



# Victimization and polyvictimization among Spanish youth protected by the child welfare system<sup>☆</sup>



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 19 March 2015

Received in revised form 23 October 2015

Accepted 23 October 2015

Available online 24 October 2015

### Keywords:

Victimization

Polyvictimization

Child welfare system

Adolescents

Residential facilities

## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To analyze lifetime and past-year victimization and polyvictimization among adolescents in residential care from a southwestern European country. Also, age and gender differences in victimization profiles were examined.

**Method:** A sample of 129 youths aged 12–17 years old ( $M = 14.58$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ ; 65 females) were recruited from 18 residential facilities in Spain. The 36-item interview version of the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (Finkelhor, Hamby, Ormrod, & Turner, 2005) was used to assess interpersonal victimization experiences.

**Results:** All adolescents reported at least one type of victimization during lifetime, and 85.3% did so for the past year. The most common lifetime and past-year victimization experiences were witnessing and indirect victimization (90.7% and 51.9%, respectively) and conventional crime (88.4% and 66.7%, respectively). Females were more likely to report lifetime and past-year witnessing of family violence ( $OR = 3.37$  and  $OR = 8.51$ , respectively) and caregiver victimization ( $OR = 2.98$  and  $OR = 5.92$ , respectively), and past-year sexual victimization with physical contact ( $OR = 4.36$  and  $OR = 3.40$ , respectively) than were males. Regarding polyvictimization thresholds, 53.1% and 26.5% of protected adolescents were lifetime and past-year polyvictims, respectively, and they suffered victimizations from 3 to 6 different domains in both time frames.

**Conclusions:** Victimization and polyvictimization should be continuously assessed in the child welfare system in order to prevent future exposure to violence among already vulnerable adolescents.

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## 1. Introduction

Children and adolescents involved in the child welfare system have been described as the most vulnerable and disempowered youth in society (Euser, Alink, Tharner, Van Ijzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2014; Gavrilovici & Groza, 2007; Green & Masson, 2002). Although children are not always removed from their families in order to protect them from abusive and neglectful caregivers, most of those who are placed in residential care will have suffered numerous experiences of victimization during their lives (Collin-Vézina, Coleman, Milne, Sell, & Daigault, 2011) prior to being taken into care (Hobbs, Hobbs, & Wynne, 1999; Morantz, Cole, Ayaya, Ayuku, & Braistein, 2013).

Studies also show that children and adolescents in residential care continue to experience several types of victimization while under the supposed protection of the welfare system (Ellonen & Pösö, 2011; Horwath, 2000). Gavrilovici and Groza (2007) found that Romanian children under institutional care had experienced threats, slaps or hits in the residential facility, at school, and in the neighborhood, and that they had also been victims and witnesses of sexual abuse. Other European studies have similarly reported that while in residential care, minors suffered physical abuse by staff, peers or other adults (Euser et al., 2014), sexual abuse by peers (Green & Masson, 2002), care staff or other adults (Euser, Alink, Tharner, Van Ijzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2013), emotional and physical abuse by care staff (Rus et al., 2013), and physical or sexual abuse by a staff member or a peer (Hobbs et al., 1999). In addition, some of the studies which have analyzed victimization experiences among children and adolescents in residential care (e.g., Gavrilovici & Groza, 2007 in Romania; Hobbs et al., 1999 in the UK; or Morantz et al., 2013 in Kenya) have found that these minors tend to suffer more than one type of victimization.

### 1.1. Polyvictimization in child welfare samples

In recent years, research on what has been termed polyvictimization (Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005) has shown that children

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and adolescents experience multiple kinds of victimizations in different settings. Studies with community samples have revealed polyvictimization to be an important problem in several countries, including Canada (Cyr et al., 2013), Finland (Ellonen & Salmi, 2011), and the UK (Radford, Corral, Bradley, & Fisher, 2013). Particularly, in Spain Pereda, Guilera, and Abad (2014) have reported that most adolescents experienced one or more types of victimization during their lifetime (83%) and the past-year (68.6%), and among the victimized the mean number of different types of victimization was 3.85 and 2.86, for lifetime and past year periods.

Few studies, however, have sought to analyze multiple types of victimization experiences among children involved in the child welfare system. Among those that have, mention should be made of two studies conducted in child welfare in Canada. In their study of 53 youth (aged 14–17 years) from six residential care units, Collin-Vézina et al. (2011) found that all of them reported high rates of abusive and neglectful experiences, ranging from one to five forms of child maltreatment (i.e., physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, and physical and emotional neglect) during their lives. For their part, Cyr et al. (2012) studied 220 minors (aged 2–17 years) from three youth centers which included children living in reception centers in Quebec, and found that 90% of them had experienced at least one type of victimization during the past year and that around half of them were polyvictims, suffering four or more victimizations (based on the criteria of Finkelhor, Ormrod, et al., 2005). Using a different methodology, namely chart review, Brady and Caraway (2002) analyzed the experiences of 41 children (aged 7–12 years) from two residential treatment centers in the United States. They found that 97.6% of them had experienced at least one traumatic event during their lifetime, while a third had suffered multiple traumatic experiences (4–6 types of traumas), mainly related with caregiver victimization such as physical and sexual abuse, and witnessing domestic violence, among others.

Given that the results from this small number of studies suggest that victimization experiences are common among the residential care population, there is clearly a need to assess both lifetime and past-year polyvictimization among children involved in the welfare system.

### 1.2. The present study

The aim of the current study is to provide empirical data about the prevalence of victimization and polyvictimization among adolescents being cared for by the child welfare system of a southwestern European country, Spain. Based on the available literature (Collin-Vézina et al., 2011; Cyr et al., 2012; Euser et al., 2013; Gavrilovici & Groza, 2007), we hypothesize that adolescents placed in residential facilities (short- and long-term care) would report a higher prevalence of lifetime and past-year victimization experiences than adolescents from a community sample (Pereda et al., 2014) in the same cultural context and using a similar methodology. As regards polyvictimization, we expected to find a large group of polyvictims for both time frames, as reported in previous child welfare studies (Collin-Vézina et al., 2011; Cyr et al., 2012). The study also examines the influence of gender and age on victimization profiles, since previous research has found these to be important variables to take into account when studying victimization in this group of adolescents (e.g., Collin-Vézina et al., 2011; Cyr et al., 2012; Euser et al., 2013; Gavrilovici & Groza, 2007).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The sample comprised 129 youths (64 males and 65 females) recruited from 18 residential facilities (78.3% long-term and 21.7% short-term centers) in the north-eastern region of Spain. Centers were selected by convenience sampling. The admission criteria for this study required participants to be aged between 12 and 17 years old ( $M = 14.59$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ )

and to have sufficient cognitive and language abilities to understand the interviewer's questions.

In most cases only one reason for implementing child protection measures was recorded in the case file ( $M = 1.10$ ,  $SD = .095$ ,  $Mdn = 1.00$ ,  $IQR = 1$ ), examples being neglect (72.9%), physical (11.6%) and sexual (3.9%) abuse, unaccompanied immigrant children (2.3%), witnessing domestic violence (1.5%), labor exploitation (1.5%), fetal abuse (0.8%), corruption (0.8%), and undefined risk situations (13.2%). In 3.9% of cases, no such information was available. The participants had been subject to child protection measures for between less than 1 month and up to 13 years and 8 months ( $M = 3.58$ ,  $SD = 3.29$ ,  $Mdn = 2.25$ ,  $IQR = 13.67$ ), with no information about 6 of them. Most of the adolescents (73.7%,  $n = 95$ ) were under protection measures during the past year. The majority of them still had some contact with their parents (89.9%). The main sociodemographic characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1. Males and females were comparable in terms of country of birth, contact with parents, type of center, the duration of child protection measures, and socioeconomic status. However, male and female participants differed significantly ( $\chi^2 = 4.843$ ,  $p = .028$ ,  $Phi = 0.194$ ,  $p = .028$ ) in terms of their distribution by age group (classified as either 12–14 years old or 15–17 years old).

### 2.2. Procedure

This was a cross-sectional study. Participants were recruited during 2013 from 18 residential facilities overseen by the Directorate-General for Children and Adolescents (DGAIA) of the Catalan Ministry of Social Welfare and Family. The short- and long-term centers look after children from 3 to 18 years old who have been removed from their homes in order to be protected from an unsafe family situation. Once the nature of the project had been explained to the managers of these facilities, written informed consent was obtained from the legal guardians of the adolescents, who themselves signed this document on the day of the interview if they had voluntarily agreed to participate. The rate of participation was 69.2%, which represents 9.1% of the total number of adolescents placed in residential facilities in the north-eastern region of Spain. Participants were interviewed individually and assessed by researchers trained in collecting data on violence against children (United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), 2012). The Institutional Review Board of the University of Barcelona (IRB00003099) approved the study, which was conducted in accordance with the basic ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki in Seoul (World Medical Association, 2008). No financial assistance or compensation was offered to participants.

**Table 1**  
Sample characteristics.

Variable	Male		Female		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Age						
12–14	38	59.4	26	40.0	64	49.6
15–17	26	40.6	39	60.0	65	50.4
Living in						
Long term center	53	82.8	48	73.8	101	78.3
Short term center	11	17.2	17	26.2	28	21.7
Country of origin <sup>a</sup>						
Spain	48	75.0	39	60.0	87	67.4
Other	16	25.0	26	40.0	42	32.6
SES <sup>b</sup>						
Low	24	37.5	22	33.8	46	35.7
Middle low	10	15.6	17	26.2	27	20.9
Middle	6	9.4	7	10.8	13	10.1
Middle high	2	3.1	1	1.5	3	2.3
High	3	4.7	1	1.5	4	3.1
Missing cases	19	29.7	17	26.2	36	27.9

<sup>a</sup> Youths' country of origin.

<sup>b</sup> Socioeconomic status (based on adapted version of Hollingshead, 1975).

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