

# Understanding and Serving People Experiencing Homelessness: A Trauma-Informed Approach to Library Service

Kathleen Guarino, LMHC

The National Center on Family Homelessness  
American Institutes for Research  
Health and Social Development program



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## Today . . .

1. Homelessness in the United States
2. Risk factors for Homelessness
3. Intersection Between Homelessness and Trauma
4. Homelessness and Public Libraries

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### McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (2009)

Homelessness includes any individual or family:

- 1) Lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence;
- 1) Living in a residence that is a public or public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings (e.g., cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings);
- 1) Living in a shelter providing temporary living arrangements (including hotels and motels), congregate shelters and transitional housing;
- 1) An individual who resided in a shelter or place not meant for human habitation and who is exiting an institution where he/she temporarily resided;

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### McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (2009)

- 5) An individual or family who will imminently lose their housing and has no subsequent residence identified and lacks resources or networks needed to obtain other permanent housing and is impacted by other disabilities (e.g., such as physical or mental health conditions, substance abuse, and histories of childhood abuse);
- 5) Unaccompanied youth and homeless families with children and youth defined as homeless under other Federal statutes who have experienced a long-term period of not living independently in permanent housing, has experienced multiple moves, is expected to continue in such status;

Any individual or family who is fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or other life threatening-conditions and lack resources to obtain other permanent housing.

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### U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)

Definition of homelessness for counting and service eligibility:

- 1) Individuals and families who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, including those who reside in emergency shelter, transitional housing, or a place not meant for human habitation, or are exiting an institution where they temporarily resided (for up to 90 days), and were in shelter or a place not meant for human habitation immediately prior to entering that institution.
- 2) Individuals and families who will imminently lose their primary nighttime residence within 14 days and lack resources or support networks to remain in housing.
- 3) Families with children or unaccompanied youth defined as homeless under other federal statutes.
- 4) Individuals and families who are fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence, have no other residence, and lack the resources or support networks to obtain other permanent housing.

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### HUD's 2014 Annual Homeless Assessment Report

In January 2014, there were **578,424** people experiencing homelessness on any given night in the United States.

**69%** were staying in residential programs.

**31%** were found in unsheltered locations.

(HUD, 2014)

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**63%** of all people experiencing homelessness were individuals.

**37%** were people in families.

**Two thirds** were over the age of 24.

**24%** were under 18

**10%** were between 18 and 24.

(HUD, 2014)

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- Half of the homeless population in the U.S. is in five states: CA, NY, FL, TX, and MA.
- Between 2013 and 2014, 14 states plus D.C. experienced increases in homelessness.
- Between 2007 and 2014, homelessness increased in 19 states.
- Overall, homelessness has declined by approximately 10% since 2010 and 2% over the past year.

(HUD, 2014)

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**Disparities:**

Individuals and families who are minorities comprise a disproportionate percentage of the homeless population.

Nearly 60% of shelter residents are minorities. They are 1.5 times more likely to be homeless.

African Americans are three times more likely to be homeless when compared to the overall US population.

(US Conference of Mayors, 2006; HUD, 2012)

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INDIVIDUALS

FAMILIES

UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN & YOUTH

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**INDIVIDUALS**

**362,163** or **63%** of all people experiencing homelessness.

**6 in 10** were in emergency shelters or transitional housing programs.

**42%** were staying in unsheltered locations such as under bridges, in cars, or in abandoned buildings.

**87%** were over age 24.

**11%** were between ages 18 and 24.

**2%** were under age 18.

(HUD, 2014)

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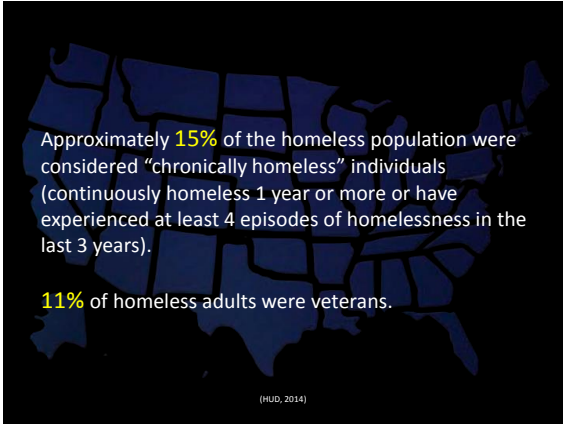
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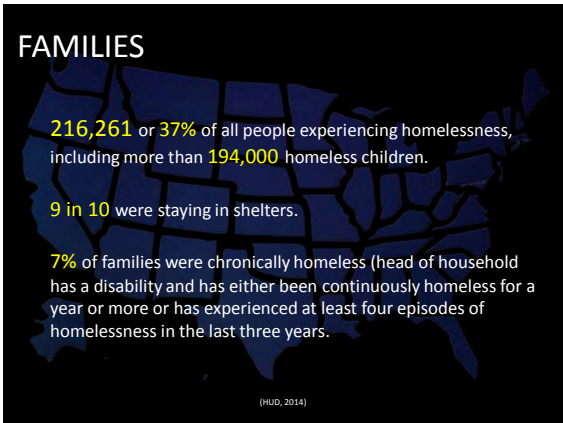
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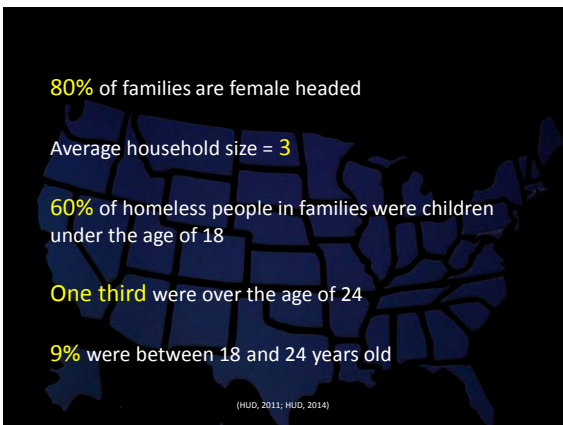
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- According to HUD's 2014 report, since 2010, number of homeless people in families has declined by 11%. These numbers do not include families who are "doubled up."
- Using the expanded definition of homelessness, the Department of Education reports 75% of students who experienced homelessness were in doubled-up living situations.

(HUD, 2014)

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**2.5 million**  
children experience  
homelessness annually.

**1 in 30**

(The National Center on Family Homelessness at American Institutes for Research, 2014)

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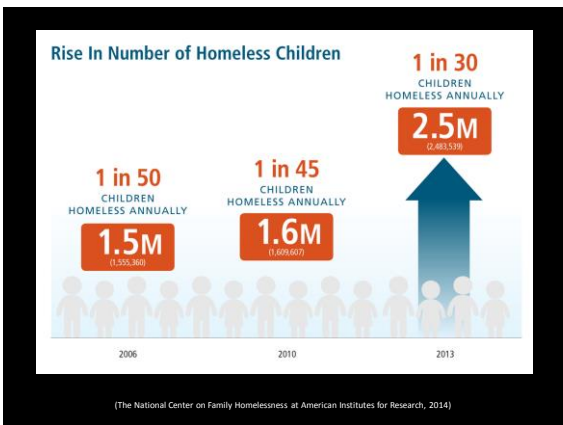
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51% of homeless children are under the age of 6.



(Samuels et al., 2010; HUD, 2009)

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## CHILDREN & YOUTH

**Unaccompanied Children:** people who are not part of a family or multi-child household (composed only of people under the age of 18) during their episode of homelessness, and who are under the age of 18.

**Unaccompanied Youth:** people who are not part of a family during their episode of homelessness and are between the ages of 18 and 24.

(HUD, 2014)

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There were **45,205** unaccompanied homeless children and youth on a single night in 2014.

**86%** were between the ages of 18 and 24.

**14%** were under the age of 18.

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## Homeless Programs

- **Emergency Shelter** means any facility, the primary purpose of which is to provide a temporary shelter for the homeless in general or for specific populations of the homeless and which does not require occupants to sign leases or occupancy agreements.
- **Transitional Housing Program** provides people who are homeless a place to stay combined with supportive services for up to 24 months.
- **Permanent Supportive Housing** is designed to provide housing and supportive services on a long-term basis for formerly homeless people, who have disabilities.
- **Other Permanent Housing** is housing with or without services that is specifically for formerly homeless people, but that does not require people to have a disability.

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## Homeless Programs

- **Rapid Rehousing** is a model that emphasizes housing search and relocation services and short and medium-term rental assistance to move people rapidly into permanent housing.
- **Homelessness prevention** services may include housing relocation and stabilization services and short and medium-term rental assistance to prevent homelessness.

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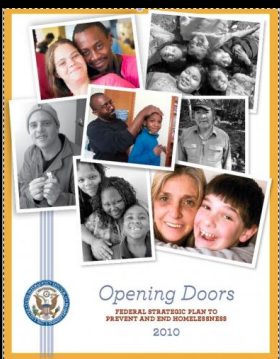
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## Strategic Plan to End Homelessness



- Increase leadership and collaboration
- Increase access to stable and affordable housing.
- Increase economic security.
- Improve health and stability.
- Retool the homeless crisis response system.

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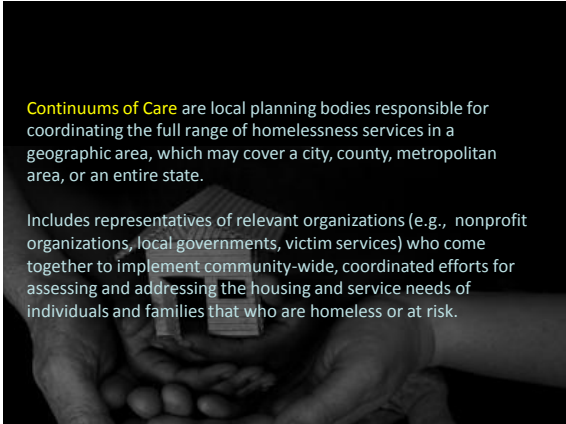
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**Continuums of Care** are local planning bodies responsible for coordinating the full range of homelessness services in a geographic area, which may cover a city, county, metropolitan area, or an entire state.

Includes representatives of relevant organizations (e.g., nonprofit organizations, local governments, victim services) who come together to implement community-wide, coordinated efforts for assessing and addressing the housing and service needs of individuals and families that who are homeless or at risk.

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**Risk Factors for Homelessness**

**Structural**

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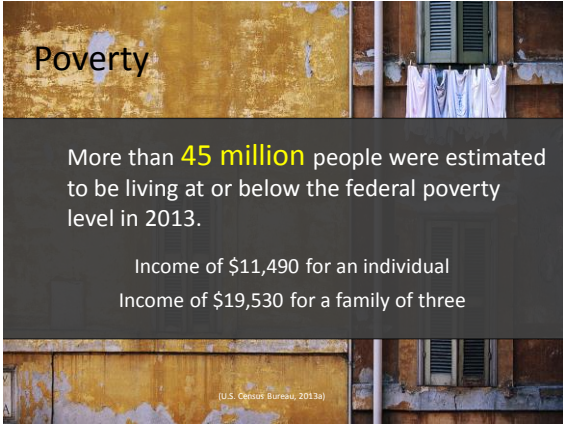
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## Poverty

More than **45 million** people were estimated to be living at or below the federal poverty level in 2013.

Income of \$11,490 for an individual  
Income of \$19,530 for a family of three

(U.S. Census Bureau, 2013a)

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## Poverty

An estimated **20 million** Americans account for the “poorest of the poor” – people at 50% or less of the federal poverty level.

About **7%** of the U.S. population.

(U.S. Census Bureau, 2013a)

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## Poverty

Rates are highest for families headed by single women.

About 22% or 16 million children are among the nation’s poorest families.

Children account for 24% of the U.S. population but represent 34% of all people living in poverty.

(U.S. Census Bureau, 2013a)

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## Lack of Affordable Housing

Our country is experiencing a significant and prolonged shortage of affordable housing.

In the U.S., for every 100 extremely low-income households seeking to rent housing, there are 30 available units.

(National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2013a)

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## Lack of Affordable Housing

2015 Federal Minimum Wage = \$7.25/hour (\$15,080 annually)

Housing Wage: estimate of full time hourly wage that a household must earn to afford an apartment at estimated Fair Market Rent while spending no more than 30% of income on housing costs.

2015 Housing Wage for a one-bedroom unit = \$15.50  
2015 Housing Wage for a two-bedroom unit = \$19.35

(National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2015)

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There is no state in the U.S. where a minimum wage worker working full time can afford a one-bedroom apartment at fair market rent.

(National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2015)

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## Lack of Affordable Housing

Availability of public housing and publically funded housing subsidies has diminished.

Between the mid-1990's and 2010, about 200,000 public housing units were demolished and only 50,000 replaced.

The Housing Choice Voucher Program – HUD's largest rental assistance program – experienced cutbacks. Vouchers have not kept pace with need.

(National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2015)

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## Other Structural Factors:

Impact of the great recession (downturn in labor market, foreclosures).

Lack of employment opportunities.

Decline in available public assistance (struggle to get medical care, housing, employment, food, benefits, childcare).

Exiting institutions (e.g., foster care, prison) without adequate planning and resources.

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## Risk Factors for Homelessness

### Individual

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- Serious illness or disability and lack of affordable health care.
  - Fragmented social supports, absence of safety net.
  - Domestic violence or other forms of violence.
  - Mental health issue.
  - Addiction.
  - Family conflict/separation.
- (Burt, et al 2011; The National Center 2009; National Coalition for the Homeless)

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Exposure to trauma is a common denominator in the lives of people experiencing homelessness.

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Pathways into homelessness are often traumatic:

- Chronic stressors associated with poverty (e.g., financial instability, social isolation, unsafe neighborhoods, lack of resources, lack of affordable housing, parental stress, racism)
- Experiences of interpersonal violence
- Sudden loss
- Abrupt family separation
- Involvement in foster care
- Catastrophic illness

Homelessness itself is traumatic.

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Traumatic stress is different from other kinds of stress.

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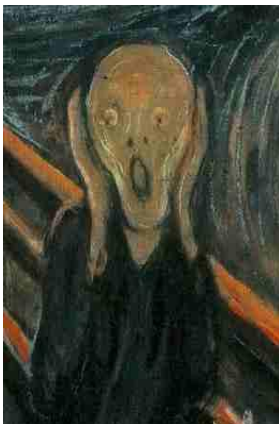
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Overwhelming demands placed upon the physiological system that result in a profound felt sense of vulnerability and/or loss of control.  
— Robert D. Macy

“Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning.”  
— Judith Herman

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### What makes a stress Traumatic?

- Overwhelming experience.
- Involves a threat.
- Results in vulnerability and loss of control.
- Leaves people feeling helpless and fearful.
- Interferes with relationships and beliefs.

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**Complex trauma:** involves prolonged or repeated experiences of trauma, particularly traumatic events that begin early within the care-giving relationship and have a short and long-term impact.

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For most people in the homelessness and public mental health systems, traumatic experiences are not a single incident/event.

Traumatic experiences of adults and children with serious mental health problems are interpersonal, prolonged and repeated.

(Jennings, 2008)

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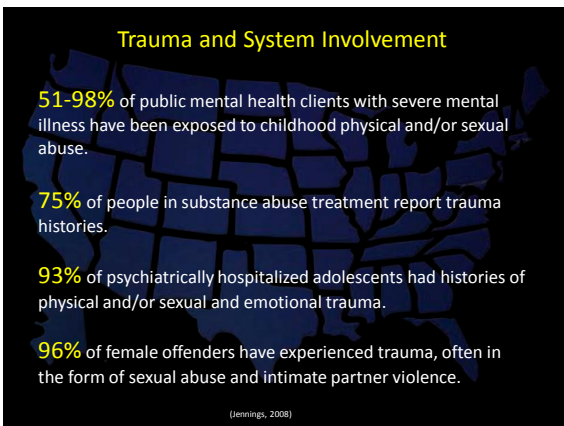
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**Trauma and System Involvement**

**51-98%** of public mental health clients with severe mental illness have been exposed to childhood physical and/or sexual abuse.

**75%** of people in substance abuse treatment report trauma histories.

**93%** of psychiatrically hospitalized adolescents had histories of physical and/or sexual and emotional trauma.

**96%** of female offenders have experienced trauma, often in the form of sexual abuse and intimate partner violence.

(Jennings, 2008)

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## INDIVIDUALS

Increased risk of a number of adverse events in childhood including:

- Out of home placement
- Housing poverty and instability
- Homelessness as children
- Other types of family stress (disability, violence, other disruptive behaviors)



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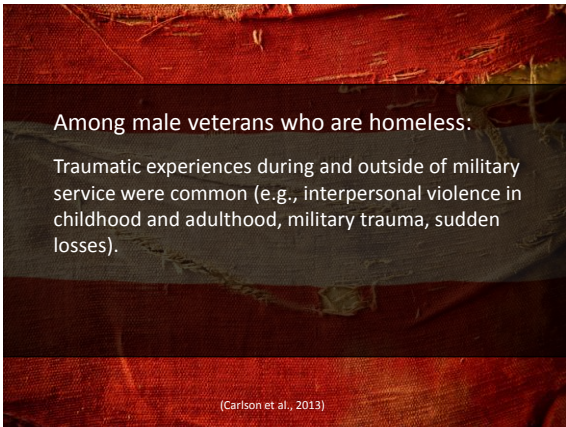
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### Among male veterans who are homeless:

Traumatic experiences during and outside of military service were common (e.g., interpersonal violence in childhood and adulthood, military trauma, sudden losses).

(Carlson et al., 2013)



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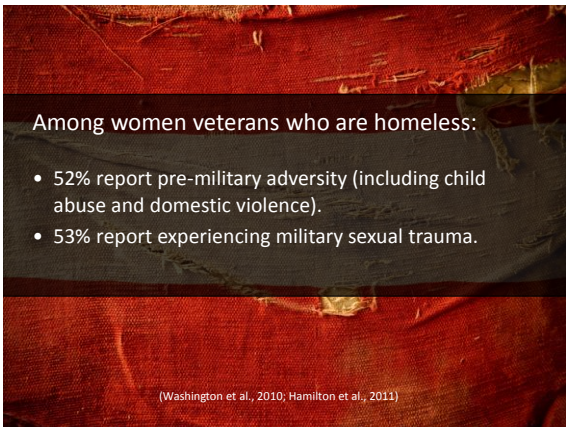
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### Among women veterans who are homeless:

- 52% report pre-military adversity (including child abuse and domestic violence).
- 53% report experiencing military sexual trauma.

(Washington et al., 2010; Hamilton et al., 2011)



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## UNACCOMPANIED YOUTH

High rates of trauma before and after becoming homeless.

- 17-35% were sexually abused in their homes.
- 40-60% were physically abused.
- History of foster care correlated with becoming homeless at an earlier age and for a longer period of time.
- Up to 43% of males and 39% of females report being assaulted with a weapon while on the streets.
- Survival strategies can be further victimizing

(Robertson & Toro, 1999; Jenks, 1994; Stewart et al., 2004; Whitbeck & Simons, 1990; Roman and Wolfe, 1995)



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## LGBTQ YOUTH

- Approximately 20% of youth who are homeless (rates vary from 6%-35%).
- Coming out associated with family conflict/rejection.
- Higher rates of victimization by a caretaker and on the street than heterosexual homeless youth.
- Will experience 7.4 more acts of violence than their heterosexual peers.

(Cochran et al., 2002; Whitbeck et al., 2002; Whitebeck et al., 2004)



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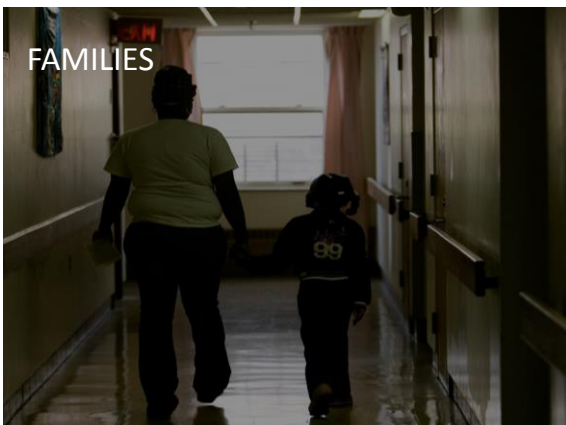
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## FAMILIES



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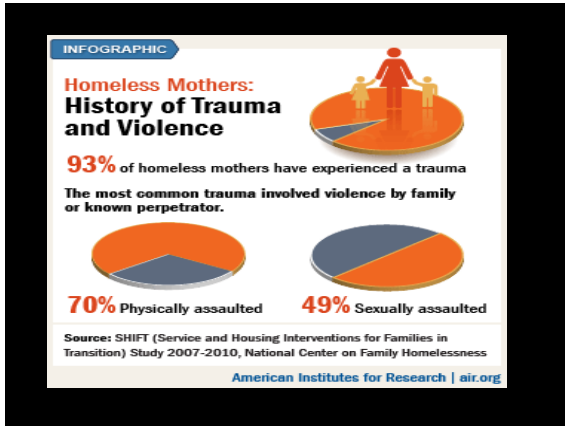
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Potentially traumatic experiences while homeless may include:

- Victimization
- Sudden moves
- No room in shelter
- Stigma and mistreatment
- Separation from family members
- Loss of belongings, pets
- Health issues and lack of care
- Unsafe relationships

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An event becomes traumatic when it overwhelms the stress response system and leaves people feeling helpless, vulnerable, out of control.

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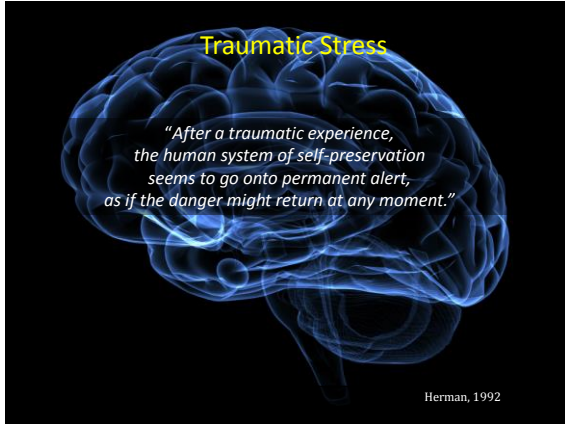
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**Emotional Responses**  
Irritability, sadness, anxiety, depression, guilt, grief

**Behavioral Responses**  
Changes in sleeping/eating, isolating, hypervigilance, increased conflict, crying, avoiding reminders

**Physical Responses**  
Headaches/stomachaches, heart racing, fatigue, muscle pain

**Cognitive Responses**  
Confusion, difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, preoccupation with the event (e.g., talking about constantly, repeating stories, repetitive play)

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For most people, with the appropriate level of support, responses to trauma may be intense but are short-lived.

**For some, the effects are more significant.**

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Prolonged elevated levels of stress hormones, particularly Cortisol are related to:

- Lower immune functioning and bone density
- Increased weight gain, blood pressure, cholesterol, heart disease
- Increased risk for depression and mental illness

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- Thinking, planning, focusing, organizing
- Problem-solving
- Coping
- Self-regulation
- Future thinking/ cause and effect
- Communicating
- Learning new skills

**SURVIVAL MODE**  
**"fight or flight"**

- Heightened baseline state of arousal
- On alert for threat
- Reactive
- Sensitive to triggers/reminders of the event
- Focused on safety and survival

**complex trauma**

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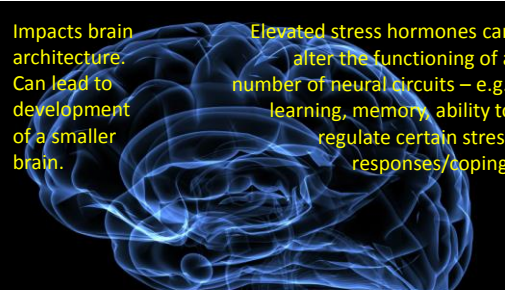
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Impacts brain architecture. Can lead to development of a smaller brain.

Elevated stress hormones can alter the functioning of a number of neural circuits – e.g., learning, memory, ability to regulate certain stress responses/coping.

Changes to the stress system. More sensitive response to future stressors and reminders of trauma (triggers). Can increase risk for future physical or mental illness.

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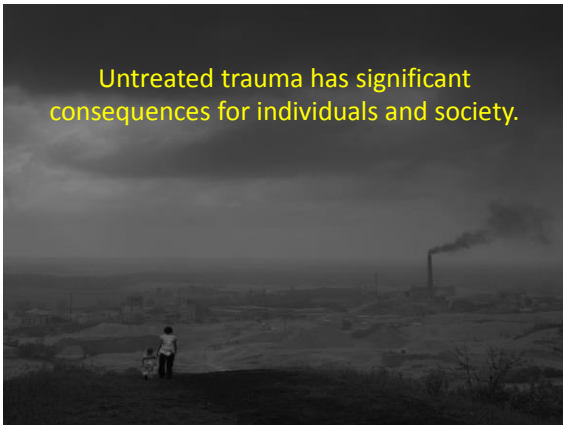
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Untreated trauma has significant consequences for individuals and society.

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### Adverse Childhood Experiences Study

17,000 participants in the general population completed a survey as part of a routine health screening. Adverse childhood experiences included:

- Physical abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Emotional neglect
- Physical neglect
- Mother treated violently
- Household substance abuse
- Household mental illness
- Parental separation or divorce
- Incarcerated household member

(Felitti et al., 1998)

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Adverse childhood experiences are related to long-term outcomes that include . . .

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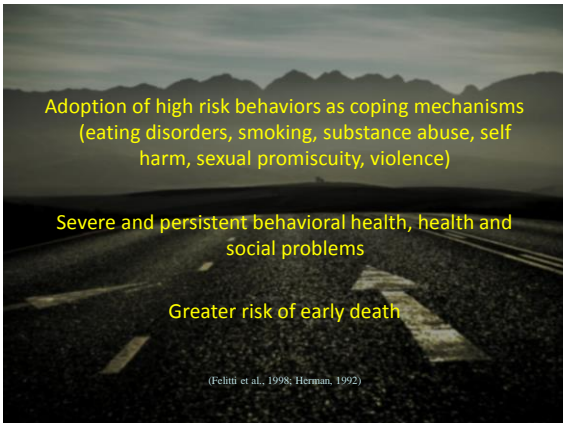
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Adoption of high risk behaviors as coping mechanisms (eating disorders, smoking, substance abuse, self harm, sexual promiscuity, violence)

Severe and persistent behavioral health, health and social problems

Greater risk of early death

(Felitti et al., 1998; Herman, 1992)

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## Homelessness & Public Libraries

- Community space open to all.
- All are entitled to same services.
- Access to resources and information.
- Much-needed youth programming.
- Place to go when shelters are closed.
- Haven from trauma and victimization on the streets.

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## Challenges

- High rates of trauma exposure and impact.
- Mental health and substance abuse issues.
- Disruptive behaviors, hygiene issues, sleeping.
- Lack of staff education and comfort-level.
- Overwhelming nature of the problem.
- Balance of ensuring safety and comfort for all.
- Barriers to full access to library services (e.g., no permanent address, prohibitive fines, lack of transportation, stigma and discomfort serving).

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## Next

1. What libraries are doing to address homelessness.
2. Considering the impact of trauma and adopting a "trauma-informed" approach to library service.

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