

Trauma-informed front-line services essential for the new shape of society and life post-COVID

Now more than ever we need to move towards a trauma-informed society and services

1.0 Understanding trauma and its impact

Trauma is a harmful and costly public health problem.¹ Traumatic life experiences can have a significant impact on people's lives, increasing the risk of poorer physical and mental health and poorer social, educational and criminal justice outcomes. Trauma can affect people at any stage in their lives and particular sections of the population (e.g. children) are more vulnerable to traumatic experiences.²

In Ireland, we know there are traumatised populations not only in the mental health and substance abuse services, but also in homeless services, the criminal justice system, and those who frequent the care and family courts systems.

The Adverse Childhood Experiences movement³ is injecting a new impetus into the public and political discourse around human distress and behaviours, and provides a framework for better understanding of the needs of both children and adults who

¹ U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration SAMHSA, <https://nicic.gov/samhsas-concept-trauma-and-guidance-trauma-informed-approach>. Magruder, Kathryn M et al. "Trauma is a public health issue." *European journal of psychotraumatology* vol. 8,1 1375338. 9 Oct. 2017, doi:10.1080/20008198.2017.1375338

² Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach.

³ Felitti, V.J., Anda, R.F., Nordenberg, D, et al. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study. *American Journal Preventative Medicine*. 1998; 14: 245-258; Ashton, K., Bellis, M. & Hughes, (2016) Adverse childhood experiences and their association with health-harming behaviours and mental wellbeing in the Welsh adult population: a national cross-sectional survey; Bellis, M. A., Hughes, K., Leckenby, N., Jones, L., Baban, A., Kachaeva, M., Terzic, N. (2014). Adverse childhood experiences and associations with health-harming behaviours in young adults: surveys in eight eastern European countries. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 92(9), 641–655. doi:10.2471/BLT.13.1292

have experienced trauma. In a comprehensive Lancet paper calculating the cost of ACEs, Bellis et al found annual costs attributable to ACEs were estimated to be US\$581 billion in Europe alone.⁴ The study noted that ACEs are consistently an avoidable risk factor for some of the largest threats to public health and costs to health services. For the purposes of the research, the term ACEs referred to some of the most intense sources of stress that children can be exposed to, including child abuse, interparental violence, and parental substance misuse.

The study concluded that even a modest 10% reduction in the prevalence of individuals with single or multiple ACEs could be equivalent to annual savings of \$105 billion.

Given all of this research and evidence, we must accept that trauma is an almost universal experience of public and social systems and it is imperative that cultural changes take place to reflect this.

Addressing trauma requires a multi-pronged, multi-agency public health approach including public education and awareness, prevention and early identification, and effective trauma-specific assessment and treatment. One of the world's leading expert bodies on trauma, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), has identified three key elements of a trauma-informed approach as: realising the prevalence of trauma; recognising how trauma affects all individuals; and responding by putting this knowledge into practice.⁵

This approach in health and social services is more important than ever because natural disasters such as the global pandemic occurring at the moment means that currently, society at large, is experiencing a kind of trauma and grief that is different

⁴ Bellis et al, Life course health consequences and associated annual costs of adverse childhood experiences across Europe and North America: a systematic review and meta-analysis: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667\(19\)30145-8/fulltext#seccestitle130](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(19)30145-8/fulltext#seccestitle130)

⁵ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach.

to anything we've collectively experienced before. The social fall out post-COVID in our schools, workplaces, mental health and social structures will undoubtedly be significant. Now more than ever we need to move towards a trauma-informed society and services.

2.0 What 'trauma-informed' means for service delivery

A trauma-informed approach to the delivery of health and social care services means that people who work in those services have an understanding of trauma and an awareness of the impact it can have across settings, services, and populations.

A trauma-informed service understands that people's behaviours are occurring for a reason, and that, to take one example, someone with challenging behaviour should, rather than being labelled violent, be seen as frightened or traumatised, and treated as such. Services need to ask 'what happened to you', instead of focusing on problematic behaviours and asking, or perhaps telling – what is wrong you?

Trauma-informed practice practically means⁶:

- integrating understanding of past and current experiences of trauma into all aspects of service delivery.
- Promoting resilience and eliminating stigmatising language.
- providing professionals with training in trauma to support recovery in families and communities. Currently training on trauma and ACEs is rarely part of health-care, education or social-care curricula.
- making people feel safe and in control in environments that do not retraumatise.

3.0 Leadership and investment required

⁶ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach.



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With all this evidence and knowledge coming to the fore, the new Irish government must commit in national policy that frontline public services starting with mental health, addiction, homeless and criminal justice become trauma aware.

By taking a public health approach to trauma, it does not mean that everybody needs to be a trauma expert, but rather recognising trauma should be everybody's business.

We know with ambitious thinking and leadership, this can be done. Our nearest neighbours Scotland have a national training plan in place to ensure that all frontline workers can recognise and deal with psychological trauma.⁷ Police, social workers and nurses were among the staff to benefit from the plan, which is being rolled out to all frontline workers.

Trauma-informed approaches to childhood care and education have become increasingly widespread too.⁸ For young people, schools must become a place that recognises their trauma and teachers and schools must be supported to nurture trauma-informed environments.

In Ireland, we are beginning to see mobilisation around this issue. Conferences and other events with experts from other jurisdictions to raise awareness about ACEs

⁷ Scottish government pledges £1.35 million from the Scottish Government will be invested to create a national training programme, developed for workers supporting people who have had adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and traumatic experiences in adulthood, <https://www.gov.scot/news/gbp-1-35-million-for-trauma-training/>. See the national training plan: <https://www.nes.scot.nhs.uk/media/4321706/Scottish%20Psychological%20Trauma%20Training%20Plan%202019.pdf>

⁸ McConnico, N., Boynton-Jarrett, R., Bailey, C., & Nandi, M. (2016). A framework for trauma-sensitive schools: Infusing trauma-informed practices into early childhood education systems. *Zero to Three*, 36(5), 36–44.

Mendelson, T., Clary, L. K., Sibinga, E., Tandon, D., Musci, R., Mmari, K., ... & Ialongo, N. (2020). A randomized controlled trial of a trauma-informed school prevention program for urban youth: Rationale, design, and methods. *Contemporary clinical trials*, 90, 105895.

Overstreet, S., Chafouleas, S.M. Trauma-Informed Schools: Introduction to the Special Issue. *School Mental Health* 8, 1–6 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-016-9184-1>

See also: <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/31839/1/inc83-making-the-links-nurture-ACES-and-trauma.pdf>

and trauma have taken place,⁹ training is being rolled out in certain sectors, and there is huge interest in developing knowledge and practice around this issue.¹⁰ In order that all of this work is harnessed and supported, a central driving force with funding is required at government level to embed the concept of trauma-informed services into all government-funded services, creating a shared purpose and understanding around the issue.

By making public policies and the strategies of government departments ACE-aware, and trauma-informed, we can ensure that trauma is everyone's concern and that our government policies and front-line services embed an approach that displays empathy and understanding to make a difference in people's lives.

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⁹ See Mental Health Reform: <https://www.mentalhealthreform.ie/news/experts-highlight-importance-of-trauma-informed-policy-and-practice-to-future-of-irish-health-services/>; See Pein: https://www.pein.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/PEIN-ACEs-Policy-Paper_Every-Childhood-Lasts-a-Lifetime_2019-10.pdf

¹⁰ See Barnardos: <https://www.barnardos.ie/media/5775/barnardos-strategy-2019-2-page-summary-2.pdf> See Novas: <https://traumainformedcareireland.com/about-trauma-informed-care/> See Cork city press release: <https://www.corkcity.ie/en/council-services/news-room/press-releases/lord-mayor-launches-adverse-childhood-experiences-and-trauma-training.html>