

The study used data from the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual [victims](#) and their substance use disorder during the past year.

Substance use disorders involved alcohol or other drugs. Victim experiences included sexual assault or any unwanted activity; physical attacks by parents, spouses, romantic partners or anyone else; childhood neglect by parents or caregivers; and assaulted with a weapon.

The research sample was nationally representative and consisted of 34,653 adults aged 20 years and older. They responded to questions about their use, abuse and dependence on 10 substances, such as alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, and pain medications.

Researchers compared victimization experiences with four sexual identity subgroups (including "not sure") separately for men and women.

Lesbian and bisexual women were more than twice as likely as heterosexual women to report any victimization experiences, the findings show. Three times as many lesbians as heterosexual women reported childhood sexual abuse, but researchers

attribute this, in part, to lesbians' greater willingness to acknowledge and report this experience.

Gay men also had high prevalence rates of victimization with about half of them reporting any victimization experiences in their lifetimes. They reported significantly higher rates of [childhood sexual abuse](#), childhood neglect, [partner violence](#) and assault with a weapon than heterosexual men.

Men and women who reported two or more victimization experiences had higher odds of alcohol and other drug dependence, indicating a cumulative effect of multiple victimization experiences, the researchers said.

The findings also indicate that gay, lesbian and bisexual youth may use substances to cope with adverse psychological and interpersonal effects of victimization, thus increasing the risk for further victimization from others.

"Programs and interventions must go beyond educating youth about the risks of [substance use](#) to help youth also recognize and cope with the stressors of childhood physical and sexual abuse, relationship violence and other forms of victimization, especially among sexual minority youth," said Sean Esteban McCabe, a research associate professor at the U-M Substance Abuse Research Center and Institute for Research on Women and Gender.

The study's researchers are lead author Tonda Hughes of the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Sharon Wilsnack of University of North Dakota, as well as U-M's Brady West, a doctoral student in the Michigan Program in Survey Methodology at the Institute for Social Research, and Carol Boyd, director of the Institute for Research on Women and Gender.

The findings appear in the December issue of *Addiction*.

**More information:** [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/add.14505](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/add.14505)

Provided by University of Michigan  
APA citation: Individuals who are victimized -- especially in childhood -- likely to abuse alcohol and other drugs (2010, December 17) retrieved 4 May 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-12-individuals-victimized-childhood-abuse.html>

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