The Production of Trauma from Violence

Figure 2 depicts the production of trauma from violence. Violence, the threat of violence, loss as a consequence of violence and structural violence all contribute to individual and community-level trauma. Trauma is caused by experiences or situations that are emotionally painful. Violence is the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological or emotional harm, maldevelopment or deprivation. Structural violence refers to harm that individuals, families and communities experience from economic and social structures, social institutions, relations of power, privilege and inequality and inequity that may harm people and communities by preventing them from meeting their basic needs.

At the community level, this means both that multiple people are traumatized, and significantly, that there is a breakdown or disconnect within the community and across the members of the community.

There are symptoms of trauma at both the individual and community levels. At the individual level, symptoms include re-experiencing the trauma, emotional numbing, avoidance, and increased arousal. At the community level, trauma manifests within three interrelated clusters: the people cluster (the social-cultural environment), the place cluster (the physical/built environment) and within the equitable opportunity cluster (the economic environment). Symptoms of community level trauma within the people cluster include: damaged, fragmented or disrupted social relations, particularly intergenerational relations; damaged or broken social networks and infrastructure of social support; the elevation of destructive, dislocating social norms that promote or encourage violence and unhealthy behaviors instead of community oriented positive social norms; and a low sense of collective political and social efficacy. Symptoms within the place cluster include deteriorated environments; unhealthy, often dangerous public spaces with a crumbling built environment; and the availability and promotion of unhealthy products without the availability of healthy products. Symptoms within the equitable opportunity cluster include: intergenerational poverty; long-term unemployment; relocation of businesses, corporations and jobs; limited employment opportunities; and government and private disinvestment.

Both individual symptoms and community-level symptoms of trauma increase the risk of violence. Violence contributes to the production of trauma and trauma, in turn, contributes to the production of violence. Finally, a community that is experiencing these symptoms of community trauma, without healing and support, does not have adequate efficacy and capacity to organize against and counter structural violence. Further, the symptoms of community trauma may provide a basis for legitimizing structural violence (e.g. justifying enhanced suppression and containment tactics), which can further contribute to community trauma.
Figure 2 The Production of Trauma from Violence

- Re-experiencing
- Emotional numbing
- Avoidance
- Increased arousal

INDIVIDUAL

SYMPTOMS

COMMUNITY

SYMPTOMS

Equitable Opportunity
- Inter-generational poverty
- Unemployment
- Disinvestment

People
- Disconnected, damaged relations
- Destructive social norms
- Low sense of political/social efficacy

Place
- Deteriorated environments
- Unhealthy, dangerous public spaces
- Crumbling built environment

COMMUNITY

TRAUMA

INDIVIDUAL

TRAUMA

STRUCTURAL

VIOLENCE

VIOLENCE

THREAT OF

VIOLENCE

LOSS

Figure 2: The Production of Trauma from Violence

- Re-experiencing
- Emotional numbing
- Avoidance
- Increased arousal

Individual Symptoms

Community Symptoms

Equitable Opportunity
- Inter-generational poverty
- Unemployment
- Disinvestment

People
- Disconnected, damaged relations
- Destructive social norms
- Low sense of political/social efficacy

Place
- Deteriorated environments
- Unhealthy, dangerous public spaces
- Crumbling built environment

Community Trauma

Individual Trauma

Structural Violence

Violence Threat of Violence Loss
Community trauma is not just the aggregate of individuals in a neighborhood who have experienced trauma from exposures to violence. Community trauma is the product of the cumulative and synergistic impact of regular incidents of interpersonal, historical, and intergenerational violence and the continual exposure to structural violence. Structural violence refers to harm that individuals, families and communities experience from the economic and social structure, social institutions, social relations of power, privilege and inequality and inequity that may harm people and communities by preventing them from meeting their basic needs. Structural violence is a primary cause of the concentration of premature death and unnecessary disability in oppressed communities and is very closely linked to social injustice.

Just as individuals who are subject to trauma from exposures to violence require healing to promote wellness and resiliency, communities need to heal from the trauma of interpersonal, structural, historical and institutional violence. Communities need to develop resilience to allow them to function as environments that can promote health and wellness and individual resiliency among the children, youth and families who are part of the community. Community resilience is

“...They know it, and they express it. They say things like ‘the whole community is hurting.’ Ongoing institutional and personal racism and other forms of oppression, make healing from trauma that much more challenging.”

— Christina Goette, Director, Shape Up SF
the ability of a community to recover from and/or thrive despite the prevalence of adverse conditions. In the context of community trauma, building resilience means putting the conditions in place in which the community can heal from past trauma and be protected against the impact of future trauma. Strategies to create these conditions need to focus on the three inter-related components of the community environment: the social-cultural environment, the physical/built environment and the economic environment (see Figure 1). Such a comprehensive approach simultaneously promotes community healing while building community resilience and preventing violence (see Figure 4).

A number of community-level strategies are emerging to address community trauma and promote community healing and resilience (see Figure 3). The most effective strategies build on indigenous knowledge, expertise and leadership to produce strategies that are culturally relevant and appropriate.

**THE SOCIAL-CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT** 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. Strategies include:

- i. Rebuild social relationships, particularly intergenerational relations;
- ii. Revitalize damaged or broken social networks and infrastructure of social support;
- iii. Strengthen and elevate social norms that promote or encourage healthy behaviors, community connection and community oriented positive social norms;
- iv. Establish collaborations that promote community-level strategies while rebuilding community social networks;
- v. Change the narrative about the community and the people in it;
- vi. Shift community social norms;
- vii. Organize and promote regular positive community activity;
- viii. Provide a voice and element of power for community folks around shifting and changing environmental factors as well as the structural factors;
- ix. Promote and restore a connection to and sense of cultural identity, which has been shown to have a positive impact on mental health outcomes.
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. Churches fulfill some of this role in many communities but a healthy community has multiple entities including businesses, civic organizations, social organizations, schools and youth-driven organizations that contribute to the social and cultural environment that promotes positive relationships, social norms, behavior and activities within a community. A healthy community provides both the context for the healthy development of children and youth as well as the foundation for individual resiliency in the face of adversity and challenges to health and well-being.

**COMMUNITY EXAMPLE**

**Safe Parks as Gathering Places**

In San Francisco, Kaiser Community Benefit has partnered with the YMCA for neighborhood revitalization projects. One project focused on transforming a park that residents perceived as unsafe. Through family events in the park, families were served food and were given the opportunity to volunteer for a couple of hours. As a result, the park is now perceived as a safe space for residents. Community events such as movie nights in the parks help make residents feel safe because many of their neighbors are utilizing the park during the day and evening hours.

**THE PHYSICAL/BUILT ENVIRONMENT** Strategies within the 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. Strategies include:

i. Improve the quality of the built environment and public spaces and maintain these for the community;

ii. Create safer public spaces through improvements in the built environment through addressing parks, housing quality and transportation;

iii. Reclaim and improve public spaces for the community.
The systematic disinvestment in and neglect of poor inner city communities has been a part of the structural violence that has produced community trauma over the last sixty years. Healing from this trauma requires that the roads, buildings, parks, transportation and public services be improved and maintained so they are transformed from sources of toxic stress with negative impacts on both the physical and mental health of residents to an environment that encourages positive social interaction and relationships and healthy behaviors and activities.

“We need to improve the built environment—and then beyond that the policy and systems change work—strategies. There is a policy and systems piece that says that the city thinks this is important. Creating a city-wide program like the healthy food initiatives is what we need around trauma.”

— Community Health Worker

COMMUNITY EXAMPLE
Trauma-Informed Community Building

The impact of sustained trauma and persistent stress on a community result in challenges to traditional community building strategies. Fully understanding these challenges and how they impact a community’s readiness for sustained neighborhood change is essential for community building efforts. In late 2012, BRIDGE Housing Corporation, in partnership with the residents of Potrero Terrace and Annex, consultants, and HOPE SF, embarked on a planning process to create a blueprint for improving outcomes for residents of Potrero Terrace and Annex, two large public housing sites in San Francisco, California.

The Practical And Realistic And Desirable Ideas for Social Enrichment (PARADISE) Plan is the product of an extensive research and community engagement process to investigate and offer recommendations to address the disparities facing public housing residents in key investment areas that include: (1) Early Childhood Education, (2) K-12 Education, (3) Economic Security, (4) Health and Wellness, and (5) Public Safety. Known as Trauma-Informed Community Building (TICB), TICB is a model for strengthening community in trauma affected neighborhoods. The blueprint includes strategies that focus on people, neighborhood and housing. This model recognizes trauma as a challenge to community building and works to simultaneously improve the physical/built environment and the social-cultural environment to promote community healing and resilience.
Opportunity

THE ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT 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 including strategies such as: 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 be supplied with a livable wage which can support a family. Strategies include:

i. Institute restorative justice programs that shift the norms around conflict resolution and healing circles to, among other outcomes, support people to stay on paths to pursue educational and economic opportunities;

ii. Foster economic and workforce development strategies that improve the employment skills, capacity and readiness of community members and link them to job opportunities with a living wage;

iii. Promote economic empowerment/opportunity and workforce development;

iv. Increase community wealth and resources to reduce dislocation and gentrification.

Fostering Resilient, Thriving Communities

Community-level strategies focused on the social, physical and economic environment can support healing from community trauma, while contributing to greater community resilience. A more resilient community (see Figure 4) can protect against trauma and other adverse community experiences, thus reinforcing community healing and reducing trauma-inducing conditions. This creates the conditions that are preventive against community trauma. These relationships are described in more detail in Figure 5 and the text box entitled: Promoting Community Well-Being: From Trauma to Resilience.

Figure 4 Elements of a Resilient Community
“Communities have deteriorated over time, generation after generation. We have curriculums that are effective, but we don’t have the piece around self-love, community-love during the early stages of development and so the connection, the investment and ownership of their community is a result of loss of self and self-worth. A comprehensive community effort will recognize the pain that has been endured by young people for generations. Healing the Hood: childhood, motherhood, fatherhood, neighborhood. Protecting children, honoring women, respecting elders and building individual capacity in those neighborhoods. Reclaiming public space, looking at what we can do so that young men and older fathers can roll their sleeves up and contribute something to the community. It’s about relationship building. Lifting up usually silenced or missing voices and bringing them to the table.”

— Samuel Nunez, Executive Director, Families and Fathers of San Joaquin
Figure 5 depicts a model for moving from trauma to community resilience and increased well-being for individuals, families and communities. In neighborhoods with high rates of interpersonal violence combined with exposure to structural violence, both individual and community trauma need to be addressed.

Individual approaches to trauma include trauma-informed care and mental health services, for example. Effective approaches contribute to individual healing and, in part, to community healing. Community level strategies must focus on the social-cultural environment (people), the physical/built environment (the place) and the economic environment (equitable opportunity) because the symptoms of community trauma manifest within each. The social-cultural strategies include: rebuilding social relationships, particularly intergenerational relations; revitalizing damaged or broken social networks and infrastructure of social support; and strengthening and elevating social norms that promote or encourage healthy behaviors, community connection and community oriented positive social norms. The physical/built environment strategies include: creating safer public spaces through improvements in the built environment by addressing parks, housing quality and transportation and reclaiming and improving public spaces. The economic/educational environment strategies include: restorative justice programs that shift the norms around conflict resolution and as an alternative to zero tolerance policies, healing circles that simultaneously provide spaces for expression of and healing from individual trauma and reinforcement and strengthening of intergenerational relationships; economic empowerment/ opportunity; workforce development and increasing community wealth and resources. These strategies contribute to community healing and also help build community resilience.

A resilient community is a community that can thrive in spite of adverse events or experiences. The elements of a resilient community here are drawn from THRIVE (Tool for Health and Resilience in Vulnerable Environments). THRIVE is a framework for fostering community resilience and a tool for assessing the status of community conditions and setting priorities to improve health, safety, and health equity. First developed for the U.S. Office of Minority Health by Prevention Institute, it identifies specific factors in the social-cultural (people), physical/built (place) and economic (equitable opportunity) environments that contribute to health, safety and health equity. A resilient community in turn reinforces community-level strategies to address trauma, helping to protect against the onset of trauma and contributing to community healing.

Individual and community healing result in reductions in trauma. These, in turn, contribute to reductions in violence and increased well-being. Similarly, a resilient community contributes to reductions in individual and community trauma and violence, as well as increased well-being for individuals, families, and communities.
Figure 5  Promoting Community Resilience: From Trauma to Well-being

INDIVIDUAL APPROACHES

- Trauma-informed care
- Mental health services

COMMUNITY STRATEGIES

Equitable Opportunity
- Restorative justice
- Healing circles
- Economic empowerment
- Workforce development
- Investment in resources

People
- Rebuild relationships and networks
- Strengthen healthy social norms
- Promote community connection

Place
- Create safer public spaces
- Improve the built environment
- Invest in parks, housing and transportation

RESILIENT COMMUNITY

Equitable Opportunity
- Adequate living wages
- Local wealth
- Quality education

People
- Strong social networks
- Trust
- Willingness to act for the common good
- Norms/culture that support health and safety

Place
- Safe parks and open spaces
- Arts and cultural expression
- Perceptions of safety
- Availability of healthy products
- Availability of quality housing

Reduced individual and community trauma

Reduced risk of violence, threat of violence

Increased well-being for individuals, families and communities