

Substance use among trans adults in Australia: findings from the Private Lives 3 survey

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The Difference is Research

Background

- Trans and gender diverse (trans) people are a minority population whose gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth.
- There is limited research evaluating substance use patterns within this population in Australia.**
- Most research has been performed in the U.S.¹** and their generalisability to the Australian context is uncertain due to differences in sociopolitical climates, local drug cultures, and healthcare systems.
- Substance use among trans people is commonly conceptualised using minority stress theory²,** which is a framework that explains how chronic stressors unique to marginalised populations contribute to adverse health and well-being outcomes.
- Minority stressors may be:
 - External** to an individual, such as experiences of discrimination, harassment, and violence.
 - Internal** to that individual, including internalised transphobia, anticipated rejection, and identity concealment.

Aims

- Describe the patterns of substance use** among a sample of **trans adults in Australia**, including at-risk illicit drug use, potentially hazardous alcohol use, and daily cigarette smoking.
- Examine factors associated with at-risk substance use**, including sociodemographic characteristics, psychological distress, sexual assault, external minority stressors, and acceptance and gender affirmation.

Methods

- Secondary analysis of data from **Private Lives 3 (PL3)**, Australia's largest national community survey on the health and well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) adults¹.
- A total of 6,835 valid responses were obtained, of which **1,506 identified as trans**.
- Statistical analysis:** descriptive statistics and multivariable logistic regression analyses.
- Outcome variables – At-risk substance use:**
 - At-risk illicit drug use** – Drug Abuse Screening Test-10 (DAST-10) ≥ 3
 - Potentially hazardous alcohol use** – Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test – Consumption (AUDIT-C) ≥ 3
 - Daily smoking** of cigarettes or other tobacco products
- Independent variables:**
 - Sociodemographic characteristics**
 - Psychological distress** – Kessler-10 ≥ 22
 - Lifetime history of sexual assault**
 - External minority stressors**
 - Acceptance and affirmation**

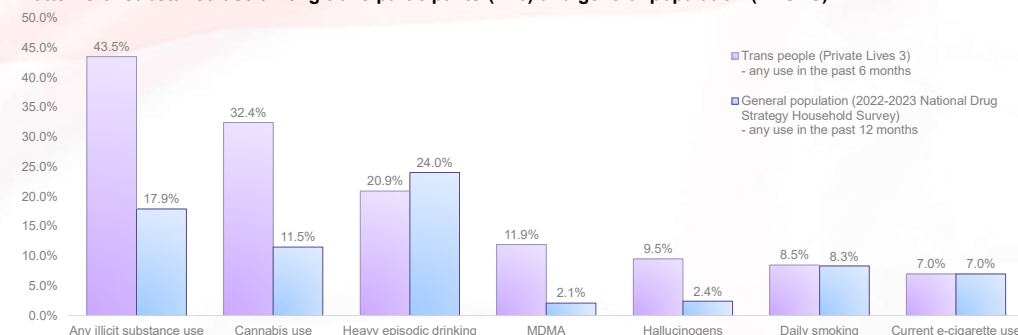
Results

Sample characteristics

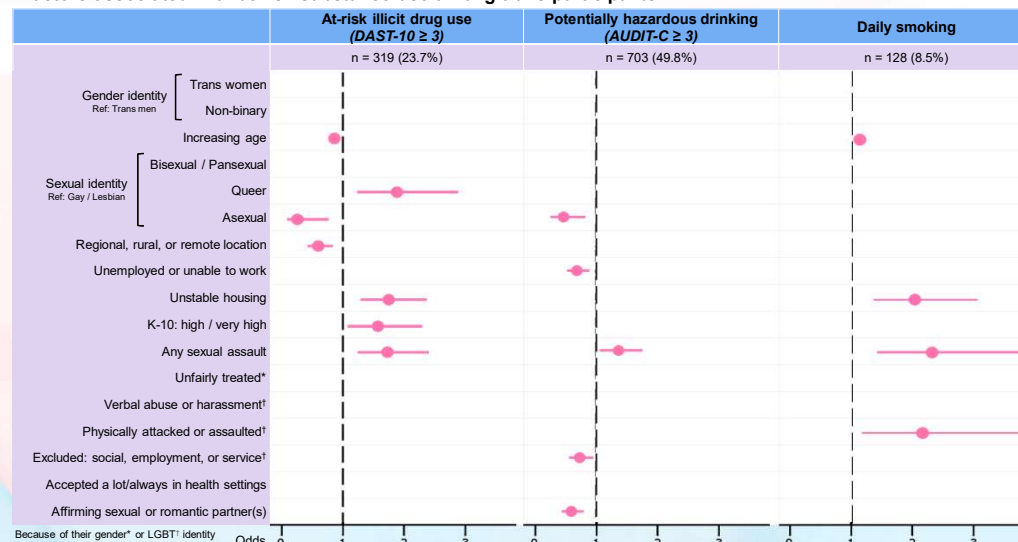
Median age: 25 years 33.5% Unstable housing 58.1% History of sexual assault
Age range: 18–77 years 27.3% Unemployed or unable to work 73.3% High psychological distress



Patterns of substance use among trans participants (PL3) and general population (NDSHS)



Factors associated with at-risk substance use among trans participants



Notes: All variables included in the final multivariable models are shown in this figure. To enhance readability, adjusted odds ratios and 95% confidence intervals are displayed only for variables significantly associated with the outcome(s).

External minority stressors

79.9% Unfairly treated*
50.6% Verbally abused or harassed‡
56.6% Refused service, denied employment, or socially excluded†
Because of their gender* or LGBT identity†

Acceptance and affirmation

31.1% Felt accepted 'a lot' or 'always' while at work
26.7% Felt accepted while accessing a health or support service
53.1% Felt their gender was affirmed by their romantic and sexual partners

Discussion

- Illicit substance use was greater among trans participants (PL3) than in the general population (2022–2023 National Drug Strategy Household Survey), while episodic drinking, daily smoking, and current e-cigarette use were comparable.
- Although substance use among trans people is often conceptualised using minority stress theory in U.S. studies, we did not find significant associations between exposure to most external minority stressor or acceptance and affirmation variables, and outcomes of at-risk substance use.
- Instead, we found associations with several broader psychosocial factors.
 - History of sexual assault, housing instability, sexual identity, and age were associated with ≥ 2 outcomes.
 - Gender identity was not significantly associated with our at-risk substance use outcomes
- These discrepancies may reflect regional differences in sociocultural, legal, and healthcare contexts.

Implications

- These findings emphasise the importance of addressing psychosocial factors that significantly contribute to at-risk substance use among trans adults in Australia.
- Key priorities include:
 - Expanding trauma-informed community-based harm reduction and treatment services that are co-designed with trans people.
 - Strengthening social policies, particularly those that improve housing stability, alongside improved accessibility of mental health services and peer support programs.
 - Establishing appropriate screening and referral pathways tailored to the unique needs and experiences of trans people.
 - Further research using a strengths-based approach to identify protective factors against at-risk substance use and evaluate other determinants of substance use that lie outside a minority stress framework.

References

- Connolly, D., & Gilchrist, G. (2020). Prevalence and correlates of substance use among transgender adults: A systematic review. *Addict Behav.* 111, 106544.
- Hendricks, M. L., & Testa, R. J. (2012). A conceptual framework for clinical work with transgender and gender nonconforming clients: An adaptation of the Minority Stress Model. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 43(5), 460–467.