

# RESEARCHER WANTS TO ADDRESS YOUTH SELF-HARM IN KANSAS



Self-harm can be an incredibly difficult topic to discuss. Michael Riquino knows, because he spent years avoiding conversations about this highly stigmatized behavior. But no matter what group of people he worked with as a clinical social worker, from sexual assault survivors, to school-aged children to seniors, he encountered self-harming behaviors.

And, Riquino shares, it is a part of his story as well. “I engaged in self-harm in parts of my childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood,” he says. “It’s part of why I feel so passionate about researching and providing resources for individuals who engage in self-harm.”

As an assistant professor with the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare, Riquino, Ph.D, MSW, focuses on youth with marginalized identities and their experiences with self-harm. It’s a widespread problem, he says, with nearly half of U.S. adolescents reporting they have engaged in self-harm at least once in any given year.

Riquino’s goal as a researcher is twofold. He wants to better understand why youth with marginalized identities are more likely to engage in self-harming or suicidal behaviors. And, he wants to address the unique challenges these youth face at both a personal and societal level—such racism, homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of discrimination—that may lead to self-harming behaviors as ways to cope.

A firm believer in the strengths perspective, Riquino thinks youth themselves play an essential role in figuring out how to address self-harming behaviors. “I want to learn from what they know and then build on what they know in terms of adapting treatments and developing approaches that address a problem that is directly affecting them.”

## RESEARCH STUDIES

## EFFECTIVENESS OF 12-STEP

## PROGRAMS FOR LGBTQ+ PEOPLE



For many people with substance use issues, 12-step programs like Alcoholic Anonymous offer a path toward recovery. But what if you encounter unique barriers to treatment in these programs because of your sexual or gender identity? Say, for example, you are gay and your sponsor exhibits homophobic behaviors. Or you are gender non-binary and must choose between an all-male or all-female group. Or, what if you are uncomfortable with the religious undertones of the program?

Briana McGeough, Ph.D., MSW, assistant professor at the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare, is engaged in a national study designed to answer these questions and gauge the effectiveness of 12-step programs for the LGBTQ+ community. The national study will survey people who identify as a sexual and gender minority and who report having had a problem with alcohol or another substance.

“Very little research has been done about the experiences of LGBTQ+ people in 12-step groups like AA. We don’t have much information about what about these programs works, and doesn’t work, for members of this community,” explains McGeough. The survey will ask those who have participated in a 12-step program to share how they got involved in the program, what has gone well or not so well in it, and how taking part in the program has affected their substance use.

The information she gains will be critically important, because sexual and gender minority individuals are up to six-times more likely to experience alcohol or other substance dependence. And, they are more than twice as likely to be involved in a 12-step program, even after taking into account the higher rates of alcohol and other substance use problems.

“I think decisions around accessing substance use programs can be scary and difficult,” she shares. “My hope is that my research will help LGBTQ+ folks who are seeking support for substance use make more informed decisions about whether and how to engage with 12-step programs.” She also hopes the findings will help social workers better support people who identify as LGBTQ+ as they make decisions about finding treatment for substance use.

## HIS WORK IN KANSAS

Michael Riquino is excited to get to work in Kansas, collaborating with community mental health centers, school districts, and other agencies across the state to address the mental health needs of youth, especially those who have marginalized identities.

“Suicidal ideation and suicide attempts are growing at increasingly high rates across the country. In Kansas, suicide is the second leading cause of death among young people,” he says. Riquino wants to connect with stakeholders across Kansas to better understand the needs of youth and develop solutions, including digital interventions that might improve access to mental health care for people in rural and frontier communities.

## HER WORK IN KANSAS

Strengths Model Case Management is at the core of Briana McGeough’s work as a social welfare researcher, clinician, and professor. So she says she is excited to get to work in Kansas, which she calls the “epicenter of strengths-based work.”

“A big part of what I want to do with my career is to help social workers better support people in general, and members of the LGBTQ+ community,” she explains. “I’ve lost friends to suicide and have other friends who have struggled, so this is a big issue and a place I can make a difference.”





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