

Gay college students may be at increased risk for drinking problems because of how they, their peers are treated

April 2 2012, by Jared Wadley

(Medical Xpress) -- Gay, lesbian, and bisexual college students who experience subtle discrimination are at increased risk of having a problem with alcohol compared to heterosexual students, a new University of Michigan study finds.

The study also found that how students' peers were treated also matters. Compared to heterosexual students, [sexual minority](#) students who knew others who were subjected to [hostility](#) were at increased risk for having a drinking problem.

Considerable attention has been given to preventing bullying and violence targeting gay youth. The study's results imply that such efforts may be helpful in decreasing problematic alcohol use among sexual minority students, but efforts to tackle subtle mistreatment are also needed.

"Addressing disrespectful, discourteous behaviors on campus may seem unimportant compared to addressing overt discrimination and violence, but this study's results suggest otherwise," said Michael Woodford, assistant professor of social work and the study's lead author.

He co-wrote the study with Amy Krentzman, a U-M [psychiatry research](#) fellow, and Maurice Gattis, an assistant professor of [social work](#) at University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Researchers collected data from [college students](#) who completed an anonymous [online survey](#) about the campus climate. Nearly 2,500 students participated in the study. More than 400 self-identified sexual minority students completed the survey, allowing the researchers to compare heterosexual and sexual minority students.

Students answered if they experienced mistreatment within the last year, and if they witnessed or knew of others who had been mistreated. They also answered questions about their drinking and drug use during the past semester.

This is the first known study to examine the role of witnessing mistreatment on college students' wellbeing. Being in an environment where others are mistreated can negatively affect one's wellbeing, the authors wrote. The results indicate, regardless of sexual orientation, witnessing incivility or hostility can contribute to having a drinking problem.

Other findings include:

- Sexual minority students were significantly more likely to report being the target of incivility and hostility, and witnessing hostility.
- Sexual minority students were significantly more likely to report any alcohol or drug use and problematic drinking and problematic [drug use](#) compared to heterosexual students.

According to Woodford, the results suggest that it will be important to ensure all aspects of the campus climate are addressed, including subtle, uncivil behaviors that may not necessarily intend to harm or discriminate against others. Policies and organizational initiatives that create environments of mutual respect for all students are needed.

These initiatives include Safe Space and Ally programs that prepare

students to recognize various forms of discrimination and how to intervene. Creating such an environment will take time, so it will be important to help gays and lesbians develop effective coping mechanisms when faced with mistreatment on campus, Woodford said.

"Obviously, counseling staff and other health professionals will need to assess for various types of mistreatment, and work with students to strengthen healthy coping mechanisms," he said.

Student organizations targeting sexual [minority students](#) may also be beneficial. Woodford noted that these initiatives, however, can present a "catch-22 situation" in that as [students](#) support one another, some may hear stories of how their friends and acquaintances were treated in hostile ways, which this study's results show is a risk for having a drinking problem.

The findings appear in *Substance Abuse and Rehabilitation*.

More information: *Substance Abuse and Rehabilitation*:
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