

Resources for the Prevention of Sexual Abuse



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“Polyvictimization Across Social Contexts: Home, School, and Neighborhood Violence Exposure”

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THE QUESTIONS

Do the frequency and social context (specifically in three distinct settings: home, school, and neighborhood) in which juvenile justice-involved youth have been exposed to violence have an effect on their behaviors and implications for choosing the best treatment plan for these youth?

THE RESEARCH

Past research tells us that almost 65 percent of children who have been victimized or witnessed violence report that they have experienced “polyvictimization,” i.e. multiple experiences as a victim of different types of violence. This article looks deeper into polyvictimization: it examines not just the cumulative effects on a child of repeated exposure to violence, but how the particular locations of the polyvictimization, specifically home, school, and neighborhood, influence how a child’s health and well-being are ultimately affected differently from one another. In researching victimization across these varied social contexts, the researchers hoped to provide a greater understanding of the heterogeneity of classes of youth exposed to violence and identify how different classes may

display internalizing behaviors (e.g. post-traumatic stress symptoms) or externalizing behaviors (e.g. violent or suicidal behaviors).

METHODS

This study sought to: determine if meaningful groups of adolescents could be identified based on their self-report of exposure to violence as either a witness or a victim in three distinct settings: homes, schools, and neighborhoods; test whether demographic characteristics and family history of mental health issues predict a form of class membership of youth exposed to violence; and examine if the resulting class membership of youth exposed to violence was related to distal outcomes of internalizing and externalizing problems. The study included 2,545 juvenile justice-involved youth who participated in an intake interview, conducted by a trained caseworker, in which they were asked about the frequency of their exposure to violence and to make a distinction between home, school, and neighborhood as the locations where the violence took place. Using the Ohio Scales (which are designed to assess clinical outcomes for children with severe emotional behavioral disorders), the degree of internalization versus externalization of problem behaviors was assessed for each participant. The researchers determined whether or not the participants' biological family had been diagnosed with a mental illness or depression. Based on all of this information, classes of youth exposed to violence were defined.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The authors found that: youth exposed to violence in multiple locations (home, school, and community) had the highest levels of externalizing problems (for example, acting out towards others) and lowest levels of internalizing problems; youth exposed to violence at home and in school had higher levels of internalizing problems (for example, anxiety and depression); the findings highlight the importance of social context in the study of polyvictimization so that in addition to understanding the frequency and intensity of children's exposure to violence, it is also important to determine the location/s in which the violence took place because of the prevalence of children's exposure to violence, particularly youth in the juvenile justice system, it is important to assess youth for exposure to violence and develop informed and targeted treatment plans; and because the current study focused on juvenile justice involved-youth, these results should be replicated in a community sample.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

Adverse experiences in childhood were once viewed as more of a two-sided coin: Was this client abused or not? Do they have a trauma-related diagnosis or not? These findings point to the importance of developing a deep understanding of each young person's story and how their experiences have left a mark that can yield important clues to the future. This often means deep, active listening to the narratives that our young clients bring with them

into supervision and treatment. This is not simply a value-based statement; clinicians have an obligation to consider the risk for self-harm as well as harm to others.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

Our field rightly focuses on reducing the risk that young people will abuse again in the future. All too often, however, we can forget that these clients are at higher risk to carry the effects of their past experiences as a burden well into the future. Just as we need research to guide us in the direction of externalized behavior (e.g., hurting others), it is equally important to have studies such as this to remind us that our work is also about building healthier futures for those who have abused, as well as those who have caused harm to others. Further, this study points to a risk factor that is often overlooked in the literature of our field: the effects of violence in our communities on young people.

ABSTRACT

Exposure to violence is a widespread problem that affects the mental health of children and adolescents particularly in at-risk populations such as juvenile justice involved youth. While a number of studies have examined the cumulative impact of violence exposure, few studies have examined the importance of social context. The present study examined classifications of youth exposed to violence by contextual location (home, school, and neighborhood) in a sample of 2,124 juvenile justice involved youth. Latent class analysis revealed three classes of youth exposed to violence: (a) low violence exposure, (b) moderate and high home/school violence exposure, and (c) violence exposure in all three social contexts. Furthermore, distal outcomes analysis showed differences in internalizing and externalizing problems based on class membership. Findings from the current study underline the importance of understanding the role of social context in assessing violence exposure in juvenile justice involved youth.

CITATION

Butcher, F., Holmes, M.R., Kretschmar, J.M. and Flannery, D.J. (2016). Polyvictimization Across Social Contexts: Home, School, and Neighborhood Violence Exposure. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 43, 1726–1740.