



Compassion and Incarceration: Trauma Response in Detention Settings – A View Behind the Behavior

The criminal justice system in the United States holds almost 2.3 million people in 1,719 state prisons, 102 federal prisons, 1,852 juvenile correctional facilities, 3,163 local jails, and 80 Indian Country jails as well as in military prisons, immigration detention facilities, civil commitment centers, state psychiatric hospitals, and prisons in the territories. Research has shown a connection between trauma and criminality due in part to the coping mechanisms of aggression and substance misuse after a traumatic event. Rates of exposure to traumatic events reported by male prisoners is over 62%- with 7-14% reporting significant and complex trauma histories. Over 80% of female juveniles have experienced sexual abuse, making sexual abuse one of the primary predictors of girl's entry into the criminal justice system.

Over the last two decades, there has been an increasing recognition of the role that trauma plays in a wide range of health, mental health and other social problems from both the perspectives of the victim and of the suspect. Traumatic experiences, particularly multiple experiences over the course of a lifetime, can result in a range of behavioral health problems beyond and including post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, depression, anxiety problems, childhood behavioral disorders, psychosis and some personality disorder diagnoses are all common traumatic responses.

In other words, people who have experienced trauma(s) may respond to the experience(s) in a variety of ways including expressions of violence and other criminal and non-criminal behaviors. A considerable body of literature has documented the relationship between trauma/child abuse and subsequent aggressive and criminal acts. Child abuse and neglect, poverty, sexual molestation, and witnessing violence are, among others, the most common risk factors for post-traumatic reactions, aggression, and antisocial behavior.

Unfortunately, many first responders, law enforcement, attorneys, prosecutors, counselors, jail staff and other allied professionals, do not truly understand trauma or the real impact of trauma and are not providing true trauma informed response and care. While the corrections environment itself may cause or exacerbate trauma symptoms in some individuals, facilities have the ability to implement trauma-informed practices to minimize re-traumatization. Further, a trauma responsive environment also increases a staff person's ability to mitigate the constant vicarious trauma that they are exposed too and increases professionalism, compassion and quality care while reducing staff turn-over and by decreasing potentially violent interactions between staff and inmate. It is clear that providing a trauma responsive structure and services increases the possibility of reducing recidivism and in creating a real and tangible change in offenders' lives upon reentry. A change the entire community would welcome.

Objectives:

- Explain the physiological and neurological effect of trauma on the brain
- Explore impact of trauma on behavior and decision making
- Explain "safety" from a neurological perspective
- Define a holistic, multifaceted definition of trauma informed response and care
- Explore the relationship between incarceration and trauma
- Explore trauma informed response and care as it relates to recidivism
- Explore re-entry and coping mechanisms
- Discuss vicarious trauma in jail staff and its impact on consumers and community