

Prevalence of Substance Usage in College Students who Have a Mental Health Condition

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 27 public and private colleges and universities in the state working to prevent high-risk behaviors by implementing evidence-based strategies, including education, social norming campaigns, policy review and enforcement, and more. This brief includes data for the 23 4-year institutions in the coalition; 2-year campuses participate in a separate version of the survey, and their data is not included in this statewide aggregate. 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, drugs (illegal and prescription), tobacco/nicotine, interpersonal violence, and mental health have on student health and wellness. This brief will focus on data related to substance usage in college students who have a mental health condition collected from the 2025 Missouri Assessment of College Health Behaviors (sample size, N = 5,634).

Introduction

Mental health concerns are caused and exacerbated by a variety of contributing factors. Particularly in college students, moving away from home, adapting to a new schedule, and dealing with financial responsibilities can create stress³. College is also a time where students may be exposed to substance usage at a higher rate. Here, we examine the relationship between the prevalence of substance usage (alcohol, prescription drugs, cannabis, and tobacco/nicotine) in students who have a mental health concern, compared to students who do not experience mental health concerns. Caring for the whole individual involves recognizing how substance misuse and mental health concerns can be related. This allows for the deployment of specific interventions necessary to treat both conditions.

Mental Health Conditions amongst Students within the Past Year

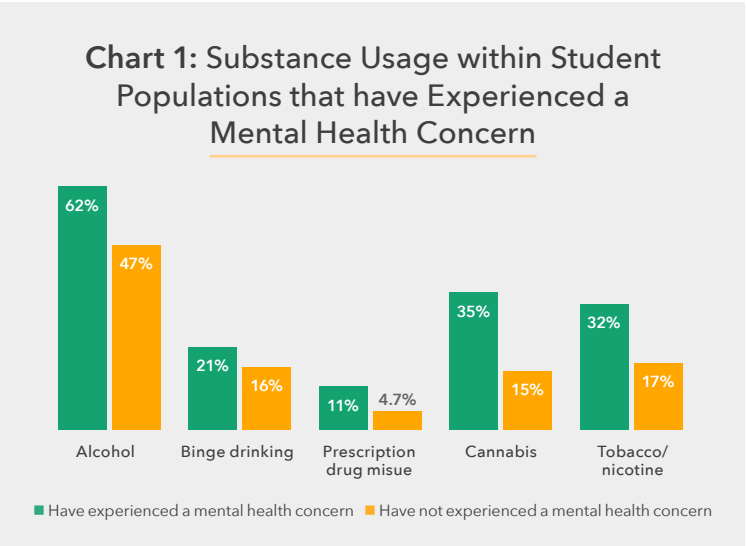
Amongst Missouri college students, 73.5% of individuals have self-reported experiencing a mental health concern in the past year. This self-report speaks to individual experiences and is independent of students who have been diagnosed with a mental health condition by a medical professional (46.9%). The majority of students have self-reported experiences of anxiety (63%), depression (44%), chronic sleep issues (25%), panic attacks (25%), disordered eating (24%), and/or a variety of other, less-prevalent conditions.

Substance Usage Rates within the Past Year

Of students that have reported experiencing one or more of these mental health concerns, substance

usage within the past year was analyzed. Substance usage is broken down into categories: past year alcohol use, past year binge drinking*, past year prescription drug misuse (with or without a doctor’s prescription), past year cannabis use, and past year tobacco/nicotine use). In every category, substance usage was higher in students that have experienced a mental health concern compared to students who have not experienced a mental health concern (Shown in Chart 1.). The difference was the largest regarding cannabis usage. Of students who have a mental health concern, 35% use cannabis. Of students without a mental health concern, only 15% use cannabis. The higher rates of substance usage within populations that have a mental health condition highlights the intersectionality of two experiences common to college students. This information creates a point of focus for prevention professionals.

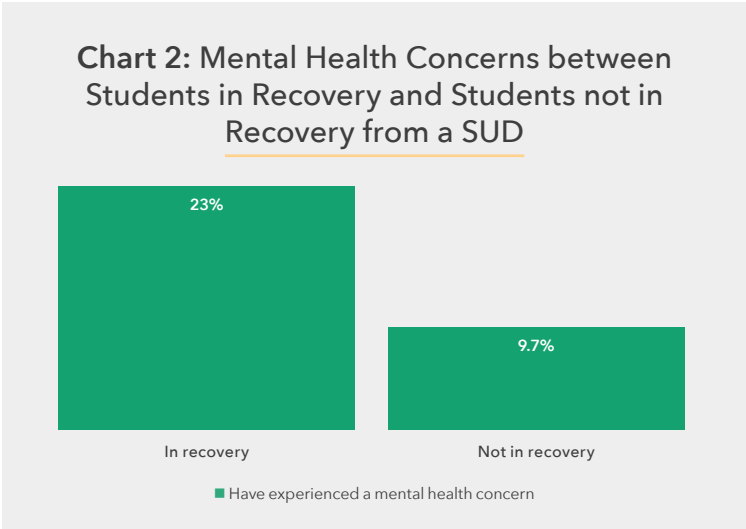
*Binge drinking defined as five or more drinks within a two hour period for males and 4 or more drinks within a two hour period for females.



Comorbidity of Substance Use Disorder and Mental Health Concerns

Substance use disorder (SUD) is a treatable mental disorder that affects the brain, body, and behavior an individual and hinders their ability to control their usage of substances, whether that be legal/illegal drugs, alcohol, or prescription medications¹. When two disorders or illnesses occur in the same person

simultaneously, they are described as comorbid². Comorbid disorders may interact with one another and cause a worsening of overall symptoms. SUD and mental health disorders have comorbidity with one another in many individuals. Among Missouri college students that identify as someone in recovery from a substance use disorder, 23% have experienced at least one mental health concern in the past year. Amongst individuals who do not identify as being in recovery, 9.7% have experienced at least one mental health concern (Shown in Chart 2). Populations that have experienced a substance use disorder and are now seeking recovery should not only be offered support for their cessation efforts, but also for their mental well-being overall. Recognizing comorbidities ensures that the whole person is being treated and all of their needs are being acknowledged.



Conclusion

These data show a higher rate of substance usage among Missouri college students who have reported experiencing a mental health concern. It is difficult to say whether decreased mental well-being is a result of substance usage or if those who have mental health conditions use substances as a coping mechanism. Regardless, tobacco/nicotine, cannabis, alcohol, and prescription drug misuse is higher in populations of college students that report having a mental health concern. The intersectionality of these issues must be considered when working with college students, especially those in recovery.

Resources

Missouri Alliance of Collegiate Recovery (MACRO)

MACRO, the Missouri Alliance of Collegiate Recovery Organizations, is the first organization of its kind in the state of Missouri to create a statewide network for growing and enhancing collegiate recovery support services. Our mission is to unite collegiate recovery efforts across the state and to be a top resource for Missouri schools as they build their own recovery support organizations. In doing so, we hope to increase the capacity of colleges and universities in Missouri to address recovery on their campuses, and in their communities. MACRO is currently housed at the University of Missouri – Columbia. It is operated by Missouri Partners in Prevention (PIP), with support from the Missouri Department of Mental Health. Visit mopip.org/MACRO to learn more.

RESPOND Program

RESPOND is a training program designed to educate the campus community (staff, faculty, and students) on how to identify and address mental health concerns. Developed by Dr. Christy Hutton at the University of Missouri – Columbia, the content of this program includes an overview of mental health issues on college campuses and signs associated with mental health issues, as well as discussions on stigma and culture. Additionally, the course focuses on how to effectively respond with basic listening and empathy, risk assessment at the lay level, support, referral, and taking care of oneself (including appropriate

boundaries based on role or personal preference). To learn more about RESPOND, contact Partners in Prevention at pip@missouri.edu or visit mopiptraining.org/respond.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

To find mental health treatment services in your area, call the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) National Helpline at 1-800-662-HELP (4357), visit the SAMHSA online treatment locator , or text your ZIP code to 435748.

For more information about Partners in Prevention and to explore our research, visit mopip.org/pip/research.

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

Report prepared by Amy Hohenberger, Prevention and Implementation Team Intern. Data prepared by Kayleigh Greenwood and Meg Mottola, Research Coordinators. Published August 2025.

References

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