

Substance Use and Mental Health in Louisiana

January 2025



TULANE UNIVERSITY
Newcomb Institute

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVE

Substance use, depression, and anxiety are interrelated issues that increase risk for intentional (e.g., suicide) and accidental deaths and are both linked to past decade declines in life expectancy in the U.S. (1,2). Louisiana has higher age-adjusted rates of substance use related-deaths and –suicide, relative to that seen for the U.S. as a whole; it also has sharper steps of increase in these concerns over the past decade (3). Less clear from these data are the prevalence of substance use and mental health concerns for the general population in Louisiana and how these vary by gender, age, and rural/urban residence. We used statewide data to assess the prevalence of these concerns with Louisiana adults.

METHODS

We analyzed data from the statewide 2023 Louisiana Violence Experiences (LaVEX) survey, which assessed adults' experiences of violence, substance use and mental health. In partnership with NORC at the University of Chicago, we conducted an online survey available in English and Spanish with 1081 Louisiana residents aged 18 and older in summer 2023. For more details on this study please see the [LaVEX full report \(4\)](#).

We assessed the following key variables*:

- *binge alcohol use* in the past 30 days
- *illicit drug use* in the past 30 days
- *severe depression/anxiety* symptoms, past two weeks
- *suicidality* in the past year

*Items are detailed in Text Box 1 at the end of this report.

FINDINGS

Mental Health and Substance Use in Louisiana

1 in 3 Louisianans engage in binge alcohol use (29%)

- 26% of women
- 32% of men

1 in 8 Louisianans engage in illicit drug use (13%)

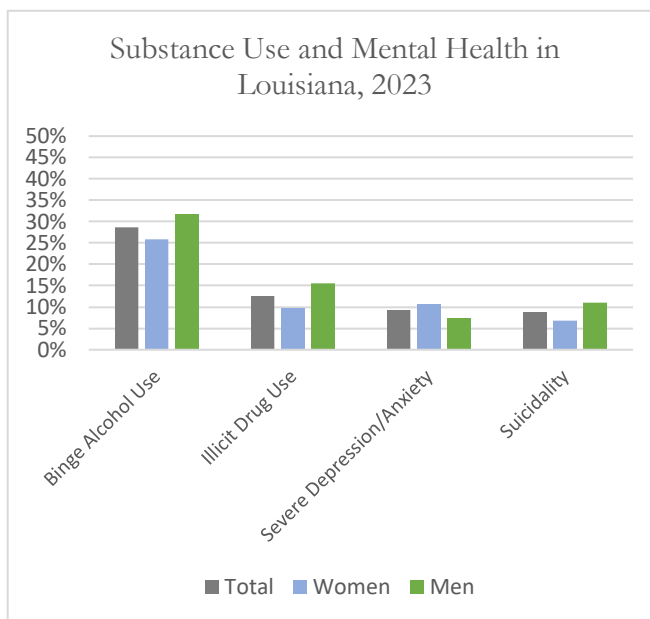
- 10% of women
- 16% of men

1 in 11 Louisianans have severe depression/anxiety (9%)

- 11% of women
- 7% of men

1 in 11 Louisianans report past year suicidality (9%)

- 7% of women
- 11% of men



Rural/Urban Differences in Substance Use and Mental Health

Substance use differences by urbanicity are small.

- Binge alcohol use is slightly higher for urban compared with rural Louisianans (29% vs 26%)
- Illicit drug use is slightly lower for urban compared with rural Louisianans (12% vs 16%).

Gender differences in substance use are more pronounced in rural compared with urban Louisiana.

- Rural: Men are 2x as likely as women to report binge alcohol use (43% vs 18%) and almost 3x as likely to report illicit drug use (28% vs 10%)
- Urban: Binge alcohol use is slightly higher for men than women (31% vs 27%) as is illicit drug use (14% vs. 10%).

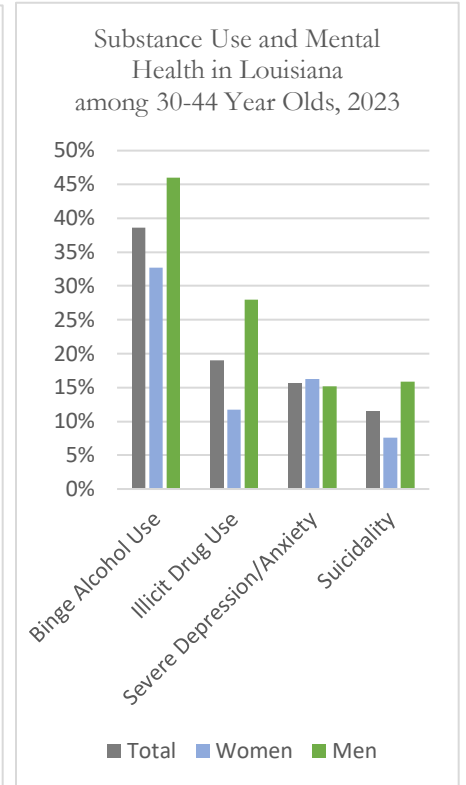
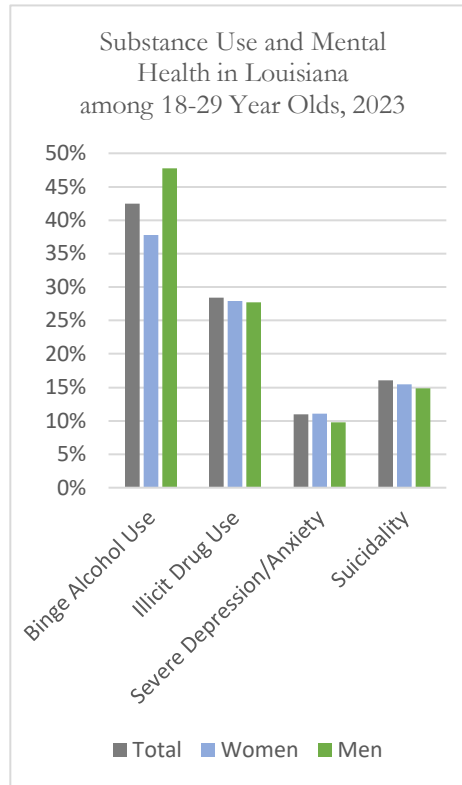
Depression/anxiety is twice as likely in rural compared with urban Louisiana (16% vs. 8%). However, in rural areas depression/anxiety is slightly higher for men than women (15% of women and 17% of men), where in urban areas depression/anxiety is slightly higher for women than men (10% of women and 7% of men).

Suicidality is slightly higher in urban than rural Louisiana (9% vs 7%) and higher for men than women in both rural Louisiana (9% of men and 5% of women) and urban Louisiana (11% of men and 7% of women).

Substance Use and Mental Health Concerns Among 18-29 and 30-44 Year Olds

Younger working age adults (18-29 and 30-44) have higher levels of substance use, depression, and suicidality relative to older adults (45+).

- Binge alcohol use is reported by 43% of 18-29 year olds and 39% of 30-44 year olds, with higher prevalence seen for men than women.
- Illicit drug use is reported by 28% of 18-29 year olds and 19% of 30-44 year olds, with higher prevalence seen for men than women for 30-44 year olds but no gender difference seen for 18-29 year olds.
- Severe depression/anxiety symptoms in the past two weeks (from the time of the survey) is reported by 11% of 18-29 year olds and 16% of 30-44 year olds, with comparable prevalence by gender for both age groups.



- Suicidality in the past year is reported by 16% of 18-29 year olds and 12% of 30-44 year olds. For 18-29 year olds, the gender difference is minimal, reported by 16% of women and 15% of men, but among 30-44 year olds, men are twice as likely as women to report suicidality (16% of men vs. 8% of women). This holds true for 45-59 year olds as well (12% of men vs 6% of women) [data not shown].

Summary of Key Findings and Implications:

- Substance use is at epidemic proportions in Louisiana, and men are more likely than women to engage in these behaviors. In rural areas, these gender differences are particularly stark, with men twice as likely to be binge drinking and three times more likely to engage in illicit drug use as compared to women. Our prime working age population (30-44) also has a high prevalence of these behaviors: 39% report binge alcohol use and 19% report illicit drug use.
- Severe depression/anxiety and suicidality are also common, reported by approximately 1 in 10 Louisiana adults, respectively. Severe depression/anxiety is particularly high among rural Louisiana adults and among Louisiana adults aged 30-44, where we see 1 in 6 report severe depression/anxiety, respectively.
- Louisiana is notable in seeing higher prevalence of suicidality for men than women, where nationally, women have higher rates of suicidality and suicide attempts (6). This gender disparity is absent for 18-29 year old Louisianans (the age group with the highest rate of suicidality). However, we see twice the risk for suicidality among men compared with women among 30-59 year olds. Men aged 18-44 see the highest risk with 1 in 3 reporting past year suicidality.
- Mental health concerns are a major public health issue for Louisiana, yet we continue to have poor access to mental health services (3). More focused and tailored services are needed, with an emphasis on

substance use and suicidality prevention for men, particularly rural and working aged men, as they appear to carry greater burden of risk.

References

1. Esang M, Ahmed S. A closer look at substance use and suicide. *American Journal of Psychiatry Residents' Journal*. 2018 Jun 1.
2. Shiels MS, Tatalovich Z, Chen Y, Haozous EA, Hartge P, Nápoles AM, Pérez-Stable EJ, Rodriguez EJ, Spillane S, Thomas DA, Withrow DR. Trends in mortality from drug poisonings, suicide, and alcohol-induced deaths in the United States from 2000 to 2017. *JAMA network open*. 2020 Sep 1;3(9):e2016217-.
3. Kaiser Family Foundation. Mental health and substance use fact sheets: Louisiana. 2023. <https://www.kff.org/statedata/mental-health-and-substance-use-state-fact-sheets/louisiana/>
4. Raj A, Johns NE, Closson K, Mahoney A, Yore J, Kully G, LaVeist T, Theall K. Louisiana Violence Experiences Survey (LaVEX) 2023. August 2023. Newcomb Institute, Tulane University and Center on Gender Equity and Health, University of California San Diego. <https://newcomb.tulane.edu/LaVEX>
5. Kroenke K, Spitzer RL, Williams JB, Löwe B. An ultra-brief screening scale for anxiety and depression: the PHQ-4. *Psychosomatics*. 2009;50(6):613-21.
6. Ivey-Stephenson AZ, Crosby AE, Hoenig JM, Gyawali S, Park-Lee E, Hedden SL. Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviors Among Adults Aged ≥18 Years — United States, 2015–2019. *MMWR Surveill Summ* 2022;71(No. SS-1):1–19. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.ss7101a1>

If you need help: Please contact the Louisiana Mental Health, Suicide, and Crisis 24-hour Hotline: **988**

Text Box 1. Measures of substance use and mental health in the LaVEX 2023 Survey

Binge Alcohol Use: We asked: “During the past 30 days, on how many days did you have [5/4] or more drinks of alcohol in a row, that is, within a couple of hours?” Participants could respond from 0-30 days. We dichotomized this as yes (1+ days) or no (0 days).

Illicit Drug Use: We asked: “During the past 30 days, on how many days did you use prescription drugs without a doctor’s orders or use illegal drugs (excluding marijuana)? Illegal drugs can include substances like inhalants or sniffed substances such as glue, gasoline, paint thinner, cleaning fluid, or shoe polish (used to feel good or to get high), heroin, crack or cocaine, methamphetamine, hallucinogens (drugs that cause people to see or experience things that are not real) such as LSD (sometimes called acid), Ecstasy (MDMA), PCP (sometimes called angel dust), peyote, just to feel good or to get high.” Participants could respond from 0-30 days. We dichotomized this as yes (1+ days) or no (0 days).

Severe Depression/Anxiety: Using the four item Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-4), we asked: “Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by the following problems?”

- Feeling nervous, anxious or on edge
- Not being able to stop or control worrying
- Little interest or pleasure in doing things
- Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless”

For each item, participants could respond: 1) “not at all,” 2) “several days,” 3) “more than half the days,” and 4) “nearly every day.” Using the PHQ-4 guidance (5), we summated the responses and ranked the summated score as normal (0-2), mild (3-5), moderate (6-8), and severe (9-12). We then dichotomized the measure as severe yes/no.

Suicidality: We asked participants: “During the past 12 months, did you ever seriously consider attempting suicide?” If participants responded “yes” to this yes/no item, they were categorized as having suicidality.

Social support: We asked participants: “How often do you get the social and emotional support you need?” Responses were: “always,” “usually,” “sometimes,” and “rarely.” We dichotomized this as high (always/usually) and low (sometimes/rarely) social support.

Acknowledgements: We would like to thank Newcomb Institute at Tulane University for supporting this work, and NORC for their implementation of the survey. We would also like to thank our survey participants for their time and generosity in providing the data for this research.

Citation: Raj A, Closson K, Patel P, Rao N, Daniel C. *LaVEX 2023: Substance use and mental health in Louisiana*. January 2025. Newcomb Institute at Tulane University. <https://newcomb.tulane.edu/LaVEX>