

RESPONDING TO THE COMPLEXITIES OF TRAUMA

BY KATELYN GRECO
& STEPHANIE UEBERALL **OPINION**

Research shows that upwards of 90 percent of justice-involved youth have witnessed or experienced trauma. These youth often experience trauma at a young age, over a prolonged period of time, and struggle with complicated grief due to experiencing multiple forms of trauma. To best serve and address the risks and needs of justice-involved youth, policies and practices should be trauma-informed and gender-specific, as trauma experiences and symptomatology can differ by gender.

Justice-involved youth often experience trauma in multiple environments and contexts, including at home, in school and the community, and within peer relationships. Research estimates that Black youth will lose on average three loved ones to murder. Gun-related homicide is the leading and second leading cause of death for black males and females ages 15-24 respectively.

Youth of color also experience institutional betrayal, or the perpetuation of victimization from social institutions that the youth depends on such as school or the justice system, at higher rates than their white counterparts. This victimization extends trauma beyond physical, emotional and sexual abuse to also include structural violence, or when a social structure hinders groups and individuals from reaching their full potential.

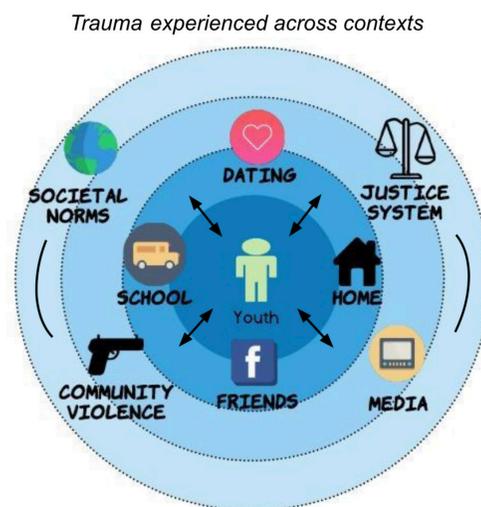
Youth who experience multiple forms of trauma often have difficulty handling intense feelings of disappointment, anger, frustration and hopelessness, and cope with aggression, isolation, recklessness and self-harm. Healthy relationships and self-worth become difficult to recognize and cultivate, and traumatic experiences are often normalized. The failure to address past trauma or a lack of sensitivity to past trauma may exacerbate trauma-related symptomatology and deepen engagement with unhealthy behaviors. For example, a young woman with a history of

sexual assault may be triggered if patted down by a male police officer and re-traumatized.

The Citizens Crime Commission (CCC) recommends that policies and practices be trauma-informed and gender-specific in order to address the complexities of trauma that justice-involved youth often experience. By implementing informed policies and practices, youth will not be punished for natural reactions to triggering experiences but instead receive services, supports, and opportunities that facilitate transformation.

CCC recommends that governments create youth-led councils that give youth a voice to inform the policies and practices that impact them. Youth should also have access to culturally competent bereavement services that are specifically informed on issues of murder and gun violence. Such services should be accessible in spaces youth frequent, including through social media.

Governments should invest in collective efficacy models, which create the ability for individuals in a community to come together to achieve common goals. These models empower residents to lead solutions that build capacity for social control, protective factors, and accountability of social institutions. Through this model, programs would educate youth and staff on how to change social norms within institutions and mitigate unintended consequences of policies and practices. Youth would engage in co-designing policy and practices, while professionals in contact with youth trauma would learn how to identify and treat complex trauma. ●



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