The 2023 Delaware Epidemiological Profile

Substance Use, Mental Health, and Related Issues:

Gender and Sexuality
The annual Delaware State Epidemiological Profile is a valuable data resource for strategic planning, decision-making, and evaluation. The report includes modules that highlight indicators of mental health and wellbeing, patterns of substance use and its consequences, and risk and protective factors for people in Delaware. The report also highlights crosscutting issues that warrant attention as well as populations that may experience disproportionate risk for these concerns.

This module is part of a series of materials. To review the Annual Epidemiological Profile Companion Guide (which includes data notes), modules on additional topics, downloadable slides, and infographics, please visit the UD Center for Drug and Health Studies Delaware Epidemiological Reports page. Links to presentations referenced in the annual profile are available from the Presentations webpage.

The SEOW is facilitated by a team at the Center for Drug and Health Studies at the University of Delaware that convenes a network of more than 100 representatives from approximately 55 state and nonprofit agencies, community organizations, advocacy groups, and other entities. The SEOW's mission is to bring data on behavioral health and associated issues to the forefront of prevention and treatment efforts in Delaware. To learn more, please visit the What is the SEOW? webpage.
Gender and Sexuality

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Gender and Sexuality

Members of the LGBTQ\(^1\) community have consistently faced discrimination, harassment, and violence at the interpersonal and societal levels (Center for American Progress, 2023). Despite making up a substantial portion of the population\(^2\) and ample evidence of discriminatory practices and policies, research on LGBTQ individuals has not been robust. Collecting data on this population is important but difficult, as sexuality and gender categories are often fluid and evolve over the life course, while other demographic measures are more fixed (Ruberg and Ruelos, 2020). However, most existing research provides evidence of the disproportionate risk for substance use and poor mental health experienced by people who identify as LGBTQ (Marshal et al. 2008; Marshall et al. 2011; SAMHSA, 2023). Data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health indicates that lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) adults are more likely to have a substance use disorder, drug use disorder, any mental illness, and serious mental illness compared to straight adults (SAMHSA, 2023). They were also more likely to experience mental health and economic challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic; LGBT respondents were twice as likely as non-LGBT adults to report symptoms of depression and anxiety during the pandemic, and also more likely to report experiencing food insecurity, loss of employment income, and difficulty paying expenses (U.S. Census, 2021).

It is important to note that differences in these rates are not intrinsically associated with being LGBTQ but rather relate to the adversities that these individuals frequently face concerning their sexual orientation or gender identity.

This module presents an overview of the behavioral health of LGBTQ youth in Delaware based on the following data sources:

- Delaware School Surveys
- Youth Risk Behavior Surveys

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\(^1\) The letter “Q” has multiple meanings in this context. It is typically short for queer but can represent those individuals who do not feel fully represented by the adjectives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, or those who are questioning or unsure how they identify in terms of sexual orientation, gender identity, or in terms of gender expression. While the LGBTQ acronym (or LGBT depending on the wording of the referenced data source) is used in this text, it is important to acknowledge that this is an imperfect and non-exhaustive identifier, and many sources may use variations of this acronym to refer to the community. The Trevor Support Center and GLSEN offer terminology resources on this topic. (Gender expression refers to how an individual presents gender identity. Although this is an important topic there is very little available data; therefore, it is beyond the scope of the current discussion.)

\(^2\) Recent data sources estimate that 7% to 8% of the adult population identify as LGBT (Gallup, 2022; U.S. Census, 2021). Someone is transgender when their gender identity is different from the sex that they were assigned at birth; the term cisgender is used to describe people whose sex at birth and gender identity are aligned. It is estimated that there are approximately 1.6 million transgender youth and adults in the U.S. (Herman, Flores, O’Neill, 2022).
Delaware School Survey (DSS)³

The Delaware School Surveys (DSS) are state-funded annual surveys administered to 5th, 8th, and 11th grade public school students throughout Delaware. They are designed to provide estimates of youth substance use and related factors. There are two versions of the survey, one for 5th grade students and a secondary version for 8th and 11th graders. (Due to the data gap in 2020 as well as the changes in the methodology for the 2021-2022 administration related to the COVID-19 pandemic, results of the 2022 DSS should be compared with caution to previous survey results. For more information regarding pandemic impacts on school survey data collected by CDHS, readers can visit the Companion Guide to the 2023 Epidemiological reports.)

The DSS Secondary Survey includes questions for 8th and 11th grade students on sexual orientation and gender identity. The category of LGBTQ is inclusive of students who report their sexual orientation as gay or lesbian, bisexual, other, or unsure, and/or students who report their gender as transgender, nonbinary, or another self-described gender option. We combine these responses into one variable labeled LGBTQ in order to report substance use and mental health related outcomes for these students. Figures 1 and 2 report the 8th grade prevalence rates for sexual orientation and gender identity, respectively. For purposes of this analysis, an estimated 29% of 8th grade students are grouped into the LGBTQ variable based on their survey responses.

![Pie chart showing sexual orientation for 8th grade students in DSS 2022](image)

Figure 1: Sexual orientation, 8th grade, DSS 2022

³ Source: Center for Drug & Health Studies. (2022). Delaware School Surveys, University of Delaware. For more information or to review the survey questionnaires and earlier reports, visit the DSS page of the University of Delaware Center for Drug and Health Studies website.
Like the data on adults referenced in the introduction, the 2022 DSS indicates that 8th grade LGBTQ students are at greater risk for substance use compared to other students. They reported nearly twice the rate of recent use of alcohol, marijuana, and vaping.
LGBTQ 8th graders were even more likely to report recent symptoms of anxiety and depression compared to other students. Half of all LGBTQ students reported symptoms of anxiety compared to 20% of cisgender or heterosexual students. Nearly four in ten LGBTQ students (39%) reported recent symptoms of depression compared to 12% of other students.

The DSS also includes the following: *In general, how would you rate your emotional health?* and have five response categories: *excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor*. Figure 5 indicates the differences among LGBTQ students and cisgender and heterosexual students. Only 6% of LGBTQ students rated their emotional health as excellent compared to 24% percent of other students; 27% of LGBTQ students rated their emotional health as poor compared to 7% of cisgender and heterosexual students.

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4 In the DSS Secondary Survey, anxiety is defined as students who respond that they have felt very nervous or anxious on more than half of the days in the past two weeks, and depression is defined as students who respond that they have been bothered by feeling down, depressed, or hopeless on more than half of the days in the past two weeks.
Figures 6 and 7 report the 11th grade prevalence rates for sexual orientation and gender identity, respectively. An estimated 26% of 11th grade students meet the criteria for LGBTQ based on their survey responses, which is similar to the prevalence reported by 8th graders (29%).

Figure 6: Sexual orientation, 11th grade, DSS 2022
Reported rates of substance use and mental health symptoms among 11th grade LGBTQ students are higher than those of cisgender and heterosexual students. Of note, more than half of LGBTQ students reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety and 43% reported symptoms of depression for more than half of the days in the two weeks prior to taking the survey.

Figure 8: Past year substance use among LGBTQ students, 11th grade, DSS 2022

Past year alcohol use and LGBTQ status was not statistically significant at the p<.05 level. 

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\(^5\) Past year alcohol use and LGBTQ status was not statistically significant at the p<.05 level.
When asked about their emotional health, only one in three 11th grade students who identify as LGBTQ rated it as good, very good, or excellent. Eight percent of cisgender and heterosexual students rated their emotional health as poor, compared to 30% of LGBTQ students.
Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)\(^6\)

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) is a CDC-funded survey that is administered in odd-numbered years to both national and state samples of students. The survey monitors various topics of health risk behaviors. Delaware has participated in these surveys for over 20 years. The CDC reports data on students who identify their sexual orientation as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or heterosexual. In the figures below, we report indicators related to substance use, mental health, and experiences of violence and trauma for LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) high school students compared to heterosexual students.

![Past Month Substance Use Among LGB High School Students, Delaware YRBS 2021 (in percentages)](image)

Figure 11: Past month substance use among LGB students, HS, DE YRBS 2021

Like the National Survey on Drug Use and Health and the Delaware School Surveys, the YRBS indicates that substance use rates are higher among LGB students compared to heterosexual students. Twenty-nine percent of LGB high school students reported using alcohol in the past month, compared to 19% of heterosexual students. Greater differences were observed in the rates of past month marijuana use.

As Figure 12 indicates, these disparities were even more pronounced when looking at symptoms of depression and suicidal behavior and ideation. Sixty-three percent of LGB high school students reported periods of depression lasting two weeks or more in the year before responding to the survey compared to 30% of heterosexual students. Nearly half (44%) had seriously considered suicide, four times the rate reported by heterosexual students. One in three LGB high school students had planned to attempt suicide, 24% had attempted suicide, and 8% had made a suicide attempt that resulted in a serious injury or required medical treatment in the past year.

The YRBS also includes questions related to bullying and violence, including sexual violence. Findings from the 2021 survey indicate that high school students who identify as LGB are also more likely to report experiencing such traumas. While the rate of being involved in a fight or being threatened or injured with a weapon at school were similar for both groups, LGB students were considerably more likely to be bullied at school or electronically. One in five LGB students reported that they had been bullied in person or electronically compared to 8% of heterosexual students.

Seventeen percent of LGB high school students indicated that they had experienced sexual violence within the year prior to taking the survey. They also reported a 20% lifetime rate of being physically forced to have sexual intercourse. These reporting rates are substantially higher than those reported by their heterosexual peers (6% and 5%, respectively).

It bears repeating that higher rates of substance use, mental health symptoms, and experiencing trauma are not inherently related to being LGBTQ but to their unique experiences and the adversities they may face. More effective and consistent data collection on these issues can help policy makers, educators, and practitioners understand how to better support LGBTQ students and mitigate the experiences that increase the risk for LGBTQ students.

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7 All mental health indicators in Figure 12 refer to the 12 months prior to taking the survey.
Experiences of Bullying and Violence among LGB High School Students, DE YRBS 2021 (in percentages)

- Threatened or injured with a weapon at school: LGB 7%, Heterosexual 5%
- Were in a physical fight: LGB 16%, Heterosexual 16%
- Electronically bullied: LGB 20%, Heterosexual 8%
- Bullied on school property: LGB 20%, Heterosexual 8%

Figure 13: Bullying and violence among LGB high school students, DE YRBS 2021

Experiences of Sexual Violence Among LGB High School Students, DE YRBS 2021 (in percentages)

- Ever physically forced to have sexual intercourse: LGB 20%, Heterosexual 5%
- Experienced sexual violence from anyone (in the past 12 months): LGB 17%, Heterosexual 6%

Figure 14: Experiences of sexual violence among LGB students, HS, DE YRBS 2021
References and Data Sources


