

# Tobacco use in the LGBTQ+ community

The LGBTQ+ community is disproportionately impacted by tobacco.

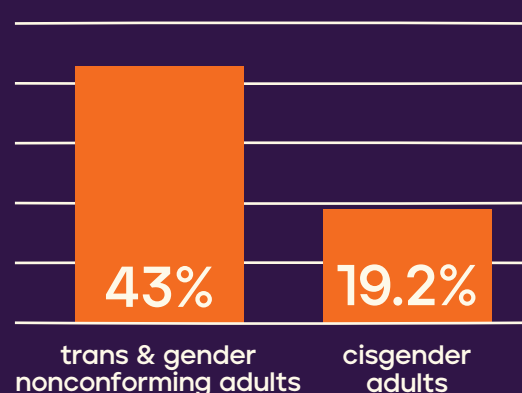
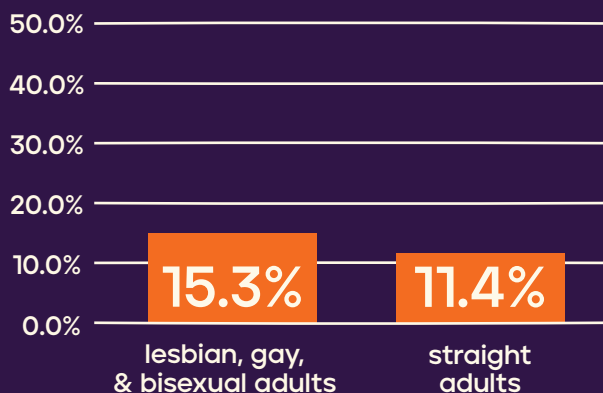


**Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth** and adults report **higher prevalence** of tobacco product use than their heterosexual peers.



**Transgender and gender diverse youth** and adults report **higher prevalence** of tobacco product use than their cisgender peers.

## Who smokes cigarettes?



The tobacco industry has spent decades capitalizing on LGBTQ+ individuals. In 1995, the tobacco company R.J. Reynolds created "**Project SCUM**" (Sub-Culture Urban Marketing) to boost cigarette sales by targeting gay men and homeless individuals in San Francisco's Castro district.

Learn more about the Pride + Progress coalition focused on helping LGBTQ+ communities break free from nicotine addiction:  
[truthinitiative.org/pride-progress](https://truthinitiative.org/pride-progress)



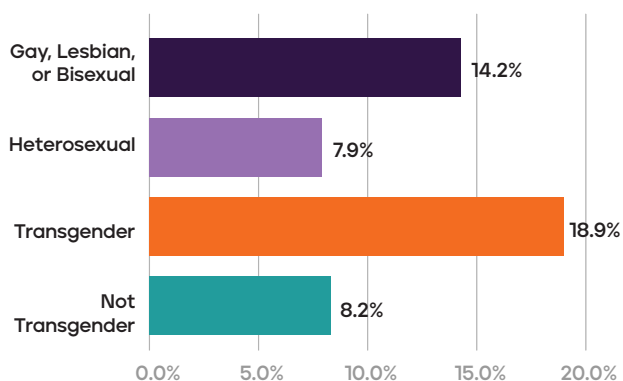
**PRIDE** and  
**PROGRESS**

# Tobacco Use in the LGBTQ+ community

The LGBTQ+ community experiences social stigma and discriminatory treatment at disparately high rates. The tobacco industry has historically targeted communities that experience higher stress – contributing to disproportionately high tobacco use rates in the LGBTQ+ community.

**Lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) adults smoke cigarettes at rates significantly higher than straight adults<sup>1</sup>** and were nearly twice as likely to use e-cigarettes<sup>2</sup> – trends due in part to targeted marketing by Big Tobacco.<sup>3</sup> Transgender and gender diverse adults have 2x the prevalence of tobacco products use than their cisgender peers.<sup>4</sup> For years, the tobacco industry has made efforts to appeal to LGBTQ+ consumers through targeted advertisements in LGBTQ+ press, through cigarette giveaways, free tobacco industry merchandise, and more.<sup>5</sup> Today, the **LGBTQ+ community is among the hardest hit by tobacco.**

Prevalence of current tobacco product use by U.S. middle and high schoolers; NYTS 2021



*Note: Terminology in this document varies and is based on the studies cited. Truth Initiative recognizes that some of these terms are no longer preferred in the LGBTQ+ community.*

## Tobacco Use Rates in the LGBTQ+ Community

Research documenting health disparities among LGBTQ+ individuals is growing,<sup>6</sup> but there are still limited national data available regarding tobacco use among the LGBTQ+ community. However, the data that are available undoubtedly indicate that the LGBTQ+ community is disproportionately impacted by tobacco.

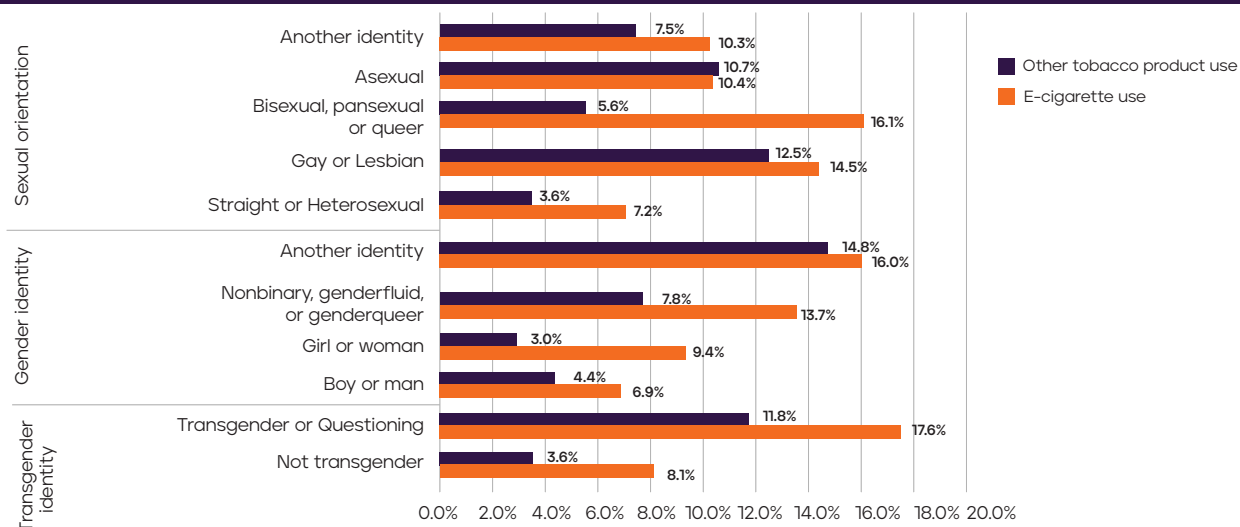
## Tobacco use trends among sexual minority youth

- » LGB youth **are more likely to use tobacco** than their straight peers. Data from 2021 show that 14.2% of LGB youth used tobacco, compared to 7.9% of heterosexual youth.<sup>7</sup>
- » LGB youth are also more likely to use **multiple tobacco products**, or report **more frequent use**. LGB female youth had 2X the odds of multiple tobacco product use compared to their heterosexual peers.<sup>8</sup> Lesbian and gay youth who used tobacco reported more frequent use of tobacco products than heterosexual students.<sup>9</sup>

## Tobacco use trends among gender minority youth

- » In 2021, just under 19% of transgender youth used tobacco compared to 8.2% of cisgender youth.<sup>7</sup>
- » According to data from 2023, transgender high school students had **2X the prevalence of e-cigarette use** compared to their cisgender peers and **3X the prevalence of other tobacco use** relative to cisgender high school students.<sup>10</sup>

## Prevalence of e-cigarette use and other tobacco product use by sexual orientation, gender identity and transgender identity among U.S. middle and high school students, 2023 NYTS



### Tobacco use trends among sexual minority adults

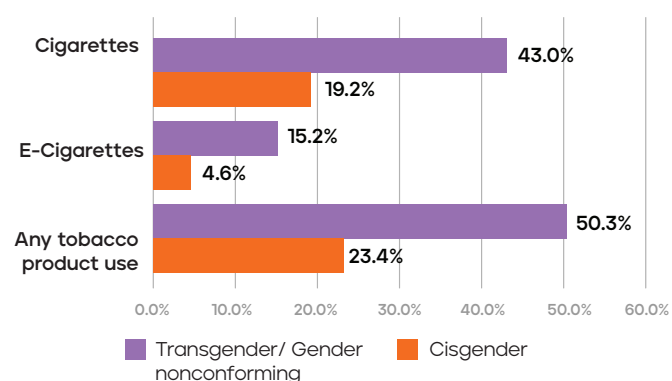
Overall, more LGB adults used tobacco (27.4%) than straight adults (18.4%).<sup>1</sup>

- » **More lesbian, gay or bisexual adults smoked cigarettes (15.3%) compared to heterosexual adults (11.4%).**<sup>1</sup> LGB young adults reported a higher prevalence of cigarette smoking (16.3%) compared to their heterosexual peers (12.5%).<sup>11</sup> LGB young adults also saw higher e-cigarette use (11.2%) than heterosexual young adults (4.0%).<sup>11</sup>
- » LGB smokers are **significantly more likely to smoke menthol cigarettes**, which are easier to smoke and harder to quit.<sup>13</sup> Out of current smokers, 54% of lesbian or gay and 49% of bisexual smokers used menthol cigarettes, compared to 42% of heterosexual smokers.<sup>13</sup>

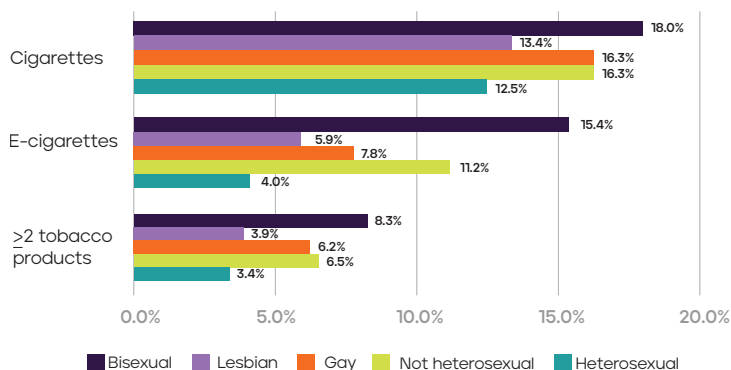
### Tobacco use trends among transgender and gender diverse adults

- » Transgender and gender nonconforming adults were also about 2X to 3X more likely to report tobacco use compared to cisgender adults.<sup>4</sup>
- » Only 19.2% of cisgender adults reported currently using cigarettes compared to 43% of transgender and gender nonconforming adults.<sup>4</sup>

#### Adult cigarette, e-cigarette and any tobacco product use among U.S. adults by transgender identity; PATH 2016-2018



Prevalence of current cigarette and e-cigarette use among U.S. adults by sexual orientation; NHIS 2019-2021 combined data



LGBTQ+ individuals are more represented – such as fashion or video games<sup>17</sup>

In 1995, the tobacco company **R.J. Reynolds** created a marketing strategy called "**Project SCUM**" (Sub-Culture Urban Marketing) to boost cigarette sales by **targeting gay men and homeless individuals** with advertisements and displays placed in communities and stores.<sup>15</sup>

Today's **e-cigarette companies** have followed suit by supporting LGBTQ-friendly events, including the e-cigarette company VaporFi's **sponsorship of an annual gay pride festival** in Miami, where they encouraged participants to celebrate diversity **while on the lookout for VaporFi e-cigarettes**.<sup>18</sup> LGBTQ+ young adults **reported higher levels of exposure** to tobacco advertisements in physical stores and venues than their straight counterparts. This included spaces such as LGBTQ+ stores and Pride events.<sup>16</sup>

Decades of advertising efforts targeting the LGBTQ+ community appear to have paid off. Compared to straight smokers, **LGBTQ+ smokers saw or heard about tobacco discounts and e-cigarette ads** in the past month at greater rates than non-LGBTQ+ smokers.<sup>19</sup> LGBTQ+ individuals reported rates of exposure to tobacco couponing messages on video streaming websites like Hulu at rates 3X higher than straight individuals.<sup>19</sup> Bisexual women were **more likely to be exposed to ads** for cigarettes, e-cigarettes, and cigars compared to straight women.<sup>20</sup> LGBTQ+ young adults who were frequently exposed to LGBTQ+ targeted marketing were also more likely to report tobacco use compared to LGBTQ+ individuals who were less frequently exposed.<sup>16</sup>



Image courtesy of Trinkets & Trash

# Tobacco marketing in the LGBTQ+ community

Targeted marketing of tobacco products to the LGBTQ+ community began as early as the 1990s, when tobacco companies – **aware of high smoking rates among sexual minorities** – aimed to take advantage of the emerging LGBTQ+ market.<sup>14</sup>

Tobacco companies used many methods to target the LGBTQ+ community, including **advertising** in gay press publications, depicting tobacco use as a **normal part of LGBTQ+ life**, using **corporate philanthropy** as evidence of its support of the LGBTQ+ community, participating in giveaways, increasing advertising, and **hosting community outreach efforts** (e.g. "LGBTQ+ bar nights") featuring specific cigarette brands.<sup>15</sup> Tobacco companies also use LGBTQ+ themes and symbols in their advertisements (such as rainbow flags). LGBTQ+ individuals have reported exposure to tobacco advertisements on LGBTQ+ websites, streaming services, and social media.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to targeting advertisements directly to LGBTQ+ individuals, tobacco companies tailor their ads to certain interest groups where



# ACTION NEEDED:

The tobacco industry has targeted the LGBTQ+ community for decades. Action must be taken at the federal, state and local levels to help reduce tobacco use overall, including among the LGBTQ+ community. Truth Initiative recommends the following steps:

- » **The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) should restrict tobacco content on social media and use of influencers by tobacco companies to adult audiences.** Further, the Federal Trade Commission must ensure that all paid influencer advertisements are declared and clearly indicate the risks associated with nicotine use.
- » **The FDA must remove all flavored tobacco from the market,** including menthol cigarettes, flavored cigars and e-cigarettes. We support the permanent removal of flavored tobacco unless a manufacturer can demonstrate: 1) that a particular flavor helps current tobacco users switch completely to a substantially less hazardous product; 2) it will not lead non-tobacco users, such as youth, to initiate tobacco use; and 3) the flavor itself does not increase the risk of harm from using the product. States and localities should also restrict sales of flavored tobacco.
- » **Ensure access to cessation services** and reduce barriers to care for the LGBTQ+ community.

- » **Improve data collection** on topics including tobacco use rates, perceptions, and disease risk in the LGBTQ+ community to ensure a more robust picture of tobacco use among this group.
- » **Support the LGBTQ+ community** through a variety of means, including, but not limited to passing local and state-level legislation that is protective of LGBTQ+ rights. LGBTQ+ youth and young adults living in states with more protective policies in place report lower odds of cigarette and e-cigarette use.<sup>21</sup>



Federal, state and local levels can take important steps to help reduce tobacco use overall, including among the LGBTQ+ community.

For more information on the disproportionate effect tobacco has on certain populations, including racial minorities, low-income communities, and those with mental illness, visit [truthinitiative.org](https://truthinitiative.org).

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