

Policing Disability: Law Enforcement Contact among Urban Teens

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ABSTRACT

Youth with disabilities, especially disabilities with behavioral manifestations, are at high risk for intrusive police contact, as are youth of color. However, most current research cannot identify diagnosis or race/ethnicity as distinct risk factors from socioeconomic and behavioral characteristics. Using the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (N=3,128), we assessed disparities in three measures of youth-police contact by disability status, race/ethnicity, and intersections between the two. Regression models indicated disparities in in-school police contact.

Youth diagnosed with Attention-Deficit or Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADD/ADHD) reported more contact than their non-disabled counterparts. The few youth in the sample diagnosed with autism reported relatively little police contact. Within-race/ethnicity disparities by ADD/ADHD diagnosis were largest and most robust among Hispanic girls. Black boys diagnosed with ADD/ADHD, compared to Black boys without diagnoses, were more likely to be stopped at school. They also reported more intrusive contact than White boys with ADD/ADHD diagnoses, suggesting they faced risks associated with both their disability and their race/ethnicity. Findings highlight inequalities in police contact among youth – especially youth of color – with disabilities.

Given the repercussions of police contact for health, educational attainment, and further interactions with the justice system, policing may exacerbate inequalities between youth with and without disabilities.