



# The impact of extrafamilial victimization and poly-victimization on the psychological well-being of English young people

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## ABSTRACT

Childhood victimization impacts on the well-being of children and young people, particularly those experiencing an extreme amount of different types of victimization (i.e., poly-victims). However, limited attention has been given to the impact of different categories of extrafamilial victimization (experienced outside of the family), particularly in the UK. The intricacies of the significant detrimental impact poly-victimization has on victims are also poorly understood. In this study, 730 young people, aged 13 to 16 years (mean 13.8 years), from one county in the UK, were surveyed about their lifetime and past year experiences of extrafamilial victimization, the locations in which these occurred, and current trauma symptoms. The results showed that interpersonal forms of extrafamilial victimization (e.g., sexual victimization) were significant predictors of trauma, whilst more indirect forms of extrafamilial victimization (e.g., witnessing the victimization of others) were not. When extrafamilial poly-victimization and number of extrafamilial victim locations were accounted for within regression models, however, this impact was reduced. Poly-victimization within the past year was the strongest predictor of trauma symptoms. Number of victim locations did not significantly predict trauma symptoms above and beyond the impact of poly-victimization, although it was a contributory predictor. These findings suggest that a holistic exploration of a young person's extrafamilial victim experiences is needed in any clinical assessment or research into its psychological impact. Specifically, attention should be given to the experiencing of extreme levels of victimization (e.g., poly-victimization). Further longitudinal research is needed to understand why poly-victimization has the greatest impact on psychological well-being.

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## Introduction

Prevalence studies in the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK) suggest that more than 80% of children and young people experience some form of victimization within the home, school and/or community over their lifetime (LT; Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005a; Radford, Corral, Bradley, & Fisher, 2013) and around 60% within the

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past year (PY; Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2015; Radford et al., 2013). Childhood victimization is rarely a one-off event and children and young people are two to three times more likely to experience subsequent victimization following an initial exposure within the PY (Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2013) or over their LT. Figures suggest that 10–14% of children and young people experience extreme and ongoing victimization over their LT, 23% within the PY (Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007; Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2009b). These children and young people experience a multitude of different types of victimization on many different occasions by the same or a different perpetrator, and are referred to as 'poly-victims' (Finkelhor et al., 2007).

Suicidal ideation (Finkelhor, Vanderminde, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2014), physical health problems (Wilson, Kiewer, & Sica, 2004) and poorer academic functioning (Perkins, Perkins, & Craig, 2014) are amongst just a few outcomes relating to childhood victimization. Research suggests that victimization which is more interpersonal and invasive, such as sexual victimization (Turner, Finkelhor, Shattuck, Hamby, & Mitchell, 2015a), as opposed to more indirect (e.g., witnessing community violence as opposed to being directly victimized in the community; Fowler, Tompsett, Braciszewski, Jacques-Tiura, & Baltes, 2009), has the most detrimental psychological impact on the young person. Emerging research also suggests that incidents involving a weapon, injury and power imbalance exacerbate the impact of victimization on the young person, possibly as a result of increased fear (Turner et al., 2015a).

While the type and characteristics of victimization appear to influence the impact it has on the young person, research suggests that experiencing multiple types and multiple episodes of victimization may be the most damaging (Boynton-Jarrett, Ryan, Berkman, & Wright, 2008). Turner, Finkelhor, Shattuck, and Hamby (2012), for example, reported past year poly-victims (i.e., 10–17 year olds with exposure to seven or more different types of PY victimization) to be almost six times more likely to report suicidal ideation than non-poly-victims. Indeed, Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, and Hamby (2005b) have shown how controlling for the effects of poly-victimization significantly reduces or eliminates the statistical significance of the relationship between individual types of victimization and well-being. Multiple and poly-victimization should therefore be controlled for, or explored alongside the impact of individual forms of victimization. This is particularly important considering poly-victims have been found to be more likely to have experienced victimization involving a weapon, injury and a sexual element than non-poly-victims (Finkelhor et al., 2005b). Poly-victims are therefore likely to be prevalent amongst those who experience the most severe, interpersonal forms of victimization. As such, their presence is likely to influence the outcomes of any exploration of the impact of these types of victimization if not controlled for.

Whilst a significant amount of attention has been given to exploring the impact of victimization experienced within the family (intrafamilial victimization), much less research has explored the impact of victimization outside of the family (extrafamilial victimization). Where extrafamilial victimization has been explored, the focus tends to have been on the impact of specific types of victimization such as bullying or community-based violence exposure (see reviews by Fisher, Gardella, & Teurbe-Tolon, 2016; Fowler et al., 2009, respectively). Consequently, there is limited research looking at the impact of a wider range of victim experiences within the school and community which may not include interpersonal violence and may be more indirect (e.g., property victimization, witnessing the non-violent victimization of others, etc.) Our own research exploring the prevalence of extrafamilial victimization amongst 13–16 year olds in the UK found they experienced, on average, three different types of extrafamilial victimization in their LT (Jackson, Browne & Joseph, 2016). This ranged from property victimization to sexual assault. Similar findings were reported by Finkelhor et al. (2014) who found 48% of 10–17 year olds in the USA were victimized in a range of ways by peers at school. These findings therefore suggest we need to broaden our exploration of the impact of extrafamilial victimization beyond community violence exposure and bullying, and to gain a more holistic view of its impact. In doing so, we also need to recognise the co-occurrence of victim experiences and account for the impact of multiple exposure to extrafamilial victimization and extrafamilial poly-victimization.

Whilst it is becoming increasingly accepted that multiple and poly-victimization has a significant detrimental impact on young people, few studies have attempted to explore *why* this is the case. One reason may be the number of locations in which poly-victims are likely to be victimized. Victimization in one setting increases the likelihood of victimization in another (Ho & Cheung, 2010; Radford et al., 2011), and poly-victims are therefore likely to have been victimized in a range of locations (Turner, Shattuck, Finkelhor, & Hamby, 2015b). However, there are contradictory findings regarding whether the number of locations and/or the range and number of different types of victim experiences has more of an impact on the young person and causes the most harm for the individual. For example, Ho and Cheung (2010) report that the number of victim locations (home, school and community) has a larger impact than the amount of victim experiences. By contrast, Mrug, Loosier, and Windle (2008) found that the number of contexts in which the young person experienced violence did not predict adjustment beyond the effect of cumulative violence exposure. Alternatively, Wright, Fagan, and Pinchevsky (2013) found a combination of cumulative victimization of different types across different life domains (e.g., home, school, community) to have the largest impact on substance misuse. Similarly, Margolin, Vickerman, Oliver, & Gordis (2010) report cumulative exposure to violence across multiple domains (e.g., home and community) increases risks of internalizing and externalizing problems and academic failure amongst young people. Whilst the two factors are likely to be interconnected, understanding which has the most detrimental impact on the victim's psychological well-being will help provide a foundation from which academics and practitioners can respectively understand and address its impact on the young person.

More research is therefore needed to investigate the impact of extrafamilial victimization on the psychological well-being of the young person, taking into account poly-victimization and number of victim locations. Such research is particularly needed in the UK and should be carried out exploring a wide-range of extrafamilial victim experiences instead of focussing largely on exposure to violence. It is also important to recognise that it is not just the physical location of victimization that

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