

**Pride and Poppers:**

**An Exploration of Substance Abuse in the Queer Community**

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After a long day working for Verizon, 21-year-old Kenny Strobl switched up his usual Friday night routine and stayed in with his boyfriend, Issac, at his home in New Orleans. The couple were relaxing and watching “Game of Thrones” when Kenny received a phone call from a friend who invited them to a club where, the caller gushed, “Everyone’s doing Ketamine.”

“I don’t do that shit,” Kenny replied, before hanging up and resuming his low-key evening with his boyfriend.

“Everybody I’ve talked to is like ‘oh yeah, the gays use it, but we use it responsibly,’” Kenny said. “But what does responsibly look like?”

Nightlife has long been a staple of queer culture. From strobe lights and pulsing Gaga in gay clubs, to drag bars with fabulous queens and even better cocktails, queerhood has been historically confined to the shadows of the night. And where there’s nightlife, there’s often drug use.

Drug use is statistically more prominent in the LGBT community than the straight population.

According to a [2020 study](#) by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, nearly 22% of adults identifying as gay, bisexual or lesbian had an alcohol use disorder in the past year, compared to 11% in the overall population. A total of 41% of queer adults reported past-year marijuana use, compared to nearly 19% of the overall adult population.

Experts blame ongoing discrimination, a growing body of anti-LGBTQ legislation, and a lack of culturally competent health-care services for fueling higher rates of substance abuse among American queer and transgender communities. Stress, stigma and inaccessible treatment have created a perfect storm, rendering queer people extremely vulnerable to the dangers of substance use.

### **The long-unspoken history**

Substance use has long been a part of the LGBT community, due to the ostracization of queer folk from everyday life, even from a legislative standpoint. Sodomy laws have been around in America as early as the 1600s, according to William Eskridge's book "Dishonorable Passions." The first state to repeal sodomy laws was Illinois in 1962, meaning just 63 years ago it was illegal to be gay in all 50 states. Just as recently as 2003, the Supreme Court repealed all sodomy laws and federally decriminalized homosexuality.

This legal discrimination of queer people has historically led to systematic violence and harassment toward the LGBT community, which in turn caused queer meeting spaces to be limited to bars or after-hours joints. These bars created a safe space for LGBT people to be themselves without the fear of oppression or danger, while also being surrounded by drugs and alcohol. However, these bars were not always safe, and were often subject to raids. Police frequently utilized discriminatory laws to put LGBT people in jail.

The American fight for LGBT rights exploded in the 1960s. One of the most prominent conflicts between LGBT folk and law enforcement were the infamous Stonewall Riots, known for being the catalyst which birthed the gay rights movement in the United States.

Police raided the Stonewall Inn in New York City during the early morning of June 28, 1969, which eventually lead to four days of struggle between police and LGBTQ patrons and protesters, a group largely consisting of transgender people, LGBTQ people of color, and LGBT youth.

As well as being a catalyst for the eventual gay rights movement, the Stonewall riots emphasize how cornered the LGBT community was in terms of meeting spaces. Bars and clubs were the only option for literal decades. And despite more and more sober LGBT spaces popping up now, most queer youths still resort to partying at good old-fashioned gay bars.

However, the recent uptick in substance use isn't just limited to queer people. [In 2020](#) the National Center for Drug Abuse statistics reported more than 13% of Americans 12 and over used drugs in the last month, a nearly 4% increase since 2019. Over 70,000 drug overdose deaths occur in the U.S. annually and the number of overdose deaths increases at an annual rate of 4%.

“It's not necessarily that more teenagers and young people are using drugs,” said Jessica Jarrard, who deals with substance abuse at Connecticut-based Rainbow Counseling Services. “There's more and more divide amongst those who are and those who aren't.”

“It's no longer like it was in your parents' day and age where it's like, ‘OK, those people use drugs, it's pot and it's not really that dangerous’,” they continued. “Now, some of the drugs people are using and exposed to are a lot more dangerous, and [have] a lot more addictive potential.”

More Americans are using drugs nowadays, which creates an enabling backdrop for LGBT Americans to fall into a pattern of drug misuse. With the combination of societal stigma, legislative discrimination, as well as an uptick in substance use within the general population, the LGBT community is at an elevated risk when it comes to the dangerous reality of drug use.

### **Minorities in America**

Queerhood within itself is inherently traumatic. From homophobic family members, job discrimination, and the larger risk of hate crimes, it is not easy to be queer in America. As well as this, LGBT people have been facing heightened legislative discrimination over the past few years. According to the American Civil Liberties Union ([ACLU](#)), around 510 anti-LGBT bills were introduced by states throughout the country in just 2023 alone.

The LGBT community only takes up just over 7% of the U.S. population, or 13.9 million people, according to a [UCLA poll](#), which makes LGBT members a minority group within the United States. Minority groups commonly experience minority stress, which the [National Library of Medicine](#) defines as “stress stemming from experiences of stigma and discrimination, which in turn places them at risk for a number of negative physical and mental health outcomes.”

Minority stress paired with intensive anti-LGBT legislation creates a tumultuous environment for LGBT people to exist in, let alone feel safe in. These stressors combined create high levels of mental health issues within the community, which can eventually lead to reliance on substances or result in substance abuse disorders.

“We get traumatized pretty much daily if you're in a cis-het environment,” said Sharyah Hoffmann, a queer credentialed, and clinically trained substance use counselor, using a common abbreviation for cisgendered-heteronormative. “And then that contributes to long term chronic trauma, which then affects our health. Mental and physical.”

They added, “It affects our vulnerability to start using drugs, our relationship with drugs, our ability and access to be able to address drug-related harms.”

While minority stress affects all LGBT people, LGBT people of color are especially vulnerable. This is due to the intersectionality of their identities, both of which are minority groups. This can lead to more intense minority stressors daily for queer people of color.

“It's always gonna come back to race first. You're gonna be black before you're seen as queer. That's the thing they're gonna see before anything else. When we talk about working towards queer issues, if we are not talking about anti racism in that, what are we doing? Because it has to start there,” Hoffmann said.

Minority stress also has a greater impact on LGBT people with lower incomes, due to classism within the United States. According to [a survey](#) done by The Center for LGBT Economic Advancement & Research, 57% of LGBTQI+ people reported a household income of less than \$50,000 per year, compared to 36% of adults nationwide.

With lower incomes, there's a higher risk of homelessness, job instability and overall financial stress. Using illicit drugs in less sanitary environments can also lead to higher contamination rates, making the drugs themselves more of a risk.

“I work with mostly people who are unstably housed and do not have steady incomes,” Hoffman said. “So, you are gonna get shoddier, more dangerous drugs if you don't have the money.”

Minority stress impacts every member of the LGBT community, from gay white men to trans people of color, yet it impacts each of them differently. And minority stress can lead to other, more severe mental health issues down the line, which in turn can lead to reliance of substances.

### **Mental health's role**

LGBT people are more likely to suffer from mental health issues due to a variety of reasons including minority stress, societal stigma, and discrimination, to name a few. But LGBT people also suffer internal prejudice due to the societal stigma they face. Internal prejudice can be caused by shame from the church, shame from the government as well as a rational fear of

rejection from one's community at large. This can be especially difficult for trans or visibly queer people, as they are more likely to be targeted.

“That's one of the biggest negatives for me is, knowing that when I walk around in the world, that the smallest little pieces of my expression to some people makes me like a freak, or something dangerous. It's disheartening.” said 19-year-old Eli Bettmann, a queer, gender nonconforming student at Purchase college. Bettman also participates in drag on campus.

“It's wild to feel like some people can't even see me for who I am one on one. They can't see me on the same level, because they've already made so many assumptions about me,” Bettman added.

Despite the strides we have made in creating a more accepting world, many LGBT people still suffer from internal shame due to feeling outcast by society. This is especially prevalent in young LGBT people. According to [the Trevor Project](#), 73% of LGBTQ youth reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety, 58% of LGBTQ youth reported experiencing symptoms of depression, and 45% of LGBTQ youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year.

“Like I was talking about, noticing people staring at me, it also has definitely affected the way that I walk around on a normal basis,” Bettman said. “Even if people are looking at me normal, there's always a voice in the back of my head that's like, ‘what are they thinking right now?’ or ‘they think you're a freak.’”

“Especially with people who look straight, people who have a normal heteronormative presentation, they abide by gender roles and gendered clothing,” Bettman continued. “It has made me wary of that, and I hate that. I’m just trying to live and interact with the world that I live in, too.”

Internal feelings of shame, paired with mental health and identity issues can cause a need to escape. Escapism can present itself in infinite forms, and drug use is a common one.

Max Kamwoski, a social worker who specializes in substance abuse and LGBT treatment, said,

“I think being in the closet for however long you're in it is incredibly damaging, because you're basically trying to make yourself invisible. I think that is a lot of the connection to substance use too.

“Like, I need to shove down these things about myself, these things that I like, or these things I want to do, or I do these things and I feel shame about them. So, then I have to cope with that shame, and just numb out.”

Internal shame within members of the LGBT community renders them more vulnerable to substance abusing. There are risks everywhere. So, it’s important to prioritize mental health care within the community to prevent substance abuse disorders or long-term addiction.

## **Homophobic Healthcare**

Unfortunately, making mental health care accessible won't happen overnight, and there are limited resources when it comes to this specific issue. Substance abuse is a problem within itself, and queerhood coming with its own traumas creates a storm the US healthcare system isn't quite ready to address.

“I think we're lackluster in the United States of how we protect our community. And that doesn't just go for queer spaces, but especially for queer spaces. They do feel that they're more at risk. I don't think we do a good job. I think we contribute to the negative impact and, the harms and the stigma and the shame,” Hoffmann said.

According to a [2016 study](#) from the National Library of Medicine, only 12.6 percent of mental health and 17.6 percent of substance abuse facilities reported LGBT-specific programs. “Despite well-documented need”

LGBT people are statistically more likely to engage in substance use, more likely to suffer from minority stress and internal shame, as well as more likely to be targets of systematic oppression. Despite the benefits accessible help would provide, it's simply not reality.

“There's not a lot of services. The police get called and you get shamed and made fun of. There's no help for our specific group of people.” said Sam Outlaw, a queer student of color at Purchase College.

“And people are less remorseful, because they're like, ‘oh, you're substance abusing and using because you're queer, and that's the problem.’ But it's really the lack of acceptance from the world that creates a wanting to escape from yourself, because you don't know what else to do,” Outlaw said.

The lack of accessible treatment for LGBT people only aids in this issue, as well as the added prejudice minority groups face when attempting to seek health care. According to [a study](#) done in 2023 by the Kaiser Family Foundation, LGBT+ people reported lower rates of having a regular doctor or provider than their non-LGBT+ counterparts (72% v. 77%).

“I really enjoy working with the community. I see it as very important, but specifically when I work in healthcare, I saw a lot of LGBTQ people being underserved,” said Jarrard of Rainbow Counseling. “A lot of LGBTQ people have had negative experiences with healthcare providers.”

Due to systemic injustices, healthcare in general is less accessible for LGBT people, let alone mental health or substance abuse care. This leaves them with little options to turn to if they’re struggling and want to get help.

Exterior stressors combined with prevalent mental health issues, and a lack of accessible treatment create a perfect catalyst for LGBT youth to fall into patterns of drug use. Regular drug use or abuse can create even more issues for people, such as housing instability, long term addiction, as well as struggles with interpersonal relationships and sex.

## **The Problem with Sex and Drugs**

“Sex and drugs will always be intertwined in some way,” said Mike Hoffman, a professional Dom.

“As long as you have ecstasy, as long as you have poppers, as long as you have things that make you feel better while you're doing any kind of sexual activities, why wouldn't you want to enhance that?” Hoffman asked. “That's the way I see it.”

Drugs can be used during sex to numb the user's emotions and make them more comfortable during sex, or to enhance the experience of what would normally be sober sex. This issue is heavily prevalent within the LGBT community due to external discrimination, or internal shame. Both of which cause a need for escapism. However, mixing drugs and sex comes with its own variety of issues.

“One of the biggest hurdles for young LGBT people is the unfortunate use of chemicals to supplement their sexual experience. And I think it starts off innocently as ‘Let's get high! and it gets into, ‘I can only have great intimacy and sex when I'm high’,” said 60-year-old Jorge Bender, a gay man who said he's “tried every imaginable drug.”

“But that's not intimacy and that's hardly sex. You're just remembering it a lot better than what it is,” Bender said.

The use of substances during sexual activity can lead to a difficult and muddled relationship with both drugs and sex down the line, which can lead to greater more severe issues later in life. As well as this, it can create a specific reliance on drugs in a sexual context and makes it difficult to have sex without those drugs.

The risks become even greater for younger people in the gay community, as they're more likely to be exposed to substances without fully understanding the ramifications of using those substances.

“I've definitely done things, hooked up with people, that has not been the safest situation for me, multiple times,” said 21-year-old Strobl. “And in the moment, it's whatever I get it, and you send your friend your location. But at the same time, even if you send your friend your location, that's not gonna do anything if you're dead. It's worked out for me, but I know for a lot of people that hasn't been the case.”

In fact, LGBT people are nearly four times more likely than non-LGBT people to experience violent victimization, including rape, sexual assault, and aggravated or simple assault, according to a [2020 study](#) by the Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law. In addition, LGBT people are more likely to experience violence both by someone well-known to the victim and at the hands of a stranger.

As well as the dangers of mixing sex and drugs recreationally, sex work as a profession is much more common among LGBT people than their straight counterparts. According to a [report](#) titled

“Continuum of Exploitation: The Role of Inclusive Sexual Health Education in Preventing Human Trafficking of Minors,” specifically transgender and non-binary identifying youths, are seven to eight times more likely to engage in sex work for money than their heterosexual, cisgender counterparts.

This is due to a combination of factors, most prevalently employment discrimination.

Employment discrimination impacts trans people as well as LGBT people of color disproportionately, due to the intersectionality of their identities, and the societal stigma that comes with it.

According to the [National Center for Transgender Equality](#), more than one in four transgender people have lost a job due to bias, and more than three-fourths have experienced some form of workplace discrimination. Additionally, 36% of employees who were LGBT people of color experienced verbal harassment, according to a 2021 UCLA study.

This reveals a larger trend concerning systematic injustice toward LGBT people, specifically younger trans people, and people of color. Employment discrimination as well as general societal prejudice can often lead people into less desirable methods of earning money.

“The thing is, within the LGBTQ community, somewhere, someway, somehow, along the lines, it's become quite normalized for LGBTQ folks to sex work, as opposed to heterosexual folks that engage in it,” said Jazmin Perez, a medical social worker and former sex worker.

This is true, according to [the national library of medicine](#). More than 41% of young transgender women reported lifetime sex work, primarily escorting/paid sex. Perez also explained why sex workers specifically are more likely to engage in drug use.

“When you sex work, you're having sex with people who you just don't want to have sex with,”

“They tend to be mostly fat, old, ugly, and nobody wants to engage in sex with that. So, what do you do? You drink a little bit more. You're doing a little extra bump, or you explore different types of drugs, just so you can have survival sex, is what I call it,”

“Despite what community you are or have been a part of within the LGBTQ community, I feel all, if not most of them, will expose you to substances. Something I feel about the LGBTQ community is that it tends to be hyper or oversexualized. And it's hard for someone who is LGBTQ, seeing that all the time, partying and drinking and doing drugs. You're feeding into it like a vampire with blood. It's kind of hard for you to resist,” Perez said.

The combination of sex and drugs is a risk, whether you're a part of the LGBT community or not, but it's especially threatening to queer people due to the prevalent party culture, normalization of sex work, as well as exterior stressors.

### **The Prevalence of Homelessness**

Homelessness is unfortunately common among LGBT people, specifically LGBT people youth.

According to the 2022 [Trevor Project Homelessness report](#), 28% of LGBTQ youth reported

experiencing homelessness or housing instability at some point in their lives, including 38% of transgender girls/women, 39% of transgender boys/men, and 35% of nonbinary youth, compared to 23% of cisgender LGBTQ youth.

This is mostly due to discrimination toward the LGBT at large and can be especially difficult for LGBT people already experiencing poverty. As well as this, homeless people in general are much more susceptible to substance abuse disorder due to the stressors that come with being unhoused. This creates a catalyst for younger LGBT people to find solace in drug use as a form of survival and escapism.

“I have always worked with people who are experiencing poverty, and I think that is a really huge part of it. When people start living in poverty, you start to feel hopeless and helpless, and like no matter what you do, you feel like it will never change. I'm exhausted. I'm gonna turn to substances because I just can't deal,” said Kamowski.

Homelessness can lead to intensive mental health issues, due to financial stress. According to [SAMHSA](#), 21% of individuals experiencing homelessness reported having a serious mental illness, and 16% reported having a substance use disorder.

“When you are experiencing the exhaustion every day of like, ‘I’m grinding grinding grinding grinding just to be able to eat, just to be able to have a house. Not a house, but a place to stay that's safe, being able to afford medical care.’ Being able to afford all these things, it's exhausting,” said Kamowski.

“In the same way that you're like, ‘I have this money now and I'm able to buy something nice for myself. I'm gonna do that because it makes this misery a little less miserable.’ In the same way when you're like, ‘Jesus Christ, I'm exhausted. I'm gonna turn to substances because I just can't deal’.”

Substance abuse disorders are caused by stressors, which only render the LGBT community more vulnerable to these disorders, which can create an even stronger desire for escapism.

“For other people in the LGBTQ population who may not have the money to maintain a habit but still are doing it, it speaks strongly to the escapism aspect of it. It's probably not celebratory.

You don't have the funds for that drink or for that drug, but you're still using it anyways, probably purely out of escape and self-harm,” said Jarrad.

This cycle of escapism and self-harm oftentimes is a perfect recipe for addiction, or substance abuse disorder to settle in, which comes with its own issues.

### **Addiction's Harsh Reality**

“If I was just to define it myself from my experience and my education, abuse is basically using substances in a way to achieve something else in a certain way,”

“More specifically, to cope with stress, to cope with trauma, to cope with, difficult feelings. I think everybody uses different words, whether it's personally, professionally or whatever,

because addiction is also kind of like a different word, it's not always so clinical.” Kamowski said.

Addiction is the be-all, end-all of substance use when it begins to impact a user’s ability to function. Though there are temporary benefits of substance use, such as escape or fun, for some people the cons outweigh the pros, and drug use can eventually turn into a fundamental problem.

“I think that it starts off being unable to accept oneself,” said Bender. “And the drugs tend to be MOA (monoamine) inhibitors, or they tend to be central nervous system stimulants that produce a lot of dopamine. So, you feel really good, some feel very pretty, that's how I used to describe ecstasy: ‘I feel pretty.’ But the problem here comes from self-loathing.”

Drugs can provide comfort and an escape to those who might be experiencing internal conflicts, such as LGBT people. However, it’s impossible to predict whether or not one can or will become addicted to those drugs.

“Addiction is different for everyone; you have folks that can experiment with something, and they won't get as addicted as the next person,” Perez said.

Addiction also comes with its own stigmas, which places LGBT people in an even more vulnerable spot. LGBT people are more statistically likely to use drugs, but they’re also more likely to develop long-term drug problems.

According to [SAMHSA](#), around one third of bisexual females, bisexual males, and gay males had a substance-use disorder in the past year, as well as one fourth of lesbian females. Bisexual females were three times more likely than straight females to have had an opioid use disorder in the past year.

The potential for addiction is exceedingly high among LGBT people due to minority stress, job discrimination, as well as overall societal stigma. This makes it even more difficult for LGBT people to seek help.

“Drug use helps them, but it also hurts them. It helps them because they don't commit suicide, but it hurts them because they're still addicted to drugs. And I think if we just looked at addiction as a mental illness, along with other mental health problems, we would treat it differently,” said Outlaw, a student at Purchase College.

Drug addiction and reliance is a huge issue within the LGBT community due to so many exterior factors. It is an epidemic that is causing people to lose their jobs, their homes and in some cases even their lives. So, what can be done to remedy this issue?

Experts say the best and most obvious solution is to make treatment for substance abuse disorders more accessible, specifically with LGBT struggles in mind. Of course, it cannot happen overnight, but over the years LGBT-specific mental health treatment has slowly been popping up more and more.

“Nobody teaches in our community how to address those harms and where you can have access to things. Because if you're already super marginalized and then you try to go get services somewhere, it's a whole different experience than somebody else who isn't as marginalized,” Hoffman said.

“I'm very passionate about these things, because it's people's lives,” Hoffman added. “This is truly people's lives and their livelihood, and I feel like you shouldn't be sentenced to death, or you shouldn't be ostracized just because you're not het and cis or just because you use drugs.”

Help for substance abuse needs to be prioritized, making the treatment of it less stigmatized, more accessible, and specifically catered for LGBT struggles. [A 2010 study](#) of men in New York found that both straight and gay/bisexual men had better treatment outcomes in LGBT-specific substance abuse programs than gay/bisexual men in non-LGBT-specific programs.

“Being able to provide somebody the experience of ‘I'm not judging you, and I understand you, and I'm here for you, and I'm not gonna make you feel weird.’ That, to me, was very powerful,” Kamowski said.

Queer-focused therapy allows for LGBT people to feel comfortable expressing their frustrations, as well as the struggles they face due to their identities. It grants LGBT people a safe space to be themselves, and to vent about issues they may be facing, including drug use.

However, drug reliance is not exactly an easy habit to break. Even with LGBT specific therapy programs in place, it can be difficult for queer people with substance abuse disorders to get real help. Fortunately, harm reduction exists.

### **Evidence-Based Solutions**

Harm reduction is a therapeutic approach to drug use, which involves meeting the client where they're at in terms of use and offering a nonjudgmental space while providing positive alternatives for use and treatment as needed.

It's defined by the [National Harm Reduction Coalition](#) as "incorporating a spectrum of strategies including safer techniques, managed use, and abstinence to promote the dignity and wellbeing of people who use drug." Harm reduction emphasizes the importance of the people who use drugs, not the problems with drugs themselves.

"If you're queer you have a high likelihood of possibly being kicked out of your house or leaving your house. Then you're what? You're on the street if you aren't able to find a safe place to be.

And then that's a whole other thing in itself with drugs, even just being able to survive,"

Hoffman said.

"People use drugs to survive out there. And then they're not getting any information on do's and don'ts, and what's safe, safer, and what's not, and then they're just kind of winging it and figuring it out on their own. I think that leads to a higher mortality rate," added Hoffman.

Harm reduction is also a historically progressive and nonjudgmental practice, as it became popularized during the second wave feminism movement in the seventies. It became even more widespread in San Francisco the following decade during the AIDS crisis.

“A lot of queer people, basically anyone that you can think of that has been severely marginalized and uses drugs, is a part of harm reduction. When I describe it to people, I describe what I do as ‘I love people who use drugs every day,’” Hoffman said.

Harm reduction is especially useful for LGBT youth, due to their additive risks of homelessness, or a lack of proper drug use education. Harm reduction practices create a nonjudgmental space for them to ask questions.

“We ostracize queer youth,” Hoffman said. “We tell them they can't make these decisions for themselves. They don't know they're gay. They need to wait until they're older. But that's not how kids' function. We first rip away all their autonomy, we tell them what to do, and then we don't give them any information. They don't know how to safely use. I've even had people push against me and our family buildings and stuff because there's children. And I said, well, children are dying from this.”

Harm reduction has proven to be effective in treating drug use. According to a [2011 study](#) done in Vancouver about supervised injection sites, 23% of people interviewed stopped injecting, and another 57% entered addiction treatment.

Fortunately, the normalization of harm reduction within the United States is slowly becoming reality. Within the past year, President Biden has invested almost \$8 billion to support the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services “overdose prevention strategy” which utilizes harm reduction models.

Harm reduction is a positive step toward aiding marginalized communities, and allows LGBT people to receive help, judgment free.

“A lot of people on methadone still use, but if it's reducing the amount of times we're using Fentanyl from like five times a day to once or twice, that's probably going to extend their life and prevent infectious diseases quite a bit,” Jarrard said. “I wish that some harm reduction methods were more normalized within the community.”

Harm reduction is effective, experts say, due to its emphasis on the importance of individual human struggles, and the most effective way for people to get help is to learn how to balance their habits.

### **Balancing Party and Play**

Balance is the key to accepting and surging with any mental health disorder, but specifically substance abuse disorder. As well as this, it's important for folks who use drugs recreationally to keep balance in mind. The line between fun and problematic can be a blurry one. It's impossible

for an individual to tell exactly when their relationship with drugs can impact their ability to function.

“I have clients who've never drank, never used any drugs at all, that are LGBTQ. And their friends don't really use them, they're not exposed much to that,” Jarrard said. “I have LGBTQ clients who have struggled severely with addiction and see everyone in their community using similar substances.

“But it's not the case for everybody,” Jarrard added. “I definitely cannot make a blatant statement that drugs or alcohol are a problem for a lot of the LGBTQ community. It is for some. And for those some, it feels ubiquitous around them. There's also people where that feels so far from the truth for them. There's more and more sober people now.”

The LGBT community has overcome social stigma, legislative discrimination as well as personal obstacles. The steps necessary to move forward are keeping LGBT people informed about the risks of drug use and prioritizing their healthcare rights within our country.

“What does gay culture mean to me? It means a lot to me, it's a great thing, it's a bigger thing now than it used to be. Or it's more accepted now, which is great. It's everything to me, to be honest,” Strobl said.

“You get a bad side, but also there's such great people,” Strobl said. “I've met so many people at gay events, it can be so fun, too. When you meet people with shared experience, you just feel good about yourself. I would just explain it as such a duality of it's good, but don't overdo it.”