



# POLICY BRIEF

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## A Whole School Approach to Improving the Outcomes of Children Living in High Crime Communities

*by Micere Keels, University of Chicago*

Single incident mass shootings traumatize children, but the chronic stress of living in high crime communities has the biggest lasting effect on their brains.<sup>1</sup> However, it is when spectacular traumatic events happen that we are reminded that safety is a prerequisite for children to function in schools. For example, in Chicago, when 9-year-old Tyshawn Lee became the youngest targeted victim of gang-related murder, there was a rush to provide students with supportive counseling. But in the 365 days before Tyshawn's murder, the Auburn Gresham neighborhood in which he lived had 838 violent crimes, and children in that neighborhood are expected to show up to school as if unaffected by exposure to such high levels of chronic traumatic stress.

One negative consequence that has direct effects on their functioning in school is an oversensitized flight or fight reaction whenever they perceive a threat.<sup>2</sup> Students experiencing traumatic stress may perceive a teacher who is exhibiting frustration (raised voice, angry facial expressions, and heavy breathing) as threatening. Such students may then respond with disruptive and obstructive classroom behaviors that are irrational, uncontrollable, and unacceptable.

The true challenge is that schools in high poverty, high crime neighborhoods are not serving one or a few students experiencing traumatic stress, but many, if not whole classrooms of students who are attempting to cope with the aftermath of repeated exposure to traumatic stress.<sup>3</sup> In such classrooms, one student's trauma-based classroom outburst may trigger and spread to other students, creating an unmanageable classroom climate in which little learning occurs.

Black students, particularly black boys, exhibiting symptoms of traumatic stress are in a highly vulnerable position.<sup>4</sup> This is because they are more likely to be perceived as not fitting into the norm of the school and

then receive exclusionary discipline sanctions. Research shows that these exclusionary sanctions are primarily for subjective classroom disruption behaviors not because they engage in severe aggressive behaviors.<sup>5</sup>

In Texas, for example, only 3 percent of suspensions and expulsions are for conduct for which state law mandates such disciplinary actions. The remaining 97 percent are made at the discretion of school officials, according to *Breaking School's Rules*, a 2011 report by the Council of State Governments Justice Center. These disciplinary actions, particularly expulsions, can set off a chain of negative experiences that affect youth for the rest of their lives. The council found that even after accounting for individual student differences, a student who is suspended or expelled is nearly three times as likely to be in contact with the juvenile justice system the following year.

A paradigm shift is needed.<sup>6</sup> Too many children coping with chronic exposure to traumatic stress, and consequently struggling to fit in at school, are suspended or expelled and get caught in the school-to-prison-pipeline. The pipeline starts with immediate instructional loss, followed by an increased likelihood of dropping out, juvenile justice system involvement, and later adult incarceration.<sup>7</sup>

**It is imperative that schools in high crime communities are provided with supports that enable their educational practices to reflect the neurobiological research on the effects on behavior and learning of repeated exposure to traumatic and stressful life events.**

**Brain and hormonal changes** caused by toxic levels of stress and trauma make the school environment extremely challenging:

- Toxic stress causes memory systems to degrade and fail. With low memory resources, learning is exceptionally difficult to consolidate.
- Stress hormones often remain high throughout the day, which degrades children's attention spans and ability to concentrate. Follow-on eating and sleeping difficulties further degrade their capacity to engage with learning opportunities.
- Memory and concentration difficulties impede their ability to process language, making it difficult to process and follow instructions and execute logic and sequences tasks.
- Their hypervigilance for potential sources of threat and oversized response to potential threats make interpersonal interactions with peers and teachers a source of ongoing stress.

Schools are therefore confronted with the task of **supporting traumatized children** to reset their baseline internal stress and arousal levels to bring their cortex—the area of the brain responsible for thinking, logic, analysis, and problem solving—back on line.

### **The Trauma-Informed School Framework**

Becoming a **trauma-informed school** goes beyond identifying and referring students with traumatic stress to outside services. The traditional referral framework problematizes the child and treats symptoms as they surface. The trauma-informed schools framework provides administrators and teachers with the science and skills to make the school and classroom into a space that is simultaneously educative and therapeutic.<sup>8</sup>

**Creating predictable routines is key.** The brain-body systems of children experiencing chronic traumatic stress are in a constant state of arousal readiness in preparation for the recurrence of threat. Uncertain and unpredictable school contexts amplify the stress response. Strategies that promote stability and familiarity reduce the need for the stress system to be as actively engaged.

**Positive behavior supports reduce the time and energy that teachers must spend reacting to disciplinary infractions with punishment-based strategies.** Such supports include proactive strategies for defining, teaching, and supporting appropriate student behaviors. Traumatized children rely on a limited set of behavioral routines to respond to all new challenges. They are left without resources to adapt to the specific requirements of any given environment. Schoolwide positive behavioral supports focus on teaching behavioral expectations and rewarding students for following them rather than waiting for problem behaviors to occur.

**Safe, supportive relationships create a foundation that enables learning.** Traumatized children often learn to perceive relationships as possible sources of threat rather than sources of support. In school contexts where relationships are constantly being negotiated, traumatized children experience social interactions as sources of stress, which maintain the need for trauma-based behavioral routines. However, if relationships with safe and consistent adults and peers can be established, they can become the foundation for change. Connected children and young people are calmer and more able to access their cognitive systems to learn.

The ideal intervention must be much farther upstream and prevent low-income children's exposure to high levels of community violence. Until then, it is [imperative that schools act now](#) to ensure that the current generation of children can benefit from our investments in public education.

**Micere Keels** is an associate professor in the Department of Comparative Human Development at the University of Chicago.

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<sup>1</sup> L. J. Hickman et al., "How Much Does 'How Much' Matter? Assessing the Relationship between Children's Lifetime Exposure to Violence and Trauma Symptoms, Behavior Problems, and Parenting Stress," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 28(6) (2013): 1338-62.

<sup>2</sup> B. Oehlberg, *Reaching and Teaching Stressed and Anxious Learners in Grades 4-8: Strategies for Relieving Distress and Trauma in Schools and Classrooms* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> B. D. Stein et al., "Prevalence of Child and Adolescent Exposure to Community Violence," *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 6(4)(2003): 247-64.

<sup>4</sup> R. J. Skiba et al., "The Color of Discipline: Sources of Racial and Gender Disproportionality in School Punishment," *The Urban Review*, 34(4) (December 2002): 317-42, [www.indiana.edu/~equity/docs/ColorofDiscipline2002.pdf](http://www.indiana.edu/~equity/docs/ColorofDiscipline2002.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> R. J. Skiba et al., "Race is Not Neutral: A National Investigation of African American and Latino Disproportionality in School Discipline," *School Psychology Review*, 40(1)(2011): 85; Skiba et al., "The Color of Discipline."

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<sup>6</sup> One example of such a shift is Barbara Oelhberg, “Why Schools Need to be Trauma-Informed,” *Trauma and Loss: Research and Interventions*, 8(2)(Fall/Winter 2008),

[www.traumainformedcareproject.org/resources/WhySchoolsNeedToBeTraumaInformed%282%29.pdf](http://www.traumainformedcareproject.org/resources/WhySchoolsNeedToBeTraumaInformed%282%29.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> J. Wald, and D. Losen, “Defining and Redirecting a School-To-Prison Pipeline.” Framing paper for the School-to-Prison Pipeline Research Conference, sponsored by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University and Northeastern University’s Institute on Race and Justice, May 16—17, 2003, <http://youthjusticenc.org/download/education-justice/suspension-and-expulsion/Defining%20and%20Re-Directing%20the%20School-to-Prison%20Pipeline.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> M. Walkley and T.L. Cox, “Building Trauma-Informed Schools and Communities,” *Children & Schools*, 35(2)(2013): 123-26; S. D. Crosby, “An Ecological Perspective on Emerging Trauma-Informed Teaching Practices,” *Children & Schools* [e-pub] (Sept. 2015).