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Poly-victimization and trajectories of binge drinking from adolescence to young adulthood among serious juvenile offenders



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ABSTRACT

Background: Justice involved youth exposed to multiple forms of victimization (i.e., poly-victimization) may be at risk for long term substance use problems and difficulty in self-regulation, placing them at higher risk of long-term problematic behaviors. This study empirically identifies victimization classifications in a sample of justice involved youth and how long-term binge drinking is related to victimization experiences. We further sought to understand how self-regulatory abilities such as impulse control and emotion regulation effect emergent profiles and binge drinking trajectories.

Methods: Based on a sample of 1354 justice involved youth from 15 to 25 years old, classes of victimization were extracted. Emergent classes were examined in relationship to their binge drinking trajectories using latent growth models. Finally, self-regulation was examined as a predictor of binge drinking trajectories across emergent classes.

Results: The analyses indicated three classes of victimization: poly-victimized, indirectly victimized, and lowly victimized. Latent growth models revealed that the poly-victimized class had significantly steeper growth in binge drinking as compared to the indirect and low victimized patterns. Impulse and emotional regulation both significantly decelerated binge drinking only for the indirect victimization group.

Conclusions: Findings highlight the need to focus on poly-victimization in understanding binge drinking trajectories as well as the role impulse control and emotional regulation play among justice involved youth. Findings are discussed through the lens of adolescent development, coping strategies, and early traumatic experiences.

1. Introduction

Recent estimates suggest nearly 90% of justice involved youth are exposed to at least one form of violence each year, with the majority encountering multiple forms of victimization (Abram et al., 2004; Finkelhor et al., 2015). Further, justice involved youth develop substance use disorders at much higher rates than community samples (Merikangas et al., 2010; Mulvey et al., 2010) and report nearly five times higher prevalence of alcohol and drug use (Abram et al., 2004). Justice involved youth who are exposed to victimization can develop a range of behavioral and affective problems (Ng-Mak et al., 2002) including difficulties with self-regulation (e.g., impulse control and emotional regulation). Though some studies have examined the

relations between poly-victimization and substance use among delinquent samples (e.g., Ford et al., 2010; Ford et al., 2013), no study has examined the influence of self-regulation on binge drinking across patterns of poly-victimization from adolescence (12–17 years) to young adulthood (18–25 years). The aim of this study is to understand how impulse control and emotional regulation relate to victimization patterns and binge drinking trajectories among justice involved youth from adolescence through young adulthood.

Poly-victimization is defined as experiencing multiple types of victimization (Finkelhor et al., 2007) and in multiple contexts (Butcher et al., 2016). Victimization can occur through direct (i.e., personally experienced violence) or indirect encounters (i.e., witnessing violence) (Finkelhor et al., 2005). Victimization can also occur across various

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interpersonal contexts, such as with peers (i.e., bullying; Espelage and Holt, 2001), family (i.e., parental hostility; Espelage et al., 2012), and neighborhoods (e.g., exposure to community violence; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Poly-victimization is widely recognized as a separate classification of violence exposure (Finkelhor et al., 2007; Turner et al., 2010), and it has been shown to account for more variance beyond single victimization types when predicting adverse behavioral symptoms (Finkelhor et al., 2007).

Studies examining the consequences of violence exposure have been equivocal. For example, early exposure to violence has been associated with increased problem behaviors, which may be a result of young people imitating maladaptive coping strategies (Dubow et al., 2016; Guerra et al., 2003). Conversely, other studies highlight that constant exposure to neighborhood violence can lead to a desensitizing and a “psychological numbing” effect, resulting in lower problem behaviors (Ng-Mak et al., 2002). Because justice involved youth can experience a wide array of victimization and develop different responses (Abram et al., 2004; Finkelhor et al., 2015), assessing exposure to only one type of victimization can lead to an underestimation of outcomes (Butcher et al., 2016). Thus, to comprehensively examine the relation of victimization to problem risk drinking, it is essential to evaluate distinct patterns of victimization.

Research on poly-victimization among justice involved youth has reaffirmed prior associations with substance use (Bender et al., 2014; Ford et al., 2010; Reid and Sullivan, 2009; Wright et al., 2013). For example, youth involved with the juvenile justice system are at increased risk for experiencing multiple forms of violence (Abram et al., 2013) and have a heightened prevalence of alcohol use (Aarons et al., 2001; Grisso and Underwood, 2004). Specifically, poly-victimization among justice involved youth has been associated with both concurrent (Bender et al., 2014; Ford et al., 2010) and long-term (Wright et al., 2013) substance use problems. Others have found reciprocal relationships between delinquent behavior and early or sustained binge drinking over the life course among justice involved youth (Jennings et al., 2015). Recently, research has found variation in binge alcohol use among justice involved youth, across race and ethnicity (Vaughn et al., 2017). Specifically, non-Hispanic white and Hispanic youth offenders show rapid increases during early adolescent phase with African-American youth showing steady rates of binge drinking (Vaughn et al., 2017). Given the immense economic burden associated with binge drinking (Sacks et al., 2015), it is necessary to study long term predictors of binge drinking. Prior research has shown a link between victimization and substance use in delinquent samples (e.g., Ford et al., 2010, 2013), yet few studies have considered contextualizing distinct victimization classes in relation to binge drinking longitudinally. Furthermore, most of these extant studies are primarily cross-sectional, descriptive of the victimization classes, or do not have continuous measurement of substance use, which leaves a gap in the progress of binge drinking over vital periods of development. Unfortunately, these studies inherently do not investigate the development of substance use for juvenile delinquents exposed to early victimization nor do they accurately portray their trajectories of substance use among patterns of poly-victimization.

Among justice involved youth exposed to victimization, the ability to self-regulate impulsive behaviors and adverse emotions is critical to attenuating long-term problematic alcohol use (D’Andrea et al., 2012; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990). Early encounters of victimization may result in a dysregulated stress-response system, leading justice involved youth to be more susceptible to self-regulation problems (Davis et al., 2017). Taking the self-control strengths model into consideration, self-regulation is viewed as a finite resource and, once depleted, results in an inability to further regulate behavioral impulses and/or adverse emotions when exposed to additional stressors (Baumeister, 2003; Muraven and Baumeister, 2000). Thus, when youth experience repeated victimizations, the required level of coping and self-regulatory processes that aid in decision making are depleted, leaving youth

vulnerable to impulsive decision making and emotional dysregulation. Conversely, there are individuals with inherently diminished self-regulatory abilities (e.g., lower impulse control, emotional regulation), and this may become more problematic when it comes to long-term behaviors such as binge drinking. According to Gottfredson and Hirschi’s (1990) theory of criminal behavior, those who have established poor (or low) self-control in childhood have trouble resisting immediately gratifying actions throughout adolescence and adulthood. A lack of self-control may be a significant predictor of criminal behavior and also of alcohol use (Zavala and Kurtz, 2017).

In the present study, we examine a sample of juvenile justice involved youth from adolescence to young adulthood to determine the effect of multiple violence exposures on the development of binge drinking. Similar to Butcher et al. (2016), we examine poly-victimization across multiple social contexts (e.g., where the victimization occurs) and types of victimization (e.g., witness or victim). However, this study addresses a gap in the literature by evaluating how distinct victimization classes relate to developmental trajectories of binge drinking, as well as determining how impulse control and emotional regulation influence these trajectories. Among victimized youth, elucidating self-regulatory processes that may act as risk (e.g., acceleration) or protective (e.g., deceleration) factors in binge drinking trajectories has theoretical and clinical relevance. This is especially true with recent evidence pointing toward a focus on protective factors that aid in mitigating long term problem behaviors such as violence and substance use among justice involved youth (see Ttofi et al., 2016). Understanding protective, or resilience, factors among chronically victimized youth in analogous behaviors (i.e., binge drinking) may aid our current understanding of potential avenues for prevention interventions. Similar to prior studies, we hypothesize (H1) two or more profiles of poly-victimization will emerge. Additionally, we hypothesize (H2) that those with high levels of victimization will exhibit higher rates and growth of binge drinking relative to those with lower violence exposure. Lastly, we hypothesize (H3) that patterns of poly-victimization and their associations with trajectories of binge drinking are differentiated by impulse control and emotional regulation.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Data were obtained from the *Pathways to Desistance Study* (Mulvey et al., 2004), a longitudinal study of serious juvenile offenders ($N = 1,354$). Enrollment criterion stipulated that participants had to be an adjudicated delinquent or found guilty of a serious offense. Data were collected at two sites (Philadelphia, PA and Phoenix, AZ) over a seven-year period with bi-annual assessments during the first three years and annual assessments during the last four years. Participants were between the ages of 14–18 and 21–25 at baseline and study completion, respectively. Written informed consent and assent was obtained from all participants entered into the study. The overall retention rate was 89.5%. Participant characteristics can be found in Table 1.

2.2. Procedures

We used baseline data to complete our latent class analysis of poly-victimization. Thus, data collected prospectively was used to test our research questions regarding trajectories of binge drinking. We used an accelerated, longitudinal cohort design to examine developmental growth in binge drinking. To this end, we ensured time was spaced evenly to include seven time points spaced one year apart. Because cohorts (e.g., 14–18 year olds) at baseline may differ on our outcome of interest, we estimated a hierarchical linear model to test the cohort by time interaction. Results revealed no difference between cohorts, thus an accelerated, longitudinal format is appropriate (see supplemental materials).

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