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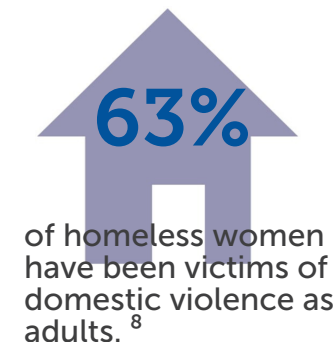
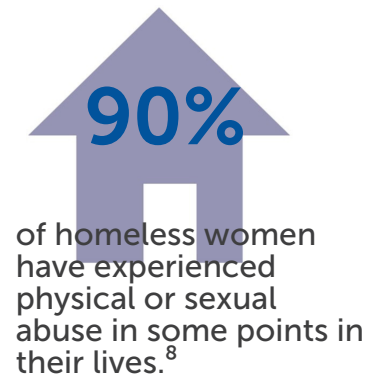
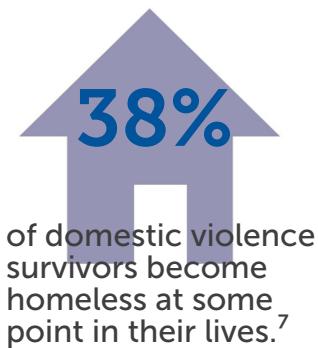
# TRAUMA-INFORMED HOMELESS SERVICES

## ISSUE BRIEF SUMMARY



Homelessness involves the loss of home, community, stability, safety, and social networks. On top of the ongoing stressors associated with homelessness, an overwhelming percentage of homeless individuals and families have experienced additional forms of trauma including physical and sexual abuse, neglect, domestic violence, community violence, and family disruptions.

Trauma-informed care in homeless service settings recognizes and responds to clients' previous trauma, approaches clients through a strengths-based lens, and provides clients with safety, respect, and choice.



### HOMELESSNESS AND TRAUMA

People experiencing homelessness are under constant stress from the insecurity of not knowing whether they will be able to sleep in a safe environment or obtain regular meals. In addition to the hardship of being homeless, a disproportionate number of individuals experiencing homelessness have endured other forms of traumatic stress including adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as child abuse and neglect and domestic violence<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, the loss of the protection of home and community makes people experiencing homelessness highly vulnerable to violence and victimization<sup>2</sup>.

### ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

Although systemic societal factors such as lack of affordable housing, and economic instability affect how many individuals are homeless at any given time, several studies have found adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) to be significantly overrepresented in homeless samples.<sup>3</sup>

### DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence is a leading cause of homelessness for women and their children in the United States. When women flee domestic abuse, they often are forced to leave their homes. They then not only have to endure the physical and psychological consequences of abuse but often experience significant economic burden leading to housing instability and homelessness.<sup>4</sup>

A study examining the needs of homeless families found striking results about these families' trauma histories. The study interviewed 50 single parent families headed by a woman 18 years or older who was pregnant or had a child/children living with her. The study found that 93% of women had experienced at least one traumatic event in childhood and/or adulthood; 81% had experienced multiple traumatic events in childhood and/or adulthood; and 79% were traumatized as children. The most common traumatic events involved interpersonal violence, including physical assaults and sexual abuse. More than two-thirds of the interviewed women had been physically assaulted in adulthood and half had been sexually abused as children. Additionally, half of the women met the formal diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which often presents for survivors of interpersonal violence.<sup>5</sup> This rate is significantly higher than US military combat veterans which ranges from 2-17%.<sup>6</sup>



## HOUSING FIRST

Housing first is an approach that prioritizes providing permanent housing to people experiencing homelessness, thus ending their homelessness and serving as a platform from which they can pursue personal goals and improve their quality of life.

This approach is guided by the belief that people need basic necessities like food and a place to live before focusing on other issues such as getting a job, budgeting properly, or attending to substance use issues.<sup>11</sup>

For people with trauma histories, ending homelessness is essential for healing that trauma and building resilience. Therefore, Housing First is in and of itself a trauma-informed approach. It's based on an understanding that housing individuals first prioritizes their strengths, respect, choice, and safety and is critical to help clients successfully remain housed and improve their life.<sup>12</sup>

## TRAUMA-INFORMED HOMELESS SERVICES

Trauma-informed care involves understanding, anticipating, and responding to the impact that trauma can have and building increased awareness about how to address existing trauma and prevent re-traumatization. Implementing trauma-informed care requires a philosophical and cultural shift within an agency, with an organizational commitment to understanding traumatic stress and to developing strategies for responding to complex needs of trauma survivors.<sup>9</sup> The following overarching tenets provide a useful framework for infusing trauma-informed care into homeless services:

- **Trauma awareness:** This may include staff training, consultation, and supervision. Trauma awareness also includes an understanding of the vulnerability of staff to secondary traumatic stress, or the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about and copes with the effects of others' trauma.<sup>10</sup>
- **Safety:** Trauma survivors often feel unsafe and may actually be in danger (e.g., victims of domestic violence). Trauma-informed care works towards building physical and emotional safety for clients and providers.<sup>10</sup>
- **Respect:** On top of significant material losses, people who are homeless often experience a loss of dignity are stigmatized. It is therefore crucial for homeless service professionals to treat individuals and families who are homeless with respect.<sup>21</sup>
- **Control & Choice:** Because control is often taken away in traumatic situations, and because homelessness itself is dis-empowering, trauma-informed homeless services emphasize the importance of choice for clients while also building environments that allow clients to rebuild a sense of efficacy and personal control over their lives.<sup>10</sup>
- **Strengths-based approach:** Trauma-informed care is strengths-based rather than deficit-oriented. Trauma-informed service settings focus on the future and utilize skills building to develop resiliency.<sup>10</sup>

There has been limited evaluation of the fairly new philosophy of trauma-informed homeless services. However, a systematic review of available studies found that trauma-informed service settings have better outcomes than "treatment as usual" when used to address, trauma, substance use, and mental health symptoms. Additional findings included: trauma-informed care may have a positive effect on housing stability, lead to a decrease in crisis-based services, and is cost effective. Results also found that service providers report positive outcomes in their organization from implementing trauma-informed programs, and that their clients respond well to trauma-informed care.<sup>9</sup>

Visit [fact.virginia.gov/trauma](http://fact.virginia.gov/trauma) for the full Trauma-Informed Homeless Services Brief.

## ENDNOTES

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