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Among non-heterosexual individuals in the Czech Republic, mental disorders and suicidal thoughts occur significantly more often, as shown by the first study of its kind in the Czech Republic

April 23, 2024, KLECANY - A new study "Mental health and help-seeking in Czech sexual minorities: a nationally representative cross-sectional study," published in the prestigious journal *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences*, revealed that up to 52% of gay and lesbian individuals experience at least one mental disorder. A quarter of them report suicidal thoughts or behaviors, which is five times higher compared to the heterosexual population. Previous research has shown that these differences in mental health are not caused by sexual orientation but are largely due to social stigma, discrimination, and lack of acceptance experienced by non-heterosexual people.

The first comprehensive Czech population-representative study, which included questions on sexual identity and mental health, allowed for a nationwide comparison of mental health and the intensity of seeking relevant help between heterosexual and non-heterosexual individuals. A total of 3063 respondents participated in the study, of which 2917 (95.2%) identified as heterosexual, 44 (1.44%) identified as gay or lesbian, 48 (1.57%) identified as bisexual, and 54 (1.76%) were classified as "other." Data collection took place in households in November and December 2022.

More Frequent and Severe Mental Health Issues

"Based on the published results, we have demonstrated that the prevalence of at least one current mental disorder was 18.85% among heterosexual individuals, 52.27% among gay or lesbian individuals, 33.33% among bisexual individuals, and 25.93% among sexually diverse individuals. Suicidal thoughts and behaviors were reported by 5.73% of heterosexual individuals, 25.00% of gay or lesbian individuals, 22.92% of bisexual individuals, and 11.11% of sexually diverse individuals. The nearly fivefold higher occurrence of suicidality among gay and lesbian individuals is unfortunately not a result significantly different from findings of similar studies abroad. However, this issue is still largely ignored here, and it is evident that it requires proper attention," describes the main author of the study from the National Institute of Mental Health, head of the Mental and Public Health of Sexually and Gender Diverse People working group, Michal Pitoňák.

The study also showed significant differences in the severity of symptoms of mental disorders. "The average severity of depressive symptoms was 2.96 among heterosexual individuals and 4.68 among gay and lesbian individuals, 7.12 among bisexual individuals, and 5.17 among sexually diverse individuals. The average severity of anxiety symptoms was 1.97 among heterosexuals and 3.5 among gay and lesbian individuals, 4.63 among bisexuals, and 3.7 among sexually diverse individuals. Higher values in these results indicate higher severity. Scores for depression ranged from 0 to 27, and scores for anxiety from 0 to 21 points. A score of 5 or higher in both scales indicates mild to moderate symptomatology," explains Libor Potočár, research worker from the Psychiatric Epidemiology working group and PhD student at the University of Oslo. The study results also suggest that differences in the rate of help-seeking are significantly wide in the Czech Republic overall: regardless of sexual orientation, in the vast majority (8 out of 10) of cases where care would be indicated, it is not sought. "This gap between the need for care and its seeking is comparable in both groups, although it is likely that the main reasons for not seeking help will differ between the groups, such as unavailability, cost, or in the case of non-heterosexual individuals, possible additional barriers related to stigmatization. However, their detailed examination was not part of this study," adds Michal Pitoňák.

Systemic Changes Can Help

"Our study provides reliable evidence that non-heterosexual people living in the Czech Republic have significantly worse mental health compared to heterosexual individuals, and according to the results of other studies, it is apparent that a considerable portion of them is likely caused by structural factors such as discrimination, stigmatization, and minority stress," adds Tomáš Formánek from the Psychiatric Epidemiology working group and PhD student at the University of Cambridge. "Based on the research results, we emphasize the need for systemic changes that would not only lead to better and more sensitive care for non-heterosexual individuals but also eliminate structural stigmatization that contributes to these health disparities. One such solution identified in the field of research on the suicidality of LGBT+ individuals is, for example, the accessibility of marriage for LGBT+ couples," concludes Michal Pitoňák.

Ke stažení

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