

MARGINALISED AND MISUNDERSTOOD? THE PATTERNS AND IMPACTS OF SUBSTANCE USE AMONG SEXUAL MINORITIES

Bourne, A

London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, London, United Kingdom

Introduction / Issues: This paper will illustrate patterns of substance use among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) populations and compare usage to heterosexual populations. Attention will be paid to the unique social and cultural circumstances of substance use and the consequences of these for supportive harm reduction and health promotion interventions.

Method: Diverse literatures across fields of public health, psychology and sociology have been reviewed and complex findings relating to the use and impacts of illicit drugs and alcohol among LGBT populations synthesised.

Key Findings: Most research indicates a higher prevalence of illicit drug use among gay men compared to their heterosexual counterparts, and a higher prevalence of alcohol use among lesbian and bisexual women. Varied theories have been proposed to explain such differences, although the extent to which these adequately capture the current social and political circumstances of many LGBT populations can be questioned. Much of the literature on substance use among sexual minorities has focused on associations with sexual risk behaviours and the potential for HIV transmission, but this has served to mask other serious mental and physical health impacts of substance use for gay men and has rendered such issues for lesbian and transgender populations less visible.

Discussions and Conclusions: Substances most popular, or most problematic, among sexual minorities can vary significantly from heterosexual populations, as can the settings in which they are utilised and the motivations for doing so. LGBT people are not a homogenous population and drug and alcohol interventions also need to take account of the other axes of inequality that can influence ill-health.

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