

How Being Trauma-Informed Improves Criminal Justice System Responses

Fact Sheet: Historical Trauma

A type of trauma that is often overlooked is historical trauma. Historical trauma is most easily described as multigenerational trauma experienced by a specific cultural group. Historical trauma can be experienced by “anyone living in families at one time marked by severe levels of trauma, poverty, dislocation, war, etc., and who are still suffering as a result” (Cutler, n.d.).

Historical trauma is cumulative and collective. The impact of this type of trauma manifests itself, emotionally and psychologically, in members of different cultural groups (Brave Heart, 2011). As a collective phenomenon, those who never even experienced the traumatic stressor, such as children and descendants, can still exhibit signs and symptoms of trauma.

Historical trauma may manifest itself as:

- **Historical Unresolved Grief:** Grief as the result of historical trauma that has not been adequately expressed, acknowledged, or otherwise resolved. Examples include Holocaust survivors; lack of acknowledgement of the Armenian genocide and the mass murder of other ethnic groups in World War II.
- **Disenfranchised Grief:** Grief as the result of historical trauma when loss cannot be voiced publicly or that loss is not openly acknowledged by the public. For example, the lack of recognition of the generations of loss of American Indians from colonialism, disease and other factors, and the corresponding lack of recognition of their right to grieve these collective experiences.
- **Internalized Oppression:** As the result of historical trauma, traumatized people may begin to internalize the views of the oppressor and perpetuate a cycle of self-hatred that manifests itself in negative behaviors. Emotions such as anger, hatred, and aggression are self-inflicted, as well as inflicted on members of one’s own group. For example, self-hatred among Blacks/African Americans who act out their aggression on people who look like them.

(Johnson, n.d.)

Common Groups Experiencing Historical Trauma

- American Indians/First Nations Peoples
 - The traumatic intergenerational experience of Native Americans/First Nations Peoples may be one of the more familiar examples of historical trauma.
 - This population has been exposed to generations of violent colonization, assimilation policies, and general loss.
 - Example of Stressor: The Americanization of Indian Boarding Schools and the forced assimilation among their students.
 - Current Manifestations: “High rates of suicide, homicide, domestic violence, child abuse, alcoholism and other social problems.” (Johnson, n.d.)

- People of Color
 - This population has been exposed to generations of discrimination, racism, race-based segregation and resulting poverty.
 - Members of this population may have been exposed to microaggressions, which are defined as “events involving discrimination, racism, and daily hassles that are targeted at individuals from diverse racial and ethnic groups.” (Michaels, 2010)
 - Example of Stressors: slavery; colonialism/imperialism
 - Current Manifestations: Mistrust of police; self-protection (e.g., weapon ownership); feelings of low self-worth (Rich & Grey, 2005)

- Immigrants
 - Given the variations in culture by country of origin, the traumatic experiences of immigrants may differ from group to group. For example, Southeast Asians such as Cambodians and Vietnamese, Africans, Latinos/Hispanics, Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Irish, and many others all have the collective experience of immigration, but the experiences of each group and subgroup may differ dramatically.
 - The reason for the immigration may also differ, from voluntary relocation to the forced relocation/forced migration/displacement of groups of people (e.g., Cambodians, Somalians, Sudanese, Nepalese, etc.).
 - Forced migration may be the result of conflict, natural disaster, famine, development projects and policies, or nuclear and chemical disasters (Forced Migration Online, 2012).
 - These various populations may have been exposed to discrimination, racism, forced assimilation/acclturation, colonization, and genocide.
 - Example of Stressor: Prevention of cultural and spiritual practices of an entire group of people (Michaels, 2010).
 - Current Manifestations: Fear of the legal system; fear of loss of culture—spiritual practices, language, and other traditions (Michaels, 2010).

- Families Experiencing Intergenerational Poverty
 - Poverty has many causes, and is sometimes perpetuated by government policies such as a federal minimum wage that is not a living wage or self-sufficiency wage.
 - Poverty can lead to family stress, child abuse and neglect, substance abuse, mental health challenges, and domestic violence (Wilson, 2005).
 - Poor individuals and families are not evenly distributed across communities or throughout the country. Instead, they tend to live near one another, clustering in certain neighborhoods and regions. This concentration of poverty results in higher crime rates, underperforming public schools, poor housing and health conditions, as well as limited access to private services and job opportunities. (Kneebone, Nadeau & Berube, 2011).
 - Poverty in these communities is frequently intergenerational. The lack of access to services, increased exposure to violence, and higher risk of victimization that exist in these communities often results in a much greater potential for experiencing trauma and re-traumatization among residents than in communities that are not areas of concentrated poverty.
 - Example of Stressors: Hunger; poor or inadequate housing; lack of access to health care; community crime
 - Current Manifestations: Domestic violence; child abuse; substance abuse (Wilson, 2005)

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Further Reading and References

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