

PAS QUICKNOTES

Trauma-Informed Planning

Trauma-informed care is an approach applied in the human services and health-care sectors that accounts for the fact that many individuals and communities have experienced trauma, a response to a highly stressful experience. Trauma-informed approaches have been used by health and human services practitioners for many years, but they have not been widely applied in planning. Interest in trauma-informed planning, however, is growing as trauma and trauma-informed approaches receive increasing attention in the community development and built environment realms.

BACKGROUND

Trauma happens when a person's or community's coping skills are overwhelmed by a stressful experience in a way that impacts how they feel and act after that experience. [Studies](#) have found that more than half of Americans experience trauma before they reach adulthood, though historically marginalized populations experience even higher rates of trauma.

Trauma can happen to individuals or entire communities. It can be the result of a one-time event (such as experiencing a violent crime or sexual assault), ongoing events (such as experiencing poverty, growing up with a caregiver with substance use disorder, or fleeing one's home as a refugee from violence or natural disaster), or chronic exposures that happen to a group of people (such as experiencing systemic racism or living in a community with a history of disinvestment and marginalization).

Trauma is a natural response to a stressful or threatening experience. Experiencing trauma can lead people to develop survival skills and protective behaviors, however, that impact how they feel during situations and interact with others. Importantly for planners, trauma can also impact how people and communities experience the community development process.

Trauma-informed care has had meaningful and beneficial impacts on health, well-being, and lived experiences of individuals who have experienced trauma. It is based on six key principles: safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice, and choice; and attention to cultural, historical, and gender issues. It guides an overall approach rather than dictating specific strategies. Trauma-informed care has been used primarily in health and human services settings, such as mental health facilities, schools, and community nonprofit organizations. These approaches, however, can also be applied to the community development process.

LEARN ABOUT TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACHES

A trauma-informed approach to community development can offer several benefits. It can make the community development process more effective and efficient for all involved by reducing frustration with the planning process and improving the number of people who benefit from development. It can also help build community strengths, promote community healing and resilience, and ensure that the community development process does not cause more harm and community trauma. Trauma-informed approaches can also inform planners' thinking about the types of built environments that foster trauma-informed healing spaces.

The first step for many planners will be learning about trauma-informed approaches. An important part of this learning is to understand the key role of ideas like social justice, antiracism, and equity. Incorporating trauma-informed approaches is often best supported by those with trauma expertise, so planners should consider inviting a trauma expert to be a member of their steering committees, stakeholder groups, or staff. Those experts include municipal social workers, mental health clinicians such as nurses or psychologists, or researchers at local universities who study trauma.

This PAS QuickNotes was prepared by Krista Schroeder, PhD, RN, Assistant Professor of Nursing, Temple University College of Public Health.



"Aspire No Limits" Philadelphia street mural honoring Shawn L. White, PhD, a community leader who created educational health initiatives on HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases for young African American men. (Photo by S. Weinik for Mural Arts Philadelphia.)



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To learn about trauma-informed approaches, planners can review resources from organizations such as [BRIDGE Housing](#), the [New Kensington Community Development Corporation](#), the [Sanctuary Institute](#), and the [Neighborhood Resilience Project](#). Trauma-informed community development has already been used with success in communities around the country. For example, it has been used [to help grow capacity, reduce displacement, and improve health in Philadelphia](#) and [strengthen existing communities and create thriving, healthy places for low-income families to live in San Francisco](#).

LEARN ABOUT AND RESPECT THE COMMUNITY'S HISTORY

A key aspect of a trauma-informed approach to community development is learning about the community's history, including past experiences with planning processes and experiences of marginalization. Marginalization can include active marginalization conducted by powerful organizations or government; implicit marginalization experienced through microaggressions, such as condescension or cutting off comment periods in meetings; or systemic barriers, such as policies and procedures.

It is important to lead with listening and center community members' perspectives on what is important to know about their community. This must be done by committing to an ongoing (not "once and done") learning process. A trauma-informed approach entails understanding that a community's history of broken promises, disrespect, or exclusion can influence how they experience planning and community development. Community members are always the experts on their community.

Further, it is important to respect that communities are not monoliths. Not everyone in a community has the same experience, and communities often include numerous subgroups with different perspectives. Seeking out and listening to community members' diverse perspectives is key, and aligns with planners' strong history of community engagement.

APPLY TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACHES TO ALL PLANNING PRACTICE

A trauma-informed approach to planning requires infusing trauma-informed principles throughout the entire planning process by taking diverse but synergistic actions. This includes ensuring the community has formal power and voice in all steps of the planning process; committing to regular re-examination of how the planning process is going, with a concrete plan for gathering and centering formal input from the community; not overpromising on what planners or the local government can deliver; taking a [strengths-based approach](#) that values and highlights the community's assets, rather than only focusing on challenges, barriers, or traumas; and providing opportunities that benefit the community from their perspective, such as creating opportunities for creative contributions through empowering community art, incorporating social activities that support social cohesion, and providing chances for useful skill development. Clarity and transparency are key throughout.

In addition, trauma-informed planning means considering how the built environment can play a role in creating [healing and restorative trauma-informed neighborhoods](#). There is rich evidence on how the built environment impacts mental health and social well-being, and how neighborhood characteristics like greenspace, placemaking, public spaces, noise, and lighting can make a neighborhood a healthier place for communities affected by trauma. Planners already know about the effects of built environments on community experiences; that knowledge provides a solid foundation for developing trauma-informed built environments.

CONCLUSIONS

Planners should consider trauma-informed approaches as a lens for application to the planning and community development process. While arising from the health and human services realm, these approaches directly align with planners' history of community engagement, as well as planners' awareness of the importance of the built environment for community experiences. Trauma-informed approaches can directly advance planners' work to promote the health, safety, and economic well-being of all people living in their communities.

PAS QuickNotes (ISSN 2169-1940) is a publication of the American Planning Association's Planning Advisory Service (PAS). Joel Albizo, FASAE, CAE, Chief Executive Officer; Petra Hurtado, PhD, Director of Research and Foresight; Ann Dilleuth, AICP, PAS Editor. © 2023 American Planning Association, 205 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 1200, Chicago, IL 60601-5927; [planning.org](#). All rights reserved. APA permits the reproduction and distribution of PAS QuickNotes to inform public officials and others about important planning-related topics. Visit PAS online at [planning.org/pas](#) to find out how PAS can work for you.

FURTHER READING

Published by the American Planning Association

American Planning Association. 2019. [Planning for Equity Policy Guide](#). Chicago: American Planning Association.

Morley, David. 2019. "[Inclusive Planning Processes](#)," PAS QuickNotes 82. Chicago: American Planning Association.

Shah, Sagar, and Brittany Wong. 2020. [Toolkit to Integrate Health and Equity into Comprehensive Plans](#). Chicago: American Planning Association.

Other Resources

BRIDGE Housing Corporation. n.d. [Trauma Informed Community Building: The Evolution of a Community Engagement Model in a Trauma Impacted Neighborhood](#).

Impact Services and New Kensington Community Development Corporation. n.d. [Connected Community: A Trauma Informed Community Engagement Toolkit](#).

Schroeder, Krista, Jennie G. Noll, Kevin A. Henry, Shakira F. Suglia, and David B. Sarwere. 2021. "[Trauma-Informed Neighborhoods: Making the Built Environment Trauma-Informed](#)," Preventive Medicine Reports 23(2021 Sep): 101501.