

Substance Use and Mental Health Disparities Among Missouri College Students

Partners in Prevention (PIP) is Missouri's higher education substance misuse consortium dedicated to creating healthy and safe college campuses. The coalition is comprised of 24 public and private colleges and universities in the state working to prevent high-risk behaviors by implementing evidence-based strategies. To measure progress and obtain data needed for the implementation of programs, PIP created the Missouri Assessment of College Health Behaviors (MACHB) Survey. The MACHB is an annual, online survey that has been implemented each spring since 2007. The survey assesses the roles that alcohol, substances (illicit and prescription), tobacco/nicotine, interpersonal violence, and mental health have on student health and wellness. This brief will focus on the intersection of students' substance use and experiences of mental health.

Introduction

A common co-occurrence is mental health concerns and substance use disorders (SUD) though we cannot say that one causes the other. Environmental factors such as trauma and extreme stress can increase the risk of either mental health concerns or a SUD to occur. Since any stage of college comes with its own stressors and the exposure of substances to students, Missouri college students are at risk for mental health concerns and SUDs.

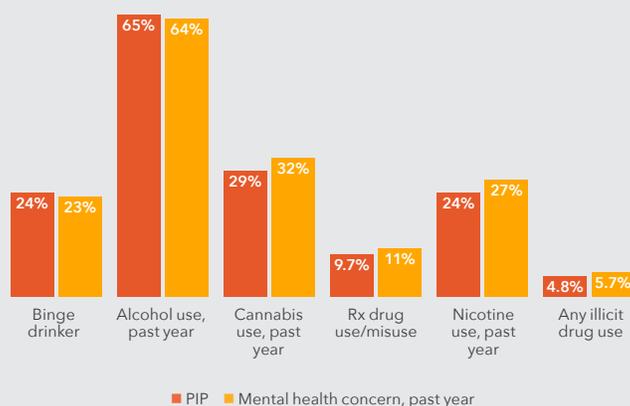
Students Substance Use and Mental Health Concerns

According to the 2022 MACHB, 65% of Missouri students had endorsed consuming alcohol in the past year with 24% of those students falling into the binge drinking category (consuming 5+ drinks for males and 4+ drinks for females in a 2 hour period at least once in past 2 weeks). In the past year, 6.3% of students used prescription drugs that were not prescribed to them and 4.9% of students misused prescriptions that were prescribed to them. In the past year, 29% of Missouri students used cannabis, 25% used tobacco/nicotine

products, 3% used cocaine, 1% used heroin, and 6% of students said they used "other" illicit substances (e.g., MDMA, mushrooms...).

To alleviate stress, some Missouri college students turn to substances. The most common motivation for students to use cannabis is "to relax" (74%). It is also a common motivation for pain medication (36%) and drinking alcohol (46%). In 2021, 6.9% of students said they drank in the past two weeks to relieve stress, which increased to 17% in 2022.*

Chart 1: Substance Use



In 2022 students went from being able to select only 3 methods to relieve stress in the past two weeks, to "select all that apply".

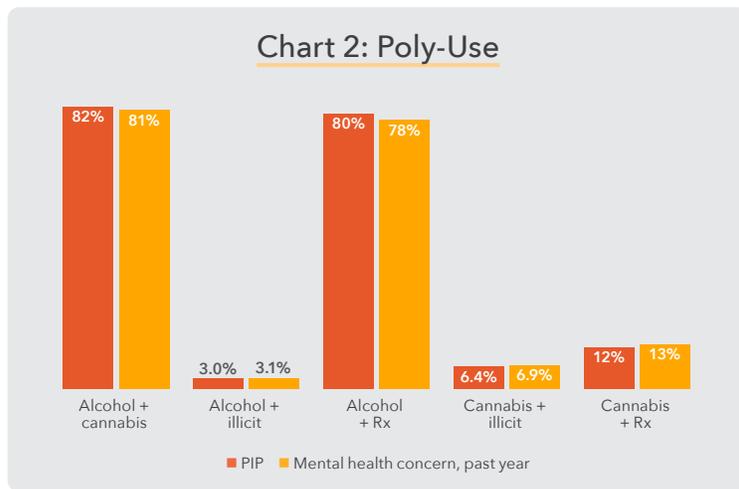
For more information, visit mopip.org

Funded by the Missouri Department of Mental Health, Division of Behavioral Health

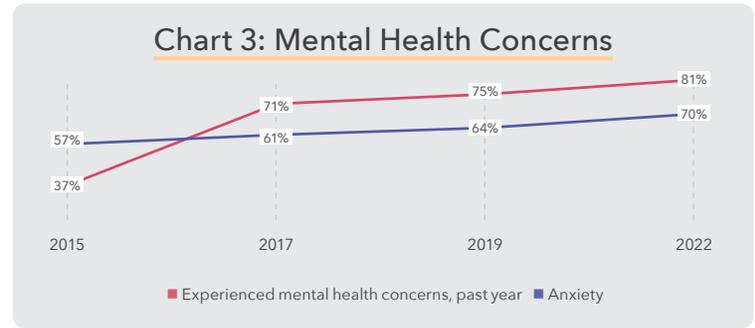
While there is not a noticeable difference between alcohol use behaviors between the PIP statewide average and students who report experiencing a mental health concern in the past year, there are noticeable differences among other substance use behaviors. Rates of cannabis and tobacco /nicotine product use are higher among students who report experiencing a mental health concern in the past year.

Poly-Use and Mental Health Concerns

With the increased need to explore poly-use of substances (using more than one substance at the same time), the 2022 MACHB included questions pertaining to substances being used with one another. 30% of Missouri students who have consumed alcohol in the past year endorsed using poly-use of cannabis (over tobacco at 26%) and 29% of students who have used, or misused prescriptions have mixed them with alcohol. Of those who have used cannabis, 60% have used alcohol at the same time. The data shows that alcohol is the most common substance to use with other substances, with alcohol and cannabis being the substances that are most often used together. The graph below combines all instances of poly-use between the substances and compares then percentages of use with or without experiencing a mental health concern (ex, “among students who poly-use alcohol and cannabis 81% reported experiencing a past year mental health concern, while 82% did not).



Although there are only slight differences between the two groups, there are high instances of using substances with one another (especially alcohol+cannabis and prescriptions+alcohol). Missouri college students with mental health concerns report higher rates of cannabis, prescription drugs, and illicit substance use. The above graph illustrates that there are high instances of poly-use among those reported substances.



Missouri College Students Mental Health Concerns

The number of Missouri college students saying that they have experienced mental health concerns has increased over the years, along with the endorsement of feeling anxiety. Anxiety is the most endorsed mental health concern among Missouri college students. While trauma also puts students at a higher risk for co-occurring SUD, what constitutes a traumatic event can differ from person to person. In 2022, 11% of Missouri college students have said they experienced post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the past year which signifies that some of those students already have a co-occurring SUD or are at risk for one.

Summary

Due to the increase of Missouri college students experiencing mental health concerns and the knowledge that many students are exposed to substances for the first time on campus, college administrators should develop programs and policies that address both issues simultaneously. It is important to ask questions about substance use using motivational interviewing when a student seeks

help with mental health concerns. It is also vital to utilize screening tools and personalized feedback interventions (like eCHECKUP or the Year One College Behavior Profile) along with individualized interventions such as BASICS.

Resources

SAMHSA

Information about co-occurring disorders in mental health, listing specific mental health concerns along with common substance misused.

[samhsa.gov/medication-assisted-treatment/
medications-counseling-related-conditions/co-
occurring-disorders](https://www.samhsa.gov/medication-assisted-treatment/medications-counseling-related-conditions/co-occurring-disorders)

Partners in Prevention

There are many resources available in the “Prevention Toolbox”. The mental health topic discusses some best practices while the illegal drugs topic lists quick links to evidence-based practices

mopip.org/topics/mentalhealth.html

mopip.org/topics/illegal.html

Contact Partners in Prevention at (573) 884-7551.

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References

1. <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/substance-use-and-mental-health>