



# Polyvictimization among a juvenile Portuguese sample



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## Introduction

Some adolescents experience more than one type of abuse [1] that can occur under different incidents during childhood and/or juvenile development [2].

Polyvictimization can be defined as the involvement in four or more types of violence experience, including childhood neglect, psychological, physical or sexual abuse and witnessing violence [3]. Polyvictimization was originally studied in the United States [2] and later in Europe [4,5] and other countries [6].

The polyvictimization experience over the last year strongly predicts trauma symptoms [7] and the propensity to endorse suicidal behavior [8]. Polyvictimization is also associated with the decrease of personal and social resources, specifically with less family and friend social support [9].

The **objectives** of the current study were to analyze the prevalence of the polyvictimization in the last year in a sample of Portuguese youth, to compare differences in polyvictimization between age and gender groups and to compare the occurrence of different types of victimization among boys and girls.

## Method

### Participants

- The sample was composed of 849 participants with aged between 12 and 17 years old ( $M=13.70$ ;  $SD=1.43$ ).
- Inclusion criteria:
  - Portuguese nationality;
  - Absence of physical or a cognitive impairment (both were signaled by the children's teacher) that could compromise the participation in the study.

### Procedure

- The study design was descriptive, observational and cross-sectional, with a non-probabilistic and convenience sample.
- Data was collected in high schools from several regions of Portugal.
- The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki [10] and was approved by the Institutional Review Board and the Ethics Committee.

### Material

- Participants answered a sociodemographic questionnaire and the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ) [2].
- The JVQ is composed by 34 items grouped into five modules:
  - Conventional Crimes;
  - Child Maltreatment;
  - Peer and Sibling Victimization;
  - Sexual Victimization;
  - Witnessing and Indirect Victimization.

## Results

Over the last year, 67% ( $n = 388$ ) of the participants experienced at least one type of victimization. The results showed differences in polyvictimization concerning age groups and not between gender. The difference between the group 12-14 years old and the group 15-17 years old was significant [ $\chi^2(3, n = 849) = 8.793, p = .032$ ], and dependent on polyvictimization.

### Differences between groups regarding polyvictimization

Boys showed higher probability of occurrence of assault without weapon ( $OR = .430; p < .01$ ; boys = 20.8%, girls = 14.2%), attempted assault ( $OR = .540; p < .01$ ; boys = 18.5%; girls = 10.9%), nonsexual genital assault ( $OR = .241; p < .001$ ; boys = 15.9%; girls = 4.4%), and burglary of family household ( $OR = .407; p < .05$ ; boys = 6.2%, girls = 2.6%).

Girls presented a higher probability of occurrence of psychological/emotional abuse ( $OR = 1.672; p < .01$ ; boys = 17.9%; girls = 26.8%).

### Conventional Crimes:

- Assault without a weapon was the most prevalent form of Conventional Crimes (17%).

### Child Maltreatment:

- Psychological or emotional abuse was reported by 22,7% of the adolescents.

### Peer and sibling victimization:

- Some type of peer and sibling victimization was reported by all youth, however, the emotional bullying was the most prevalent form of peer and sibling victimization (23.1%) and dating violence (3.5%) and the gang or group assault (3,9%) were the less common types of violence.

### Sexual victimization:

- All types of sexual victimization were reported, but with lower percentages of occurrence in this module comparing with the other modules of the JVQ. Verbal and sexual harassment (9.2%) was the most frequent type of victimization in the overall sample.

### Witnessing and indirect victimization:

- This module was the one that obtained higher percentages of occurrence of each form of victimization. Thus, Witness to assault without weapon (36.7%) and Witness to assault with weapon (26.4%) were mostly reported.

## Discussion and Conclusions

This research describes a preliminary approach to the polyvictimization in a Portuguese sample of youth. Polyvictimization in youth increases the internalizing and externalizing problems, psychopathology and the prevalence of suicide [11].

The JVQ proved to be a good measure to identify several types of victimization and to compare groups, concerning the age and gender of the participants. Our results are in line with some recent researches [e.g., 4,5].

Our study provides an important contribution to the evidence of multiple types of victimization in Portuguese juvenile. More attention needs to be paid to the polyvictimization and to its impact on children and adolescents. Our findings support the need to identify youth who have experienced polyvictimization to intervention programs among them.

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