Trauma: A Common Denominator

Trauma is often the common thread or common denominator running through a variety of co-occurring issues, ranging from mental health concerns to substance abuse, poverty, exploitation by the sex industry, homelessness and incarceration. A look at some statistics provides examples of how trauma is involved in many of the current problems faced by people seeking help from social service agencies, especially people who are struggling with multiple issues simultaneously:

- **Substance abuse.** Preliminary data from a National Institute on Drug Abuse study noted 90 percent of women in drug treatment had experienced domestic violence from a partner during their lifetime (Miller, 1994). As many as 74 percent of women in substance abuse treatment have experienced sexual abuse (Kubbs, 2000).

- **Mental health.** As many as 90 percent of people who have severe psychiatric symptoms are survivors of at least one incident of trauma during their lifetimes (Akers et. al., 2007). Studies have found that up to 53 percent of people who seek services from public mental health centers report childhood sexual or physical abuse (Huckshorn, 2004). In one study, of the 90 percent of people receiving public mental health services who had been exposed to trauma, most had multiple experiences of trauma (Huckshorn, 2004).

- **Disabilities.** A person with a disability – regardless of age, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity or sexual orientation – is twice as likely to be a victim of abuse than a person without a disability (Wayne State University, 2002). Among adults with developmental disabilities, as many as 83 percent of women and 32 percent of men have been victims of sexual assault (ICASA, 2001). In addition to abuse by family members or intimate partners, people with disabilities are at risk for abuse by attendants or health care providers. They are also more likely to experience a longer duration of abuse than people without disabilities (Young et. al, 1997). Street crime is a more serious problem as well. Studies have shown that people with disabilities have a four to ten times higher risk of becoming crime victims than persons without disabilities (Wayne State University, 2002).

- **Poverty.** Studies show that over 50 percent of women receiving public assistance report having experienced physical abuse at some point in their adult lives, and most of these women also report a history of physical and/or sexual abuse in childhood (Lyons, 2000).

- **Homelessness.** One study found that 92 percent of homeless women had experienced severe physical or sexual abuse at some point in their lives. Of all homeless women and children, 60 percent had been abused by age 12, and 63 percent have been victims of intimate partner violence as adults. Among cities surveyed by the U.S. Conference of Mayors in 2003, 44 percent identified domestic violence as a primary cause of homelessness (National Network to End Domestic Violence, 2004).
• **Sex trafficking.** Although not all sexually abused children are recruited into commercial sex, the majority of individuals involved in the commercial sex industry have a history of sexual abuse as children, usually by several people (Farley, 2003). One study found that 66 percent of people involved in commercial sex were victims of child sexual abuse. Women sexually abused as children are four times more likely than women who haven’t been abused to work in the commercial sex industry, while men sexually abused as children are eight times more likely to work in the commercial sex industry (ICASA, 2001).

• **Incarceration.** Incarcerated people have a history of trauma at much higher rates than the general population. The rate of physical or sexual abuse or violence experienced by incarcerated women, either within their families or by intimate partners, is quite high – estimates vary from 44 percent to 80 percent – compared to that reported by women in the general population – a 30 percent lifetime occurrence (O’Brien, 2002). In a study of inmates at a Midwestern state prison, 22 percent of male respondents said they had been forced to have sexual contact against their will at least once while incarcerated (ICASA, 2001).

**References:**

Akers, D., Schwartz, M. and Abramson, W. *Beyond Labels: Working with Abuse Survivors with Mental Illness Symptoms or Substance Abuse Issues.* Austin, TX: Safe Place.


