



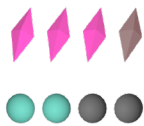
The Things They Carry

Understanding Trauma, Men,
and Cycles of Violence

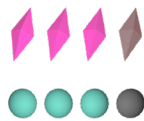
Impact Justice

August 2023

The epidemic of violence in the United States is concentrated among boys and men.



In 2021, boys and men were the **aggressors** in more than 3 out of 4 of the 4.4 million non-deadly victimizations and were the **victims** in roughly half of these violent incidents. Source: National Crime Victims Survey



The gender disparity is even more stark when looking at homicide, where boys and men made up 78% of all known **aggressors** and 78% of all **victims**. Source: FBI Uniform Crime Reports

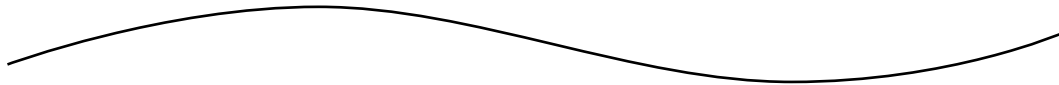
47,646
suicides

Males were also 4x more likely than females to take their own lives, accounting for the vast majority of the 47,646 documented suicides in 2021. Source: Centers for Disease Control

What if trauma, stemming from events experienced long ago, is partly fueling this violence?

In 2021, researchers at Impact Justice began surveying and interviewing men about experiences from childhood and adolescence that might have set the stage for violent crimes they later committed as adults – unlocking their memories to understand trauma among men and cycles of violence. This is what the research revealed.

The Impact Justice study enlisted formerly incarcerated men who had been convicted of a violent offense serious enough to result in a lengthy prison sentence. Over a period of 12 months, 193 men completed an online survey, and researchers conducted lengthy follow-up interviews with 18 men who were willing to talk in detail about their early lives.



“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.” - J.H.

J.H. was six years old when this beating occurred; his father had just come home from prison. What should have been a joyful reunion instead left a lasting scar.

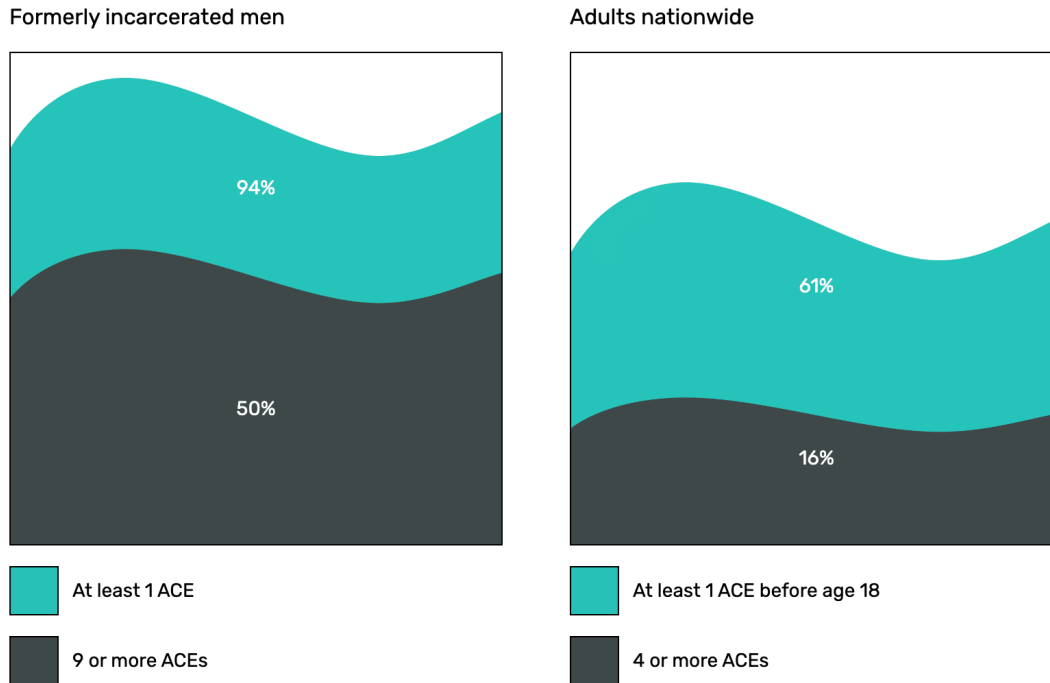
The physical abuse J.H. vividly recalls decades later is just one type of adverse childhood experience (ACE) documented in prior studies. The largest study to date, undertaken by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, consists of 16 ACEs that encompass different kinds of potentially traumatic early life experiences.

[Learn more about ACEs and related research.](#)

Children are remarkably resilient and can overcome even very difficult experiences, but a child’s defenses are no match for a slew of ACEs or any one type that is frequent or severe. In the absence of support and protection, the effects can be life altering, beginning in childhood and for decades after as trauma exacts its toll on the body and mind. Traumatic stress also can lead to aggression.

ACEs are highly correlated with structural racism and poverty, social forces that also have an outsized influence on who ends up in prison, so it’s not surprising that nearly all (94%) of the formerly incarcerated men surveyed recalled at least one of the CDC’s 16 ACEs.

What is shocking: Fully half of them (50%) reported at least nine ACEs, and some of them as many as all 16. This means that as boys they experienced potentially traumatic events and circumstances across multiple environments, essentially robbing them of any safe place to grow up.



Sources: Impact Justice and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Nearly two out of every three men surveyed (62%) experienced between 5 and 9 different ACEs just at home. Being the target of abuse and witnessing it among adults were the most commonly reported experiences.

A parent or caregiver...

Swore at you, insulted you, or put you down? **80%**

Pushed, grabbed, shoved, or slapped you **72%**

Acted in a way that made you afraid you would be physically hurt? **72%**

Hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured? **62%**

Witnessed a parent or caregiver...

Being yelled at, screamed at, sworn at, insulted, or humiliated **81%**

Being slapped, kicked, or punched **71%**

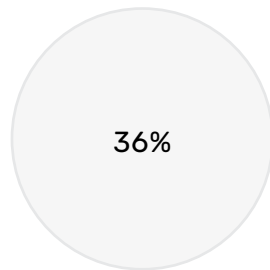
Being hit or cut with an object, such as a stick or cane, bottle, club, knife, or gun **50%**

More than half of the men surveyed (53%) report that such abusive behaviors and dynamics were a routine feature of life at home – so engrained they seemed, at least in retrospect, to be “always” occurring.

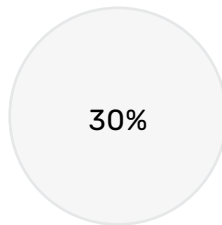
Parental neglect, especially the lack of attention and affection, can be just as wounding as physical violence – in some cases more so. Several men who participated in follow-up interviews described feeling as if they were invisible to the adults who should have wrapped them in love and affirmation.

“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?” – K.H.

The study also documents rates of sexual abuse that are four times the rate nationally.



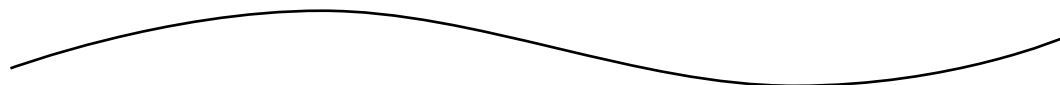
Did any adult touch or fondle you in a sexual way or have you touch their body in a sexual way?



Did any adult have (or attempt to have) any type of sexual intercourse (oral, anal, or vaginal) with you?

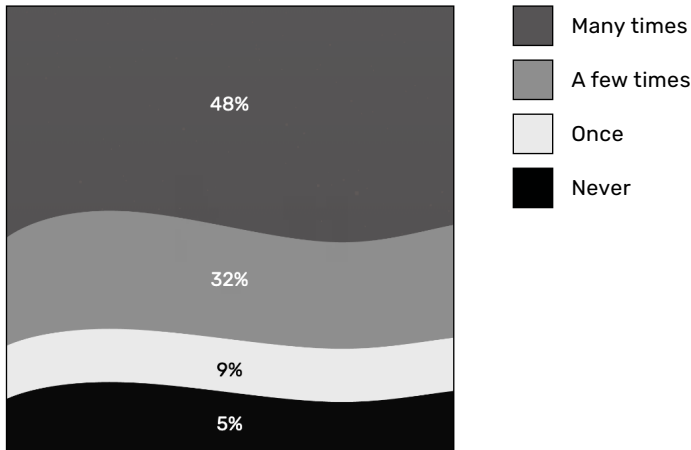


Rate of sexual abuse nationally



Abusive dynamics that played out behind closed doors had a counterpart in the streets, with nearly half of these men (48%) recalling seeing or hearing someone beaten up, stabbed, or shot.

How often, if ever, did you see or hear someone being beaten up, stabbed, or shot in real life?



D.S. was only 11 years when he encountered the body of his father who had been shot dead.

“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.’” - D.S.

Not surprising, the feeling of safety was elusive. Only one out of three men surveyed (34%) recall consistently feeling safe in their neighborhood growing up. School was not a safe place either: Three out of four (75%) were bullied, including more than a third (37%) who recall routinely experiencing intimidation and abuse at school.

“I remember being scared... and my dad telling me, ‘Kick him’... and telling me, ‘You’re a man, don’t be a pussy.’” - J.H.

Like J.H., most of the men the researchers interviewed described feeling pressure from a young age to engage in violence, either to win approval or in an attempt to protect themselves. But violence never erased their underlying insecurity.

“[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. ... I would project an image of toughness, but deep down, I was just scared. Every time I saw somebody that looked like a gangster, I found myself clutching my gun...” - P.M.

Violence was also an outward expression of emotions that as boys they didn't understand and couldn't control. An off-hand comment or minor conflict was likely to trigger an outsized response.

“If I was in school and something happened, that's how I dealt with my conflict, with threats and intimidation. ...and that isolated me even further, nobody wanted to be around the kid that kind of like was subject to snap.” - L.G.

This understanding of their younger selves, acquired after much soul-searching and self-healing, corresponds with recent advances in neuroscience showing how trauma can trap people in their survivalist “bottom brain.”

“When one of the homies would get shot or killed, all I felt was rage and anger and a desire for retaliation... I was fueled, always fueled off anger. Anger was already inside of me because of pops, because of my biological family, because of the abuse. So anger was always there.” - S.C.

The presence of a loving, supportive adult is so essential to resilience in childhood, the lack of it is considered to be an adverse experience, one of the CDC's 16 ACEs. That crucial adult support was inconsistent at best for more than half (57%) of the formerly incarcerated men surveyed.

I remember vividly just standing there screaming. ...this four or five-year-old boy... So helpless. ... I felt like I was on an island all by myself. The world was against me." - S.C.

Follow-up interviews with some of the men suggest that even when there was an adult in their young lives who made them feel special, they felt they could not confide in that person. In effect, they were alone, bearing the weight of what had or was happening to them and its repercussions. These men described feeling ashamed and emotionally detached as boys, often from a very early age.

"I'd created an image of myself as somebody that was unlovable, somebody that didn't have value. And so if I didn't value those things in myself, I didn't value them in others. If I didn't care for myself, I wouldn't care for others." - L.G.

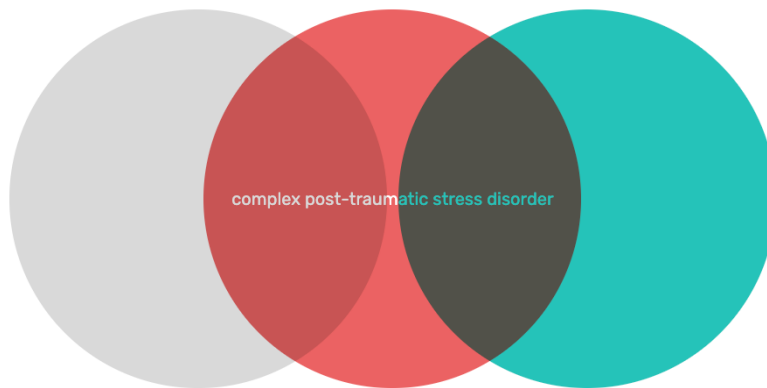


Sources: Impact Justice & American Health Rankings

Deeply wounded and disconnected from the adults in their lives, it's not surprising that half of them (49%) relied on drugs to numb painful emotions; more than half (62%) experienced bouts of depression; and nearly a third (30%) attempted suicide before age 18, a rate roughly three times higher than the national average.

“By the time I was 13 years old ... I had all of these emotions that I was trying to suppress all the time. And then the first time I got high, I was like, oh, I don't feel bad and stressed out now. So it was, like ... this huge release.” - K.H.

Collectively, these findings suggest that men whose life paths lead to prison may be living with what the World Health Organization and some others define as Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD). While PTSD is the result of an isolated traumatic event, CPTSD is the result of traumatic environments that repeatedly expose individuals to damaging circumstances and events.



The traumatic childhood experiences these men recall occurred many years ago, but their experiences and insights are acutely relevant today in the context of elevated levels of violence nationwide. They remind us that men who lash out are often deeply wounded themselves. Equally important, some of these men are also living examples of the power of healing.

“All that trauma is still there. It doesn’t go away. You learn how to deal with it.” - J.H.

“I came in touch with my empathy. I really started to embrace that, and having the emotional intelligence to be able to understand how my decisions impact folks.” - L.G.

Individuals and whole communities directly impacted by violence have long understood the power of healing and worked to put that knowledge into practice. Research, resources, and public support are finally catching up.

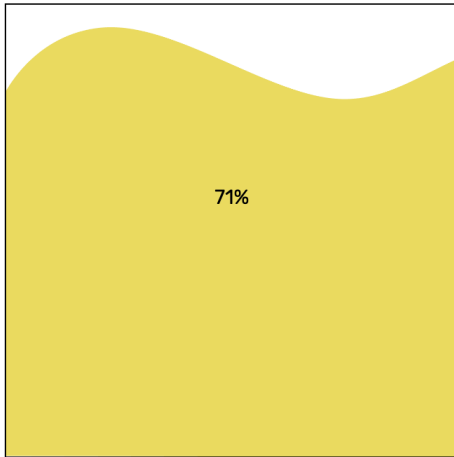
Programs that feature cognitive behavioral therapy as a response to the lingering effects of trauma show particular promise. A study of the Chicago-based program READI released earlier this year found that participating young men were nearly two-thirds less likely to be arrested for a shooting and nearly one-fifth less likely to be shot.

In Sacramento, Advance Peace reduced homicides and non-fatal shootings by 20 percent and for every dollar spent saved between \$10 and \$41 on emergency responders, health care, law enforcement, and other legal system responses.

Molly Baldwin, founder of Roca, another successful program for young men coping with trauma, sums it up well: “What we know changes behavior is people feeling safe, being able to manage their emotions and begin to heal.”

Also encouraging, programs like these and other community-based approaches to violence prevention appeal to both the public and government.

71% of likely voters believe that helping people who are likely to engage in violence is a good way to build safer, stronger communities.



The 2021 American Rescue Plan Act expanded funding for community-based approaches to violence prevention.

Source: Justice Collaborative

This is just the beginning. To end cycles of violence, boys and men of all ages need pathways to safety and healing. This includes the 1.1 million men currently in prison. Many of them are parents, and virtually all of them will come home.

“I remember making this conscious choice that I was not going to be like my father. My father didn’t really know how to say I love you. He didn’t know how to express things like that. He didn’t know how to demonstrate affection in any kinda way. . . . I think young men get to a place where they just don’t believe that they matter. So...the message I try to send... is just like, look, you do matter, your life matters.” - K.H.

[View this story online](#)

[View complete findings from Impact Justice's survey of formerly incarcerated men](#)

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