Delinquency Pathways from Polyvictimization to Adult Risky Sexual Behavior: The Roles of Developmental Timing and Biological Sex

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Background

- **Polyvictimization**, or experiencing multiple forms of victimization (i.e., physical and sexual abuse, witnessing family and community violence), is associated with risky sexual behavior (RSB) in adulthood.
- Delinquency may be one putative pathway between polyvictimization, as it is a prevalent form of risk behavior that develops during adolescence and is associated with polyvictimization and RSB.
- Though most youth victimization research focuses on childhood experiences, some research suggests that adolescent experiences may have more adverse outcomes due to "storm and stress" and temporal proximity of victimization to adult outcomes.
- Some research suggests that the link between victimization and impulsivity is stronger for girls, though literature is mixed.

Gaps in the literature

- Few prospective studies have investigated the impact of the developmental timing of polyvictimization (i.e., during childhood vs. adolescence) or the pathways through which it contributes to RSB in adulthood.
- Literature regarding sex differences in pathways from victimization to RSB is mixed, highlighting the need for research to clarify this pathway.

Aims

1. Test the mediating role of **delinquent behaviors** during late adolescence (age 18) in the associations between childhood (age 0-12) and adolescent (age 13-16) polyvictimization and RSB during young adulthood.
2. Test the impact of **developmental timing** in the relationship between polyvictimization and RSB.
3. Test whether the indirect associations between polyvictimization and RSB were moderated by biological sex.

Hypotheses

1. Delinquency will mediate the relationship between childhood and adolescent polyvictimization and number of sexual partners in young adulthood.
2. Polyvictimization during adolescence will be more strongly related to number of sexual partners than polyvictimization during childhood.
3. Polyvictimization will be more strongly related to delinquency in females than males, resulting in increased number of sexual partners during young adulthood.
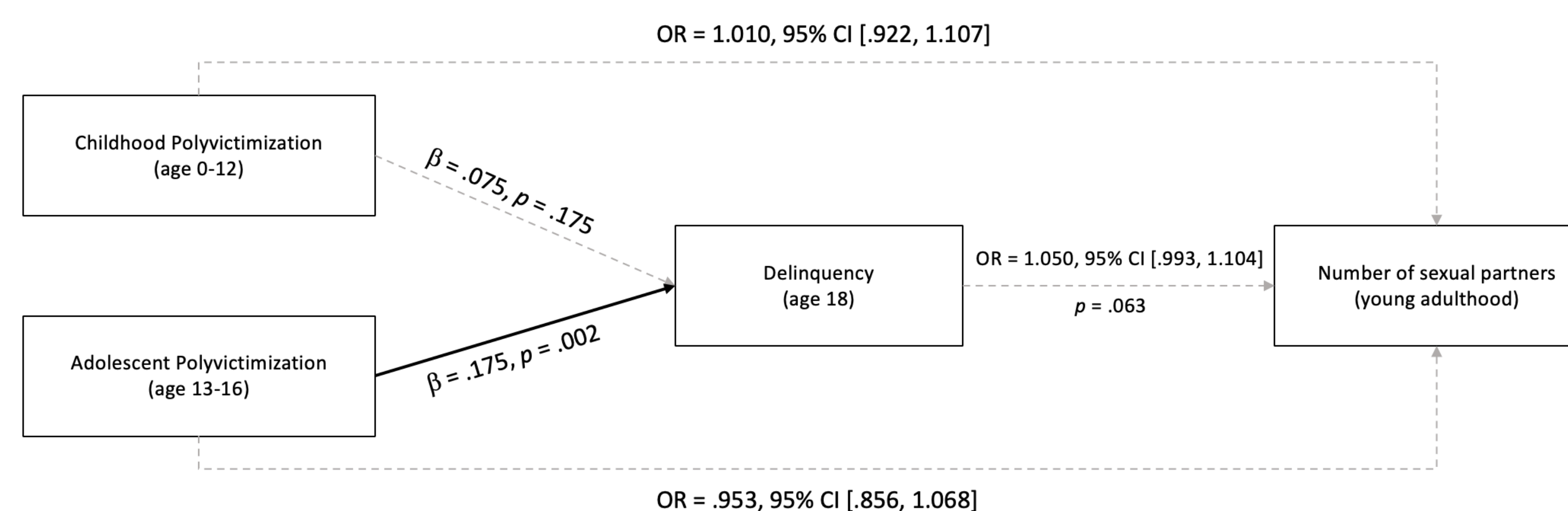
Methods

Participants and Procedure

- 483 young adults participated in the Longitudinal Studies of Child Abuse and Neglect over a 25-year period, initially recruited across five U.S. regions based on their risk for child maltreatment before age 4.
- Caregivers and youth completed surveys and interviews biannually between ages 4 and 18. Youth completed one additional assessment during young adulthood (*M Age*=23.8).

Measures

- **Polyvictimization**: Multi-informant and multi-modal assessments, including caregiver, youth, and CPS reports, as has been done previously.
  - Dichotomous indicators of (1) physical abuse, (2) sexual abuse, (3) witnessed family violence, and (4) witnessed community violence were summed two form two polyvictimization indices, scored continuously (ranging from 0-4), as has been done previously.
  - **Childhood polyvictimization** was operationalized as experiences between ages 0 to 12, and **adolescent polyvictimization** was operationalized as experiences between ages 13 to 16.
- **Delinquent Behavior Problems:** Assessed at youth age 18.
  - Youth Self Report (YSR)
    - Subscale of Delinquency
- **Young Adult RSB:** Assessed during young adulthood (*M Age*=23.8)
  - Young adults self reported the number of men and women they had sex with over the past year, summed to categorically represent total number of partners (0=*no sexual partners*, 3=*3 or more sexual partners*).
- **Demographics:** Covariates for all analyses.
  - Youth family history of poverty, marital/relationship status

Results

OR = 1.010, 95% CI [.922, 1.107]

Childhood Polyvictimization (age 0-12) → β = .075, p = .175 → Delinquency (age 18)

Adolescent Polyvictimization (age 13-16) → β = .175, p = .002 → Delinquency (age 18)

Delinquency (age 18) → OR = 1.050, 95% CI [.993, 1.104], p = .063 → Number of sexual partners (young adulthood)

OR = .953, 95% CI [.856, 1.068]

Results

Table 1.
Indirect effects between polyvictimization and RSB.

	Indirect effect	95% CI
number of partners delinquency childhood polyvictimization	.008	[-.001, .035]
number of partners delinquency adolescent polyvictimization	.022	[.002, .059]*

Note: *significant 95% Confidence Interval

Table 2.
Comparison of model fit between configural and path invariance models across biological sex.

	df, N	χ^2	p	RMSEA	CFI	TLI
Unconstrained (configural)	2, N=483	.033	.984	<.001	1.000	1.363
Constrained (path invariance)	15, N=483	12.606	.633	<.001	1.000	1.059
diff test ($\Delta\chi^2$)	13, N=483	12.136	.517	-	-	-

Discussion

- Delinquency is a salient pathway through which adolescent polyvictimization, but not childhood polyvictimization, contributes to RSB in young adulthood.
  - Results support the *posttraumatic risk-seeking* model that exposure to violence may cause impaired behavioral inhibition and overall risky decision making.
  - Recognizing delinquent behaviors as a posttraumatic symptom may help inform intervention targets for sexual wellness during adolescence among youth who have been victimized by violence.
  - Future studies should consider the role of developmental timing in victimization research.
- Results suggest that polyvictimization may equally affect males and females' sexual wellness.
- Findings underscore the need for prevention programming to target violence prevention, as well as youth prosocial behavior and sexual wellness during adolescence.

Limitations

Though existing literature suggests that number of sexual partners is a good indicator of RSB, it may not encompass the full range of RSB. Additionally, the present sample was limited in sexual and gender diversity, limiting our ability to make inferences about posttraumatic RSB in sexual and gender minority populations. Future research should consider a broader range of sexual behaviors in more diverse samples.