

The 2024 Delaware Epidemiological Profile

**Substance Use, Mental
Health, and Related
Issues:**

Gender and Sexuality



The Delaware 2024 Epidemiological Profile: Substance Use, Mental Health, and Related Issues

is prepared for

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Delaware Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health
&
The Delaware State Epidemiological Outcomes Workgroup

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 50 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.



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Gender and Sexuality

Figure 1: Sexual orientation, 8 th grade, DSS 2023.....	5
Figure 2: Gender identity, 8 th grade, DSS 2023	6
Figure 3: Past year substance use among LGBTQ students, 8 th grade, DSS 2023	6
Figure 4: Mental health among LGBTQ students, 8 th grade, DSS 2023.....	7
Figure 5: Self-rated emotional health among LGBTQ students, 8 th grade, DSS 2023	7
Figure 6: Sexual orientation, 11 th grade, DSS 2023.....	8
Figure 7: Gender identity, 11 th grade, DSS 2023	8
Figure 8: Past year substance use among LGBTQ students, 11 th grade, DSS 2023	9
Figure 9: Mental health among LGBTQ students, 11 th grade, DSS 2023.....	10
Figure 10: Self-rated emotional health among LGBTQ students, 11 th grade, DSS 2023	10
Figure 11: Past month substance use among LGB students, HS, DE YRBS 2021	11
Figure 12: Past year mental health among LGB students, HS, DE YRBS 2021.....	12
Figure 13: Bullying and violence among LGB high school students, DE YRBS 2021	13
Figure 14: Experiences of sexual violence among LGB students, HS, DE YRBS 2021	13

Gender and Sexuality

Members of the LGBTQ¹ 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 population² 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

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. The DSS Secondary Survey includes questions for 8th and 11th grade students on sexual orientation and gender identity.⁴ The category of LGBTQ in this module includes students who do not report their sexual orientation as *heterosexual* or *straight* and/or students who report their gender as *transgender*, *nonbinary*, or *another self-described gender*. 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 22% of 8th grade students are grouped into the LGBTQ variable based on their survey responses.

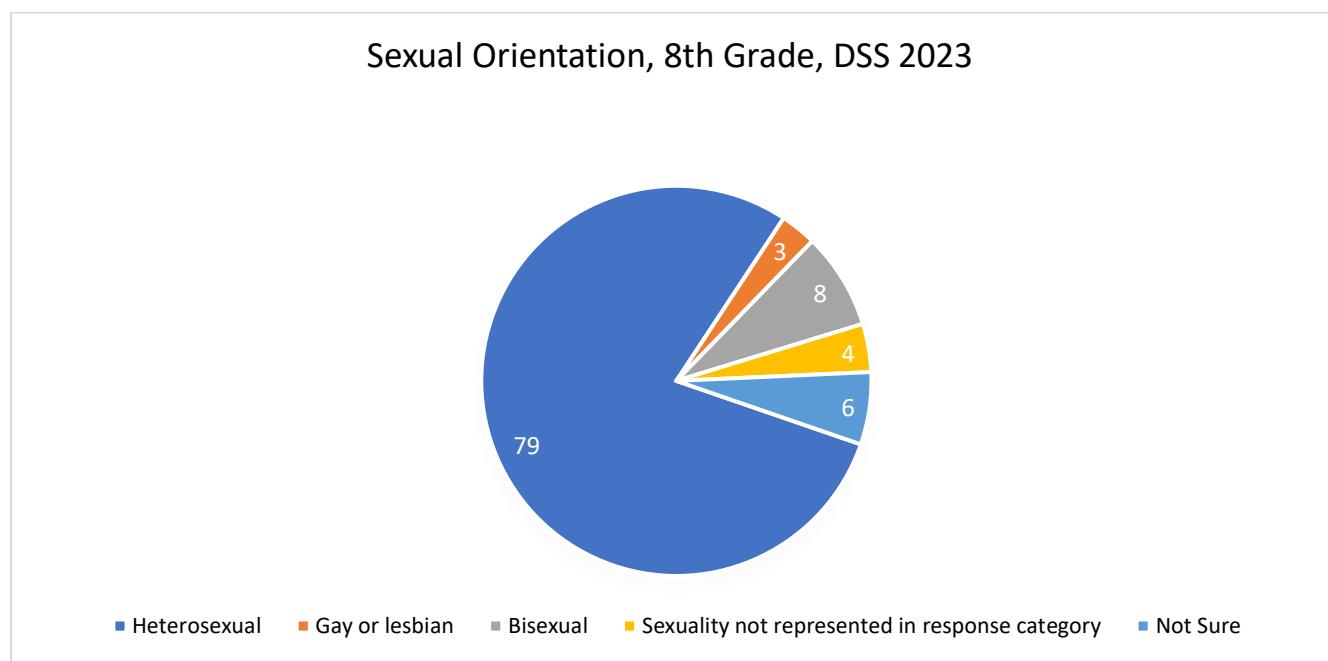


Figure 1: Sexual orientation, 8th grade, DSS 2023

³ Source: Center for Drug & Health Studies. (2023). [Delaware School Surveys](#). University of Delaware.

⁴ 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](#). Due to the data gap in 2020 as well as the changes in the administration methodology related to the COVID-19 pandemic, results of the 2023 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 that accompanies this profile accessible from the [Epidemiological Reports and Products page](#).

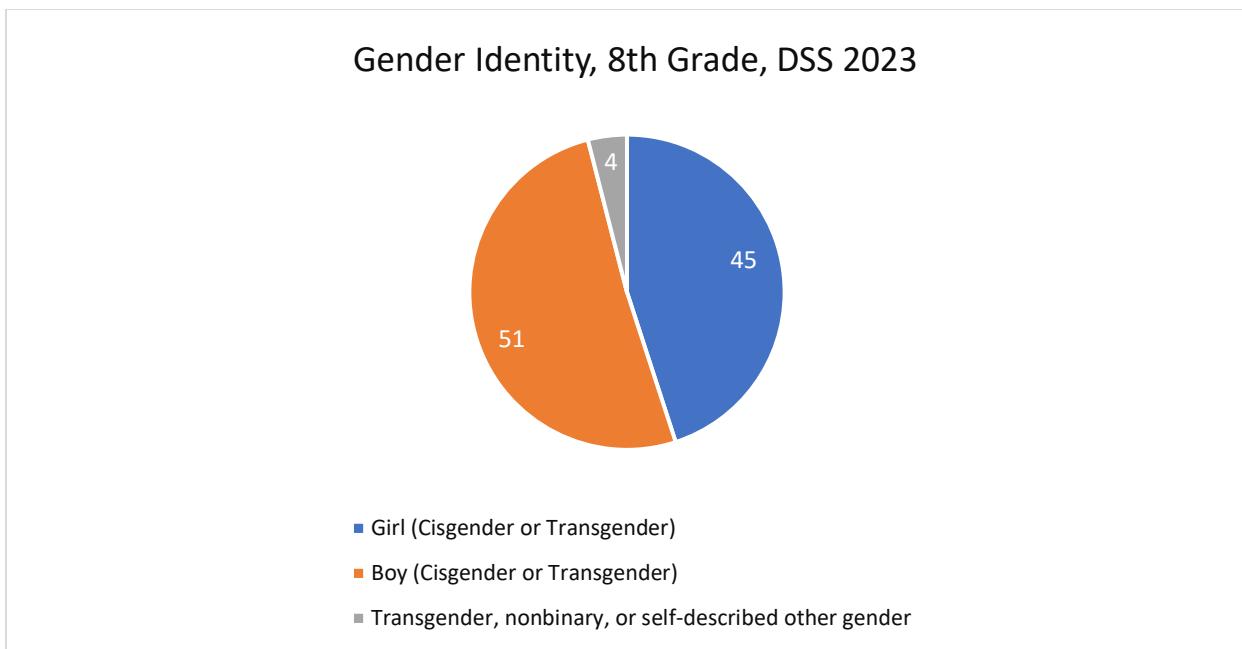


Figure 2: Gender identity, 8th grade, DSS 2023

Similar to research regarding LGBTQ adults referenced in the introduction of this module, the 2023 DSS indicates that 8th grade LGBTQ students appear at greater risk for substance use compared to other students. The prevalence rates of LGBTQ 8th graders for past year alcohol, marijuana, and vaping use are nearly twice that of other students.^{5, 6}

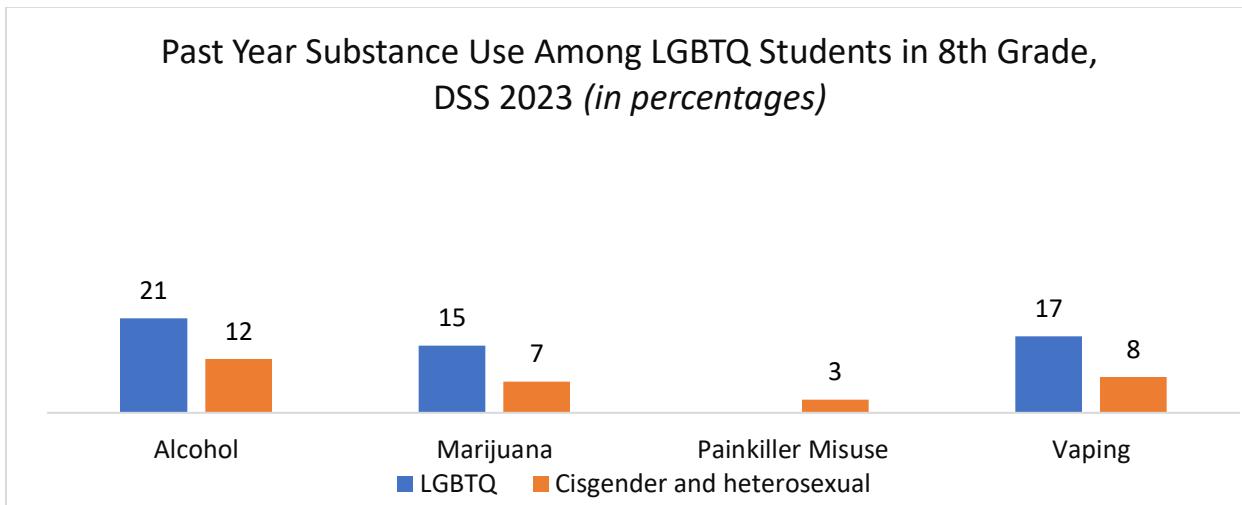


Figure 3: Past year substance use among LGBTQ students, 8th grade, DSS 2023

⁵ Prevalence rates are not available for any group if the number of respondents in a cell is below the CDHS threshold for data reporting (less than 30 students). Therefore, we are unable to report the prevalence of painkiller misuse among 8th grade students who identified as LGBTQ on the DSS 2023.

⁶ It is important to note that while there is a statistical association between these factors, this does not necessarily mean that there is a causal relationship between them; in other words, we cannot say that one factor causes the other, and there may be other conditions that also influence the association. This holds true for all of the associations discussed in this report.

LGBTQ 8th graders are more likely to report recent symptoms of anxiety and depression compared to other students.⁷ Almost half (46%) of all LGBTQ students report symptoms of anxiety compared to 19% of cisgender and heterosexual students. Nearly four in ten LGBTQ students (38%) report recent symptoms of depression compared to 13% of other students.

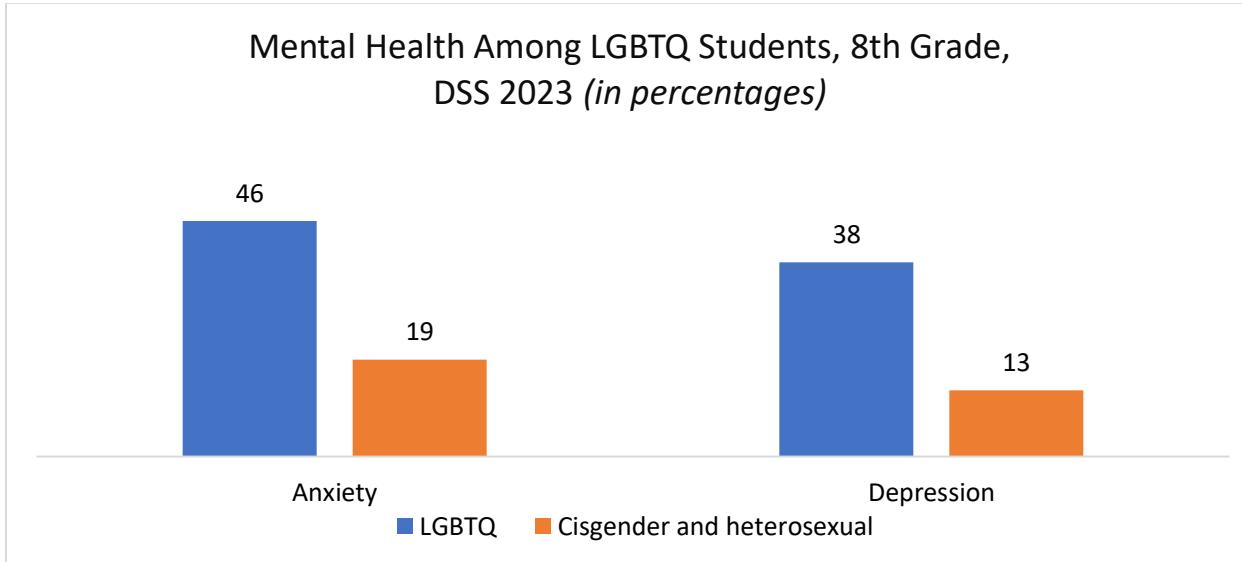


Figure 4: Mental health among LGBTQ students, 8th grade, DSS 2023

The DSS Secondary Survey also asks: *In general, how would you rate your emotional health with five potential responses: excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor.* Only 8% of LGBTQ 8th grade students rate their emotional health as excellent compared to 26% percent of other students. One in four LGBTQ 8th graders rate their emotional health as poor compared to 7% of their cisgender and heterosexual peers.

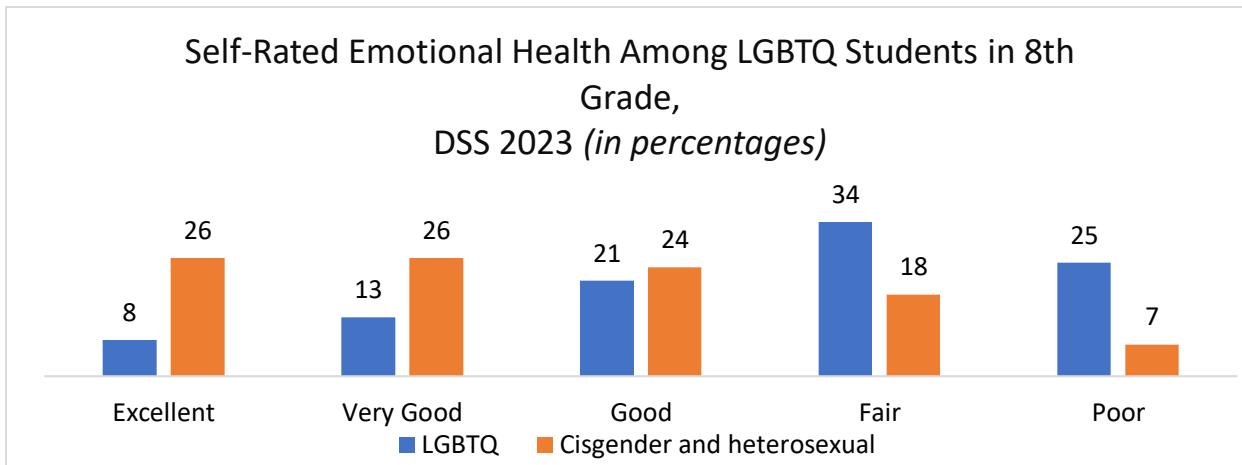


Figure 5: Self-rated emotional health among LGBTQ students, 8th grade, DSS 2023

⁷ 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 28% of 11th grade students meet the criteria for the LGBTQ variable based on their survey responses.

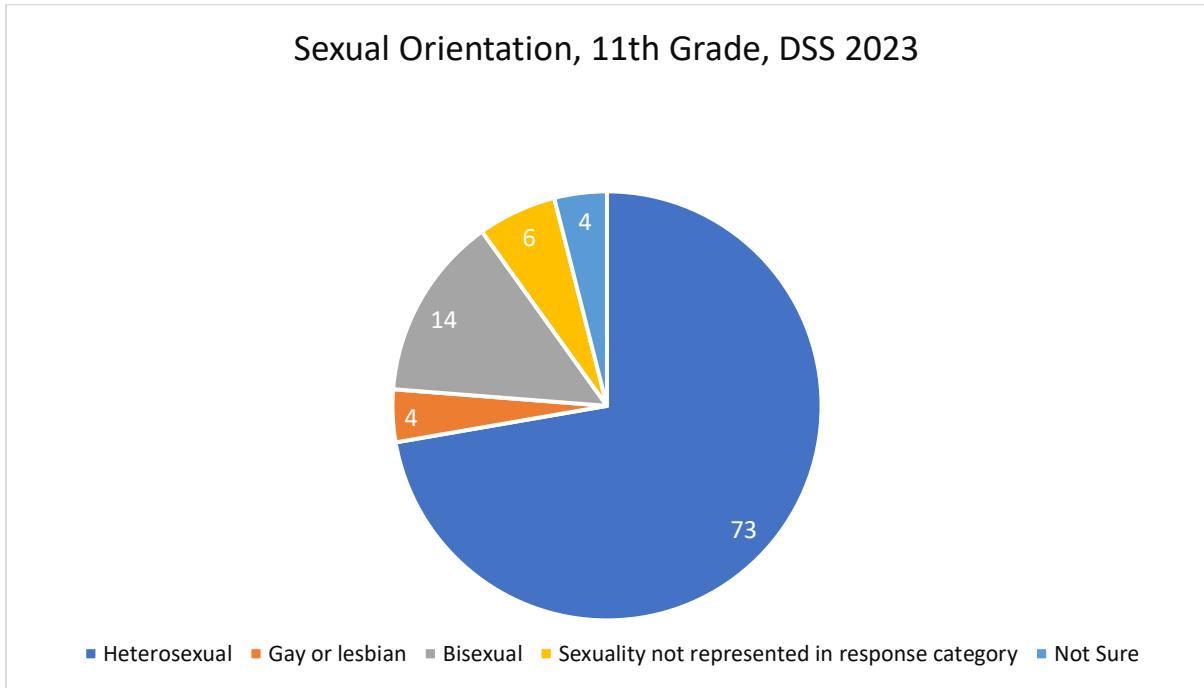


Figure 6: Sexual orientation, 11th grade, DSS 2023

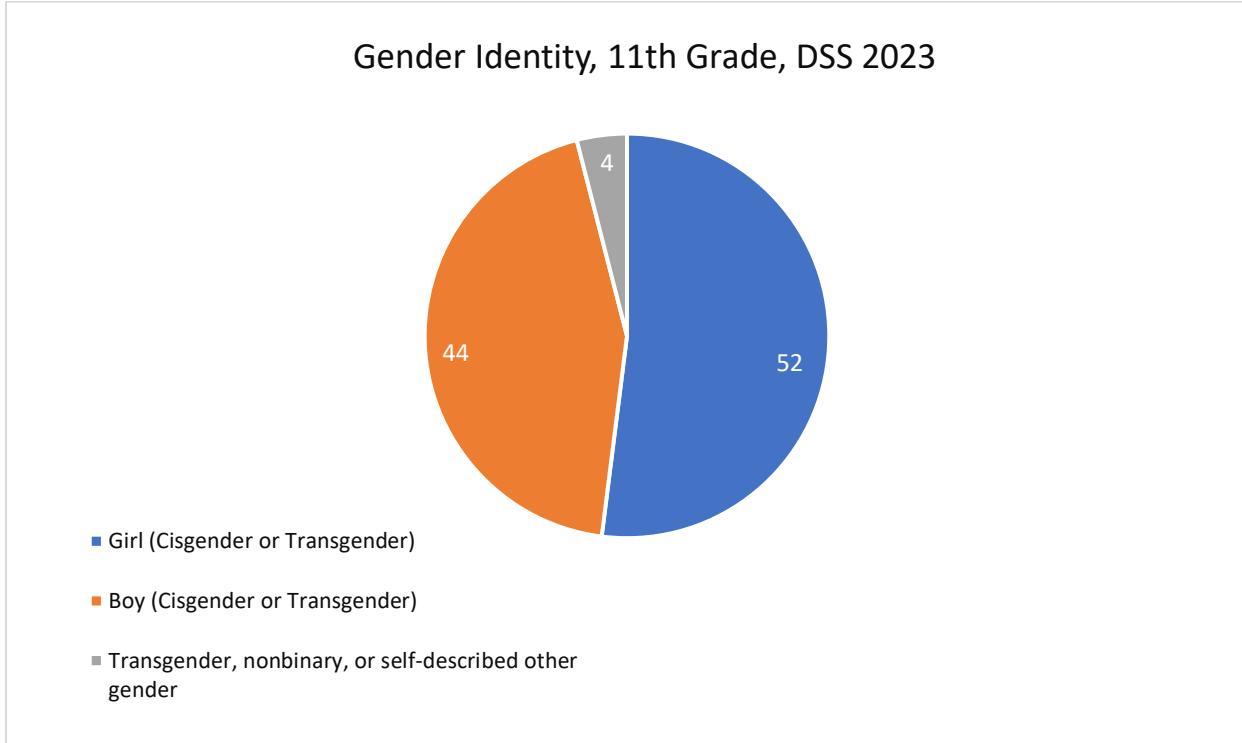


Figure 7: Gender identity, 11th grade, DSS 2023

Although the disparities are not as great as those among younger students, past year rates of alcohol, marijuana, and vaping use among 11th grade LGBTQ students are higher than those of cisgender and heterosexual students. Differences regarding mental health symptoms among the two groups are more pronounced. Nearly half (48%) of LGBTQ students report recent symptoms of anxiety and 37% report recent symptoms of depression, compared to 22% and 15%, respectively, among cisgender and heterosexual 11th graders.

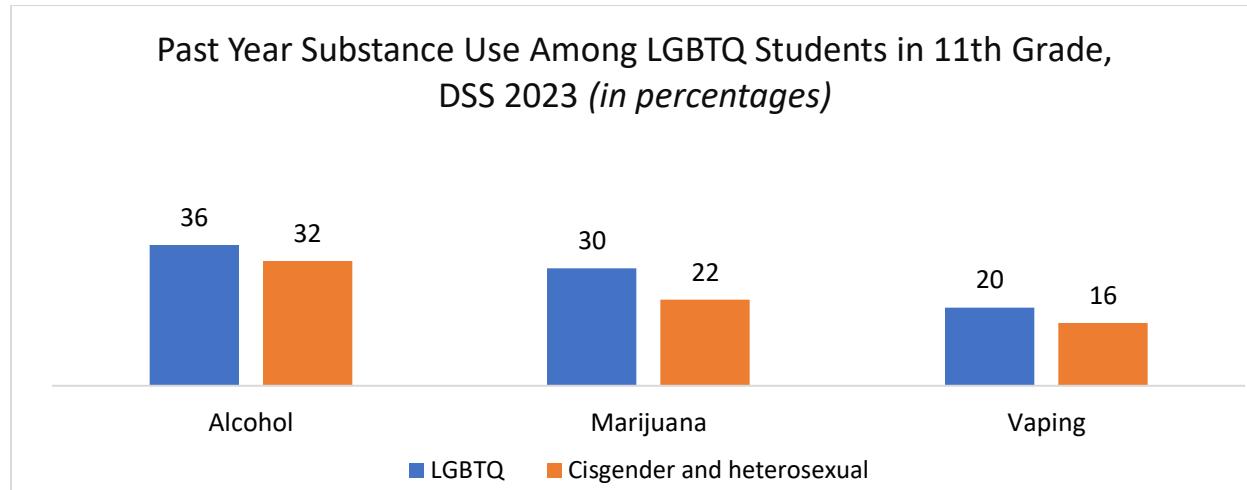


Figure 8: Past year substance use among LGBTQ students, 11th grade, DSS 2023⁸

Similar to their younger peers, LGBTQ 11th graders are more likely to report recent symptoms of anxiety and depression compared to other students. LGBTQ students report over double the rates of recent symptoms of anxiety and depression compared to cisgender and heterosexual students.

⁸ Past year alcohol use and LGBTQ status was not statistically significant at the p<.05 level. Prevalence rates are not available for any group if the number of respondents in a cell is below the CDHS threshold for data reporting (less than 30 students). Therefore, we are unable to report the prevalence of painkiller misuse among either group of 11th grade students.

Mental Health Among LGBTQ Students, 11th Grade, DSS 2023 (in percentages)

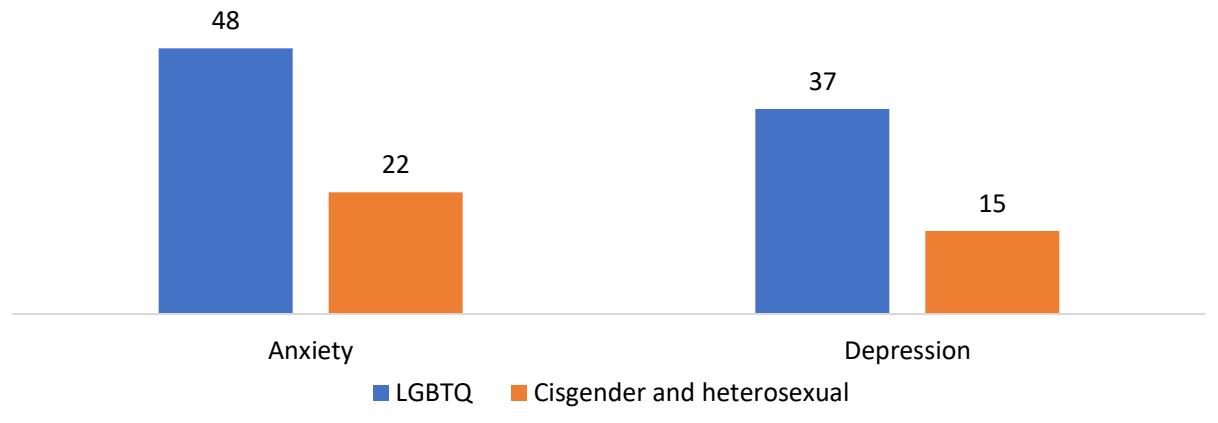


Figure 9: Mental health among LGBTQ students, 11th grade, DSS 2023

When asked about their emotional health, one in four LGBTQ students rate it as *poor* and one in three rate it as *fair*. This compares to 10% and 24% among cisgender and heterosexual 11th graders.

Self-Rated Emotional Health Among LGBTQ Students in 11th Grade, DSS 2023 (in percentages)

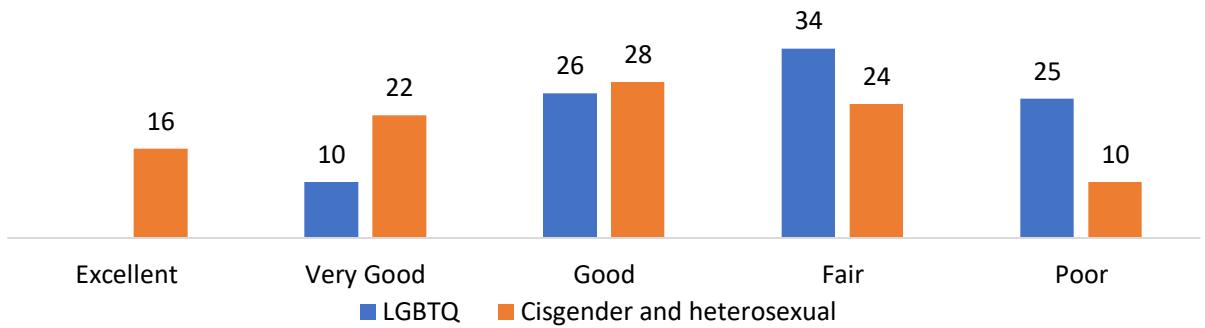


Figure 10: Self-rated emotional health among LGBTQ students, 11th grade, DSS 2023⁹

⁹ Prevalence rates are not available for any group if the number of respondents in a cell is below the CDHS threshold for data reporting (less than 30 students). Therefore, we are unable to report the prevalence of LGBTQ 11th grade students who rate their emotional health as excellent.

Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)¹⁰

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.

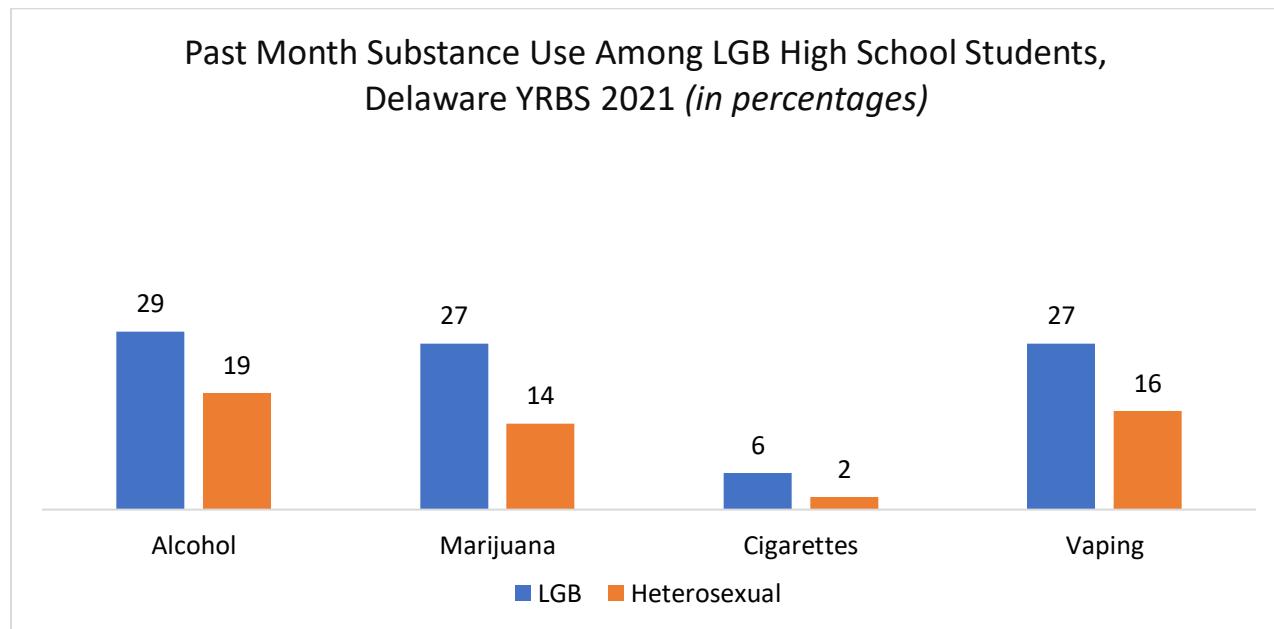


Figure 11: Past month substance use among LGB students, HS, DE YRBS 2021

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 report using alcohol in the past month, compared to 19% of heterosexual students. Greater differences are observed in the rates of past month marijuana use and vaping.

As Figure 12 indicates, these disparities are even more pronounced when looking at symptoms of depression and suicidal behavior and ideation. Sixty-three percent of LGB high school students report 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 in that time frame, 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.

¹⁰ Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). 1991 – 2021 Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data. Available at <https://nccd.cdc.gov/Youthonline/App/Default.aspx>.

Mental Health Among LGB High School Students, Delaware YRBS 2021 (*in percentages*)

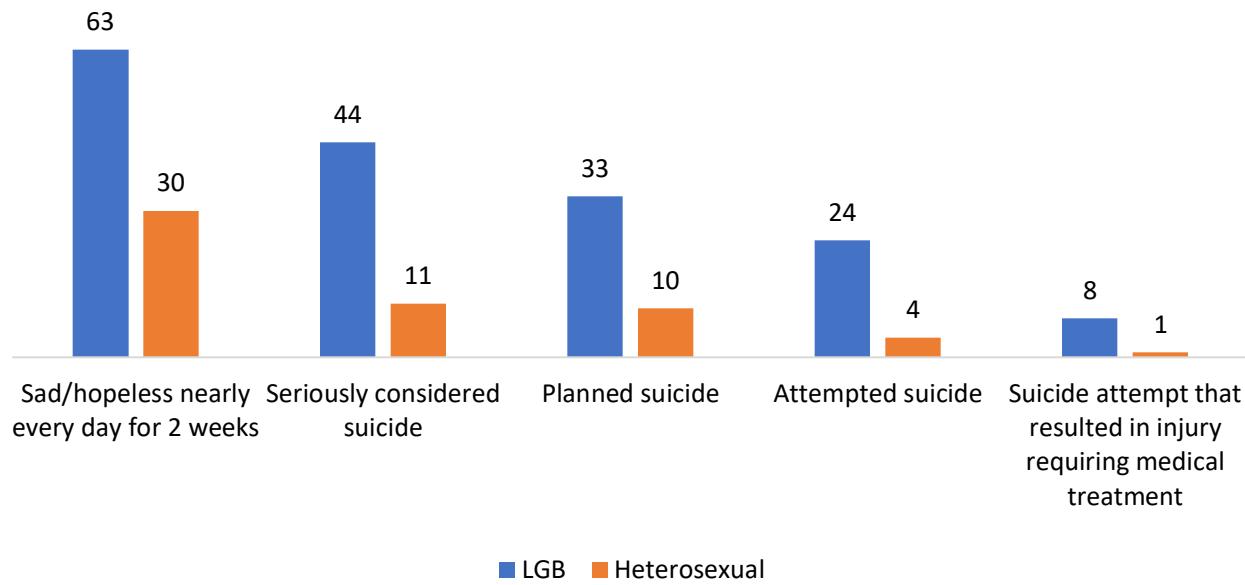


Figure 12: Past year mental health among LGB students, HS, DE YRBS 2021¹¹

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 are similar for both groups, LGB students are considerably more likely to be bullied at school or electronically. One in five LGB students report that they had been bullied in person or electronically compared to 8% of heterosexual students.

Seventeen percent of LGB high school students indicate 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 rates are substantially higher than those of their heterosexual peers (6% and 5%, respectively).

¹¹ 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*)

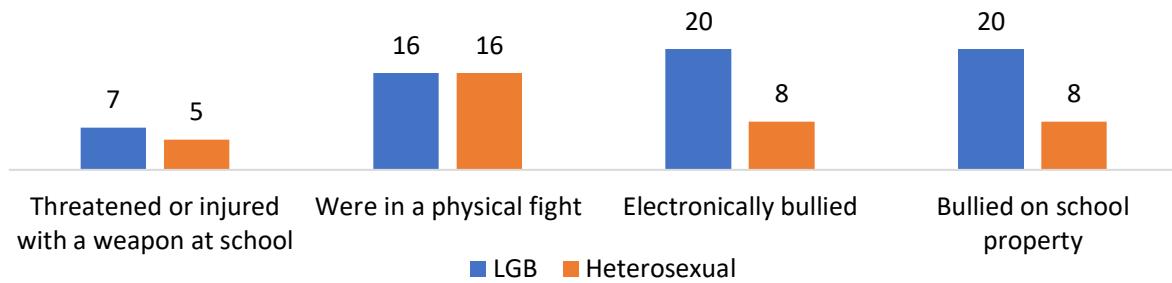


Figure 13: Bullying and violence among LGB high school students, DE YRBS 2021

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



Figure 14: Experiences of sexual violence among LGB students, HS, DE YRBS 2021

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 these risks.

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