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Substance Abuse Among LGBTQ+ Adolescents

Research Paper

Kiana Ansari

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Substance abuse is a vicious mental illness that has left countless individuals struggling to go on with their daily routines - losing their jobs and even their lives to an overdose. What causes someone to fall down this path? Many factors play a role in substance abuse issues, sexuality being one of them. The 2015 National Survey on Drug Use and Health revealed that LGBTQ+ individuals were more than two times more likely than heterosexuals to have used illicit drugs within the past year; 39.1% vs 17.1% (NIDA, 2017). Substance abuse in turn is linked to various health outcomes such as stroke, lung cancer, heart disease, and liver disease. Highlighting a link between these health outcomes and substance abuse was a study showing that annually per 100,000 patients with liver disease, 13.9-24.0 cases are substance or drug induced liver disease (Suk & Kim, 2012). This paper will explore the various factors at the individual, relationship, and community levels that cause LGBTQ+ adolescents to engage in substance abuse, the implications of it, programs for prevention, and more.

Epidemiological Data

In the U.S. alone, 3.2 million youth ages 8 to 18 identify as LGBTQ+. Break downs reveal that 1.6 million or 8% identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual while 150,000 or 1% identify as transgender. Further, the largest populations of LGBTQ+ adolescents were found in California, Texas, New York, and Florida while the smallest populations were in North Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming (Williams Institute, 2018). Some risk factors the LGBTQ+ community holds for substance abuse include low self-esteem, lack of support from family and friends, discrimination, and mental illness. These risk factors play into the fact that LGBTQ+ adolescents are 90% more likely to be involved in substance use than straight adolescents (NIDA, 2017).

As aforementioned, these high rates of substance abuse have heavy implications for the health of an individual. One specific negative health outcome seen as a result of substance use is lung cancer. In a study done on incidence and mortality rates with Lung Cancer, there was shown to be a higher rate of Lung Cancer incidences among bisexual individuals; incidence rate ratio: 1.11 ($p < 0.5$). It was also shown that mortality rates from Lung Cancer were higher among sexual minority males; incidence rate ratio: 1.05 ($p < 0.5$) (Boehmer, 2012). Substance abuse has taken large tolls on the wellbeing and health of the LGBTQ+ adolescent community. What exactly are these links between LGBTQ+ adolescents and substance abuse?

Individual Level

One risk factor associated with LGBTQ+ adolescents and substance abuse at the individual level is a lack of empowerment and confidence in both their self and sexuality. This sense of insecurity leads individuals to look for validation and security through drugs and out of body experiences (Talbot, 2019). The Montrose Center Hatch Youth Program has set forth efforts to combat this. This program targets young LGBTQ+ individuals who struggle with empowerment and confidence in both their sexuality and overall self. Their goal is to push LGBTQ+ individuals to increase confidence and make responsible life choices; straying away from homelessness and substance abuse. This is done through mentorship, motivational speeches, activities, and more. 108 LGBTQ+ individuals who attended the Hatch Program were evaluated on outcomes of self-esteem, coping, and social support. Participants reported increased social support, which in turn, correlated to a 38% increase in self-esteem which was statistically significant ($p = .05$) (Wilkerson et al., 2017). Self esteem has a significant negative correlation with substance abuse ($p < 0.05$); implying that as self esteem increases, substance abuse

decreases and vice versa (Peterson, Buser, & Westburg, 2010). Due to this, the hatch program built higher self esteem in LGBTQ+ adolescents which led to the outcome of a decreased risk of substance abuse as a result. However, this isn't the only problem that must be fought for the LGBTQ+ community.

Relationship Level

Beyond the individual level, LGBTQ+ adolescents with families that are unsupportive towards their sexuality fall into a high risk group as well. As a result of family rejection, there is a link to increased substance abuse rates due to feelings of isolation and rejection (Peterson, Buser, & Westburg, 2010). The Family Acceptance Project [FAP] at SFSU targets LGBTQ+ individuals lacking family support and acceptance. On top of their programs, they also study the link between lack of family support and increased substance abuse and mental illness and release publications on this topic. Overall, this program aims to increase family support and decrease substance abuse and other issues among LGBTQ+ adolescents. This is done through seminars, counseling sessions, and educational services. A study was done on 32 families with LGBTQ+ children who received intervention from the Family Acceptance Project. As a result of the intervention, over 80% of families stated that they were inclined to decrease family rejection after obtaining a clear understanding of the impacts of a lack of family acceptance, ($p=.05$) (Ryan, 2019). In turn, there was a 1.46 odds ratio for low family acceptance and substance abuse and only a 0.85 odds ratio for high family acceptance and substance abuse. As a result of the family project, LGBTQ+ individuals gained increased familial support which led to a 0.61 decrease in the odds ratio of substance abuse (Ryan et al., 2010). Beyond families holding homophobic views, the large scale community views impact LGBTQ+ adolescentss as well.

Community Level

One of the more large scale risk factors as it involves such a wide range, is at the community level. LGBTQ+ adolescents from schools and communities holding homophobic views and discriminatory ways, have an increased risk of substance abuse. As individuals face high levels of discrimination and feel as if they do not belong to the wide scale community, isolation forms, resulting in substance abuse (Narconon, 2015). The Gay Straight Alliance [GSA] works towards abolishing this. The GSA is an on campus club that targets forming safer schools and healthier communities for LGBTQ+ individuals in order to stray away from discrimination, homelessness, and substance abuse. They spread their voice across campus and hold educational club meetings. 186 LGBTQ+ students in high school with varying demographics were surveyed on the basis of school involvement and inclusiveness. It was shown that the scores on school engagement rose from an average of 12 out of 36 to 18 out of 36 when GSA was a part of the school. Further, based on how active GSA was on that campus, someone with a very active GSA would be expected to score 5.28 points higher on school involvement as opposed to an individual with a less active GSA program. These results were statistically significant ($p = .05$). (Seelman et al., 2015). Further, school involvement had a direct negative effect on substance abuse ($b = -.13$, $p < .05$) (Peterson, Buser, & Westburg, 2010). As GSA establishes on campuses, LGBTQ+ students feel a sense of inclusiveness and involvement among their school community, linked to a decreased risk of substance abuse.

Conclusion

Overall, LGBTQ+ adolescents fall into a very high risk group in regards to substance abuse. Factors that cause this include a lack of self confidence, lack of family support, and

discrimination in communities. Programs such as The Hatch Program, Family Acceptance Project, and Gay Straight Alliance have all put forth high efforts to fight these issues and build a safer pathway for LGBTQ+ adolescents. As for cultural competence when working with this community, individuals must be very open-minded and loving towards all. Further, due to injustices faced by the LGBTQ+ community in history, they must be an advocate for the LGBTQ+ community and work to uplift each individual to make an impact on the problem at hand. At the individual level, it is more effective if individuals from the LGBTQ+ community themselves work with these adolescents, however when dealing with family and community levels it may be more effective for pro-LGBTQ+ heterosexuals to intervene. This is due to the fact that at the relationship and community levels, they are likely working with homophobic straight individuals who are more likely to listen to another heterosexual individual due to their discriminatory viewpoints. On top of this, it is beneficial for substance abuse prevention advertisements to lack heteronormative views and be applicable to all sexual orientations.

The Montrose Center Hatch Youth program is effective in fighting the issue as they focus highly on the spread of education, peer mentorship, and role models; all factors seen to boost self esteem. In terms of cultural competence, they revealed this by offering role models that are a part of the LGBTQ+ community and have experienced similar setbacks, allowing for a deeper connection and impact. As for the Family Acceptance Project, it is a highly successful project. This is one of the most well known LGBTQ+ specific family programs and they use different interventions to do their job. These interventions include one on one sessions with the parents and children separately, educational services, and more. Since they do research as well, FAP produces many publications on the research of LGBTQ family acceptance, substance abuse,

guidance for parents, and more. This serves to be highly impactful as using the internet to spread knowledge makes it more accessible to all. Cultural competence was highlighted by the Family Acceptance Project by catering to various religious and cultural backgrounds when dealing with specific families with LGBTQ+ children. This was done by getting religious authorities such as pastors involved when needed, finding individuals with similar cultural backgrounds to work with families, and overall being conscious of how they intervene with different cultural families. Lastly, for the GSA clubs across campuses, these show to be useful in combating homophobia across schools. They are highly widespread throughout the country, therefore having towering impacts. Further, they hold a strong voice across campuses and help educate straight individuals as well. It would be more impactful if they worked towards law reforms for the LGBTQ+ community on the side, however as for combating substance abuse their role on campus is very positive. GSA is culturally competent as they have students of the same age range work with each other and allow for LGBTQ+ students to have a voice, serving to be more impactful for their age group as they have a better understanding of how to engage their peers. Further, they only have members that know how to work with both the LGBTQ+ community and heterosexual community to effectively spread the word.

Other possible useful interventions would be necessary on campus seminars or trainings for all parents on acceptance of your child and their sexuality. As previously revealed, it has been proven that a lack of family acceptance leads to a higher risk of substance abuse. This is why it should be a required component in schools as family acceptance has such a large impact on an LGBTQ+ child's mental health, substance use, and more. It also should be given to all parents as many children hide their sexuality from others, more commonly known as being 'in the closet',

due to fear of how their parents or society may react. Being ‘in the closet’ for a long time is a highly toxic state of isolation for a child and any precautions to prevent this from happening should be taken. Whether a parent has an LGBTQ+ child or not, it can only be beneficial to learn higher levels of acceptance. Giving this training to all parents allows for acceptance, love, and mindfulness at all levels which forms safer communities for LGBTQ+ and even heterosexual individuals, overall decreasing substance abuse rates among adolescents (Ryan et al., 2010). On top of this, the use of school provided resources for the LGBTQ+ community would be highly beneficial. Adolescents often remain in a state of identity change and growth so these resources can truly help guide them, especially in terms of sexuality. More specifically, these resources should be provided online so students who are not open about their sexuality yet can still receive the help they need and know their school is there to support them. These resources could include therapy, social support systems, and various educational articles. With higher support, resources, and security LGBTQ+ adolescents will be less inclined to involve in substance abuse (HRC & Partnership for Drug-Free Kids, 2012). The fight for LGBTQ+ adolescents battling substance abuse has a long pathway that must continue to be paved.

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