

# Strong link found between victimization, substance abuse

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A strong link between victimization experiences and substance abuse has been discovered by researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

The correlation is especially prevalent among gays, lesbians and bisexuals -- more so than in heterosexuals, says Tonda Hughes, professor and interim head of health systems science in the UIC College of Nursing. Hughes is lead author of the study, published in the journal *Addiction*.

Researchers compared victimization experiences of unwanted sexual activity, neglect, [physical violence](#), and assault with a weapon, across four sexual-identity subgroups -- heterosexual, gay or lesbian, bisexual, or "not sure." The study used data collected nationally from 34,635 adults from the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions.

Hughes and her research team wondered if sexual-minority women and men are at a heightened risk for victimization. The results, Hughes said, showed that they are.

Lesbian and bisexual women were more than twice as likely as heterosexual women to report any victimization over their lifetime. Lesbians, gay men and bisexual women also reported a greater number of victimization experiences than did heterosexuals. Three times as many lesbians as heterosexual women reported childhood sexual abuse.

One possible explanation for this disproportionality, Hughes said, is that lesbians are more willing to acknowledge and report this experience.

"Gays and lesbians tend to be more self-reflective," she said. "This means they are more likely to think about and report negative or stigmatizing [life experiences](#). Heterosexuals may not be inclined to do so."

Gay men also had high rates of victimization, with about half of them reporting any lifetime victimization. They reported significantly higher rates of [childhood sexual abuse](#), childhood neglect, [partner violence](#) and assault with a weapon than heterosexual men.

Not only are there higher rates of violence and victimization among sexual minorities, but there is also a higher rate of [substance abuse](#), Hughes said.

Regardless of sexual identity, women who reported two or more victimization experiences had two to four times the prevalence of alcohol dependence, drug abuse or drug dependence as women who reported no victimization, she said.

The research also concluded that gay, lesbian and bisexual youth may use substances to cope with adverse psychological and interpersonal effects of victimization, increasing the risk for further victimization from others, she said.

Provided by University of Illinois at Chicago

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