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Substance use predictors of victimization profiles among homeless youth: A latent class analysis



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A B S T R A C T

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Although a substantial body of literature demonstrates high prevalence of street victimization among homeless youth, few studies have investigated the existence of victimization classes that differ on the type and frequency of victimization experienced. Nor do we know how substance use patterns relate to victimization classes. Using latent class analysis (LCA), we examined the existence of victimization classes of homeless youth and investigated substance use predictors of class membership utilizing a large purposive sample ($N = 601$) recruited from homeless youth-serving host agencies in three disparate regions of the U.S. Results of the LCA suggest the presence of three distinct victimization profiles – youth fit into a low-victimization class, a witness class, or a high-victimization class. These three victimization classes demonstrated differences in their substance use, including rates of substance abuse/dependence on alcohol and/or drugs. The presence of distinct victimization profiles suggests the need for screening and referral for differential services.

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Street victimization is commonplace among homeless youth (Stewart et al., 2004). Previous research finds significant negative consequences associated with victimization, including increased engagement in high-risk behaviors (Melander & Tyler, 2010), disruptive residential changes (Gaetz, 2004), and the development of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Whitbeck, Hoyt, Johnson, & Chen, 2007). Despite high prevalence and the serious consequences of street victimization, few studies have investigated the existence of subgroups or classes of youth based on the type and frequency of victimization experienced. Understanding whether youth differ in their victimization profiles can inform methods for screening, assessing, and treating homeless youth. Thus, this study aims to identify such subgroups and investigate substance use as a key predictor of subgroup membership.

Background literature

Often leaving abusive home environments (Tyler & Cauce, 2002), many homeless youth continue to be victimized once on the streets, with reports of elevated physical (94%) and sexual (32%) street victimization (Tyler & Beal, 2010). Rates of

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witnessing violence are also high, with 72% of homeless youth having witnessed the physical attack of another person (Kipke, Simon, Montgomery, Unger, & Iversen, 1997). Research has demonstrated correlations between several risk factors and increased exposure to victimization. For example, youth who run away at earlier ages, report multiple episodes of running away, and spend more time on the streets are at increased odds of experiencing physical victimization (Tyler & Beal, 2010), while youth who engage in survival behaviors such as prostitution and panhandling are at increase risk for sexual victimization (Tyler & Beal, 2010). Youth who are highly transient, moving from city to city, are also at increased risk of being taken advantage of in dangerous and unfamiliar environments (Bender, Ferguson, Thompson, Komlo, & Pollio, 2010).

Substance use is a robust risk factor exposing youth to victimization on the streets (Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Bao, 2000). According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR), substance use disorders (both alcohol- and drug-related) can be further categorized as substance abuse and substance dependence (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). The fundamental feature of substance abuse is a pattern of use that leads to persistent, significant negative consequences for the user. This differs from substance dependence in which the fundamental feature is one's continued use of a substance despite significant problems related to use and includes diagnostic criteria such as tolerance and withdrawal symptoms (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). In a study of homeless adolescent clients of a drop-in center, rates of alcohol abuse and dependence were 19.5% and 61.1%, respectively, while rates of drug abuse and dependence were 30.3% and 54.6%, respectively (Gomez, Thompson, & Barczyk, 2010). Youths' alcohol abuse and dependence is a particularly strong correlate of victimization; previous work finds youth who met criteria for an alcohol use disorder were 3 times more likely to experience victimization and 5.5 times more likely to meet criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Bender et al., 2010).

In explaining the relationship between substance use and victimization, some research finds homeless youth may self-medicate, using substances to help manage victimization experiences and related psychological consequences of living on the street (Kilpatrick et al., 2003). Other work, among broader youth populations, suggests substance use may be a precursor to assault such that victims may not be able to adequately detect potential perpetrators due to impairment, and perpetrators may target intoxicated victims due to their assumed vulnerability (Champion et al., 2004; Kilpatrick, Acierno, Resnick, Saunders, & Best, 1997).

Syndemics theory, which moves beyond epidemic or comorbid explanations of health problems (Mustanski, Garofalo, Herrick, & Donenberg, 2007; Singer, 1994), posits that unfavorable social conditions among a population, such as poverty and stigmatization, influence the prevalence of comorbid health problems (Singer & Clair, 2003; Singer et al., 2006). Syndemics-based research has largely focused on psychosocial associations with sexual health (e.g., Mustanski et al., 2007; Parsons, Grov, & Golub, 2012; Singer et al., 2006), though recent work has explored syndemics in relation to victimization and alcohol (Gonzalez-Guarda, De Santis, & Vasquez, 2013; Russell, Eaton, & Petersen-Williams, 2013). For example, in a discussion of the intersections of alcohol use, interpersonal violence, and HIV infections among pregnant South African women, Russell et al. (2013) conclude that the combination of these individual epidemics results in a syndemic affecting overall maternal and child health. Given what is known about homeless youth's high victimization prevalence (e.g., Tyler & Beal, 2010) and possible self-medicating substance use (e.g., Kilpatrick et al., 2003), syndemics theory would suggest that a homeless youth's social conditions (e.g., lack of access to care, lack of guardianship, poverty), victimization, and substance use may be inextricable from one another, resulting in a syndemic of overall decreased well-being for this population.

Previous research has traditionally approached understanding victimization by establishing prevalence and identifying correlates of victimization (e.g., Bender et al., 2010). This often results in findings that categorize youth into non-victimized, or more often, victimized groups. The extant research has yet to explore how combinations of victimization type and severity create distinct subgroups of youth with more complex victimization profiles. Latent class analysis (LCA) is an analytic technique that groups individuals based on specific patterns of behaviors or experiences. This person-centered approach allows for identification of subgroups of youth where, within each subgroup, youth report similar types and frequencies of victimization experiences. More detailed investigation of complex victimization profiles can be helpful in screening youth for services, differentiating treatment needs, and developing adaptive prevention efforts.

The purpose of the current study is to investigate the existence of subgroups of homeless youth based on self-reported victimization experiences and to determine which exposure factors predict subgroup membership. Substance use disorders, as predictors, are of particular interest based on their high co-morbidity with victimization and prevalence among homeless youth. Although substance use has been identified as a risk factor for victimization, further work is needed to disentangle the types of substance use that place youth at most risk and inform intervention efforts that address these co-occurring problems. It should also be noted that most studies of homeless youth have restricted sampling to single locations or regions of the country, while this study reports on data collected on homeless youth in three cities in disparate regions of the U.S. Thus, this study aims to expand our understanding of homeless youths' victimization profiles by utilizing a uniquely large and diverse sample, the advanced methodological approach of latent class analysis, and investigation of specific substance use variables as risk factors for victimization. Specifically, three research questions guided the current investigation: (1) Do distinct subgroups (or latent classes) of homeless youth exist based on their victimization experiences? (2) Do subgroups differ significantly in the degree to which they meet criteria for a substance use disorder (substance abuse or substance dependence) and (4) Does type of substance used (alcohol or drug) predict subgroup membership?

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