



## SYSTEMS OF TRAUMA | Introduction

### How societal injustices affect and cause traumatic stress

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Trauma has an enormous impact on both individuals and society as a whole. Family and Children's Trust Fund's (FACT) last issue brief series explored how trauma affects individuals throughout the lifespan and how schools, homeless services, and those working with older adults can apply trauma-informed care to their work. Our next issue brief series will broaden its focus from the individual to the societal level and explore how societal injustices interconnect and exacerbate individual toxic stress caused by family violence. The series will include three issue briefs, the first on racial trauma, the second on economic trauma and the last on gender-based trauma. This introduction to the series provides a background on trauma, trauma responses and resilience to provide a foundation for discussion on societal injustices and traumatic stress. Accompanying resources and additional issue briefs are available at [www.fact.virginia.gov/systems-of-trauma/](http://www.fact.virginia.gov/systems-of-trauma/).

#### What is Trauma?

Trauma includes the experience of an injury, witnessing someone experience an injury, facing a threat of injury, or experiencing a violation of your personal integrity. Examples include death of a family member, child abuse, domestic violence, elder abuse, war, and school shootings. This can be an acute event, chronic events or a combination.<sup>1</sup> Repeated exposure to trauma causes **toxic stress**, or prolonged activation of stress response systems in the body and brain. Toxic stress can have damaging effects on learning, behavior, and health across the lifespan.<sup>2</sup>

#### Responses to Trauma

When people hear or see a threat their brain's limbic system or "survival brain," sends out a red alert signal that releases stress hormones and pushes the prefrontal cortex or the "learning/thinking brain" offline. This response is the normal physiological reaction that keeps humans and animals alive; however, when people experience toxic stress, in order to survive they need stress hormones to remain

hyper-vigilant to their unpredictable and often dangerous environment. Living in a constant state of red alert increases wear and tear on children's and adults' bodies. Sustained release of stress hormones over time can lead to multiple health issues including high blood pressure, high glucose levels, and a weakened heart and circulatory system. Additionally, the American Academy of Pediatrics cautions that extended exposure to toxic stress can lead to functional changes in several regions of the brain involved in learning and behavior, including the hippocampus: the brain's deepest memory.<sup>3</sup>

#### Resilience

It is important to note that trauma does not affect all people the same way. Some who experience trauma develop serious and long lasting problems while others who experienced similar trauma may have minimal symptoms. The term **resilience** is used to describe a person's capacity to adapt successfully to acute stress, trauma, and other chronic forms of adversity. Resilience



can be strengthened on an individual level, such as cognitive ability, self-efficacy, self-regulation, coping strategies, and spirituality; on a familial level, such as supportive family and social support; and on a community level such as positive school and work experiences and community resources.<sup>4</sup>

### Systems of Trauma

Structurally embedded inequalities on a societal and community level are some of the leading causes of trauma. Therefore, in order to understand strategies to prevent and treat trauma, it is important to understand the systems of trauma and societal injustices associated with traumatic stress.

The first brief in the series will discuss racial trauma. **Racial trauma**, or race-based traumatic stress, is the cumulative effect of racial harassment, racial violence and institutional racism on an individual. Racial trauma is often compared to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) with similar symptoms of irritability, hypervigilance and depression.<sup>5</sup> The brief will overview systemic inequalities and individual actions that cause racial trauma, the effects of racial trauma on communities of color and strategies for individuals, communities, professionals and organizations to prevent and mitigate race-based traumatic stress.

The second brief will discuss **economic trauma** caused by economic downturns such as being unable to find a job, having difficulty supporting a family, or seeing the closing of community organizations or local services on which they depend. The last brief will overview **gender-based trauma** which will cover violence and trauma against women and the LGBTQ population.

It is important to note that systems of trauma do not exist in a vacuum. Individuals often experience injustices and trauma due to multiple aspects of their identity such as their race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and ability. **Intersectionality**, is a term coined by social theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw to name the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.<sup>6</sup> Further, traumatic events, and the way people experience them can be impacted by the cumulative effect of multiple traumas. Therefore, this issue brief series will explore the intersectionality and cumulative effect of systems of trauma.

### Endnotes

1. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. About Child Trauma. Retrieved from: <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/about-child-trauma>.
2. Center on the Developing Child Harvard University. Toxic Stress. Retrieved from: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/>.
3. The Community Resilience Cookbook. How Adversity Affects the Developing Brain. Retrieved from <http://www.communityresiliencycookbook.org>.
4. NAMI Minnesota. Trauma and Resilience. Retrieved from <http://www.namihelps.org/TraumaAndResilienceOct-2014.pdf>
5. Perry, C. (2017) Mental Health and the Current Times: Racial Trauma. American Counseling Association. retrieved from <https://www.counseling.org/news/aca-blogs/aca-member-blogs/aca-member-blogs/2017/12/12/mental-health-and-the-current-times-racial-trauma>
6. What is intersectionality, and what does it have to do with me?. YW Boston. retrieved from: <https://www.ywboston.org/2017/03/what-is-intersectionality-and-what-does-it-have-to-do-with-me/>



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