

Sexual orientation differences in mental health morbidity: A population-based longitudinal study

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Background

Recent studies have identified substantial mental health disparities between lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals compared to heterosexuals. However, possible variation in sexual orientation mental health disparities across the life course remains largely unexplored.

Purpose: To examine disparities in mental health morbidity between LGB and heterosexual individuals in a general population sample in Sweden, and to explore potential age differences in these disparities.

Method

We used morbidity data from the Stockholm Public Health cohort, a representative general population-based study in Stockholm, Sweden. The cohort consists of over 75 000 individuals (aged 18 years and older) followed up with regular self-report questionnaires as well as registry-based archival morbidity data.

Results

Overall, LGB individuals were more likely to have received treatment for mental health diagnoses and to have used anti-depressant medication compared to heterosexuals. The largest disparities were found for mood disorders among men (odds ratio [OR] for sexual orientation disparity: 3.66, 95% CI: 1.98-6.78), and substance-related disorders among women (OR for sexual orientation disparity: 4.45, 95% CI: 2.17-9.13). Disparities in treatment for mental diagnoses were largest among adolescents and young adults, and decreased with increasing age; no sexual orientation disparities were found in the oldest age group (65 years and older). However, use of anti-depressants was consistently more than twice as common among gay and bisexual men, from early adulthood (30-44 years) and older, as compared to heterosexual men.

Conclusions

Age emerged as an important effect modifier of mental health disparities based on sexual orientation. These results partially support a developmental model of minority stress and mental health among LGB individuals.

Key messages

- There are substantial sexual orientation based mental health differences in Sweden
- Age is an important effect modifier of mental health disparities based on sexual orientation