

APSAC Research to Practice Brief

Study Title: Developmental Stage of Onset, Poly-Victimization, and Persistence of Childhood Victimization: Impact on Adult Well-Being in a Rural Community-Based Study

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Introduction:

Childhood exposure to victimization can lead to negative outcomes such as poor academic performance, substance abuse, poor physical and mental health, post-traumatic stress, and delinquent behavior. However, questions remain about the role of age of onset, as well as the persistence of victimization and poly-victimization (i.e., experiencing multiple types of victimization) across developmental stages throughout childhood. Prior research suggests that victimization rates vary across developmental stages, and that risk of victimization varies across childhood. This variability in risk can be attributed to changes in cognitive abilities, physical traits, personality, and environment making children more or less susceptible to victimization. The developmental cascade model suggests that cumulative consequences resulting from multiple interactions and transactions in developing systems can alter the course of development. Victimization is one such consequence that can interfere with developmental processes and achievements. This study seeks to understand the effects of persistent victimization and poly-victimization across developmental stages in childhood on well-being in adulthood.

Hypotheses:

- (1) Across all types of victimization, individuals who experienced victimization at an earlier age of onset would report poorer adult well-being compared to individuals who experienced victimization onset during later developmental stages.
- (2) Across all types of victimization, adults who experienced victimization that persisted across three developmental stages would report poorer well-being compared to individuals who experienced victimization across fewer stages of development.
- (3) Individuals who experienced poly-victimization across multiple developmental stages of childhood will report the lowest levels of well-being in adulthood, more than individuals who reported persistent victimization during childhood that did not reach the poly-victimization level and those who reported poly-victimization during only one stage of childhood.

Method:

The sample for this study ($n = 2,098$) was drawn from a larger study of resilience among adolescents and adults residing in the Appalachian region of three Southern states. Participants were aged 18 and older at the time of data collection. Participants were recruited through a wide variety of strategies in order to reach segments of the population not typically included in psychology research. Participants completed a self-administered survey (85% completion rate) and received a \$30 gift card and information on community resources. The survey included items assessing childhood violence exposure including peer victimization, assault, child maltreatment, witnessing community violence, and exposure to family violence. Adult well-being outcomes

measures included three dimensions: subjective well-being, mental health, and health-related quality of life. Variables were then constructed to represent stage of onset of abuse, poly-victimization, persistence of abuse across developmental stage, and poly-victimization by persistence of abuse across developmental stage.

Findings:

82% (n = 1,726) of participants reported experiencing at least one type of victimization in childhood. Experiencing victimization between 0 and 5 years old was associated with significantly worse adult well-being across all outcome measures in adulthood compared to participants who experienced victimization between 6-12 or 13-18 years old. Among adults who experienced at least one type of victimization in childhood, 45.8% reported persistent victimization (i.e., one type of victimization in more than one developmental stage), 20.5% reported poly-victimization (i.e., more than one victimization in one stage), and 11.2% reported persistent poly-victimization (i.e., more than one victimization in more than one stage). Results indicated a linear decline in overall well-being as victimization becomes more diverse and persistent across developmental stages, even when controlling for demographic characteristics and financial strain. This study supports previous findings that persistent poly-victimization shows the strongest associations with poor mental and physical health outcomes.

Recommendations:

Once a child experiences victimization, it creates cascade effects that can alter their developmental trajectory, which in turn places them at higher risk for additional or persistent victimization. These cascade effects can continue through adulthood. It is important to focus prevention and intervention efforts on addressing the effects of multiple forms of victimization, across multiple developmental stages including adulthood, to accurately understand what perpetuates cycles of violence. For example, those working with high-risk youth may not understand the scope of victimization and need research-based information and comprehensive screening tools based on long-term victimization experiences to improve prevention and intervention efforts with victimized youth. Moreover, this study highlights the need for greater access to resources in low-income, rural communities, shown both by the high numbers of adults in this study who experienced victimization and findings from previous studies showing that children in these areas are at higher risk for victimization and revictimization compared to their urban and suburban counterparts.

Bottom Line:

Experiencing poly-victimization in infancy and toddlerhood appear to have the strongest negative association with mental and physical health outcomes in adulthood, as these early experiences place children at greater risk for revictimization across multiple types of victimization and developmental stages. As we recognize the need for more individualized programming to address childhood victimization and its effects in adulthood, there is also the need for the field to move toward a more integrative approach, which may be more promising than focusing on individual types of violence alone.

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