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Original article

## Polyvictimization and Youth Violence Exposure Across Contexts

 Heather A. Turner, Ph.D. <sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Anne Shattuck, Ph.D. <sup>a</sup>, David Finkelhor, Ph.D. <sup>a,b</sup>, and Sherry Hamby, Ph.D. <sup>c</sup>
<sup>a</sup>Crimes Against Children Research Center, University of New Hampshire, Durham, New Hampshire<sup>b</sup>Department of Sociology, University of New Hampshire, Durham, New Hampshire<sup>c</sup>Department of Psychology, Sewanee: The University of the South, Sewanee, Tennessee

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 A B S T R A C T

**Purpose:** The current research used latent class analysis to uncover groups of youth with specific victimization profiles and identify factors that are associated with membership in each victimization group.

**Methods:** This study used data from National Survey of Children Exposure to Violence II. Random digit dialing and address-based sampling were used to obtain a nationally representative sample of 2,312 youth ages 10–17 years. Phone interviews, averaging 55 minutes in length, were conducted with caregivers to obtain both consent and background information and then with youths themselves.

**Results:** Six groups of youth emerged: (1) nonvictims (26.4%), (2) home victims (8.4%), (3) school victims (20.8%), (4) home and school victims (21.3%), (5) community victims (5.4%), and (6) polyvictims (17.8%). Polyvictims were likely to have been victimized in multiple settings by multiple perpetrators and experienced the most serious aggravating characteristics, including incidents involving a weapon, injury, or a sexual component. Youth in the polyvictim class experienced the highest number of different victimizations types in the past year and had the most problematic profile in other ways, including greater likelihood of living in disordered communities, high probabilities of engaging in delinquency of all types, elevated lifetime adversity, low levels of family support, and the highest trauma symptom scores.

**Conclusions:** The study supports the contention that a core basis of the particularly damaging effects of polyvictimization is the experience of victimization across multiple domains of the child's life.

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**IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION**

Six groups of youth with different victimization profiles emerged. Groups who experienced victimizations across different environments generally had more troubling profiles than groups victimized within single domains, like only school or only home. Polyvictims, with by far the most serious profile, appear to have no “safe haven” for positive development. This group represents a crucial target for intervention.

Considerable research has documented high rates of exposure to many different forms of victimization among children and youth. For example, a 2011 national survey found that over 41% of

all U.S. children ages 1 month to 17 years experienced a physical assault in the past year, almost 14% experienced some form of child maltreatment, and over 8% witnessed domestic violence [1]. There is also no doubt of the damaging consequences of the many forms of child victimization on emotional, behavioral and developmental problems [2–5]. Much child victimization research, however, has focused separately on particular types of child victimizations in specific environments such as the home, in the case of child maltreatment, or the school, in the case of bullying.

More recently, there has been a greater acknowledgement of the importance of understanding the intersections of violence

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\* Address correspondence to: Heather A. Turner, Ph.D., Crimes Against Children Research Center, University of New Hampshire, 125 McConnell Hall, 15 Academic Way, Suite 102C, Durham, NH 03824.

E-mail address: heather.turner@unh.edu (H.A. Turner).

and victimization across different contexts and domains of exposure. Research on polyvictimization, for example, has highlighted how some youth are exposed to many *different* forms of victimization, showing that over 48% of children and youth experience two or more victimization types and over 15% are exposed to six or more different types within a year [1]. Polyvictimization has been found to be more highly related to adverse child outcomes than experiencing a single, even serious and repeated, type of victimization [6,7].

However, most studies to date have not addressed the diversity of victimized youth in ways that allow the researcher to *identify groups with particular victimizations patterns*. For example, it has been suggested that polyvictimization may be especially damaging because youth who are exposed to many different types of victimization are likely to experience serious incidents involving multiple life contexts and many types of perpetrators [7]. Yet, existing research has not directly specified patterns of variation in the severity, location, and perpetrator type among juvenile victims.

Youth with different victimization profiles likely also differ on other important risk factors. For example, some groups of victims may be particularly likely to reside in neighborhoods with high levels of community disorder, places with rundown buildings, graffiti, public drinking, vandalism, and crime [8–10]. Those victimized largely by family members may most often live in households characterized by high conflict and low support [11]. Youth victimized across different environments may be exposed to particularly high levels of adversity [12], may be more likely to engage in delinquency [13], and have greater risk of mental health problems than single-domain victims [6]. Specifying how youth with different clusters of victimization experiences also differ in individual, family, and community factors will help to increase our understanding of the sources of risk and resilience in specific groups of youth victims and, ultimately, how particular vulnerabilities might be addressed.

Using a nationally representative sample of youth ages 10–17 years, the current research used latent class analysis (LCA) to uncover groups of youth with specific victimization profiles and describe their characteristics. LCA represents a uniquely powerful approach for identifying different profiles of youth victimization. Because latent groups in LCA are defined by *combinations* of responses on the indicator variables, LCA makes it possible to take into account multiple dimensions of victimization instead of focusing only on single indicators such as number of different types of victimization. LCA thus offers a “person-centered” rather than a “variable-centered” approach to examining heterogeneity among youth in terms of their experience of victimization [14,15]. The primary objectives of this study are to (1) identify underlying groups of adolescents based on their profiles of past year victimization in terms of place, perpetrator, and aggravating characteristics; (2) describe the prevalence of these latent groups among 10- to 17-year-olds in the United States; and (3) using posterior probabilities from the LCA, assign youth to their most likely latent class of victimization and describe the characteristics of each victimization group.

## Methods

### Participants

The National Survey of Children’s Exposure to Violence II (NatSCEV II) was designed to obtain up-to-date incidence and

prevalence estimates of a wide range of childhood victimizations and a variety of correlates. The larger survey consists of a national sample of 4,503 children and youth ages 1 month to 17 years of in 2011; the present study focuses on the subsample of 2,312 children and youth who were aged 10–17 years at the time of the survey.

The primary foundation of the design was a nationwide sampling frame of residential telephone numbers from which a sample of telephone households was drawn by random digit dialing. Two additional samples were drawn from sampling frames chosen to represent the growing number of households that rely entirely or mostly on cell phones: a small national sample of cellular telephone numbers drawn from random digit dialing methodology (N = 31) and an address-based sample (N = 750). Approximately, one-half of the eligible households obtained through address-based sample were cell phone-only households and thus represented an effective way of including households without landlines in our sample.

The cooperation and response rates averaged across the three sampling frames were 60% and 40%, respectively, which are good rates by current survey research standard [16–18]. Sample weights were constructed to adjust for design effects of the sampling procedure and for demographic differences between the sample and the national population of children age <18 years. Additional details regarding sampling frames, sample weighting, and nonresponse analysis may be obtained from the authors.

### Procedure

A short interview was conducted with an adult caregiver (usually a parent) to obtain family demographic information. One child was then randomly selected from all eligible children living in a household. If the selected child was 10- to 17-years old (the focal group for this study), the main telephone interview was conducted with the child.

Respondents were promised complete confidentiality and were paid \$20 for their participation. The interviews, averaging 55 minutes in length, were conducted in either English or Spanish. Respondents who disclosed a situation of serious threat or ongoing victimization were recontacted by a clinical member of the research team, trained in telephone crisis counseling, whose responsibility was to stay in contact with the respondent until the situation was appropriately addressed locally. All procedures were authorized by the Institutional Review Board of the University of New Hampshire.

### Measures

The survey instrument for NatSCEV II was a version of the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire which asks respondents about their lifetime exposure to 51 specific types of crime and violence including physical assault, property crime, sexual assault, maltreatment, peer and sibling victimization, and witnessing violence. A list of the victimization survey items has been published elsewhere [1]. For each victimization item that youth reported having experienced, a series of follow-up questions were asked to gather additional information about the victimization incident including whether it took place in the past year; where it took place; the age (juvenile or adult) and relationship of the perpetrator; and whether any aggravating circumstances, such as weapon, injury or sexual content accompanied the victimization.

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