Police Contact in Adolescence: Sexual Minorities and Health Inequality

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Objectives. To quantify the exposure of American sexual minority (SM) teens to contemporary policing, and to measure differences in police contact and its consequences by SM status.

Methods. We analyzed data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), a national random sample of urban families with children born between 1998 and 2000. Police contact and SM status were self-reported by the focal teens in interviews around age 15 (2014-2017). We estimated regression models controlling for age, sex, and race.

Results. We find that SM teens, particularly girls, were significantly more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to report police contact. Imprecise estimates suggest these patterns may differ by teens’ race (attenuated for minorities) and binary sex. Still, associations were large: among white female teens, e.g., SMs had over 7 times the odds of being stopped than their straight peers.

Conclusions. High rates of police contact, coupled with their uneven distribution, indicate policing may exacerbate the disproportionate health challenges faced by SMs. The early ages at which many youth are stopped suggest policing may be formative in the life course.

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