

LGBTQ adolescents experiencing weight-based bullying found to have increased substance use

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Weight-based victimization among sexual and gender minority youth is associated with increased odds of alcohol use, binge drinking, marijuana use, and cigarette use, reports a new study from researchers at the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity and the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences at the University of Connecticut, in collaboration with the Human Rights Campaign.

Research has found that weight-based victimization contributes to [poor health](#) in youth, including substance use and poorer emotional well-being. However, the harms of weight-based victimization have received almost no attention in LGBTQ youth, despite their high rates of obesity and high risk for victimization and psychological distress.

"The absence of research on weight-based victimization in this vulnerable population is concerning, and so our study aimed to look at how weight-based victimization is related to [health behaviors](#) of sexual and gender minority adolescents," says Rebecca Puhl, Deputy Director of the UConn Rudd Center, Professor of Human Development and Family Sciences at the University of Connecticut, and the study's lead author.

The study, published in *Health Psychology*, reports on findings from over 9,000 LGBTQ adolescents across the country who completed questionnaires examining their experiences of victimization, health,

[family relationships](#), and school experiences.

Study findings showed that LGBTQ youth who reported being teased or bullied about their weight had increased risk of alcohol use, [binge drinking](#), marijuana use, cigarette use, as well as poorer self-rated health, higher depressive symptoms, and lower self-esteem. These findings persisted regardless of adolescents' demographic characteristics, body weight, [sexual identity](#), gender identity, and sexual or gender minority victimization.

The study also found that sources of weight-based victimization (peers and family members) contribute to these health consequences in different ways. LGBTQ adolescents who were teased about their weight from family members had increased substance use behaviors and poorer self-rated health and [mental health](#), while adolescents who reported weight-based teasing from peers had increased odds of binge drinking in the last 30 days, cigarette use, and poorer mental health.

"These findings suggest the importance of considering weight-based bullying in the broader context of understanding health of sexual and gender minority adolescents, as well as the importance for increased awareness of these issues among healthcare professionals working with this adolescent population," says Ryan Watson, Assistant Professor of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Connecticut and co-author of the study.

"Clinicians and other health care providers should assess victimization experiences of these youth—not only in the context of their sexual or gender identity—but also in the context of their body weight," says Puhl.

More information: *Health Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1037/hea0000758](https://doi.org/10.1037/hea0000758)

Provided by UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity

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