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THE NATIONAL CENTER ON  
**Family Homelessness**

*for every child, a chance*

A practice area of AIR's Human and  
Social Development Program

## Trauma-Informed Care in Homeless Service Settings

In contrast to the usual stresses and strains of our daily lives, traumatic events occur outside the realm of expected daily experiences; threaten one's physical and emotional well-being and basic sense of safety; and leave people feeling overwhelmed, fearful, helpless, and out of control. Some traumatic experiences are one-time events (e.g., natural disasters or accidents), whereas others are chronic and may accumulate over a lifetime.

Experiences of chronic trauma such as violence and loss—particularly from an early age—can become toxic and have a serious impact on brain development. Trauma that goes unaddressed can result in long-term mental and physical health challenges.

Among homeless families, the prevalence of trauma is extraordinarily high. Families who are homeless often experience ongoing trauma in the form of physical and sexual abuse, neglect, domestic violence, community violence, family disruption, involvement with the foster care system, and the loss of a home, safety, and a sense of security.

Current research shows the profoundly high rates and impact of trauma on families who are homeless. The National Center on Family Homelessness conducted the SHIFT (Service and Housing Interventions for Families in Transition) Study to examine the residential stability of families in homeless shelters and housing programs. Major findings of this longitudinal study document significant traumatic experiences:

- **93 percent of mothers had a history of trauma, and 81 percent had experienced multiple traumas.** The most common trauma experienced was interpersonal violence (e.g., physical and/or sexual abuse).
- **Approximately half of the mothers met the diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).** The severity of the mothers' PTSD symptoms affected residential stability. Whereas factors related to the ability to earn income (e.g., unemployment, poor health) predicted residential instability at 15 months, the only predictors at 30 months were the severity of maternal trauma symptoms and lower self-esteem.

Given the potentially devastating impact of untreated trauma on individuals, families, and society, it is critical that service systems recognize and respond to the unique needs of trauma survivors. In the face of traumatic events and overwhelming tragedies, people are resilient. It may take time, but with the right supports and services, recovery is possible.

Providing trauma-informed care requires an organizational commitment to building the knowledge, awareness, and skills needed to create service environments that support recovery and healing. Often this means adapting the practices, policies, and culture of an entire organization. Trauma-informed care is driven by a set of core principles integrated into all aspects of an organization, including physical and emotional safety and offering families choice, control, and autonomy over the circumstances in their lives. Given the high rates of trauma among families who are homeless, a trauma-informed approach is an essential component of quality care.

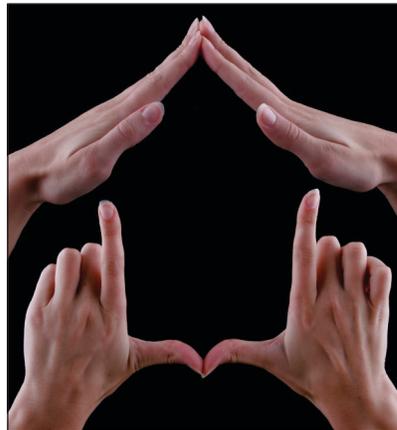


# Trauma-Informed Care Resources

## Tools

The National Center on Family Homelessness has created tools and resources to help organizations become trauma-informed.

- **Trauma-Informed Organizational Toolkit:** A roadmap for becoming trauma-informed that includes an organizational self-assessment with concrete guidelines for providing trauma-informed care and a step-by-step process for adopting a trauma-informed approach across organizations serving families who have experienced traumatic stress. [www.familyhomelessness.org/media/90.pdf](http://www.familyhomelessness.org/media/90.pdf)
- **Trauma-Informed Care for Women Veterans Experiencing Homelessness: A Guide for Service Providers:** Insight into the experiences and needs of women Veterans, an organizational self-assessment with guidelines for providing trauma-informed care to women Veterans, and resources for service providers. [www.familyhomelessness.org/media/277.pdf](http://www.familyhomelessness.org/media/277.pdf)



## Training and Consultation

The National Center on Family Homelessness supports organizations across the country in adopting a trauma-informed approach. The National Center provides training on trauma and trauma-informed care and ongoing consultation to support organizations incorporating trauma-informed practices.

We specialize in guiding individuals and organizations that serve people who have experienced trauma from homelessness, domestic violence, extreme poverty, natural disasters, and combat. Our trainings are both Web-based and in-person and are tailored to meet the needs of individual organizations.

For more information about training and consultation, contact Kathleen Guarino, L.M.H.C., at [Kathleen.Guarino@familyhomelessness.org](mailto:Kathleen.Guarino@familyhomelessness.org).

## Learn More

- **SHIFT (Service and Housing Interventions for Families in Transition) Longitudinal Study:** Examined long-term outcomes for families entering shelters, transitional housing programs, and permanent supportive housing programs over a 30-month period. Mothers were interviewed three times about housing, employment, health and mental health, substance use, trauma, receipt of services and public benefits, and child functioning. Major findings include histories of significant trauma. [www.familyhomelessness.org/media/389.pdf](http://www.familyhomelessness.org/media/389.pdf)
- **Understanding Traumatic Stress in Children:** Defines trauma, acute traumatic stress, and complex trauma; describes the most common developmental effects on children and ways for caregivers to respond to help children heal; and highlights the importance of self-care for caregivers. [www.familyhomelessness.org/media/91.pdf](http://www.familyhomelessness.org/media/91.pdf)

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**These resources and more can be found at [www.familyhomelessness.org](http://www.familyhomelessness.org).**