



## Researchers Identify Widespread "Poly-Victim" Syndrome Among Children

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DURHAM, N.H. -- Researchers at the University of New Hampshire's Crimes against Children Research Center say that a third of all victimized children suffer from what they term "poly-victimization," experiencing four or more different kinds of victimization and abuse over the course of a single year.

That means children identified as victims of sexual assault by a peer or physical abuse by a caregiver are frequently encountering many other kinds of victimization from other assailants around the same time, according to the new study. Yet parents, counselors, and even child welfare officials trying to help such youth may not be aware of this.

The report on this problem, "Poly-victimization: A neglected component in child victimization," is based on a national sample of 2,030 children ages 2-17, and was published this week in the journal *Child Abuse and Neglect*.

Poly-victims are more likely to be boys and older children, to live in large cities and to experience other adversities like serious illnesses, accidents and family problems. A large majority of all children with certain kinds of victimizations, like sex assault, physical abuse, dating violence, and bias crimes, are poly-victims. Among children who were raped in the last year, for example, 92 percent are poly-victims.

"The child protection field is much too fragmented," says David Finkelhor, professor of sociology at UNH and lead author of the study. "We find out a child has been neglected or bullied by a peer, and that's all we focus on. But many of these kids are being victimized in multiple ways, and we often fail to notice and respond to the whole problem."

The study found that it was primarily "poly-victimization" and not single victimizations alone that were associated with children's mental health problems. Among the children in the study with clinical levels of depressive symptoms, 86 percent were poly-victims. When a child who was not a poly-victim experienced a single kind of victimization, it was typically associated with many fewer mental health symptoms.

"We should really be trying to locate and help these poly-victims," Finkelhor says. "That means when we identify a child with one problem, like sexual abuse or dating violence, we should immediately assess that child for the full spectrum of possible victimizations." He and other researchers at the Crimes against Children Research Center have developed a questionnaire to conduct such assessments.

In an editorial accompanying the article, John Leventhal, professor of pediatrics at Yale University, and former editor of the journal, called the article "important," saying it added to a

growing literature on the "co-occurrence of certain kinds of violence and ... the saliency of cumulative risk."