



Adverse Community Experiences and Resilience

A FRAMEWORK FOR ADDRESSING AND PREVENTING COMMUNITY TRAUMA



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Prevention Institute is a nonprofit, national center dedicated to improving community health and well-being by building momentum for effective primary prevention. Primary prevention means taking action to build resilience and to prevent problems before they occur. The Institute's work is characterized by a strong commitment to community participation and promotion of equitable health outcomes among all social and economic groups. Since its founding in 1997, the organization has focused on community prevention, injury and violence prevention, health equity, healthy eating and active living, positive youth development, health system transformation and mental health and well-being. For more information, visit www.preventioninstitute.org.

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Kaiser Permanente is recognized as one of America's leading healthcare providers and not-for-profit health plans. Recognizing its unique role as both a healthcare provider and community partner Kaiser Permanente provides funding and clinical expertise to work side-by-side with other organizations to address serious public health issues such as violence and obesity. Through its *Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study*, conducted with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Kaiser Permanente demonstrated the connection between violence related trauma and the long-term health of individuals. Through its Healthy Eating Active Living (HEAL) investments the organization promotes community healing with support for individuals, families and safe public spaces. In 2014, Kaiser Permanente provided more than \$18 million to build healthy, safe environments in northern California alone. For more information visit kp.org/communitybenefit/ncal.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Framework for Addressing and Preventing Community Trauma

Introduction

Many communities are working to prevent violence and promote community safety and, through comprehensive, multi-sector actions, are making progress. However, communities that experience high rates of violence continue to be plagued with persistently high rates of trauma. Trauma and its associated symptoms of mental and psychological illness are more prevalent in the U.S. than in most other countries in the world. What's more, trauma can be a barrier to the most successful implementation of healing and well-being strategies, including those to prevent violence.

The impact of trauma extends beyond the individuals who directly witness or experience violence. Trauma is also produced by structural violence, which prevents people and communities from meeting their basic needs. The result is both high levels of trauma across the population and a breakdown of social networks, social relationships and positive social norms across the community—all of which could otherwise be protective against violence and other health outcomes. While new models are emerging to counter the effects of trauma, promote community healing and foster community resilience, there has not been an existing framework for understanding, addressing and preventing trauma at a community or population level. Our paper provides one.

The Landscape of Trauma

A There is growing understanding that trauma is widespread and has far-reaching impacts. The predominant approach to dealing with trauma is screening and treatment, consistent with a medical model.

- Trauma is pervasive.
- Trauma has a significant impact on development, health and well-being.
- Trauma-informed care is becoming a standard practice in a growing number of places.
- The predominant construct for addressing individual trauma is based on a medical model.

B Trauma manifests at the community level. There are emerging practices to address trauma at the community level, but there is not yet a framework for addressing and preventing it.

- In communities with high levels of violence, the idea that whole communities are traumatized is a widespread belief.
- In recent years, there has been a slight shift from understanding trauma solely at the individual level to also include collective trauma.
- Despite the increasing recognition of the widespread nature of trauma as an epidemic at the population level, the predominant focus for addressing trauma remains at the individual level.
- Policy makers, public health officials, social services providers and community organizers report that trauma undermines efforts to promote health, safety and well-being.
- There are manifestations, or symptoms, of community trauma at the community level. The symptoms are present in the social-cultural environment, the physical/built environment and the economic environment.
 - **The social-cultural environment:** The economic and social processes that concentrate poverty and urban decay in inner city neighborhoods damage social networks and trust, the ability to take action for change, and social norms.
 - **The physical/built environment:** Economic and social changes in the last 50 years have led to communities where high rates of poverty are concentrated in neighborhoods with crumbling infrastructure: There are dilapidated buildings and deteriorating roads, poor transportation services and crippled local economies. The pressures of gentrification and displacement have become an added element in the toxic stress that exacerbates community trauma in poor inner-city, and suburban, communities.



- **The economic environment:** Multiple studies have found that levels of violence, crime and delinquency, education, psychological distress, and various health problems are affected by neighborhood characteristics, particularly the concentration of poverty. The stressors of living with inadequate access to economic and educational opportunities or inequitable opportunities can also indicate trauma at the community level.
- There are emerging practices, including indigenous-based healing and restorative justice, to address trauma at the community level.
- Until now there has been no framework that defines community trauma and identifies the elements or “symptoms” of community trauma. The framework outlined here would allow for an analysis of the full impact of community trauma and inform more comprehensive strategies to address and prevent it.
- While many urban communities have people working on issues related to trauma, there is an uneven level of capacity (e.g., resources, funding, knowledge and expertise) to conceptualize and address community trauma.

How to Address and Prevent Community Trauma

A number of community-level strategies are emerging to address community trauma and promote community healing and resilience. The most effective strategies build on indigenous knowledge, expertise and leadership to produce strategies that are culturally relevant and appropriate.

- Strategies within the **social-cultural environment** are intended to counter the symptoms of community trauma and support healing and connection between people, while shifting norms to support safe and healthy behaviors. Some of the most successful youth development, violence prevention and health promotion programs build on existing community assets and are dependent on community members and organizations that connect individual youth and adults to a supportive community. Where this community organizational infrastructure and capacity is lacking or absent, violence and trauma have a more profound impact on individuals and communities.
- Strategies within the **physical/built environment** focus on improving the physical environment, reducing deterioration, and creating space for positive interaction. Reclaiming public space to be appealing to residents, reflective of community culture, and a source of pride can contribute to a sense of community worth and be supportive of healing. The systematic disinvestment and



Photo provided by Jessie Daniels

neglect of poor inner city communities has been a part of the structural violence that has produced community trauma over the last 60 years. Healing from this trauma requires that the roads, buildings, parks, transportation and public services be improved and maintained so they encourage positive social interaction and relationships, as well as healthy behaviors and activities.

- Strategies to **improve economic opportunities** for youth and adults in highly impacted neighborhoods are critical to the success of attempts to heal from community trauma, improve community health and wellness, and resist the pressures of gentrification and dislocation. These strategies must be multi-sectoral, focusing on different segments of communities, and should include: increasing the number of young people and adults who attend college; job training and placement for non-college bound youth; and job training and job-readiness training and placement of formerly incarcerated members of the community. It is critical that these employment opportunities come with a livable wage that can support a family.



Conclusion

Too many communities are plagued by trauma from experiencing adverse community conditions, including interpersonal violence and structural violence. Trauma-informed care has become a standard practice in health care and mental health care provision and education in many communities. While this is an incredibly important development, it's also critical that attention go beyond individuals and beyond a focus solely on treatment and protocols after exposure to traumatic conditions. Addressing community trauma requires attention at a population level and consideration of what can be done to prevent trauma in the first place.