

## RESEARCH IN PROGRESS: MEN &amp; TRAUMA

# Growing Up with Violence

For the past several months we've been conducting research nationally on the experience of early life traumatic experiences among formerly incarcerated men convicted of violent crimes.<sup>1</sup> We're undertaking this research to raise awareness, unlock resources, and influence trauma-informed shifts in policy and practice. If the trends we're spotting in the data hold true, there is a vast yet still-invisible population of adult survivors of childhood trauma for whom healing can be a pathway to life change, as well as millions of young people today in need of support. This brief, the first in a series, presents what we're learning about exposure to violence and lack of social and emotional support for young people under threat and stress.<sup>2</sup>



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## Violence, a feature of life growing up

As researchers familiar with the relevant literature, we knew from the outset trauma would be more common among formerly incarcerated men, but even we are alarmed by our early findings.<sup>3</sup> Most of the formerly incarcerated men we've surveyed were exposed to violence of varying types and degrees across environments: at home, in school, in the surrounding community. For many of them, such events and circumstances were a reoccurring feature of life growing up. Their experiences encompass emotional and physical abuse by parents or other caregivers, violence among adults in the home, and a fearfulness that rarely abated. At home, as one man recalled, "We were always walking on eggshells."<sup>4</sup>

Some of their earliest memories are of violence and the complex emotions it evoked. One man who shuttled between abusive homes as a boy vividly remembers one beating he received when he was six years old, shortly after his father returned home from prison. "I remember being in a ball and just feeling his fist. Most kids, if anything, they get a little spanking, a little tap on the butt or, just, 'you don't do that.' But no, not me. ... I remember screaming for help and the blows just kept on coming. ... finally my grandfather and my uncles came in, and they started beating my dad. And you know what? I didn't feel a sense of relief. ... I felt bad for my dad."

Violence was literally on display in the communities where these formerly incarcerated men grew up. Most of the men we've surveyed can remember seeing or hearing someone beaten up, stabbed, or shot at least a few times before age 18. One man recalled the shock of seeing his father's body on the street shortly after he was murdered. "I'm walking to school, and I see the body... and I'm like, 'What, is this dad?' And somebody says out the window, 'Better keep moving or next time it's going to be you.'" He was only 11 years old at the time. School, where bullying was common, was not a safe place either.

In this context, violence becomes something expected, often rewarded, and in many cases, returned.<sup>5</sup> All but one of the men we've interviewed thus far described being encouraged or forced from a young age to engage in violence. "I remember being scared... and my dad telling me, 'Kick him'... and telling me, 'You're a man, don't be a p\*ssy.'" Some recalled seeking approval and validation from older men and male peers through violence. "[F]or me to be his son and to finally have that opportunity to prove myself as the gangster that he was, that was a big motivating factor for me... that need to belong."

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### Coping on their own

Not surprisingly, very few of the men we've surveyed recall consistently feeling safe in their neighborhood, and even fewer felt they could reliably count on and trust the people around them. This kind of guardedness often leads to feelings of isolation and loneliness, which further dims a person's view of their environment and the people in it.<sup>6</sup>

Many of the men we interviewed recalled having "no one to talk to" when they were young and being dogged by feelings of low self-esteem.<sup>7</sup> And very few of the men we've surveyed consistently had an adult in their life who made them feel important or special—a prerequisite for healthy development and a defense against the worst outcomes of adverse experiences in childhood. "When I was a kid, probably the most powerful thing I remember, just as a feeling, is I wasn't loved. ... it just completely destroyed my sense of self. I really honestly can remember laying in my bed crying, thinking, why don't my parents love me?"

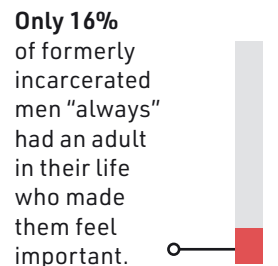
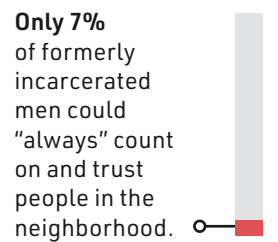
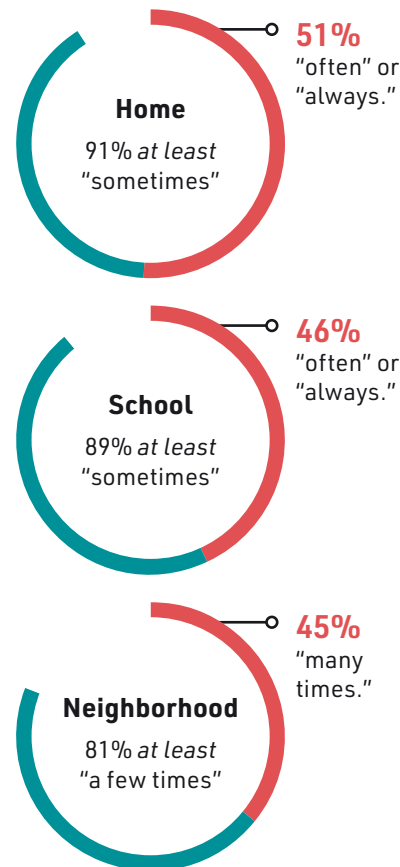
### What is trauma?

Trauma is like the wake a boat creates as it displaces water, except this wave can linger for years or even a lifetime. Anything experienced as physically harmful, emotionally disturbing, and at the extreme, life threatening, can cause trauma, with lasting adverse effects on the survivor's mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.<sup>8</sup>

### At Risk and Coping Alone

#### Exposure to Violence

#### Lack of Social and Emotional Support



Self-reports based on a structured survey of formerly incarcerated men about their experiences before age 18.

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## Implications of these early findings

Although partial and preliminary, these early findings are a window into the emotional pain experienced by a generation of men who lost their innocence too early in life. While the childhood experiences they recall are decades old, mostly from the 1980s and early 1990s, their insights are acutely relevant today. In the midst of debates about whether to defund police or expand their ranks in response to elevated levels of violence in cities across the country, these men remind us that people who lash out are often deeply wounded themselves—not only harmed but often also abandoned by the adults in their lives.

Decades of research document the importance of social and emotional support for children and teens, particularly in the form of consistent adult role models. There are proven strategies for providing that crucial support when primary caretakers can't do it alone, as well as pathways to healing for people of all ages. It's time to put that knowledge into practice.

## Forthcoming...

We plan to share other preliminary findings as our research unfolds. Subsequent briefs will explore sources of early life trauma beyond violence, the repercussions of trauma on youth development, the link between healing and accountability, and challenges and benefits of the participatory, community-based approach we're using in this research.

**Your voice and perspectives are important.**

If you're a formerly incarcerated man who has been convicted of violent crime and are interested in confidentially sharing your early life experiences with us or know of men who might be, you will find an electronic version of our survey at <https://impactjustice.org/life-experiences-survey/> or can also request a paper survey by emailing [racinfo@impactjustice.org](mailto:racinfo@impactjustice.org).

## Endnotes

- 1 The men in our study were convicted as adults of an offense serious enough to result in a lengthy prison sentence. We're eliciting their self-reports about potentially traumatic early life experiences through a structured survey followed by in-depth interviews with a subset of participants.
- 2 The preliminary findings reported in this brief reflect data collected and analyzed as of February 25, 2022. Our data collection is ongoing.
- 3 The established body of research on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) illuminates significant overlap between early life trauma and structural racism and poverty, social forces that also have an outsized influence on who ends up in prison. <https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/aces/pdf/vs-1105-aces-H.pdf>.
- 4 Jung, H., Herrenkohl, T. I., Klika, J. B., Lee, J. O., & Brown, E. C. (2015). Does child maltreatment predict adult crime? Reexamining the question in a prospective study of gender differences, education, and marital status. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 30(13), 2238-2257. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260514552446>.
- 5 Baron, S. W., & Forde, D. R. (2020). Childhood trauma, criminogenic social schemas, and violent crime. *Deviant Behavior*, 41(8), 991-1004. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2019.1596534>.
- 6 Matthews, T., Odgers, C. L., Danese, A., Fisher, H. L., Newbury, J. B., Caspi, A., Moffitt, T. E., & Arseneault, L. (2019). Loneliness and neighborhood characteristics: a multi-informant, nationally representative study of young adults. *Psychological Science*, 30(5), 765-775. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797619836102>.
- 7 Henry, B. F. (2020). Typologies of adversity in childhood & adulthood as determinants of mental health & substance use disorders of adults incarcerated in US prisons. *Child Abuse & Neglect* 99, 104251. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.104251>.
- 8 <https://www.samhsa.gov/trauma-violence>.

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