

## Briefing sheet for researchers

Part of the Picture (POTP) is a five year study exploring drug and alcohol use among lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people in England. It is funded by the Big Lottery and delivered in partnership between The Lesbian & Gay Foundation (LGF) and the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan).

The study's findings, based on a total sample of more than 8,000 completed questionnaires, are available as a suite of reports at [www.lgf.org.uk/potp](http://www.lgf.org.uk/potp). These present the current evidence base on LGB people's drug and alcohol use and highlight key issues such as substance dependency and help-seeking behaviour. Two Case Study reports explore the experiences of LGB drug and alcohol users, including the changing relationship of drugs and alcohol to their lives over time and the factors that have influenced their decisions to seek help. This briefing sheet sets out the key findings and recommendations for researchers.

### Across all age groups LGB people are much more likely to use drugs than the general population

- 35% of respondents had taken at least one illicit drug in the last month. This figure is 7 times higher than that reported by the British Crime Survey (2010/11) for the general population, and among LGB people aged 16-24 use of any drug in the last month is more than 2.5 times higher.
- Drug use is common across all age groups. More than a fifth of respondents aged 41-50 had taken at least one drug in the last month. This is in contrast to typical drug taking patterns reported in the general population where drug taking declines with age.<sup>1</sup>
- Patterns of drug use remained similar across the five years with cannabis, poppers, cocaine powder and ecstasy remaining the most popular. Use of crystal methamphetamine has risen slightly in the last year.

### Problematic patterns of drinking are much more common among LGB people

- Binge drinking is high across all genders, sexual orientations and age groups, with 34% of males and 29% of females reporting binge drinking at least once or twice a week. Available comparable data suggest that LGB people are approximately twice as likely to binge drink at least once a week, compared with the general population.

### LGB people demonstrate a higher likelihood of being substance dependent and show high levels of substance dependency

- LGB people report high levels of potentially problematic substance use, with between a quarter and a fifth of respondents scored as substance dependent. Available comparable data indicate that LGB people seem more likely to be substance dependent than the general population.
- Respondents who reported combining two or more substances in a typical session were more than twice as likely to score as dependent compared with those who typically used only one substance.

### Those scoring as substance dependent are more likely to seek help, although from informal sources rather than specialist services

- Respondents who scored as dependent were more than two and a half times more likely to have sought information, advice or other help than those who did not. However, those who had sought help were more likely to access informal sources such as the internet, friends, family and partners, leaflets and the media.

<sup>1</sup> Drug Treatment in England 2012-13 Public Health England, November 2013.

# Part of the Picture: lesbian, gay and bisexual people's alcohol and drug use in England

**A third of respondents who scored as substance dependent would not seek information, advice or treatment, even if they were worried about their drug or alcohol use.**

- Fears around confidentiality and feelings of shame and embarrassment prevent some people from seeking help, and may prevent those who do seek help from making use of mainstream or specialist substance use services.

**LGB people may be more vulnerable to developing dependent and problematic relationships with drugs and alcohol**

- The case studies show that as well as being used to have fun and enhance social situations, drugs and alcohol can also be a way of managing negative feelings and mental states related to isolation, confusion about one's identity or the experience of discrimination.
- The persistence of discrimination and prejudice related to sexual orientation, and of internalised homo- and biphobia, may make LGB people more vulnerable to developing dependent and problematic relationships with drugs and alcohol.

**Significant barriers exist to seeking information, advice or help among LGB people**

- Respondents reported difficulties with the process of accessing drug and alcohol use services, even those with an overall positive experience. The experience of being an 'outsider' related to sexual orientation was common. Service structures and even ethos created barriers to access and completion of treatment, as did a failure to address complex needs such as mental health issues (both diagnosed and undiagnosed) with substance dependency.

## Recommendations

Based on these findings, we recommend five actions for researchers to tackle the problematic substance use of LGB people:

- ➔ Monitor the sexual orientation of respondents in all future research studies and analyse the data to establish if there are gaps, trends and differences for LGB people compared to heterosexual people.
- ➔ Conduct research to build on the findings from Part of the Picture, in particular exploring LGB people's experiences of accessing support for problematic substance use and of recovery pathways, and on a potential causal link between sexual orientation and substance dependency.
- ➔ Work in partnership with the LGB voluntary and community sector to identify and address the remaining knowledge gaps in relation to LGB people's drug and alcohol use, better reach the community and share knowledge.
- ➔ Expand the evidence base by developing networks to share research into LGB people's needs among researchers and practitioners in the public and voluntary sectors.
- ➔ Create alternative research dissemination methods that include the LGB voluntary and community sector in order to maximise impact on a wider audience.