

# Psychology of Violence

## **Polyvictimization in a Child Welfare Sample of Children and Youths**

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# Polyvictimization in a Child Welfare Sample of Children and Youths

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**Objective:** To document extrafamily victimization, exposure to community violence and polyvictimization in a child welfare sample of children and youths. **Method:** Telephone interviews were conducted among 138 adolescents aged 12 to 17 years and 82 caregivers of children aged 2 to 11 years followed by child welfare agencies in Quebec to document the victimization experienced by children during the past year. **Results:** The vast majority (90%) of young people were the target of direct or indirect past-year victimizations, with the majority of these victims (93%) being the target of more than one form of victimization. More than half of the sample (54%) experienced at least four forms of victimization in the past year. **Conclusions:** This first study documenting polyvictimization in a child welfare sample outlines that practitioners should inquire about a wide range of victimization experiences. Focusing intervention on a single form of victimization (maltreatment) does not address the specific service needs of children chronically victimized and fails to address their high risk of victimization in the community. Further research is needed to understand the mechanisms linked to the increased victimization risk among maltreated children in order to develop effective intervention and prevention programs.

**Keywords:** child victimization, polyvictimization, co-occurrence, maltreatment, child welfare

The fact that maltreated children and youths are commonly victims of co-occurring forms of abuse and neglect is well documented (Briere & Runtz, 1990; Goddard & Bedi, 2010; Higgins

& McCabe, 2001; Kinard, 1998; Trickett & McBride-Chang, 1995). In Canada, data from child welfare agencies estimates that in 2003, 19,787 enquiries (19% of enquiries) in-

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cluded more than one category of substantiated maltreatment, and these enquiries perhaps underestimate the actual occurrence of multiple maltreatment because the investigating workers who completed the survey were likely unaccustomed to classifying cases under more than one form (Trocmé et al., 2005). In Quebec (predominantly French-speaking province of Canada), data are available from representative samples of parents reporting family violence toward their children (Clément, Chamberland, Côté, Dubeau, & Beauvais, 2005). Data obtained in 2004 show that nearly 40% of children had experienced more than one form of violence (psychological abuse, minor physical violence, and severe physical violence) in the same year (Clément et al., 2005).

### **School and Community Victimization of Maltreated Children**

Although concerning, such data do not inform us about victimization experienced by these maltreated children in the community. Even if positive associations between violence exposures across school, home, and neighborhood contexts have been found (Mrug, Loosier, & Windle, 2008), little research has simultaneously addressed a wide range of extrafamilial victimizations experienced by maltreated children, such as property crimes, peer victimization, and exposure to community violence. It is possible that some forms of victimization create a context of vulnerability to other forms of victimization: for example, abused children are at greater risk of peer assault at school (Perry, Hodges, & Egan, 2001), and a recent research conducted in Ontario indicates that youths (12–19 years old) involved with child welfare services have an increased risk for being bullied in high school (Mohapatra et al., 2010). Clearly, existing research indicates connections between intrafamily and extrafamily victimization (Baldry, 2003; Duncan, 1999; Perry et al., 2001; Shields & Cicchetti, 2001); in fact, it is common for children and youths to have been victims of several types of violence on multiple occasions and in different contexts (Green et al., 2000; Finkelhor, Hamby, Ormrod, & Turner, 2005; Menard & Huizinga, 2001; Saunders, 2003). Although extrafamilial violence does not fall under the mandate of child welfare legislation, it has been associated with psychological dis-

tress and psychopathology (Finkelhor, Turner, & Ormrod, 2006; Fowler, Tompsett, Braciszewski, Baltes, & Jacques-Tiura, 2009; Horowitz, McKay, & Marshall, 2005). Furthermore, some studies have found that community violence exposure predicts negative psychological outcomes independent of family violence exposure (Garrido, Culhane, Raviv, & Taussig, 2010; Linares et al., 2001; Malik, 2008). This suggests that some coordinated effort may be required to assist child welfare children in different contexts (i.e., schools, community based services, and increased parental support).

### **Polyvictimization of Children**

The term “polyvictimization” was proposed by David Finkelhor to refer to young people who suffer from a large number of different types of victimization involving separate episodes (Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007a). To measure the extent of the phenomenon, Hamby and Finkelhor (2004) developed a questionnaire on child victimization, the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ), which was administered two times in the general U.S. population (Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005; Finkelhor et al., 2007a; Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2009; Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Holt, 2009).

Analyzing the risk factors associated with the onset of polyvictimization, Finkelhor and colleagues (2007b) conclude that: “Living in a dangerous family, in which children witnessed or experienced violence, seemed to predict a debut into poly victimization” (p. 493). We should therefore expect that a high proportion of maltreated and abused children might be polyvictims. Polyvictimized children and youths are more likely to present distress and other psychological symptoms (Finkelhor et al., 2007c; Harrison, Fulkerson, & Beebe, 1997; Ryan, Kilmer, Cauce, Watanabe, & Hoyt, 2000), and the experience of polyvictimizations is a risk factor associated with the maintenance of a polyvictim status 1 year later (Finkelhor et al., 2007b). This suggests that many maltreated children may be chronically polyvictimized and should be identified in order to develop adequate interventions.

The current study wants to extend research on multiple victimization by documenting simultaneously different types of victimizations in a

sample of child welfare children. To our knowledge, this is the first study documenting polyvictimization of children in Quebec. It is also the first study using the JVQ among a child welfare sample and documenting a wide range of extrafamily victimizations among substantiated cases of abused and maltreated children. Identification of polyvictims among children followed by child welfare agencies appears essential to develop effective interventions to address the multiple problems faced by chronically polyvictimized children and their families.

## Methodology

### Participants

The final sample includes 220 children aged 2 to 17 years comprising approximately the same number of girls and boys. At the time of the interviews, the majority of children were living with their mothers (30%), in foster homes (22%), or in reception centers (20%). Only 11% lived with two parents, a minority (6%) lived with their father, and the remainder lived alone or with a relative (grandparent, aunt, adult sibling). Family income was available for only 80% of the sample (missing data). The majority (60%) of young people for whom it was possible to collect information had an annual household income (before tax) under \$20,000, whereas less than 10% had an annual household income exceeding \$55,000. The sample is largely composed of participants living in difficult financial situations, given that the average income of a single-parent family headed by a woman in Quebec was \$39,347 in 2007 (Institut de la statistique du Québec, 2009). The majority of respondents (70%) were Caucasian, whereas 14% were black, 4% were Latino, and 4% were First Nations. The other participants were of various origins (Chinese, Arabic, Japanese, and mixed).

### Recruitment Procedure

In Canada, child welfare legislation and services are organized at the provincial and territorial levels. In Quebec, child welfare services are legislated to investigate allegations of abuse or neglect (for abandonment, neglect, psychological, physical or sexual abuse, or serious behavioral problems) of children under 18 years

of age. The current sample was recruited among children (2–17 years old) whose safety and development are deemed compromised under the Youth Protection Act and are thus receiving child welfare services in Quebec. The sample selection was carried out in several stages among three Quebec youth centers covering two major urban areas of the province (Montreal and Quebec City). Two centers randomly selected a list of 300 young people between 2 and 17 years of age from active case management files (i.e., cases in which the allegations of abuse or neglect were substantiated) in their computer systems. Because one center had 1,623 active cases and the other 3,619, these lists correspond to 18% and 9%, respectively, of all the active case management files. The only criteria used for the random selection was the age: among the 300 cases selected, half were aged 2–11 years old and half were 12–17 years old, in order to ensure that all age groups be covered by the study. For the third center, all the active case management files of children between 2 and 17 years old were included given that they only had 439 active management files (excluding children under 2 years old). In all sites, case workers could exclude certain selected subjects for clinical reasons if they felt that questioning their clients about their past-year victimization experiences was contraindicated. Furthermore, in all cases, the consent of parents and adolescents aged 12 to 17 was obtained by a case worker before any contact information could be forwarded to the research team. Once consent was obtained, a telephone interview was conducted with the participants at the time of their choice. Sociodemographic data were obtained by briefly interviewing the parent where possible. Participants were asked to conduct the interview in a room where they could not be heard by a third person and were advised that the interviewer would contact the case worker if any disclosed information indicated that the child's development or security was threatened. Respondents received a \$20 gift certificate for the purchase of books or music to thank them for their participation. The procedure was approved by the three ethics boards of each youth center involved as well as by the ethics board of the University of Montreal prior to the data collection.

It should be noted that two different recruitment procedures were used and tested in this

study. In the two centers in Montreal, the cases workers responsible for the selected files excluded or contacted their eligible clients themselves. The list of selected clients in Montreal was monitored by a member of the research team. In the Quebec City center, a worker was mandated to monitor the list of selected participants, to look into their files and assess which should be excluded for clinical reasons, and to contact the eligible participant in order to get their consent. Given the different recruiting processes, the details about nonparticipation are only available for the two centers in Montreal where a research team member was responsible for monitoring the reason for nonparticipation from the two lists provided. From the initial 739 participants selected (300 in one center and 439 in the other), 11% were excluded because of an error in the selection process (case has just been closed or was transferred to another center because the family moved to another territory, case open for adoption or for courtesy services and was not an active management file), 15% were excluded by the workers responsible for clinical reasons (risk of suicide, recently experienced severe victimization, risk of family crisis or conflict); 9% were excluded because parental consent could not be obtained (parent suffers from mental illness or developmental delay, currently hospitalized, imprisoned, or impossible to reach), and 3% were excluded because the interview could not be conducted (eligible participant did not speak French or English or did not have access to a phone for the interview). From the initial list of 739 potential participants, 324 (44%) remained eligible to take part in the study. Parents refused that the case worker provide the research team with their contact information in 26% of the cases, whereas in 18% of the cases, the selected teenager refused to be contacted by the research team. In all, 56% of the eligible participants from Montreal agreed to complete the interview. Unfortunately, the mandated worker in the Quebec City center did not provide the research team with details regarding the reasons for nonparticipation (how many were excluded for clinical reason or selection problem, how many parents and youth refused, etc.). Only 37 interviews (11 with caregivers of children between 2 and 11 years old, the others with teenagers aged between 12 and 17 years old) were completed among the 300 eligible participants.

A comparison of the samples across sites revealed some differences. As expected, the sample recruited in Quebec City was largely Caucasian (97%; 64% for Montreal). The Quebec City sample comprised more girls (62%; 49% for Montreal) and fewer children between 2 and 6 years old (11%; 22% for Montreal). The majority of children from the Quebec City sample were living in a foster family (38%; 19% for Montreal), whereas 22% (as opposed to 31% in Montreal) were living with their mother only. This may partly explain why more families in Quebec City reported a familial income of \$55,000 or more (15%; 9% for Montreal). The recruitment process in Quebec City affected the response rate (12%), possibly because the eligible participants were not contacted by their own case worker. It is also possible that more potential subjects were excluded for clinical reasons because the mandated worker was judging by reading files and did not actually work or provide services to the selected clients; this may also explain why more children living in foster care took part in the study in Quebec City because they had less chances to be excluded for clinical concerns. However, it is impossible to confirm these hypotheses because we do not know how many clients were excluded and contacted by the mandated worker. Even if the response rate is somewhat deceiving, recruitment of child welfare samples is a complex process, and we were nonetheless able to obtain a good sample of child welfare clients. The response rates obtained with the different recruitment processes indicate that the exclusions and contacts with potential subjects should be done by the case workers involved with the clients to encourage their participation.

The survey was conducted between March 2007 and December 2008. The JVQ questionnaire was administered by telephone interviews, which was the same procedure used in the U.S. studies. For children aged 2 to 11 years, the interview was conducted with the caregiver most familiar with the child's daily routine and experiences. For adolescents aged 12 to 17 years, the interview was conducted directly with them. Both versions of the interview were completed in 20 to 30 min, including demographic variables. Telephone surveys involving sensitive topics have led to results that are comparable (Bajos, Spira, Ducot, & Messiah, 1992; Bermack, 1989) or superior (Reddy et al., 2006;

Rosenbaum, Rabenhorst, Reddy, Fleming, & Howells, 2006) to in-person interviews and have also been used for various extent surveys, such as the Canadian Victimization Survey (Gannon & Mihorean, 2005) or surveys on family violence toward children in Quebec (Clément et al., 2005). In addition, telephone interviews are able to reach a maximum of participants at a minimum of cost (Weeks, Kulka, Lessler, & Whitmore, 1983) and cause little inconvenience to participants. The interviews were conducted by graduate students with clinical experience in working with child victims.

### Measures

The JVQ (Hamby & Finkelhor, 2004) was translated by the method proposed by Vallerand (1989), which involves a parallel reverse translation (four translators) to maximize the quality of translation and to ensure the validity and reliability of the translated tool. The adolescent version of the JVQ describes 34 forms of victimization with or without violence and directly or indirectly experienced by the adolescent in the past year. The instrument provides information regarding eight forms of conventional crime (such as theft, vandalism, and assault), four forms of maltreatment (neglect, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and family abduction), six forms of peer and sibling victimization (including bullying, assault, and dating violence), seven forms of sexual victimization (including rape, exhibitionism, sexual harassment, and statutory rape), and nine forms of exposure to violence (such as exposure to war and ethnic conflict, to domestic violence, to violence in the community, to burglary of the family household, etc.). The questionnaire takes into account the frequency of exposure, the number of abusers, and their relationship with the young person and the presence and severity of injuries for each victimization experienced. The parent version of the instrument is the same but describes only 32 forms of victimization (dating violence and statutory rape being inapplicable). For children less than 12 years of age, the interview was conducted with the caregiver most familiar with the child's daily routine, and experiences since focus groups conducted with children between 10 and 12 years old indicated that children under 12 years old were not always able to understand the implications of an informed con-

sent. The French version of the questionnaire was conducted among 126 French-speaking participants, whereas the original English questionnaire was conducted among 94 English-speaking participants. Demographic data collected included age and gender of the child, presence of other children in the family household and their age, and gender, ethnic origin of the children and their parents, and family structure. In addition, categories of family income, educational attainment, and age of the parents were collected, as were subjective evaluations of the child's school performance.

### Method of Analysis

The prevalence of various forms of victimization and their frequency were first examined. Chi-square tests were performed to identify significant differences in gender, age, and relationship of the abuser to the child. Given that the source data differed according to the age of the child (parents for children under 12; self for adolescents), comparisons by age were made between preschool children (2–5 years) and children aged 6–11 years, and between adolescents aged 12–14 years and adolescents aged 15–17 years.

Second, a measure of the total number of different forms of victimizations experienced in the past year was created in order to identify more highly victimized youth. In accordance with the work done by Finkelhor and his colleagues on polyvictimization, a measure of polyvictimization was created using the number of different types of victimizations experienced in separate events. Repeat victimization of the same type was not counted as polyvictimization. Similarly, only victimizations experienced in separate events were considered so as not to overestimate the number of victimizations experienced. For example, an incident in which a youth was assaulted and robbed was considered a single victimization, although the episode corresponds to both a form of assault and a form of property crime. This measure, which was first used by Finkelhor and colleagues, allows determining the average number of victimizations experienced by age and identifying the most highly victimized youth, or polyvictims.

**Results**

**Property Victimization**

Table 1 shows that the majority (62%) of young people in the sample were victims of property crime, mostly (43%) in the form of theft (without violence), experienced on several occasions by more than half of the victims (52%) and significantly more prevalent among adolescents aged 15 to 17 years (56%). Robbery, which involves the use of force or threat to take possession of property, was experienced by nearly 8% of the sample, with the offender known (59%) or unknown (41%) by the youth. Despite the lower prevalence of this phenomenon, it remains a concern due to its severity and chronicity, with 53% of victims subjected to more than one robbery during the year.

**Assault and Bullying**

The prevalence of various forms of assault including bullying is shown in Table 2. Slightly less than three quarters (71%) of youth in care were assaulted during the year. Among them, 48% (34% of the total sample) sustained injuries from the assault, including persistent pain, bruises, cuts, sprains, and fractures. Boys are generally more likely than girls to be the target of assault, but the difference is statistically significant only for assault without a weapon. Regarding differences by age, there is a significant increase in gang or group assault and bullying in the 7–11-year-old group compared to younger children, whereas for adolescents, there was significantly more assault with weapon and significantly less sibling assault in the older group (15–17 years).

**Sexual Victimization**

One in five youth (21%) experienced sexual victimization in the past year, a phenomenon affecting significantly more girls than boys (see Table 3). The most common form was verbal sexual harassment (11%), committed mostly by people known to the youth (91%). Nearly one in 10 (9%), mostly older teens (15–17 years) (79%), experienced a form of sexual assault in the past year. In cases of rape or attempted rape, the perpetrator was mostly a friend or acquaintance (92%) but was also occasionally a family member (8%). The majority of the rape victims

Table 1  
*Property Victimations*

Victimization	n (220)	%	Victim gender (%)		Victim age (%)					Frequency of occurrence (%) <sup>a</sup>				Perpetrator relationship to victim <sup>b</sup> (%)			
			M	F	2–5	6–11	12–14	15–17	1	2–5	6–10	11–49	50+	D/K	Family	Friend/acquaintance	Stranger
Any property victimization <sup>c</sup>	137	62	47	53	12	15 <sup>d</sup>	29	44	38	39	9	8	5	1	37	60	6
Robbery	17	8	41	59	—	6	35	59	47	47	6	—	—	—	—	58.8	41
Theft	95	43	40	60 <sup>d</sup>	2	13 <sup>d</sup>	29	56 <sup>d</sup>	46	36	7	6	3	2	23	61	3
Vandalism	66	30	51	49	14	23	26	38	46	41	5	1	6	1	59	41	—

Note. NA = not applicable; DK = don't know.

<sup>a</sup> Percentage of youth who experienced different episodes during the past year. <sup>b</sup> Percentages based on victims with described perpetrators and may sum to more than 100% because some victimizations had multiple perpetrators who fit in more than one category. <sup>c</sup> Any property victimization includes all the victimization type. <sup>d</sup> Value is significantly different from previous column at  $p < .05$ . ( $\chi^2$  tests).

Table 2  
Assault and Bullying

Victimization	n (220)	%	Victim gender (%)		Victim age (%)					Frequency of occurrence (%) <sup>a</sup>				Perpetrator relationship to victim (%) <sup>b</sup>			
			M	F	2-5	6-11	12-14	15-17	1	2-10	11-20	21-96	97+	D/K	Family	Friend/acquaintance	Stranger
Any physical assault <sup>c</sup>	157	71	52	48	14	20	29	38	11	50	16	15	7	1	56	79	19
Assault with weapon	25	11	60	40	4	24	16	56 <sup>d</sup>	48	40	8	—	—	4	24	60	16
Assault without weapon	94	43	57	43 <sup>d</sup>	11	22	25	43	27	61	7	4	—	—	19	73	7
Attempted assault	52	24	46	54	12	13	27	48	61	29	8	—	—	2	23	64	14
Kidnap, attempted/completed <sup>e</sup>	4	2	2	2	—	—	3	1	3	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	4
Bias attack	19	9	53	47	—	16	26	58	42	42	6	5	—	5	—	58	42
Gang or group assault	24	17	62	38	—	17 <sup>d</sup>	25	58	50	50	—	—	—	—	NA	NA	NA
Assault by peer and siblings	105	48	53	47	19	23	31	28 <sup>d</sup>	18	55	12	6	9	—	65	35	—
Nonsexual genital assault	16	7	63	38	—	6	38	56	50	31	6	13	—	—	25	69	6
Bullying	33	15	36	64	15	24	28	33	33	55	6	3	—	3	49	49	3
Emotional bullying/teasing	75	34	44	66	7	27 <sup>d</sup>	30	36	18	45	9	13	11	4	9	85	3
Dating violence <sup>f</sup>	24	18	58	42	NA	NA	29	71	38	58	4	—	—	—	—	100	—

Note. NA = not applicable; D/K = don't know.

<sup>a</sup> Percentage of youth who experienced different episodes during the past year. <sup>b</sup> Percentages based on victims with described perpetrators and may sum to more than 100% because some victimizations had multiple perpetrators who fit in more than one category. <sup>c</sup> Total for any physical assault excludes bullying and emotional bullying and teasing. <sup>d</sup> Value is significantly different from previous column at  $p < .05$ . ( $\chi^2$  tests). <sup>e</sup> Percentages not provided and differences not explored due to low prevalence ( $n = 4$ ). <sup>f</sup> Percentage based on adolescents (12-17 years old) only ( $n = 138$ ) because victimization is not applicable to children under 12 years old.



Table 3  
Sexual Victimization

Victimization	n (220)	Victim gender (%)		Victim age (%)							Frequency of occurrence (%) <sup>a</sup>				Perpetrator relationship to victim (%) <sup>b</sup>		
		%	M	F	2-5	6-11	12-14	15-17	1	2	3	4-10	11+	D/K	Family	Friend/acquaintance	Stranger
Any sexual victimization <sup>c</sup>	46	21	22	78 <sup>d</sup>	—	15 <sup>d</sup>	26	59 <sup>d</sup>	35	20	11	24	11	—	11	87	20
Any sexual assault <sup>e</sup>	19	9	26	74 <sup>d</sup>	—	10	11	79 <sup>d</sup>	42	26	16	11	—	5	16	90	37
Sexual assault, known adult <sup>f</sup>	3	1	—	3	—	—	—	3	2	1	—	—	—	—	—	3	—
Sexual assault, adult stranger <sup>f</sup>	4	2	—	4	—	—	—	4	4	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	4
Peer sexual assault <sup>f</sup>	7	3	2	5	—	2	—	5	4	1	1	—	—	1	1	4	2
Rape or attempted rape	12	5	25	75	—	—	17	83 <sup>d</sup>	58	25	17	—	—	—	8	92	—
Flashing or sexual exposure	18	8	28	72	—	28 <sup>d</sup>	17	55	61	11	—	22	6	—	22	50	33
Sexual harassment	23	10	17	83 <sup>d</sup>	—	9	30	61	31	35	4	13	13	4	9	91	4
Statutory sexual offence <sup>f,g</sup>	7	9	—	7	NA	NA	3	4	2	3	—	2	—	—	—	7	—

Note. NA = not applicable; D/K = don't know.

<sup>a</sup> Percentage of youth who experienced different episodes during the past year. <sup>b</sup> Percentages based on victims with described perpetrators and may sum to more than 100% because some victimizations had multiple perpetrators who fit in more than one category. <sup>c</sup> Any sexual victimization includes all the sexual victimization types. <sup>d</sup> Value is significantly different from previous column at  $p < .05$ . ( $\chi^2$  tests). <sup>e</sup> Sexual assault excludes statutory sexual offence, sexual harassment and flashing or sexual exposure. <sup>f</sup> Percentages not provided and differences not explored due to low prevalence ( $n = 7$ ). <sup>g</sup> Percentage based on adolescents (12-15 years old) only ( $n = 82$ ) because victimization screener was not asked to children under 12 years old and to teenagers over 15 years old.

experienced one episode in the past year, but 25% were raped on two occasions and 17% on three.

### Maltreatment

More than one third (39%) of the sample experienced maltreatment in the past year (see Table 4). However, these results should be interpreted with caution because it is unknown if the children in the sample were followed by child welfare services during the entire year included in this study. The most common form of maltreatment was psychological/emotional abuse (31%), followed by physical abuse (17%), both significantly more frequent among older adolescents. The maltreatment was especially chronic for victims of psychological/emotional abuse, with 76% experiencing more than one episode in the past year and 13% of these experiencing 21 or more episodes. Neglect was less frequent (6%) but was often experienced chronically (36% experiencing more than episode in the past year).

### Witnessing Violence and Indirect Victimization

Almost two thirds (66%) of the sample were exposed to violence, the most common forms being witness to assault without weapon (51%) or with weapon (25%), in which both the offender and the victim are rarely a family member. Past-year exposure to intrafamilial violence was experienced by 16% of the young people in the form of domestic violence (9%) or witness to physical abuse by a parent toward a sibling (7%). These forms of exposure are rather chronic because 47% of young people exposed to domestic violence witnessed more than one event, with the percentage increasing to 53% for witnessing physical abuse toward a sibling. A worrisome phenomenon is the murder of someone close for 10% of the youth. The majority of the murder victims were friends or acquaintances (77%) or family members (22%), whereas the offender was rarely someone known to the youth (4%). Even more worrisome is the finding that some youth were witness to murder, a rare and particularly serious crime. This was experienced by eight adolescents aged 15–17 in the past year, three of whom even

Table 4  
*Maltreatment*

	Victimization	n	Victim gender (%)		Victim age (%)							Frequency of occurrence (%) <sup>a</sup>					Perpetrator relationship to victim (%) <sup>b</sup>		
			%	M	F	2–5	6–11	12–14	15–17	1	2–5	6–10	11–20	21+	D/K	Family	Friend/acquaintance	Stranger	
																			2–5
Maltreatment <sup>c,d</sup>		86	39	47	54	19	14	17	50 <sup>e</sup>	24	33	13	9	19	2	88	12	NA	
Physical abuse <sup>d</sup>		37	17	51	49	11	22	16	51 <sup>e</sup>	46	33	5	3	8	5	78	11	NA	
Psychological or emotional abuse <sup>d</sup>		67	31	42	58	12	13	19	55 <sup>e</sup>	22	39	15	9	13	2	91	9	NA	
Neglect <sup>d</sup>		14	6	64	36	36	21	7	36	43	21	7	—	7	22	86	—	NA	
Custodial interference/family abduction <sup>d</sup>		11	5	64	36	46	18	—	36	64	27	—	—	9	—	91	—	NA	

*Note.* NA = not applicable; D/K = don't know.

<sup>a</sup> Percentage of youth who experienced different episodes during the past year. <sup>b</sup> Percentages based on victims with described perpetrators. <sup>c</sup> Maltreatment includes all types of maltreatment. <sup>d</sup> Percentages sum to less than 100% because some perpetrators identified did not fit in the categories (social worker, educator, etc.). <sup>e</sup> Value is significantly different from previous column at  $p < .05$ . ( $\chi^2$  tests).

witnessed three murders in that period. These youth, who are often associated with street gangs, are therefore exposed to (and possibly involved in) particularly severe and traumatic forms of violence. Youth in care are thus frequently exposed to violence without being directly targeted, and many are chronically exposed to violence, as illustrated in Table 5.

### **Polyvictimization**

The data show a high prevalence of victimization among children followed by child welfare agencies. Indeed, almost all (91%) of the youth were victimized in the past year, and the data show that multiple victimization is common: among these victims, 93% experienced at least one other form of victimization in a separate event. The picture is different according to age, because among children aged 2–5 years, 79% experienced at least one victimization in the past year, whereas 85% of children aged 6–11 years, and virtually all adolescents (92%), were victimized in the past year.

The first U.S. survey (Finkelhor et al., 2007a) identified polyvictimized youth as those having experienced an above average number (3) of different past-year victimizations, or 22% of the sample. The authors also distinguished between low polyvictimized youth (4–6 victimizations) and high polyvictimized youth (seven or more victimizations). Using the same scale in our child welfare sample, almost one third (29%) of the sample experienced 4–6 past-year victimizations (low polyvictimization), whereas a quarter (25%) experienced seven or more victimizations (high polyvictimization). In short, on this basis, more than half of the sample (54%) was composed of polyvictims experiencing at least four different forms of victimization in the past year.

By observing the relationships between the various categories of victimization, we note that the vast majority of youth experienced victimization in more than one category. Ninety-three percent of maltreated youth, 97% of assault victims or witnesses to assault, and 99% of property crime victims experienced another category of victimization. Note as well that all the children who experienced sexual victimization also experienced another category of victimization in the past year:

89% were also witnesses to assault, 87% were targets of assault, nearly 80% were victims of property crime, and nearly 60% were maltreated. Almost 40% of polyvictims older than 6 years were targets of sexual victimization, whereas more than half (51%) of polyvictims aged 15–17 years experienced this form of victimization.

### **Discussion**

Many children experienced a high number of victimizations in 1 year, and child welfare children in Quebec are particularly affected by polyvictimization. To our knowledge, this is the first study using the JVQ in Quebec and among a child welfare sample. The results reveal a significantly higher prevalence of polyvictimization among this group compared to the U.S. youth population. Our results show that polyvictimization increases with the age of the child, adolescents being the most affected. Although our sample consisted mainly of adolescents, the results are corroborated by studies with representative samples of the U.S. youth population (Finkelhor et al., 2007a, 2007b, 2007c; Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2009).

### **Risky Behavior and Polyvictimization**

A possible explanation resides in routine activity theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979), which suggests that proximity to crime, exposure to crime, target attractiveness, and lack of guardianship increase the likelihood of becoming a victim. As children get older, they are increasingly exposed to the public sphere (and to potential aggressors) and are less frequently accompanied by an adult (reduced guardianship and protection), which may increase their risk of victimization (Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Holt, 2009). Adolescents who run away or engage in other high-risk behaviors in their daily routines are exposed to dangerous places and people and in greater proximity to crime. The situation of child welfare youth is particularly worrisome in light of the high prevalence of particularly severe forms of victimization such as rape, exposure to shootings, witness to murder, and gang or group assault. Given the high prevalence of adolescents followed by Quebec child welfare agencies because of behavioral disorders, it would be important to explore the

Table 5  
Witnessing or Indirect Victimization

Victimization	n (220)	Victim gender (%)		Victim age (%)						Frequency of occurrence (%) <sup>a</sup>					Perpetrator relationship to victim (%) <sup>b</sup>		
		%	M	F	2-5	6-11	12-14	15-17	1	2-5	6-10	11-49	50+	DK	Family	Friend/acquaintance	Stranger
Any witness or indirect <sup>c</sup>	145	66	49	51	9	12	32	47	23	41	16	16	4	—	32	59	35
Witness domestic violence	19	9	47	53	37	32	11	21	52	26	16	—	5	—	100	NA	NA
Witness physical abuse <sup>d</sup>	17	8	41	59	23	—	12	65 <sup>e</sup>	47	24	23	6	—	—	94	NA	NA
Witness assault with weapon	54	25	43	57	4	—	24	72 <sup>e</sup>	33	39	17	7	—	4	9	54	44
Witness assault, no weapon	112	51	49	51	6	10	35	49 <sup>e</sup>	32	46	9	8	1	4	14	65	26
Burglary of family household	26	12	35	65	11	4	31	54	54	27	4	4	4	7	39	31	8
Someone close murdered	22	10	41	59	—	9	23	68	54	46	—	—	—	—	—	9	36
Witness murder <sup>f</sup>	8	4	2	6	—	—	—	8 <sup>e</sup>	62	38	—	—	—	—	—	1	7
Exposure to shooting, riots, etc.	32	15	38	62	6	—	25	69 <sup>e</sup>	50	34	13	—	3	—	NA	NA	NA

Note. NA = not applicable; DK = don't know.

<sup>a</sup> Percentage of youth who experienced different episodes during the past year. <sup>b</sup> Percentages based on victims with described perpetrators and may sum to more than 100% because some victimizations had multiple perpetrators who fit in more than one category. <sup>c</sup> Any witness or indirect includes all the victimization types. <sup>d</sup> Percentages sum to less than 100% because some perpetrators identified did not fit in the categories (social worker, educator, etc.). <sup>e</sup> Value is significantly different from previous column at  $p < .05$  ( $\chi^2$  tests). <sup>f</sup> Percentages not provided and differences not explored due to low prevalence ( $n = 8$ ).

link between the multiplicity of victimization experiences during adolescence and the presence of risky behavior. For many teenagers, there is reason to believe that involvement in gangs or delinquent activities explains, in part, their victimization (Lauritsen, Sampson, & Laub, 1991; Outlaw, Ruback, & Britt, 2002). The fact that victimization increases the risk of developing delinquent behavior, which, in turn, increases the risk of revictimization (criminogenic effect of victimization) has been supported by some studies (Cuevas, Finkelhor, Turner, & Ormrod, 2007; Widom, Schuck, & White, 2006). Because child maltreatment and poor parenting are associated with subsequent deviant behavior (Rebellon & Van Gundy, 2005; Stouthamer-Loeber, Wei, Homish, & Loeber, 2002), delinquency among the sample may partially explain the high prevalence of adolescent victimization. However, the reciprocal relationship between victimization and delinquency was not explored and should be considered in future studies among child welfare samples.

### **Looking at Children's Experiences as a Whole and Developing More Integrated Services**

It is worrisome that young people receiving child welfare services are subjected to a large number of victimizations in separate events yearly. Although our study did not collect information about adaptive disorders among the sample, the fact that experiencing multiple forms of childhood victimization is a stronger predictor of psychological distress than any one particular type of victimization has been documented in other studies (Finkelhor et al., 2007a, 2007b; Holt, Finkelhor, & Kaufman Kantor, 2007; Vranceanu, Hobfoll, & Johnson, 2007). Because many children followed by child welfare agencies are facing adaptive problems (Trocmé et al., 2005), assessing the full extent of their exposure to violence could further practitioners' ability to respond to their needs. Our data clearly indicate that concentrating attention and intervention on one form of victimization obscures the true burden of victimization carried by children under child welfare legislation and overlooks their experience as a whole. Because a large proportion of the children identified as having experienced one form of victimization

were also polyvictimized, it is clear that for some, victimization is more a condition than an isolated event. A more general view of the problem is likely to favor a less fragmented approach and greater collaboration among the various stakeholders and agencies serving children and youth. Human ecology theory emphasizes the importance of understanding children in context, a critical component in designing effective treatment and preventive interventions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Lerner, 1995). Duncan (1999) suggested that for a child who is being maltreated at home, school may provide a respite from abuse, and for a bullied (but not abused) child, home may provide respite from school. For children victimized both in school, in the community, and within the family, these pervasive experiences of feeling unsafe may explain their greatest distress. This suggests that fragmenting the intervention in "silos" (type or location of the violence, relationship between the victim and perpetrator) limits the effective response for children and their families and that a better coordination and integration of services is needed. An effective response would require an expanded definition of exposure to violence and its impact on children and families in order to improve the identification, screening, and referral of children in need. Cross-disciplinary and interagency partnerships (child welfare services, schools, shelters, and governmental and community agencies serving children and family, etc.) are needed to ensure service linkage and coordinating care across organizations and to address a full range of needs for children and families exposed to violence. A coordinated effort implies that child welfare agencies will need to strengthen working relationships with other agencies and community service providers and develop protocols in order to share information and offer joint services. To better intervene, it appears essential to clarify each agency's roles, responsibilities, and available services, which requires changes at the policy level that encourage sharing information, partnerships, and joint trainings across organizations.

### **Preventing Subsequent Victimization and Targeting Polyvictims**

Another implication that can be derived from our data is that intervention by child welfare

should also address the risk of subsequent victimization of children receiving services. Polyvictimized children and youths are at increased risk of polyvictimization the following year (Finkelhor et al., 2007b), and there are a large proportion of polyvictims in the child welfare system. It is therefore important to develop mechanisms to identify young polyvictims who are not only more likely to present severe adaptive disorders but are also at risk of subsequent victimization. Knowing that abuse initiated early on may be repeated through different developmental stages and in different contexts signals the need for practitioners to target polyvictims and to develop programs aiming at preventing future victimization not only within their family, but also in the community. Current research suggests that to prevent victimization in the community, the intervention should include formation of social support, greater supervision, and modifying youth's negative coping strategies (Garrido et al., 2010). Research also indicates that parental involvement in community organizations and parental emotional support attenuates the impact of the exposure to community violence (Horowitz et al., 2005; Rosario, Salzinger, Feldman, & Ng-Mak, 2008). That being said, further research will be needed to understand how certain victimizations group together, how some produce other forms of victimization, and why some children are more likely to suffer from more than one form of victimization, in order to put an end to their ongoing victimization experiences. In summary, a broader assessment of victimization and the recognition of the potential risk of future victimization of children in the child welfare system are needed at the system and policy level, in order to improve intervention and prevent the negative effects of violence exposure among children.

### Limitations

The study has some limitations. First, our data derive from a single source (the adolescent or parent) and have not been corroborated by other data sources. Although some participants may have minimized or exaggerated the victimizations they experienced, they were still best placed to inform us about their daily experiences. Second, access to the participants for research purposes was difficult, and several

gatekeepers were required to give their consent before a parent or child could participate and provide further consent. Many youth in care were excluded by case workers for clinical reasons and were perhaps highly polyvictimized. As well, because parental consent was required, we must wonder whether some young people were excluded because their parents were opposed to their participation. It is possible that these children were still victims of intrafamilial abuse, but the refusal of parents may also have been due to mistrust regarding the child welfare system, because parents were informed that any information revealing a potential risk for the safety and development of their child would be reported to their case worker. We do not know the characteristics of all the children excluded or who themselves refused to participate in the study. Because information about youth in care is confidential, parents and adolescents were asked to provide their consent before any information about them was transmitted to the research team. It is clear that few parents of children aged 2–11 agreed to take part in the study, and our sample is thus mainly composed of adolescents. Again, we do not know whether presence of intrafamilial victimization or mistrust in the child welfare system motivated their refusal. The fact that participants received compensation for their participation in the form of a gift certificate was possibly more motivating for the adolescents than it was for the parents. Thus, despite the efforts of the team to recruit a representative sample of young people followed by child welfare services in Quebec, the sample is not representative of all the children under child welfare legislation in the province. There is reason to believe that the most serious cases have been excluded by the workers and that many abusive parents refused to participate or to consent to the participation of their adolescent in the study, and we are unaware of the characteristics of the young people and parents who refused to participate.

Another weakness of the study is that we do not know how long the children in the sample have been receiving child welfare services. Therefore, the results on maltreatment should be interpreted with caution. Because it is unknown if the children in the sample were followed by child welfare services during the entire year included in this study, it does not imply that child welfare agencies fail to protect chil-

dren from abuse. It is possible that some of the victimization experiences reported occurred prior to child welfare involvement.

In addition, even if the interview was conducted with the parent most familiar with the daily routine and experiences of children under 12 years old, it is possible that these parents were unaware of all the victimizations experienced by their child or were reluctant to report certain forms (because they themselves were abusers or because of shame or social desirability bias). The U.S. studies interviewed youth 10 years and older directly and denoted no significant difference between the rates of victimization reported by parents of children aged 8–9 years and those reported by youth aged 10–11 years (Finkelhor, Ormrod, et al., 2005). However, it is possible that the data underestimate the victimization experiences of children under 12 years old. Finally, a weakness of the study is the absence of data on adversities, delinquency, and adaptive problems facing young people in this child welfare sample.

## Conclusion

The results of this study highlight the importance of obtaining data on multiple forms of victimization experienced by young people from diverse populations. The JVQ is an instrument allowing for a more holistic approach to child victimization; it is well suited to a child welfare population and can potentially serve as a tool for professionals working with young people facing multiple problems. The instrument could be used in the development of public surveillance mechanisms to monitor the scope of the problem across populations and geographical regions as illustrated by the National Survey on Children's Exposure to Violence in the United States (Finkelhor & Turner, 2009). This would allow policymakers to compare effective policies at the international level.

To encourage more adapted interventions and to identify the pathways to polyvictimization, future research should also examine protective factors (intelligence, secure attachment, temperament, adaptive capacity, peer relationships, etc.) in connection with vulnerability factors in order to improve our understanding of the various mechanisms involved in youth polyvictimization. Polyvictimization trajectories, protective factors, and vulnerability factors are also

likely to differ according to the gender and age of the child, implying the need to consider several explanatory models. Furthermore, adversities, some forms of victimization and potentially traumatic events not explored in this study should also be documented. For example, witness to assault of a parent by a sibling, witness to suicide, voyeurism, sexual exploitation, and various forms of Internet victimization should also be included when inquiring about victimizations experienced by young people.

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