Social Ecological Correlates of Polyvictimization among a National Sample of Transgender, Genderqueer, and Cisgender Sexual Minority Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Polyvictimization is a common experience for youth in the United States, with 20% nationally experiencing five or more different forms of victimization in the last year. Utilizing a large, national convenience sample of sexual and gender minority adolescents (N = 1177, 14-19 years old), the current study aimed to (a) generate the first estimates of last year polyvictimization (including nine victimization subtypes) for transgender, genderqueer, and cisgender (i.e., assigned birth sex aligns with gender identity) sexual minority adolescents and (b) identify social ecological correlates of last year polyvictimization. The study utilized an online survey advertised through Facebook and community organizations across the United States. Approximately, 40% of participants experienced ten or more different forms of victimization in the last year and were classified as polyvictims. A significantly higher percentage of transgender female (63.4%), transgender male (48.9%), genderqueer assigned male at birth (71.5%) and genderqueer assigned female at birth (49.5%) were polyvictimized in comparison to cisgender sexual minority males (33.0%). Polyvictimization rates for cisgender sexual minority females (35.1%) were not significantly different from male counterparts (33.0%). Several significant risk factors for polyvictimization were identified: genderqueer identity for participants assigned male at birth and higher-levels of posttraumatic stress, family-level microaggressions, and peer rejection. The manuscript concludes with recommendations for future research including the exploration of factors (e.g., lack of community support, gender-role policing) associated with higher polyvictimization rates for genderqueer adolescents. Additionally, professionals (e.g., foster care, homeless shelters, schools) require new tools to assess for polyvictimization among sexual and gender minority adolescents.

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Polyvictimization is often defined as experiencing five or more different forms of victimization (e.g., bullying, sexual abuse, dating violence, etc.) in the last year (Finkelhor et al., 2007a). Polyvictimization is a common experience for youth in
the United States, with 20% of a nationally representative sample (2 to 17 y/o) experiencing five or more different forms of victimization in the last year and 7% experiencing seven or more different forms (Finkelhor et al., 2007a). The co-occurrence of victimization experiences appears to be the norm, as 64.5% of youth who experienced one form of victimization (e.g., child maltreatment) in the last year also reported experiencing a second unique type (e.g., bullying; Finkelhor, Turner, Hamby, & Ormrod, 2011). Polyvictimization is a profound public health concern for two major reasons. First, polyvictims are substantially more likely to report higher rates of depression, posttraumatic stress, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and substance use in comparison to non-polyvictims (Finkelhor et al., 2007a; Ford et al., 2010; Turner et al., 2006). In fact, the total number of different forms of victimization is a better predictor of individual mental and behavioral health outcomes than any single form of victimization, including sexual assault (Cyr et al., 2012; DeHart, 2009; Finkelhor et al., 2007b; Turner et al., 2006). Second, consistent with trauma theory (Alexander, 2009), prior experiences of victimization profoundly increase the risk for future incidents of victimization that can result in an individual becoming polyvictimized (Finkelhor, 2008).

The extant literature on polyvictimization has great relevance to the study of transgender (i.e., assigned birth sex does not align with gender identity; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012), genderqueer (i.e., gender identity or expression does not conform to the gender binary; Richards et al., 2016), and cisgender (i.e., assigned birth sex aligns with gender identity; Aultman, 2014) sexual minority adolescents. This manuscript uses the terms “sexual minority” and “gender minority” to refer to adolescents who identify as non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender, respectively (Savin-Williams, 2001). For example, cisgender sexual minority males and cisgender sexual minority females refer to adolescents who identify as non-heterosexual and have a gender identity that aligns with their assigned birth sex.

Although no single study has examined polyvictimization rates for these vulnerable adolescent populations, empirical evidence suggests they are at greater risk for multiple forms of violence. In the 2015 National Youth Risk Behavior Survey (Grades 9 to 12), sexual minority adolescents were at higher risk for victimization than heterosexual youth, including higher rates of being bullied (34.2% vs. 20.2%) threatened or injured with a weapon on school property (10.0% vs. 5.1%) and being forced to have sexual intercourse (17.8% vs. 5.4%; Kann et al., 2016). These findings are consistent with previous research with sexual minority and transgender adolescents who reported high rates of bullying victimization, with 75% to 98% reporting verbal bullying victimization, followed by relational (76% to 86%), electronic (28% to 62%), and physical (22% to 38%) in the last school year (Birkett et al., 2009; Kann et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2014; Sterzing et al., 2014). In a recent study by Sterzing and colleagues (2016; 15 to 19 y/o), 46% of sexual minority adolescents reported moderate to extreme childhood emotional abuse, followed by physical abuse (34%), and sexual abuse (32%). In a study on intimate partner violence (IPV) among middle- and high-school students (N = 3745; 12 to 19 y/o), found that 88.9% of transgender adolescents experienced physical IPV compared to 35.9% of cisgender males and 23.9% of cisgender females, while 61.1% of transgender adolescents experienced sexual coercive IPV compared to 8.8% of cisgender male and 16.4% cisgender female adolescents (Dank et al., 2013). No research to date has explicitly identified the victimization experiences for genderqueer adolescents. This is an important gap as gender-role nonconformity—a potential proxy for a genderqueer identity—has been identified as a risk for multiple forms of victimization, including bullying, IPV, and childhood abuse (Dank et al., 2013; D’Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006; Roberts et al., 2012; Roberts et al., 2013; Toomey et al., 2014).

Not only is there a dearth of research on victimization with sexual and gender minority adolescents, the research that does exist has been siloed by victimization type (i.e., bullying only vs. IPV only), making it impossible to determine their polyvictimization status. This constitutes a significant gap requiring future research to simultaneously assesses victimization experiences across multiple domains relevant to childhood and adolescence: property victimization, bias and non-bias-motivated forms of physical assault, child maltreatment, sexual victimization, IPV, school-based bullying, cyberbullying, and indirect/witnessed forms of victimization (Finkelhor et al., 2011; Swearer & Doll, 2001). As described by Finkelhor (2008), polyvictimization research helps address the problems created by studying single forms of violence as if they occur in isolation to one another by (a) identifying the scope, seriousness, and complexity of victimization experiences, (b) promoting the development of integrative theoretical explanations, and (c) advancing better prevention policies and interventions.

In addition to the identification of polyvictimization rates, important gaps exist regarding the social ecological correlates of this phenomenon (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1998). Past victimization and polyvictimization research with the sexual minority, gender minority, and general adolescent population suggest several risk and protective factors to investigate across the social ecology. At the individual-level, research is required that examines the influence of sexual orientation, gender identity, race/ethnicity, gender-role nonconformity, and mental health problems on polyvictimization rates. In relation to sexual orientation, bisexual and questioning adolescents appear to experience higher rates of bullying victimization in comparison to their gay and lesbian counterparts (Birkett et al., 2009; O’Malley Olsen, Kann, Vivolo-Kantor, Kinchen, & McManus, 2014). Moreover, transgender adolescents appear at greater risk for homophobic victimization in comparison to cisgender sexual minority peers (Birkett et al., 2015). Although differences in victimization by race/ethnicity remains largely unexplored with sexual and gender minorities, Doll et al. (1992) found 50% of gay and bisexual Black and Latino men reported childhood sexual abuse compared to 32% of White gay and bisexual men. Gender-role nonconformity, in addition, is an empirically-identified risk factor, with gender role non-conforming adolescents reporting higher rates of peer victimization in comparison to their more gender-role conforming peers (D’Augelli et al., 2006; Pauletti et al., 2014; Roberts et al., 2013; Toomey et al., 2014, 2012, 2013; Wilson et al., 2005). Although mental health problems have been primarily examined as consequences of victimization for sexual and gender minority adolescents, research with the general adolescent population have identified mental health problems as risk factors for peer victimization, sexual victimization, and child maltreatment (Turner et al., 2006).
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