Child victims and poly-victims in China: Are they more at-risk of family violence?☆

Ko Ling Chan*

Department of Social Work and Social Administration, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

A B S T R A C T

Multiple forms of violence may co-occur on a child. These may include various forms of child victimization and different types of family violence. However, evidence that child victims are more likely to witness other types of family violence has been lacking in China. Using data of a large and diverse sample of children recruited from 6 regions in China during 2009 and 2010 (N = 18,341; 47% girls; mean age = 15.9 years), the associations between child victimization and family violence witnessed were examined. Descriptive statistics and the associations between child victimization, demographic characteristics, and family violence witnessed were analyzed. Lifetime and preceding-year rates were 71.7% and 60.0% for any form of child victimization and 14.0% and 9.2% for poly-victimization (having four or more types of victimization), respectively. Family disadvantages (i.e., lower socio-economic status, single parents, and having more than one child in the family) were associated with child victimization and poly-victimization. Witnessing of parental intimate partner violence, elder abuse, and in-law conflict also increased the likelihood of child victimization and poly-victimization, even after the adjustment of demographic factors. Possible mechanisms for the links between family violence and child victimization are discussed. The current findings indicated the need for focusing on the whole family rather than the victim only. For example, screening for different types of family violence when child victims are identified may help early detection of other victims within the family.

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Introduction

Child victimization, which is children's experience of being victimized by various forms of violence including but not limited to child maltreatment by parents, violence by peer and siblings, neighborhood crime, and the exposure to indirect violence against others, is a prevalent problem that has been attracting more and more attention worldwide. The World Report on Violence against Children issued by the Secretary-General of the United Nations provides a comprehensive review of the various kinds of injuries sustained by children and calls for governments to take action (Pinheiro, 2006).

Surveys in Western countries have revealed preceding-year prevalence of child victimization ranging from 24% to 70% (e.g. Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007; Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, & Hamby, 2010; Millard & John, 2010). As to multiple forms of child victimization, Finkelhor et al. (2007) estimated that 1 in every 5 children were victims of more than four types of violence (poly-victimization). Past research has revealed the prevalence of specific types of child victimization, such as 3–62% for physical abuse (Lau, Liu, Cheung, & Wong, 1999; Tang & Davis, 1996), 2–36% for neglect (Chan, 2011; Hong Kong

Medical Coordinators on Child Abuse, 2003), and 21–68% for school bullying (Hazemba, Siziya, Muula, & Rudatsikira, 2008; Wong, Chen, Goggins, Tang, & Leung, 2009).

Identification of factors associated with child victimization is an essential element of effective prevention. Exposure to family violence, which is violence that occurs against different members within the family, can be associated with or even predictive of the risk of child victimization. However, few child victimization studies have included the various types of family violence despite the possible links between them. Many of the existing studies have focused on the co-occurrence of two types of violence against children, such as child abuse and intimate partner violence (IPV; Casanueva, Martin, & Runyan, 2009), child abuse and elder abuse (Pritchard, 2007), and physical child abuse and school bullying (Dussich & Maekoya, 2007). Despite the scarcity of earlier studies involving multiple forms of family violence, researchers have generally arrived at a conclusion that various types of violence are likely to co-occur among members within a family.

What lies beneath the association between child victimization and the family that the victim comes from has been a popular field of research. Apart from individual factors such as parental psychopathology and addictive behaviors (e.g. Windham et al., 2004), family disadvantages are one factor that has been consistently found to be predictive of child victimization and other family violence. For example, low socio-economic status and chronic poverty, which may increase the stress level and in turn the likelihood of harsh parenting practice among parents, are commonly identified as risk factors of family violence and child victimization (Rodriguez, 2010; Turner, 2005). Families with single parents are also believed to be at greater risk of violence (Turner, Finkelhor, Hamby, & Shattuck, 2013). In addition to the greater chance of having financial hardship, single parents are likely to have less time devoted to their children. Children with lower levels of parental supervision are more at-risk to violence in the extra-familial contexts. Children with siblings may also face similar situations, for the time and resources tend to be diffused with more children in a family (Ma, Liu, Liu, & Liu, 2007).

In this study, the prevalence of child victimization using a large and diverse sample of school-aged children from six geographical regions in China was investigated. The main objective was to examine the associations between child victimization and various types of family violence. Three types of family violence were selected with reference to the positive findings in previous research. Other than IPV between parents (e.g. Casanueva et al., 2009) and elder abuse against elderly members of the family (e.g. Pritchard, 2007), in-law conflict between parents and grandparents of the child was also included in this study. With reference to the positive association between in-law conflict and IPV (e.g. Chan et al., 2009) and the link between IPV and child maltreatment, in-law conflict may be one kind of family violence that is closely related to child victimization. Also, the associations between various family characteristics and child victimization were explored. Based on earlier research (e.g. Turner et al., 2013), the following family factors were selected: (a) socio-economic status and financial hardship, which were indicated by the education level, employment status, and incomes of parents; (b) marital status of parents; and (c) the number of children within the family. This study took a children's perspective on examining the issue and therefore used child reports of their own experiences of violence victimization and witnessing family violence. Based on past findings on violence (e.g. Casanueva et al., 2009; Chan et al., 2009; Pritchard, 2007; Turner et al., 2013), the hypotheses were (a) that children's exposure to past parental IPV, in-law conflict, and elder abuse at home would be associated with a higher likelihood of victimization and poly-victimization and (b) that various family disadvantages, such as financial hardship and single parenting, would be associated with greater likelihood of victimization and poly-victimization.

Methods

Study design and sample characteristics

This study employed data from a large study which had been conducted in China during 2009 and 2010. As noted in previous research (Chan, Yan, Brownridge, & Ip, 2013), it would be an extremely challenging task to recruit a sample that truly represents the Chinese population given its enormous size and diverse ethnicities. Therefore, the study adopted a more practical method of sampling by purposively selecting six cities from different geographic regions in China. The six cities were Tianjin (northern), Shenzhen (southern), Shanghai (eastern), Xi'an (western), Wuhan (central), and Hong Kong (a special administrative region). A two-stage stratified sampling strategy was employed: three districts were randomly selected in each city, and schools were randomly sampled from each district. A total of 150 schools agreed to participate for a response rate of 76.7%. One class in each grade was then sampled, and all children in that class were invited to complete the survey on regular school days. After obtaining consent from the children and one of their parents, children were asked to respond to questions by completing a structured survey. All completed surveys were sealed in an envelope by the children themselves to ensure privacy. A total of 18,341 children returned a completed survey, giving a response rate of 99.7% at the individual level. More details of the study design and procedures have been published elsewhere (Chan, 2013; Chan et al., 2013).

In this analysis, the data of 18,341 children recruited in school settings were employed. All of these children were 15–17 years old ($M = 15.86$, $SD = 0.97$) during the study, and girls comprised 46.7% of the sample. Regarding the ethnicity, more than 90% of the children were from Han, and others were from Hui, Manchu, Uygur, or Zhuang. About 58.9% of children had at least one sibling, and the mean number of siblings was 0.91 ($SD = 1.04$). Around 90.2% of parents were married or cohabiting. More than one fifth (23.9%) of families had income below the median in this sample, and 7.4% were receiving social security (which was equivalent to social assistance in the United States) at the time of the survey. The unemployment