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Victimization and Polyvictimization among Juvenile Offenders: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Introduction: This systematic review aims to identify and synthesize the global empirical evidence on victimization and polyvictimization among juvenile offenders aged 10–19 years.

Method: The review protocol was developed following PRISMA guidelines. Quantitative studies published between 2000 and 2024 in English or Spanish were included if they assessed victimization or polyvictimization using standardized or validated instruments and Official records, case files, and ad hoc items or non-standardized self-reports. Bibliographic searches were conducted in PubMed, PsycInfo, Scopus, Web of Science, and ProQuest between August and December 2024.

Results: A total of 55 studies were included, with a predominance of cross-sectional designs (*n* = 39) over longitudinal studies (*n* = 16), and the majority conducted in the United States (*n* = 39). Risk of bias was generally low, particularly for participant recruitment and statistical analyses. Findings indicate that victimization and polyvictimization experiences are highly prevalent in this population. Sexual victimization, physical abuse, neglect, and exposure to violence were among the most frequently reported forms, with polyvictimization affecting a substantial proportion of adolescents.

Conclusions: The evidence highlights a critical and widespread prevalence of adverse experiences among juvenile offenders, with rates of exposure to violence often exceeding 90%. Exposure to violence and polyvictimization were particularly common. These findings underscore the urgent need for trauma-informed approaches within the juvenile justice system that address cumulative adversities, reduce recidivism risk, and promote mental health outcomes.

1. Introduction

Interpersonal victimization—understood as the harm suffered by an individual as a result of violent actions by others that violate social norms—has been widely studied in child and adolescent populations (Finkelhor, 2008). Traditionally, research has focused on specific victimization experiences, such as maltreatment, sexual abuse, or exposure to domestic violence. However, more recent studies have emphasized the need to adopt a broader and more integrated perspective that acknowledges the accumulation of violent experiences throughout childhood and adolescence. This approach recognizes that victimization rarely occurs in isolation but tends to accumulate, giving rise to the phenomenon known as polyvictimization (Finkelhor et al., 2005; 2007).

The polyvictimization perspective represents a significant advancement over traditional approaches, as it acknowledges that different forms of violence may coexist and interact, thereby amplifying their impact. Empirical evidence demonstrates that polyvictimization not only entails a higher frequency of adverse experiences but also a deeper and more complex effect on mental health, psychosocial adjustment, and development (Lee et al., 2023). Cumulative exposure to multiple forms of violence significantly increases the risk of developing symptoms of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and antisocial behavior (Haahr-Pedersen et al., 2020). This finding has prompted a conceptual shift in the study of victimization, moving from a fragmented analysis toward a comprehensive approach to understanding violence.

Accordingly, an average of 3.3 violent experiences has been reported in general population samples of children and adolescents in Canada (Cyr et al., 2013), 3.8 in Spain (Pereda et al., 2014), 5.2 in the United Kingdom

(Radford et al., 2013), and up to 7 in Chile (Pinto-Cortez et al., 2022). In similar samples, the prevalence of polyvictimization—defined as exposure to multiple forms of victimization above the mean for the respective age group—has been estimated at approximately 10% among adolescents in Norway (Mossige & Huang, 2017), 21% in Colombia (Caballero-Domínguez et al., 2022), and close to 30% in Spain (Montiel et al., 2025) and in England and Wales (Tura et al., 2023), among other countries. These data highlight that polyvictimization affects a significant proportion of adolescents, despite the methodological challenges associated with its definition and measurement (Segura et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, the situation is particularly concerning in samples considered to be at risk, where studies on polyvictimization remain even more limited. In this regard, lifetime polyvictimization rates have been reported to reach approximately half of the samples among youth receiving child and adolescent mental health services (Adams et al., 2016; Davis et al., 2019; Ford et al., 2011; Pereda et al., 2015) or belonging to gender minority groups (Pereda et al., 2025; Sterzing et al., 2019). These figures are even higher among children and adolescents living in out-of-home care within the child protection system (Collin-Vézina et al., 2011; Cyr et al., 2012; Fernández-Artamendi et al., 2020; Segura et al., 2015).

Taken together, these findings reveal the existence of groups of children and adolescents who are particularly vulnerable and at high risk of experiencing multiple forms of victimization, making the study of polyvictimization essential for comprehensively understanding and addressing violence in childhood and adolescence (Finkelhor et al., 2011; Sabri et al., 2013).

In response to this need, the present review focuses on adolescents in conflict with the law as a particularly vulnerable group. It consolidates empirical findings published between 2000 and 2024, providing an integrative synthesis of prevalence patterns and critically examining how polyvictimization has been conceptualized and operationalized in this population. Given the fragmented and methodologically heterogeneous nature of the existing evidence, this study advances a more coherent understanding of cumulative trauma exposure within juvenile justice contexts and outlines key directions for future trauma-informed research and practice.

2. Theoretical Framework

The concept of the intergenerational cycle of violence refers to the observed tendency for experiences of maltreatment during childhood—particularly physical abuse and neglect—to significantly increase the likelihood that an individual will become a perpetrator in adulthood. This proposition, extensively supported by longitudinal studies, suggests that early exposure to abusive environments alters emotional, cognitive, and social developmental processes, establishing risk trajectories that may be replicated across the lifespan.

The most influential study on this topic is that of Widom (1989), who introduced the term “cycle of violence” through a prospective longitudinal design that followed children who had experienced abuse and neglect into adulthood. Her findings demonstrated that individuals who had suffered physical abuse were significantly more likely to be arrested for violent offenses, followed by those who had experienced neglect. Widom (1989) concluded that childhood maltreatment constitutes a significant risk factor for later violent behavior, although it does not inevitably determine future criminal conduct. Subsequent research confirmed these associations, showing that individuals exposed to physical abuse or neglect are more likely to be arrested for juvenile delinquency, adult criminality, and violent offenses, and to be arrested at earlier ages (Widom & Maxfield, 1996).

Other longitudinal studies have continued to explore this phenomenon. For example, Ehrensaft et al. (2003) identified conduct disorder in adolescence as a robust predictor of later violence, substantially increasing the likelihood of intimate partner violence. Moreover, childhood maltreatment—particularly physical or sexual abuse—along with exposure to interparental violence, also contributed to this outcome, even after controlling for variables such as socioeconomic status, parental mental health, and family dynamics.

Consistent with these findings, Smith et al. (2005) examined the impact of adolescent maltreatment on antisocial behavior using data from the Rochester Youth Development Study (RYDS). Their results indicated that experiencing maltreatment during adolescence significantly increased the likelihood of engaging in antisocial behaviors, including arrests, general delinquency, violent crime, and illicit drug use.

Neurobiological evidence further supports the understanding of the intergenerational cycle of violence, showing that repeated exposure to threatening and chaotic environments disrupts the organization of stress-response systems. This neurodevelopmental vulnerability suggests that the developing brain is particularly sensitive to adverse experiences, potentially leading to dysfunctional stress reactivity characterized by impulsivity, anxiety, emotional dysregulation, and profound effects on behavior and social adaptation (Perry, 2009). Additionally, research has shown that in individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), amygdala hyperreactivity and reduced hippocampal volume contribute to difficulties in integrating emotional experiences and memories, thereby perpetuating maladaptive responses and increasing the likelihood of reactive and violent behaviors (Young & Widom, 2013).

Current literature indicates that early and repeated exposure to trauma not only increases the risk of cognitive, socioemotional, and behavioral problems but also shapes how young people respond to norms, authority, and institutional interventions (Zelechoski et al., 2024).

Overall, the literature suggests that the cycle of violence is neither automatic nor inevitable; rather, it represents a statistically significant pattern resulting from the interaction of emotional, relational, neurobiological, and structural factors. Violence experienced during childhood affects human development through both psychological mechanisms and structural processes that shape relationships and skills over time. This underscores the importance of examining how early victimization experiences are associated with later behaviors—an issue central to the present study.

3. Objective

The present systematic review aims to consolidate and critically examine the global empirical evidence on victimization and polyvictimization among juvenile offenders. Beyond summarizing prevalence rates and the most frequently examined forms of victimization, this review seeks to evaluate how polyvictimization has been conceptualized, defined, and operationalized in this population. By identifying methodological heterogeneity, demographic and geographic patterns, and gaps in the adoption of an integrative polyvictimization framework, the study aims to advance a more coherent understanding of cumulative trauma exposure among justice-involved adolescents. Specifically, the review addresses the following questions: (1) What is the reported prevalence of victimization and polyvictimization among juvenile offenders? and (2) ¿Which forms of victimization have been most frequently assessed in the literature?

4. Method

4.1 Protocol

The protocol for this systematic review was developed in accordance with the PRISMA guidelines Page et al. (2021), ensuring transparency and rigor in the selection, extraction, and synthesis of the evidence. The adoption of these recommendations helps minimize bias and enhance the methodological quality of the study, ensuring that the findings provide a solid foundation for future research and practical applications in the field of victimization and polyvictimization among juvenile offenders.

4.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Quantitative studies assessing victimization and/or polyvictimization through standardized instruments were included in order to analyze prevalence rates among juvenile offenders. Participants' ages were limited to the 10–19 range, considering adolescence as a developmental stage characterized by heightened vulnerability to adverse experiences. The time frame 2000–2024 was established for conceptual and methodological reasons: since 2000, research on child and adolescent victimization has undergone a turning point, particularly with the development of the polyvictimization framework, while the upper limit ensures the inclusion of up-to-date evidence. The search focused on publications in English and Spanish, as English dominates the international scientific literature and Spanish allows for the integration of findings from Ibero-American contexts. Studies involving non-offending participants, samples outside the specified age range, as well as qualitative research, opinion papers, editorials, books, and book chapters were excluded, prioritizing original empirical evidence suitable for comparative analysis.

4.3 Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted in the databases PubMed, PsycInfo, Scopus, Web of Science, and ProQuest, using a combination of terms related to polyvictimization, victimization, and juvenile offender populations. The search terms included: "polyvictimization" OR “poly-victimization” OR “poly-victimisation” AND "victimization" OR “abuse” OR “maltreatment” OR “trauma” OR “adversity” AND "juvenile offenders" OR “juvenile perpetrator” OR "youth offenders" OR "delinquent youth" OR "adolescent offenders” OR “juvenile aggressor” OR “young perpetrator” AND "prevalence".

4.4 Management and Screening

To document the search process, a spreadsheet was created to record the database consulted, the date of the search, the search terms used, and the number of results obtained.

A first screening was then conducted based on the review of titles and abstracts, including studies that met the established inclusion criteria. In a second screening stage, full texts were examined to extract relevant information, including: title, objectives, country, year of publication, methodological design, measurement instruments, sample size and mean age, as well as the assessment of the prevalence of victimization and/or polyvictimization.

4.5 Methodological Quality Assessment

The risk of bias of the included studies was assessed using the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI, 2020) checklist for studies reporting prevalence data, following the recommendations of Munn et al. (2015). This tool enables a systematic evaluation of methodological quality, considering aspects such as sampling procedures, measurement of variables, and the validity of the reported data.

5. Results

The initial search identified 938 studies; after removing duplicates, 816 unique records were retained. The first screening reduced the sample to 83 articles and, following the exclusion of 28 studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria, a total of 55 studies were ultimately included. The study selection process is illustrated in Fig. 1.

Of the 55 empirical studies included that reported prevalence rates of victimization and polyvictimization, 39 were cross-sectional designs and 16 were longitudinal studies. The vast majority were conducted in the United States (70.9%), followed by Canada (7.3%), Spain (5.5%), Australia (3.6%), and other countries such as Russia, Brazil, Chile, China, Malaysia, New Zealand, and Singapore (1.8%). Sample sizes showed considerable variability, ranging from 47 to 29,204 participants.

Regarding sample composition, 43.6% (n = 24) included participants of both sexes, another 43.6% (n = 24) focused exclusively on males, and 12.7% (n = 7) included only females. Participants' ages ranged from 10 to 19 years, with a mean age of 15.76 years (SD = 0.78). Some studies did not report the mean age (Jeanis et al., 2019; Reid et al., 2017) or provided only age ranges (Ahlin & Hummer, 2019; Asscher et al., 2015; Van der Put & De Ruiter, 2016).

In terms of measurement instruments, 72.7% of the studies used standardized questionnaires and inventories, 16.4% relied on official records or file reviews, and 10.9% used ad hoc items or non-standardized self-reports. The most frequently used instruments were the Exposure to Violence Inventory (ETV, 12.7%), followed by the Washington State Juvenile Court Assessment (WSJCA/WSJCPA, 7.3%), the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ, 7.3%), and the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ/JVQ-R2, 5.5%).

Most studies reported ethnic-racial categories. Studies conducted in the United States showed high representation of African American and Latino youth in some samples: Phan and Kingree (2002) reported 85% African American participants; Kimonis et al. (2011), 68%; and Stimmel et al. (2013), 51.6% African American, with 27.2% Latino. Other studies reported less represented groups, such as Native American youth and participants from Middle Eastern/North African backgrounds (Mii et al., 2024), or American Indian youth in Arizona (Katz et al., 2011).

Of the four studies conducted in Canada, only two reported information on ethnic characteristics. Rojas and Gretton (2007) indicated that 28.4% of participants were Indigenous youth and 71.6% were non-Indigenous. Viljoen et al. (2005) reported a distribution of 43.3% Caucasian, 40.4% Indigenous, 7.1% Asian, and 9.2% other visible minorities. The remaining two studies did not include ethnic differentiation in their sample descriptions (Carpentier & Proulx, 2011; Dennison & Leclerc, 2011).

Of the three studies conducted in Spain, Benedicto et al. (2016) reported that most participants were Spanish nationals (44.1%), followed by youth of Latin American (29.8%), Moroccan (15.5%), and Romanian (7.2%) origin. Silva et al. (2014) reported a majority of participants of foreign origin (63.5%), mainly from Latin American countries (36.2%), the Maghreb (16%), and other countries (11.3%). Although Pereda et al. (2017) collected information on participants' country of birth, they did not report specific analyses related to ethnicity.

Of the two studies conducted in Australia, only one reported ethnic background, with 13.2% Indigenous participants (Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander) and 86.8% non-Indigenous (Thomsen et al., 2023).

In countries where only one study was identified, Lie et al. (2021) reported that participants were divided into Chinese descendants (32.9%) and non-Chinese (67.1%). Lim et al. (2012) reported a sample composed of 50% Māori and Pākehā youth. Wahab et al. (2021) reported a sample predominantly of Malay ethnicity (87.8%), followed by Indian (9.6%) and Chinese (1.3%) participants. The remaining studies did not report ethnicity-related data (Alvarez Vivar et al., 2023; Huculak et al., 2011; Ruchkin et al., 2002).

In terms of types of victimization, sexual victimization was the most frequently studied (67.3%), followed by physical abuse (54.6%), neglect (43.6%), exposure to or witnessing community or domestic violence (40.0%), and emotional abuse (34.6%). Reported prevalence rates showed wide variability across studies, ranging from 8% for sexual abuse among males (Asscher et al., 2015) to 98.1% for exposure to violence among males too (Burton et al., 2011).

Overall, studies consistently report extremely high rates of lifetime victimization among juvenile offenders. General victimization—defined as experiencing at least one traumatic event or prior form of victimization—reached between 94% and 96% in several samples (Ruchkin et al., 2002; Jencks & Burton, 2013), underscoring the near universality of adversity within this population.

When examining specific forms of victimization, witnessing violence and physical abuse emerged as the most prevalent. Some studies reported exposure to violence rates exceeding 90% (Burton et al., 2011; Huculak et al., 2011; López et al., 2019), with witnessing violence reaching 98.1% in one sample. Physical abuse similarly showed extremely high prevalence, with Katz et al. (2011) reporting that 97.8% of participants had experienced it at some point in their lives.

In comparison, sexual victimization—although alarmingly high in specific subgroups such as adolescents who committed sexual offenses (Yeater et al., 2015)—tended to be reported at relatively lower percentages in broader juvenile justice samples (Li et al., 2021; Morais et al., 2018).

Polyvictimization as an explicit construct was addressed by only 10.9% of the studies. Reported rates varied widely, ranging from 5.3% among detained adolescents identified through latent class analysis (Ford et al., 2013) to 98% in a sample of girls in the juvenile justice system (DeHart & Moran, 2015). This heterogeneity reflects differences in definitional criteria. Across the analyzed studies, varied approaches were used to classify polyvictimization. Some studies employed numerical cut-off points based on counts of victimization types, while others applied more complex statistical analyses. DeHart and Moran (2015) operationalized polyvictimization as having experienced four or more subtypes of victimization across the lifespan (out of 20 subtypes assessed), noting that the four-subtype threshold is commonly used in the literature. Pereda et al. (2015) applied a percentile-based criterion. Using the sample-percentile criterion, they identified the top 10% of the sample with the highest number of victimizations, corresponding to 15–16 or more lifetime types. Under the community-percentile criterion, they used a cut-off based on the 90th percentile of a normative community sample, classifying as polyvictims those reporting nine or more lifetime types of victimization and six or more in the past year.

Other studies adopted latent class approaches based on patterns of exposure. Mii et al. (2024) identified four distinct classes, including a specific “Polyvictimization” class defined by exposure to all ten types of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) assessed (emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, neglect, and family dysfunction, among others). Similarly, Ford et al. (2013) conducted an exploratory latent class analysis of 19 types of

traumatic adversity and identified a “Polyvictim” class characterized by a mean of 11.4 types of adversity (out of 19 possible) and a high probability of reporting nearly all forms of victimization assessed.

Another approach involved cumulative scoring. Marini et al. (2014) assessed cumulative victimization by summing the number of maltreatment types experienced according to the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ), which evaluates five dimensions: sexual, physical, and emotional abuse, and physical and emotional neglect.

Overall, the findings indicate that victimization and polyvictimization experiences are highly prevalent in this population. Sexual victimization, physical abuse, neglect, and exposure to violence were among the most frequently reported forms, with polyvictimization affecting a substantial proportion of adolescents. Significant variations were observed according to gender and type of offense, particularly regarding sexual victimization and neglect. Table 1 presents the main characteristics of the reviewed studies.

Table 1

Summary of the Articles Reviewed

1	Authors and year	Country	*N*	Type of victimization	Assessment instrument
	Alvarez Vivar et al. (2023)	**Chile**	**115**	**Adverse childhood experiences (abuse, neglect, domestic violence)**	**EEA**
2	Ahlin & Hummer. (2019)	USA	1.618	Forced sexual assault, Prior sexual victimization history	NIS-3
3	Asscher et al. (2015)	USA	13.613	Physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, any form of maltreatment	WSJCA
4	Baker et al. (2001)	USA	47	Physical abuse history of the youth, sexual abuse history of the youth, witnessing domestic violence, sexualized environment, parental victimization	YCM
5	Benedicto et al. (2016)	Spain	63	Sexual victimization, domestic violence, family abandonment, physical abuse, school bullying	Retrospective study based on the review of records
6	Burton et al. (2011)	USA	451	Sexual victimization, physical victimization, neglect, witnessing violence	UDCS
7	Carpentier & Proulx. (2011)	Canada	351	Sexual victimization, physical victimization, psychological victimization, parental neglect, paternal abandonment	Coding scheme
8	Chen. (2016)	USA	1.354	Violent victimization (beaten up, mugged, or seriously threatened by another person, chased and thought they might be seriously hurt, attacked with a weapon, shot, raped or sexually assaulted)	ETV
9	Collibee et al. (2021)	USA	199	Physical abuse and threatening behavior, social networking abuse	CADRI/ Social Networking Abuse Scale
10	DeHart & Moran. (2015)	USA	100	Polyvictimization, caregiver violence, dating violence, sexual violence, witnessed violence	JVQ

1	Authors and year	Country	*N*	Type of victimization	Assessment instrument
	Alvarez Vivar et al. (2023)	**Chile**	**115**	**Adverse childhood experiences (abuse, neglect, domestic violence)**	**EEA**
11	Dembo et al. (2022)	USA	4.336	lifetime sexual assault victimization	Single-item self-report question
12	Dennison & Leclerc. (2011)	Canada	111	Sexual abuse victimization, physical violence, psychological violence, inadequate parenting	CTQ/ Archival clinical file review
13	Feingold et al. (2022)	USA	1.354	Direct experience of violence/witness to violence	ETV/PAI
14	Ford et al. (2013)	USA	1.959	Physical assault, physical abuse, family violence, community violence, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect	TESI (Traumatic Experiences Screening Instrument)
15	Gaylord-Harden et al. (2020)	USA	1.170	Exposure to community violence	ETV
16	Hinton et al. (2021)	USA	1.094	Direct victimization, indirect victimization, total victimization - baseline	ETV
17	Howard et al. (2012)	USA	88	Exposure to community violence	CREV-R
18	Huculak et al. (2011)	Brazil	325	witnessed violence and experienced violence, physical abuse and sexual abuse	SAHA
19	Hussey et al. (2008)	USA	114	Physical victimization, emotional victimization	General Victimization Scale /GAIN-I
20	Jeanis et al. (2018)	USA	29.204	Physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse & neglect	PACT
21	Jencks & Burton. (2013)	USA	87	Witnessing domestic violence, witnessing community violence/severe violence sexual victimization	Set of dichotomous questions
22	Jory et al. (2002)	USA	381	Sexual victimization, general childhood victimization/trauma	SAEQ /CTQ/ SERSAS
23	Katz et al. (2011)	USA	909	Victimization by common crimes (threats with a	Self-report (National Institute of Justice -

1	Authors and year	Country	*N*	Type of victimization	Assessment instrument
	Alvarez Vivar et al. (2023)	**Chile**	**115**	**Adverse childhood experiences (abuse, neglect, domestic violence)**	**EEA**
				weapon, assault)	NIJ)
24	Kimonis et al. (2011)	USA	373	Witnessing of violence, violent victimization	ETV, Life Events scale
25	Lansing et al. (2017)	USA	118	Traumatic Events: physical and sexual abuse, domestic violence, dating violence, gang violence, being a victim of a crime, gun attacks, kidnapping, and witnessing violence	SCI-TALS/ LEC
26	Letourneau et al. (2018)	USA	251	Peer victimization, sexual victimization	Social Experience Questionnaire—Self Report/ National Survey of Adolescents
27	Li et al. (2021)	Singapore	790	Child Abuse (emotional abuse, physical and sexual abuse, emotional neglect, physical neglect)	ACE-IQ/RYDM/YSR
28	Lim et al. (2012)	New Zealand	150	Victimization history (physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect)	Coding from official client files
29	López et al. (2019)	USA	184	Exposure to violence: violence experienced and witnessed	Exposure to Violence Inventory
30	Marini, et al. (2014)	USA	406	Sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse. Physical neglect, emotional neglect and polyvictimization	CTQ
31	McKillop et al. (2017)	Australia	535	Forced sexual activity, nonsexual assault	Official administrative records. GYFS, DJAG, QPS.
32	McReynolds & Wasserman. (2011)	USA	220	Forced sexual activity, nonsexual assault	V-DISC/ *VISA*
33	Mii et al. (2024)	USA	265	Adverse childhood experiences	10-item ACE Questionnaire

1	Authors and year	Country	*N*	Type of victimization	Assessment instrument
	Alvarez Vivar et al. (2023)	**Chile**	**115**	**Adverse childhood experiences (abuse, neglect, domestic violence)**	**EEA**
34	Morais et al. (2018)	USA	498	Childhood sexual abuse	Semi-structured interview/ File information/Department of Human Resources (DHR) reports.
35	Pereda et al. (2015)	Spain	101	Conventional crime, caregiver victimization, victimization by peers and siblings, sexual victimization, witnessing and indirect victimization, electronic victimization, polyvictimization	JVQ
36	Phan & Kingree. (2002)	USA	272	Sexual abuse	CTQ
37	Piquero et al. (2017)	USA	1.354	Bullying victimization, exposure to violence	ETV
38	Reid et al. (2017)	USA	1.826	Adverse experiences and child maltreatment (emotional and physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional and physical neglect, domestic violence)	C-PACT/ ACEs/ Reports from the Florida Abuse Hotline
39	Robertson et al. (2008)	USA	761	Physical abuse, sexual abuse	self-report items
40	Rojas & Gretton. (2007)	Canada	359	History of child abuse (sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect)	Retrospective coding from file records
41	Ruchkin et al. (2002)	Rusia	370	Direct and indirect victimization (being beaten, being assaulted, being threatened)	Survey of Exposure to Community Violence
42	Silva et al. (2014)	Spain	104	Physical abuse, emotional abuse	10 items used by the LONGSCAN investigators
43	Stimmel et al. (2014)	USA	66	Witnessing community violence, physical abuse/assault, sexual victimization, domestic violence	UCLA PTSD Index for DSM–IV
44	Thomsen et al. (2023)	Australia	218	Child abuse (physical, sexual, emotional, neglect)	Official records.

1	Authors and year	Country	*N*	Type of victimization	Assessment instrument
	Alvarez Vivar et al. (2023)	**Chile**	**115**	**Adverse childhood experiences (abuse, neglect, domestic violence)**	**EEA**
				Victimization in the family environment, social victimization and peer victimization	
45	Tillyer et al. (2018)	USA	888	Direct violent victimization	ETV
46	Van Der Put & De Ruiter, 2016)	USA	13.613	Physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect	WSJCA/ Self-reported information
47	Van Der Put et al. (2014)	USA	628	Physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect	WSJCA
48	Van Der Put. (2013)	USA	73	History of maltreatment (sexual abuse by a family member, sexual abuse outside the family, physical abuse by a family member, physical abuse outside the family, neglect)	WSJCPA
49	Veneziano et al. (2000)	USA	74	Sexual abuse; anal intercourse, fellatio, fondling	Adolescent Sexual Offender Packet
50	Viljoen et al. (2005)	Canada	243	Verbal and physical bullying in custody/ previous/external victimization	Victimization and Bullying While in Custody Scale
51	Wahab et al. (2021)	Malasia	230	Conventional/Commercial crime, peer and sibling victimization, witnessing and indirect victimization, neglect and maltreatment, sexual victimization, poly-victimization	JVQ-R2
52	Wareham et al. (2022)	USA	452	Childhood sexual assault - CSA	Single-item self-report question
53	Yeater et al. (2015)	USA	245	Sexual coercion	**7**-item measure developed by Abbey and McAuslan/ Sexual Experiences Survey
54	Yoder et al. (2018)	USA	505	Sexual victimization, physical abuse, emotional abuse	Confidential self-report survey
55	Zhang et al. (2016)	China	358	Child sexual abuse	CTQ

Finally, the studies demonstrated a low risk of bias, particularly in recruitment procedures (96.4%), the description of participants and context (91.1%), and statistical analysis (89.3%). However, higher proportions of unclear assessments were observed in the domains of non-response management (32.1%) and measurement reliability (16.1%), reflecting the typical methodological limitations of research conducted in forensic and juvenile justice settings. Table 2 presents these results.

Table 2
Risk of bias assessment of the included studies (JBI, 2020)

Assessed Domain	**Low Risk n (%)**	**Unclear Risk n (%)**	**High Risk n (%)**
Sample representativeness	44 (78,6)	1 (1,8)	10 (17,9)
Appropriate recruitment	54 (96,4)	–	1 (1,8)
Sample size	41 (73,2)	7 (12,5)	7 (12,5)
Description of participants and setting	51 (91,1)	4 (7,1)	–
Measurement validity	43 (76,8)	7 (12,5)	5 (8,9)
Measurement reliability	39 (69,6)	9 (16,1)	7 (12,5)
Statistical analysis	50 (89,3)	4 (7,1)	1 (1,8)
Response rate	40 (71,4)	9 (16,1)	–
Management of non-response	32 (57,1)	18 (32,1)	2 (3,6)

6. Discussion

This systematic review advances Knowledge on justice-involved youth, First, by consolidating 24 years of empirical research, it provides a comprehensive synthesis of prevalence patterns of victimization and polivictimization among juvenile offenders. Second, beyond documenting high exposure rates, the review critically examines how polyvictimization has been conceptualized, defined, and operationalized across studies, revealing substantial methodological heterogeneity and a limited adoption of an integrative framework. Third, the study identifies important demographic and geographic imbalances in knowledge production, highlighting structural blind spots that constrain the generalizability of existing evidence.

The results confirms that victimization and polyvictimization are highly prevalent phenomena among juvenile offenders, demonstrating that exposure to multiple forms of violence and adversity is a cross-cutting characteristic of this population. The predominance of cross-sectional studies (70.9%) limits the ability to establish causal trajectories; however, the inclusion of 16 longitudinal studies provides relevant evidence regarding the persistence and accumulation of adverse experiences over the course of development. This finding is consistent with developmental and life-course models (Thornberry & Krohn, 2003) and the intergenerational cycle of violence framework (Widom, 1989), which posit that early exposure to violence increases the likelihood of delinquent trajectories—persistent in some cases—through cumulative and transactional mechanisms.

A notable aspect is the marked geographic concentration of evidence in the United States (70.9%). While this allows for a robust body of research within that context, it also limits the generalizability of the findings. The

limited representation of studies in Latin America—including only one study from Chile and one from Brazil—and in other regions of the world highlights a significant gap in the literature, particularly considering that juvenile justice systems, patterns of community violence, and structural conditions differ substantially across countries.

Regarding the underrepresentation of certain groups in the samples, particularly ethnic minorities and female adolescents, an important limitation emerges in the reviewed literature. Although some studies included ethnic-racial differentiation—reporting high percentages of African American and, to a lesser extent, Latino youth—this information was not systematically considered or analyzed across all investigations. Consequently, it remains difficult to draw solid conclusions about the magnitude and specific characteristics of polyvictimization among ethnic minority groups.

Similarly, consideration of gender differences revealed significant variation. Female adolescents are underrepresented in samples of juvenile offenders, as reflected by the fact that only seven of the 55 included studies focused exclusively on girls. This distribution reflects a historical bias toward the study of male juvenile delinquency (Hoyt & Scherer, 1998), limiting understanding of gender-specific victimization trajectories. The literature suggests that girls in conflict with the law tend to present higher rates of interpersonal violence and cumulative adverse experiences, as well as distinct clinical profiles (Arbach et al., 2021; Kerig, 2018).

Methodologically, the wide variation in sample sizes (47 to 29,204 participants) indicates substantial heterogeneity across studies, reflecting the coexistence of large-scale investigations and smaller-scope research, which may affect the stability of prevalence estimates. Although most studies employed standardized instruments, the diversity of measurement tools complicates direct comparisons of findings. Notably, the limited use of the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ) (Finkelhor et al., 2005)—an instrument specifically designed to assess polyvictimization from a broad and ecological perspective—stands out.

Sexual victimization was identified as the most frequently studied form, followed by physical abuse and neglect. This emphasis likely reflects both the clinical and legal severity of sexual abuse and its well-documented association with internalizing and externalizing problems among youth (Álvarez Vivar et al., 2023; Morais et al., 2018; van der Put et al., 2014). Furthermore, a significant association between sexual violence and delinquent behavior among girls has been documented (Siegel & Williams, 2003), underscoring the importance of adopting a gender-sensitive research perspective and examining how victimization experiences may differentially affect adolescents according to gender.

However, polyvictimization as an explicit construct was analyzed in only one out of every ten studies, suggesting that a fragmented approach to victimization still predominates. Given evidence indicating that simultaneous exposure to multiple forms of violence tends to accumulate across the lifespan rather than occur in isolation (Finkelhor et al., 2007), there is a clear need to advance toward comprehensive models capable of capturing the complexity of the phenomenon.

The wide variability in reported polyvictimization prevalence reflects substantial differences in operational definitions. These discrepancies largely stem from the absence of uniform criteria: some studies conceptualize polyvictimization as the accumulation of multiple adversities without a specific cut-off point, whereas others establish thresholds of four, nine, or more types of victimization. This lack of methodological consensus limits international comparability and complicates precise estimation of the true magnitude of the phenomenon (Segura et al., 2016).

From a methodological quality perspective, most studies demonstrated a low risk of bias in key domains such as recruitment and statistical analysis. Nevertheless, weaknesses were identified in the management of non-response and measurement reliability, which is understandable in juvenile justice contexts, where voluntariness, institutional distrust, and participant turnover may affect data consistency. These limitations should be considered when interpreting prevalence rates, particularly in studies based on administrative records or non-standardized items.

7. Study Limitations

The present review presents certain limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The assessment of victimization and polyvictimization across the included studies relied on a wide range of measurement strategies, including ad hoc questions, case file reviews, and standardized instruments. This diversity in assessment approaches limits the comparability of prevalence estimates and reduces the precision with which findings can be synthesized.

More importantly, the absence of a unified operational criterion for defining polyvictimization constitutes a central challenge for the interpretation of the evidence. Studies employed different thresholds and classification strategies to identify polyvictimized youth, making it difficult to establish consistent prevalence ranges or to meaningfully compare patterns across samples. This lack of conceptual and operational consensus constrains the cumulative interpretation of the reported estimates.

Additionally, the limited use of standardized and multidimensional instruments, such as the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ), restricts the extent to which victimization experiences are assessed comprehensively and systematically across studies, further complicating cross-study comparisons.

Finally, the marked geographic concentration of evidence in the United States and the underrepresentation of female adolescents and ethnic minorities limit the generalizability and subgroup-specific interpretation of the findings.

Taken together, these considerations highlight the need for greater methodological and conceptual coherence, as well as more cross-cultural and inclusive research, to strengthen the interpretability and comparability of prevalence estimates in this field.

8. Conclusion

Overall, the findings reinforce the need to understand juvenile offending within a developmental victimology framework, in which the accumulation of adverse experiences plays a central role in shaping delinquent trajectories. The evidence suggests that adolescents in the juvenile justice system not only exhibit transgressive behaviors but also present complex histories of repeated exposure to violence. Therefore, it is essential that interventions incorporate systematic assessments of victimization and polyvictimization, as well as trauma-informed and resilience-oriented approaches. Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs, standardized criteria for defining polyvictimization, and greater representation of non-Anglophone contexts in order to advance toward a more global, comparable, and clinically meaningful understanding of the phenomenon.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate: Not applicable. This study is a systematic review of previously published studies and does not involve human participants or primary data collection.

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Authors' contributions: XS conceived the study, conducted the literature search, performed the data extraction and analysis, and drafted the manuscript. NP supervised the study design, contributed to the interpretation of the data, and critically revised the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Figures

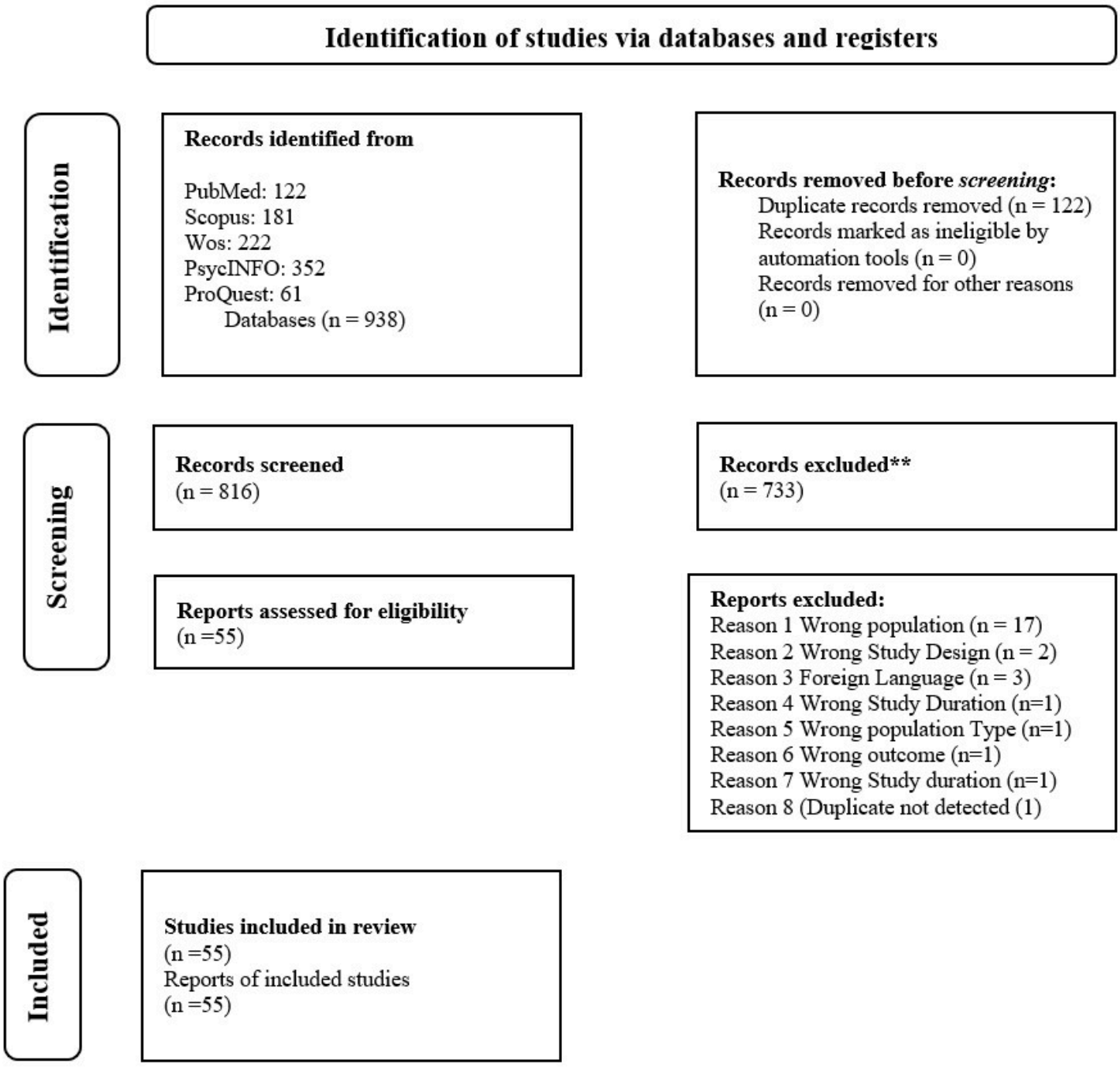

Figure 1

PRISMA Flow Diagram (Page et al., 2021)