

FACT SHEET: Mental Health and Substance Use among Bisexual Youth in Ontario

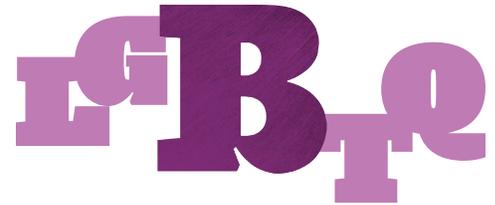
Did you know?

- Bisexual* people tend to have the **poorest mental health of all sexual minority groups** that have been studied. Research has shown that they are more likely to experience **anxiety, depression, self-harm, suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts** than are gay and lesbian people.
- Bisexual youth aged 16 to 24 report even higher rates of mental health issues than bisexual people over 25.
- Bisexual people have often been left out of research, and when they are included in studies, they are often grouped with gay/lesbian people or with heterosexual people. Because of this, we are only now gaining a clearer picture of the unique mental health challenges and service barriers that bisexual people experience.

Background

The **Risk and Resilience: Bisexual Mental Health Study** is a community-based research project investigating mental health and mental health service experiences among bisexual people living in Ontario. The goals of this project are:

1. to **assess mental health**, risk factors and supportive factors for health among bisexuals
2. to **identify barriers** to mental health and to accessing mental health services
3. to identify people's **coping strategies** and other forms of resilience
4. to **make recommendations** to improve mental health services for bisexual people in Ontario.



“I do have very good friends. I’m immensely grateful for the support system I have – my family, including my not extended family, but my grandparents and my parents. We all live in the city, and everyone’s got everyone else’s back . . . So we’re all pretty solid . . . I am aware that’s not something that even most people have, and I think that gives me a huge advantage to deal with myself even personally – not going to anyone else [a service provider], but knowing that that network is there is huge”

– Addison, 17, white man

* This study uses “bisexual” as an umbrella term for anyone who experiences attraction to more than one sex and/or gender. It encompasses a broad spectrum of non-monosexual sexual orientations, including queer, pansexual, omniseual, two-spirited, fluid and other identity labels.

Our approach

We asked **bisexual people from across Ontario** about their mental health and their experiences with mental health services. In total, 405 people took part in the online survey, and over 40 people met with researchers for in-person interviews. Participants were asked questions about seven key mental health issues: **depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), alcohol use, illicit drug use, suicidality (thoughts of suicide and suicide attempts) and tobacco use.**

For this study, we **defined bisexual as meaning anyone who is attracted to more than one sex and/or gender.** All the people who participated agreed that this definition applied to them in some way. We also collected information on sex assigned at birth, gender identity, racial/ethnic/cultural identity and age.

“Youth” refers to participants aged 16–24. Out of the 405 participants, about one quarter (99 people) were youth. In this fact sheet, we compare bisexual youth both with bisexual adults and with heterosexual youth, because age and sexual orientation are both related to higher stress levels and/or mental health problems. One participant said, “That period of my life from about 18 to 26, where I was figuring things out and things were pretty complicated, I had issues with my mental health and depression and substance use and self-medication. . . . Every year from 27 onward, I’ve said, ‘I’m so relieved I’m not 22 right now.’” Another participant reflected: “Shit that comes out when you first come out, both as trans and bi, is not the shit that I’m dealing with 10 years on.”

Our findings

MENTAL HEALTH

Our study found that bisexual youth have poorer mental health than bisexual adults: bisexual youth had significantly higher rates of depression and PTSD symptoms, as well as significantly higher rates of suicidal thoughts in the past year.

DEPRESSION

Participants gave us information on their rates of depression by answering questions about how frequently they have recently experienced things such as little interest or pleasure in doing things. Bisexual youth had significantly more depression symptoms than bisexual adults. The average score on the depression scale for youth was 9.2, compared with 6.8 for adults. This contrasts with the general population in Canada, in which youth were less likely to report a mood disorder such as depression (3%) than were the overall population (6%).

In our study, the rate of moderate to severe depression was 41% for bisexual youth, greater than the 35% for bisexual adults. Both these rates are considerably higher than rates for the Canadian population: a Canadian study of over 3,000 randomly sampled people showed that 8% of participants reported moderate or greater depression.

This is my community

“I cook a lot, to take care of myself. Also, because I really like eating. And I find taking care of other people – so cooking for my family, or my girlfriend, or my best friend, or all of those people at once. It’s really nice to feel needed by other people, so I like to cook to provide small comforts for others. And that’s how I take care of myself”

– Addison, 17, white man

POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder that can result from experiencing a traumatic event. We measured PTSD symptoms with a version of the PTSD Checklist, which includes questions like, "How much have you been bothered by repeated, disturbing memories, thoughts or images of a stressful experience from the past?" On average, bisexual youth have more PTSD symptoms than bisexual adults. The average score on the checklist for youth was 35.6, significantly higher than the score for adults (31.1). This questionnaire measures PTSD using scores that can range from 17–85. People who score 44 or higher may have PTSD. Based on this, 26% of youth in our study could be considered to have PTSD, compared with the general population, about 10% of whom report being diagnosed with PTSD.

SUICIDE

We asked participants whether they had considered or attempted suicide in the past year. A greater percentage of youth had thought about or attempted suicide in the past year than had adults. In fact, 30% of youth said they had seriously thought about suicide in the past year, compared with 15% of adults. Both these figures are much higher than in the general population, where approximately 4% of both youth and adults report thinking about suicide. We found that there was no significant difference between the number of youth and the number of adults who attempted suicide.

ANXIETY

Participants gave us information on their anxiety levels by answering five questions, including how often they felt anxious, how bad it was, and how much it affected their lives. In this case, we did not find a difference between what adults and youth reported. Both adults and youth had high rates of anxiety. In youth, 39% had anxiety levels that would likely affect their ability to participate in activities such as school, work or social life.

SUBSTANCE USE

The use of alcohol and other drugs often goes hand in hand with poorer rates of mental health because it can form part of peoples' strategies for managing stress. In our study, we found no differences in alcohol and other drug use between bisexual adults and youth, though both reported higher rates of use than the general Canadian population. Overall, 31% of participants reported rates of alcohol consumption that would be considered "problem drinking," and 45% reported engaging in illicit drug use in the past year. This compares with 19% of people aged 12 and older in the general Canadian population who reported drinking five or more alcoholic beverages at one time at least once a month, and 13% of Canadians who reported illicit drug use within the past year.

Discussion

The findings in our study contribute to the developing picture of mental health in bisexual youth. Like our study, **other recent studies have found that bisexual people are at higher risk for depression**, though this finding is more consistent among women.

This is my community

“I got heavily involved in drugs and alcohol for a long time . . . the thing to do was party, and I used that as a vehicle to basically escape the anti-gay tone that was running through my peers, that made it very important that I stay in the closet, as far as I was concerned. And after a couple of years of that, by the time I was 17 or so, the denial had become very ingrained. That developed into a drug habit”

– Sam, 51, Aboriginal and white man

Similarly, we found **rates of considering or attempting suicide in the past year that are higher than those reported for the general population**. This higher suicidality rate is reflected in rates found in other studies. For example, the Canadian Community Health Survey reported a lifetime suicidality rate of 35% for bisexual men, compared with 7% for heterosexual men. For women, the corresponding figures were around 45% for bisexual women and 10% for heterosexual women.

Our **youth participants also reported more PTSD symptoms than the general Canadian population**.

Overall, our study supports the patterns found by other studies and suggests that those at highest risk for poor mental health are bisexuals aged 16–24.

WHY ARE ANXIETY, DEPRESSION, PTSD, SUICIDALITY AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE SO HIGH AMONG BISEXUAL YOUTH?

- **Biphobia**. This refers to negative attitudes toward bisexuality and bisexual people. This prejudice can often lead to discriminatory behaviour.
- Unfortunately, many people behave as if bisexuality does not exist. **Bisexuals are often accused of actually being straight and just experimenting**, or looking for attention. Alternatively, bisexuality is sometimes described as a stage on the way to coming out as gay or lesbian.
- These attitudes are hurtful and oppressive, and **can cause significant levels of self-doubt and anxiety in bisexual people**. One participant described how bisexual invisibility affected their mental health: "I was unaware of the term bisexual for a very long time. I only knew of two things: gay and straight. So when I felt these attractions, or when I did something sexual with a guy, it caused some anxiety of course, not understanding what the heck was going on."
- While the discrimination bisexual people experience from heterosexual people can be similar to that experienced by gay and lesbian people, bisexual people also **face a lack of acceptance by lesbian and gay communities**. This means that the valuable and effective community support gay and lesbian people can access is less available to bisexual people. One participant expressed that who their partner is can limit access to the community: "I know depending on who I am with, that might affect what spaces I or we are welcomed in."
- Health care providers often **lack the training or skills** to meet the needs of bisexual people. As well, there is a lack of research on the bisexual population to inform health care practices.

Although the high rates of anxiety, depression, PTSD, suicidality and substance abuse are concerning, we need to **recognize the resilience of bisexual youth**. Most bisexual youth are not struggling with mental health concerns, despite the above barriers.

This is my community

“I don’t actually know what the rest of my life is going to be like, but I’m confident of my skills and talents and interests, and general ability and maturity. So I’m very optimistic that I will find a good place in the world, that is my proper place”

– Addison, 17, white man

Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, our research team and community advisory committee members made the following recommendations to address mental health issues among bisexual youth:

- **Fighting biphobia is essential.** One way this can be accomplished is through visibility and education campaigns about bisexuality. Visit www.bisexualhealth.com for information about the visibility campaign our team has initiated.
- Gay-straight alliances and **LGBTQ university groups can be encouraged to reach out to bisexual youth** specifically, since often bisexual people don't see these groups as a safe and supportive space for them (just consider what is missing in the name "gay-straight alliance"!).
- **Health care providers should receive education about the unique challenges bisexual people face**, in order to deliver competent care to these communities. For information about health care provider training on this topic, please visit www.rainbowhealthontario.ca.

For more about our team's community-based research on bisexual health, please visit www.lgbtqhealth.ca.

Acknowledgments

Fact sheet authors: Giselle Gos and Corey Flanders, with contributions from Nael Bhanji and Iradele Plante. This fact sheet could not have been possible without the contributions of the following people: the participants in the Risk & Resilience Study of Bisexual Mental Health, the Risk & Resilience research team and Advisory Committee, the Re:searching for LGBTQ Health Team, and our community reviewers, Cherese Reemaul and Kate Sloan. The Risk & Resilience Study was funded by the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (Institute of Gender and Health, Grant # 106609).

This fact sheet is based on the following paper: Ross, L.E., Bauer, G.R., MacLeod, M.A., Robinson, M., MacKay, J. & Dobinson, C. (2014). Mental health and substance use among bisexual youth and non-youth in Ontario, Canada. *PLoS ONE*, 9 (8), e101604. To read this paper, please visit: <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0101604>.

Suggested citation: Gos, G. & Flanders, C. on behalf of Re:searching for LGBTQ Health. (2016). *Mental Health and Substance Use among Bisexual Youth in Ontario* [Fact sheet]. Toronto: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. Retrieved from www.bisexualhealth.com.

