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## Exposure to life adversity in high school and later work participation: A longitudinal population-based study



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This paper investigates whether exposure to violence, sexual abuse, or bullying is associated with later work participation and whether high school completion has a potential mediating role. Self-reported junior high school questionnaire data were linked for eight consecutive years to prospective registry data for the demographics, educational progress, employment activity, and social benefits of 11,874 individuals. Ordinal regression analysis showed that violence and/or bullying at 15 years of age predicted negative work participation outcomes eight years later, independent of high school completion and other relevant factors. Although increasing educational level may have some preventive effect, these results indicate that prevention efforts should be initiated at an early age and should target adverse life experiences.

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### Introduction

The long-term consequences of childhood exposure to violence, sexual abuse, and bullying are of great public health concern (Brown, Fang, & Florence, 2011; Srabstein & Leventhal, 2010). Research has shown that individuals exposed to abuse and bullying have an increased risk of severe physical and psychological health problems and that exposure to multiple forms of victimization increases this risk (Annerbäck, Sahlqvist, Svedin, Wingren, & Gustafsson, 2012; Chartier, Walker, & Naimark, 2010; Felitti et al., 1998; Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007). Traumatic life experiences may also affect academic achievement (Juvonen, Wang, & Espinoza, 2011; Konishi, Hymel, Zumbo, & Li, 2010; Leiter & Johnsen, 1997; Rethon, Head, Klineberg, & Stansfeld, 2011; Veltman & Browne, 2001). A few studies also indicate that childhood abuse may lead to long-lasting, perhaps lifelong, consequences in terms of a reduced ability to participate actively in the labor market (Anda et al., 2004; Brown & Taylor, 2008; Currie & Spatz Widom, 2010; Liu et al., 2012; Varhama & Björkqvist, 2005; Zielinski, 2009). A limited number of studies with selected samples have focused on bullying and work participation. One retrospective study by Varhama and Björkqvist (2005) found that about one-third of long-term unemployed adults have been exposed to frequent bullying during their adolescence (Varhama & Björkqvist, 2005). In addition, bullying has been shown to affect wages

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negatively later in life (Brown & Taylor, 2008). However, epidemiological studies combining information on both abuse and bullying and their long-term consequences are lacking.

It may be important to understand the potential combined effects of bullying, violence, and sexual abuse on later work participation because they may occur together or overlap partly. In alignment with the social ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), research has documented that abuse rarely occurs as a separate incident but rather occurs in combination with other forms of victimization, occurring in multiple contexts (Finkelhor et al., 2007; Holt, Finkelhor, & Kantor, 2007; Romano, Bell, & Billette, 2011). Duncan (1999) found that individuals who are bullied in school experience higher rates of emotional and physical maltreatment by parents and more childhood sexual assaults than do those who are not bullied (see also Dussich & Maekoya, 2007; Fosse & Hølen, 2002; Shields & Cicchetti, 2001). Abused children may lack social abilities and have difficulties with relationships because of their abuse experiences and insecure attachments. As a result, they may be excluded or may become victims of further bullying (Kim & Cicchetti, 2010). Still, there is limited research on the consequences of the combination of bullying and other traumatic events (Mohapatra et al., 2010; Nilsson, Gustafsson, & Svedin, 2012). To our knowledge, no studies have investigated the combined effect of exposure to violence, sexual abuse, and bullying during adolescence and its relationship with later work participation.

Abuse and bullying are often related to other adverse childhood experiences (Bowes et al., 2009; Chartier et al., 2010; Felitti et al., 1998) and lower sociodemographic status. Low socioeconomic status, parental loss or absence, parental divorce, parental unemployment, and low levels of parental education (Bowes et al., 2009; Turner, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2006) have been found to associate with unemployment in adulthood (de Goede, Spruijt, Maas, & Duindam, 2000). These factors should be accounted for when investigating the long-term effects of abuse and bullying.

The few studies on this topic indicate that abuse and bullying might impair the ability to work years later (Anda et al., 2004; Liu et al., 2012; Zielinski, 2009). However, the mechanisms responsible for this potential relationship are largely unknown. One possible pathway is educational attainment. Violence, sexual abuse, and/or bullying may affect mental health or cognitive capacities in such a way that the individual shows poor academic performance (Leiter & Johnsen, 1997; Strøm, Thoresen, Wentzel-Larsen, & Dyb, 2013; Veltman & Browne, 2001), displays problem behavior in school (Anthonsamy & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007), or quits school prematurely. Any of these may prevent the individual from acquiring the skills needed to enter the labor market. Research has shown that completing high school increases the chance of inclusion in the labor market (Falch & Nyhus, 2011). Education is important because it increases human capital by providing adaptive skills and improved social identity and self-worth, which are necessary for successful work participation (Gill, 1999; Riddell & Song, 2011).

In this study, we investigated prospectively the potential long-term consequences of sexual abuse, physical violence, and bullying, separately as well as in combination, in terms of later work participation. We also investigated whether completion of high school has a mediating effect on this potential relationship. The unique data material, which combined questionnaire and registry data, allowed us to follow a general population of 11,875 15-year-olds and their educational progress, employment activity, and social benefits from completion of junior high school into young adulthood.

## Method

### Procedure

The baseline data are from a large health survey (The Youth Studies) conducted in six counties (Oslo, Hedmark, Oppland, Nordland, Troms, and Finnmark) in Norway by the Norwegian Institute of Public Health and the University of Oslo. The project started in Oslo and Hedmark in 1999–2001 and was extended to include four more counties in 2001–2004. The survey included a variety of measures relating to the youths' mental health, well-being, use of health services, and exposure to violence, sexual abuse, and bullying. The self-reported survey was distributed to all the 10th graders in the participating counties and was completed in the classroom. The participation was voluntary and based on signed informed consent. The survey, along with the consent form and a prestamped envelope, was left at school for the students who were not present on the day that the survey was completed (Søgaard & Eide, 2005).

The Norwegian welfare system is administered by the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration and provides citizens the right to health care, disability payments, pensions, and survivor benefits if needed. This allows individuals to receive help from the government when they are not able to work or study. All individuals residing in Norway are registered with a unique personal identification number, which was used to link questionnaire data with Norwegian registry data from the Historical Event Data Base (FD-Trygd) and the National Education Data Base (NUDB). The FD-Trygd database is managed by Statistics Norway and provides information about the Norwegian citizens' demographics, social welfare benefits received, job seeking, employment, and income. The NUDB database provides information about the citizens' educational progress from junior high school to higher education completed (up to PhD level). The information was gathered from the completion of junior high school through the eight following years (2000–2008). This procedure resulted in a data set that was used to relate the questionnaire responses for each individual at age 15–16 years to information about their demographics, educational progress, employment activity, and social benefits during the following eight years.

The participants signed an informed consent form at baseline indicating their acceptance of the linkage of survey data to registry data. The study was approved by the Regional Committee for Medical and Health Research Ethics and by the Norwegian Data Inspectorate.

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