

## How to Assess Poly-victimization in Your Work: Approaches & Tools

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Poly-victimization refers to experiencing multiple different *types* of victimization, such as physical abuse by a caregiver, bullying at school, and witnessing an assault in one's neighborhood. The children with the highest number of exposures are considered poly-victims (over 7 exposures in the last year in our research). Poly-victimization has been found to be the strongest predictor of psychological symptoms in multiple national studies.<sup>1,2</sup> Contrary to many people's beliefs, it seems to matter less which type of victimization a child experiences (maltreatment versus bullying, for example) in comparison to how many different types of abuse he or she has sustained. This insight calls for a new framework and a new approach for working with victimized children, one that is more child-centered and holistic and less focused on particular types of violence. Everyone who deals with youth victimization in their work knows that sometimes it is hard to make a positive impact in the lives of endangered children. A child-centered and family-centered focus has the potential to improve efforts to increase the safety and well-being of all children.

Accurate assessment of the true burden of victimization is the first step. This document describes how assessing poly-victimization can improve your work and be integrated into your practice. It also describes the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ), a freely available and widely used tool for assessing poly-victimization (to access the JVQ, type "JVQ toolkit" into a search engine or go to [http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/jvq/index\\_new.html](http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/jvq/index_new.html)). See the White Paper

entitled “*Poly-victimization: Childhood Exposure to Multiple Forms of Victimization*” for more information about rates and consequences of poly-victimization.<sup>3</sup>

### **How to incorporate the assessment of poly-victimization into your work:**

There are at least four approaches to incorporating the assessment of poly-victimization into practice.

(1) The JVQ can enhance clinical assessments and screenings. The JVQ can be incorporated into intake assessments to obtain a more comprehensive and accurate picture of a child's victimization exposure. This can be accomplished in several ways. Of course, the full JVQ or one of its alternate forms can be administered, but this is just one possibility. If your assessment procedure already includes extensive coverage of maltreatment and sexual victimization, as it typically will in most Children’s Advocacy Centers (CAC) and child protection settings, then it is possible to just use the peer, crime, and/or witnessing modules to get a better sense of other exposures. Even in situations where comprehensive psychosocial assessments are not traditionally undertaken, such as health care or law enforcement settings, simple screening can offer a youth the opportunity to disclose. The burden of creating an opportunity to disclose safety issues should not be placed on children and adolescents. Using all or part of the JVQ as a routine part of assessment can create this needed opportunity for children and adolescents. The JVQ can appropriately be used at intake or as part of an ongoing check-in to stay apprised of current safety issues for children in ongoing treatment.

(2) Poly-victimization can also enhance needs assessment. Needs assessments are designed, as the name suggests, to document service priorities in a community or sometimes for a special population, such as children in foster care. In the current financial climate, making a strong case for services is especially important. Broadening assessment by adding a measure of

poly-victimization such as the JVQ can help document the true burden of victimization in a community and so make the strongest case possible for child-friendly funding and policy proposals. Needs assessments are conducted in many settings, such as schools, hospitals, clinics, and the broader community. Local data can strengthen grant proposals and help track trends in a community. All or part of the JVQ can easily be incorporated into a needs assessment survey.

(3) Poly-victimization can be a key component of program evaluation. Measures of poly-victimization can increase the scope of outcome measures and can help track program effects that may be overlooked. For example, O'Farrell and colleagues developed a program for alcoholic men and their partners. They had the idea of adding measures of domestic violence, even though intervening for violence was not their original goal, and found that their program also reduced rates of domestic violence for participants. Broadening outcome measures maximizes the chances of finding and documenting all of the effects of a program, and this is especially true in the CAC world. What is more, we also know that interventions and programs often work differently for different client populations. Assessing poly-victimization allows for examination of how aspects of programs may work particularly well for a specific group of clients. A broader focus can also provide information about how to improve programs by targeting services of greatest need.

(4) Finally, poly-victimization assessment can advance existing basic research on maltreatment and other forms of victimization. We need to know much more about how maltreatment fits into the broader web of violence than we currently do.<sup>4</sup> We know that practitioner-researcher collaborations are a key part of how this work will get done.

## Assessing Poly-victimization

There are numerous measures available that can be used to assess poly-victimization. We describe a few of these below. It is important to distinguish between the *symptoms* that might follow exposure to victimization or other adverse events and the *adverse events* themselves. The measures described below all assess exposure to victimization, sometimes along with exposure to other adverse events.

### Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ)

The Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ) is the instrument used in the national Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence (NatSCEV), which is the nation's primary surveillance mechanism for youth victimization and the largest nationally representative dataset on youth victimization. The JVQ is the most comprehensive measure of youth victimization and has national norms available. We recommend a victimization-focused tool such as this one as helpful in addressing possible ongoing safety issues.

#### *Features of the JVQ, Reliability and Validity*

The Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ) underwent a very extensive development process, including review by more than 15 violence researchers, nine focus groups with parents and teens, 24 in-depth narrative interviews with clients of a child abuse treatment agency (the high risk sample ensured we could get detailed reports for a wide range of victimizations), and, to date, three nationally representative studies that can be used for norms. Careful word-by-word attention was given to every item to make sure each item expressed each type of victimization in simple, straightforward language that can be understood by as many youth and parents as possible. For example, we avoided irregular past tense of verbs such as "stolen" and carefully worded all items so that they use present-tense base verbs such as "steal." We included

thresholds to make sure that joking around and horseplay were less likely to be included. After focus groups with Head Start teachers and others, we adopted "private parts" as a nearly universally known phrase for genitalia that avoids slang and medical terms that some youth may not know.

In our nationally representative sample, we conducted a test-retest reliability study and assessed construct validity by examining the associations with trauma symptoms. Information from these studies showed the people answer questions on the JVQ consistently over time and there are strong relationships between affirmative answers to JVQ questions and higher levels of a variety of types of trauma symptoms.<sup>5</sup> We recommend the first National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence (NatSCEV) for national norms.<sup>2</sup> The following forms are available:

- ◆ Full JVQ interview. This has all of the "screeners" and all of the follow-up questions. Screeners are the basic questions asking about whether victimization has occurred. For example, the robbery screener reads, "At any time in your life, did anyone use force to take something away from you that you were carrying or wearing?" There are 34 core screeners and more than 20 possible supplemental screeners. The full interview also has all of the follow-up items. Follow-up items collect additional details about any reported incidents, such as who the perpetrator was and whether the child was injured. Altogether, there are approximately 50 different follow-ups. Different ones are asked depending on the nature of the incident (for example, the injury question is not asked for verbal abuse). The full interview takes 30 to 40 minutes, depending on the number of victimizations that are endorsed.

The full interview is the gold standard and the version that is used in our nationally representative research. The full JVQ provides the most comprehensive and detailed information, but it is challenging to administer without a computer because of the skip and

branching patterns in the follow-up. The full JVQ also includes incidents that are fairly rare in the general population, such as kidnapping, and may not be necessary for every purpose.

◆ Abbreviated JVQ interview. The abbreviated interview retains the 34 core screeners and some key follow-up questions, such as perpetrator identity, but simplifies the interview so that it can be administered without a computer and in a shorter time period, usually under 20 minutes.

◆  Screener sum version. We recommend the screener sum version for a brief yet comprehensive tool that can even be given as a self-administered paper and pencil questionnaire. The screener sum version omits all of the follow-up items and just obtains a count of victimization types that a child has experienced. This can be administered in 10 to 15 minutes, even when some of the supplemental items are included. Despite obtaining less information, the results correlate well with the information from the full interview.<sup>4</sup> In many clinical settings where a "yes" answer might be followed up by a clinician anyway, the follow-ups may not be necessary for preliminary screening.

◆ Reduced item version. There is an even shorter, 12-item reduced item version that can be administered in about 5 minutes. However, we recommend the screener sum version over this one whenever possible.

All of these forms are available for free on the JVQ Toolkit website, (<http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/jvq/>).

### **Administration and Scoring**

The administration of the JVQ is fairly straightforward and can be accomplished by paraprofessionals who have some familiarity with basic clinical assessment principles and with the JVQ items. As noted above, it can even be completed as a self-administered questionnaire

using either a paper-and-pencil format or a computer. Clinical follow-up of answers should be done by an appropriately trained and licensed professional. As with all questionnaires involving sensitive items, it is important that it be administered in a safe and private environment. That is more essential than who administers the questionnaire. There are numerous scoring choices. Please consult the website or publications for details on these. A simple sum across the entire questionnaire is what is used to assess poly-victimization. The current standard of seven different victimization types in a one-year period is used to indicate poly-victimization.

### **Other Tools That Assess Multiple Forms of Youth Victimization**

The *North Shore Trauma History Checklist*<sup>6</sup> is a 29-item semi-structured interview that is one of the most widely used tools in CAC's.<sup>7</sup> It covers a wide range of potentially traumatic events, including not only victimization but also natural disasters and homelessness. Developed for clinical use, it measures several different forms of victimization and is similar to other tools in the field but has limited psychometric data available on it. The *Childhood Experiences of Violence Questionnaire*<sup>8</sup> is designed for adolescents and includes 12-items with good psychometric properties. It covers some family and community violence types. Other measures, such as the *Adverse Childhood Experiences Scale*<sup>9</sup> also assess multiple types of victimization but are primarily designed for adult retrospective reports.

### **Conclusion**

Ensuring the safety and well-being of children is the primary mission of Children's Advocacy Centers and all of the organizations and multidisciplinary professionals that are part of the CAC. Incorporating poly-victimization assessment into the work of CAC's will help us identify the true burden of victimization. There are many available tools that can improve the assessment of youth victimization. As mentioned above, even a single broad screen will help to

more accurately document, and likely increase the reported number of children who are victimized in multiple settings. The comprehensive assessment of youth victimization offers the hope of more child-centered, holistic and effective services that will better ensure the safety of all children. Tools such as the JVQ also offer the chance to better document the important scope and impact of the work we do.

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