



# Trauma and Reentry

Working With Clients Who Have Experienced Custodial Trauma

# Zoom Tips to Guide Discussion

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Please feel free to turn your **video** off or on as needed.

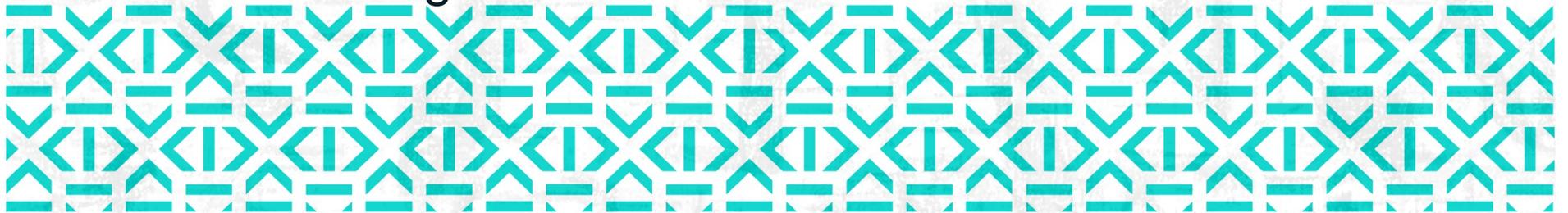
As you have **questions or comments** during the presentations, please add them to the chat box.

You were automatically placed on **mute** when you entered the meeting.

Please flag any **acronyms or unfamiliar terms** in the chat.

# Welcome!

Lahela Mattox, Chief Operations Officer  
Regional Task Force on Homelessness



# Introduction: Homebase

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**Lily Harvey**  
*Senior Staff Attorney,  
Head of CLSI*



**Maddie Nation**  
*Policy Analyst*

Reach Our Team: [clsi@homebaseccc.org](mailto:clsi@homebaseccc.org)

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# Introduction: Local Partners

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**Marc Stevenson**

*LCSW, Licensed Behavioral Health  
Clinician, Father Joe's Villages*



**Curtis Howard**

*Lead Organizer, All of Us or None-  
San Diego Chapter.*

# 2021 Training Series

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# Today's Training Goals

- Better understand the experience and trauma inherent in criminal legal system contact;
- Explore how trauma can manifest for clients in reentry and beyond;
- Reflect on personal and agency approaches to custodial trauma;
- Learn strategies to better serve this population.

# Agenda

- Context
- Perspectives on Custodial Trauma and How Best to Address it
  - Clinician Perspective
  - Advocate Perspective
- Questions and Discussion

# Context: **Who** Experiences This Trauma?

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Formerly incarcerated community members are **nearly ten times more likely to experience homelessness** than the general population.



Icon made by [Freepik](#) from [www.flaticon.com](http://www.flaticon.com)

People who are BIPOC and/or LGBTQI+ are **disproportionately represented** in both homelessness and criminal legal systems.

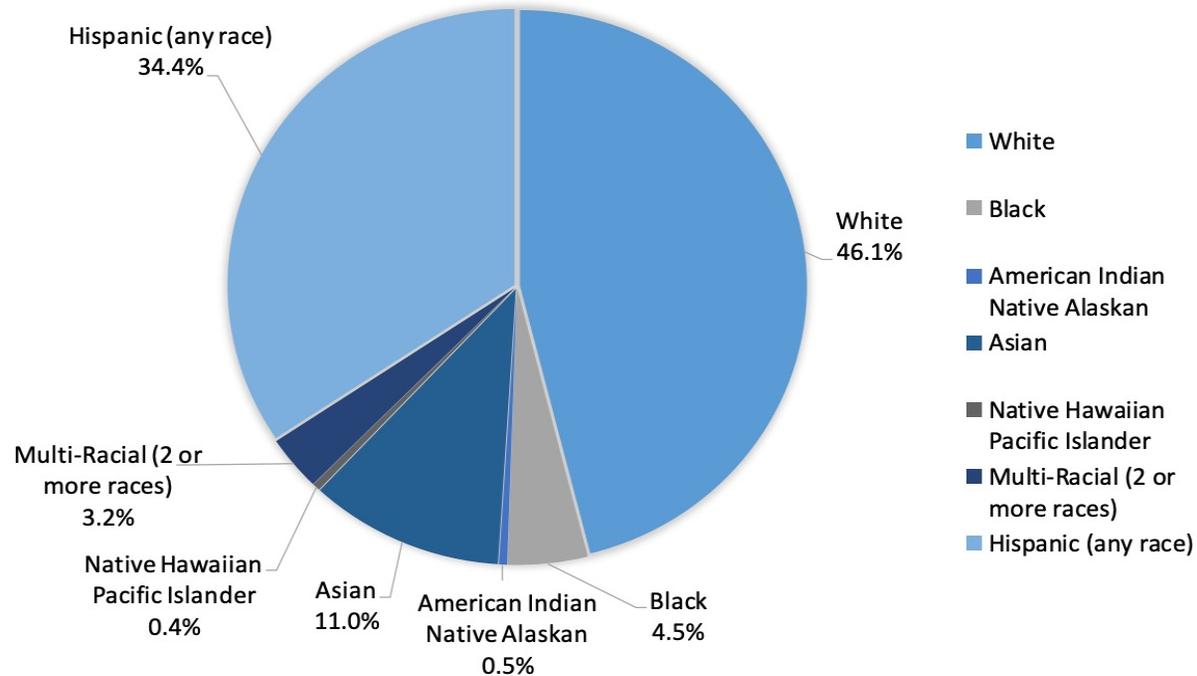
# **36% of U.S. women and 29% of men have experienced domestic violence**

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but **68%** of men and **60%** of women in  
the U.S. **prison** population have  
experienced physical or sexual abuse

# San Diego County Snapshot - Population by Race

2017 Population Estimates by Race/Ethnicity

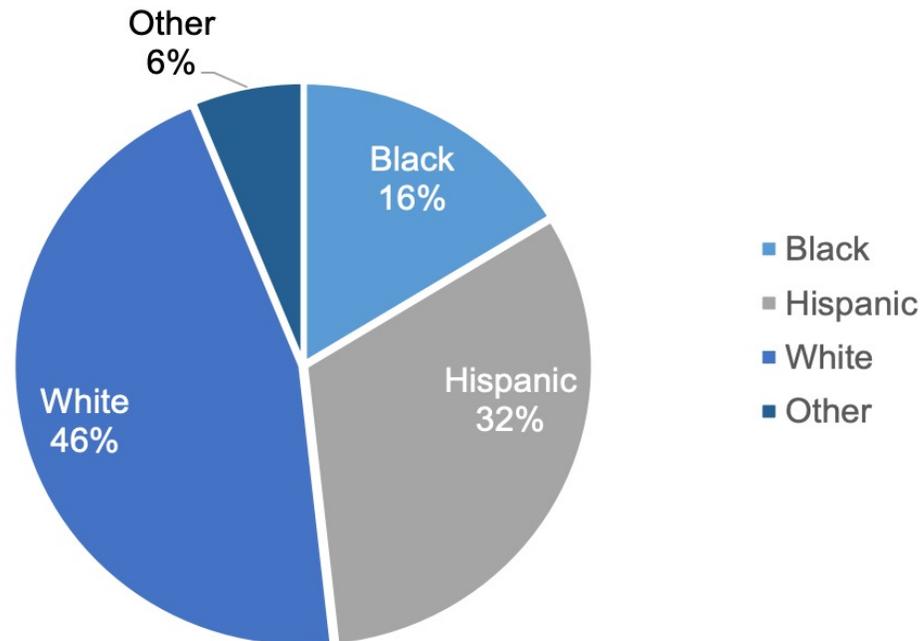


\* <https://www.bscc.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/Demographic-Reference-Data-San-Diego.pdf>

# San Diego County Snapshot - Arrests by Race

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2017 Arrests by Race/Ethnicity



\* <https://www.bscc.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/Demographic-Reference-Data-San-Diego.pdf>

# Share out

In your chat box, please answer the following question:

On a **scale of 1 to 5**, how would you rate your/your **agency's ability** to respond to the unique needs of people dually impacted by homelessness and the criminal legal system?

# Custodial Trauma

Marc Stevenson,  
LCSW, Father Joe's Villages

## Presenter Info

- Marc Stevenson LCSW
- McAlister Institute New Connections Re-Entry Program
- Mental Health Systems Parolee Partnership Program
- Trauma Therapist at Village Health Center FJV
- Volunteer consultant for SDSU Psychology Clinic
- Culture of Incarceration Trainer Community Research Foundation

# Today's Presentation

- Definitions
- How incarceration traumatizes and retraumatizes
- How custodial trauma can show up
- How this is relevant to housing

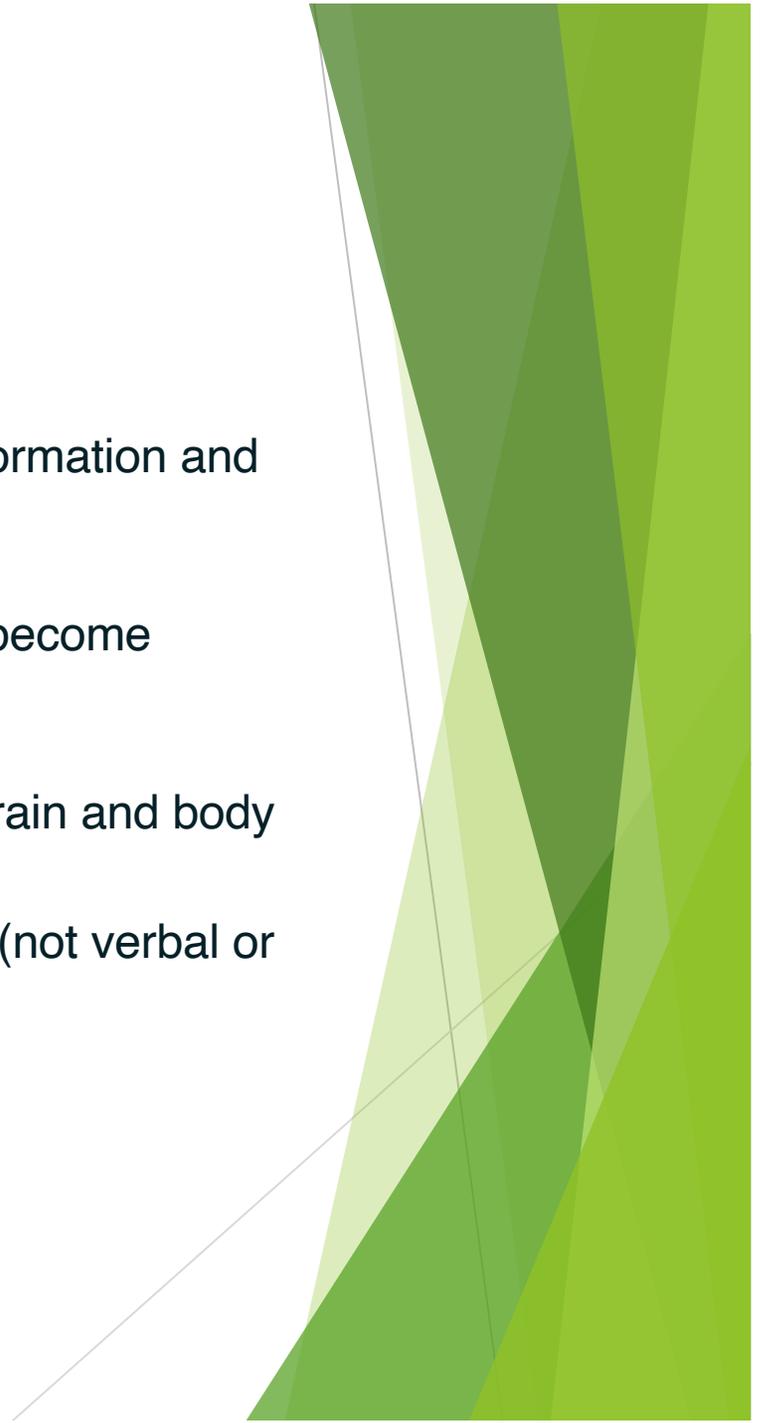


# What is Trauma?

- Psychological trauma can occur when a person experiences an extreme stressor that negatively affects his or her emotional or physical well-being. (Ruglass, 2014)
- Trauma can cause development of personality traits as defenses against perceived threats
- Some people will develop a disorder like PTSD, or other responses
- Some people will experience symptoms similar to those in PTSD though do not meet diagnostic threshold
- Some people will experience trauma and have no symptoms due to factors like community support and resilience

## Trauma and the Brain

- The brain and body routinely manage new information and experiences
- With trauma natural coping mechanisms can become overloaded
- Disturbing experiences remain frozen in the brain and body
- Stored in the Limbic System in raw emotional (not verbal or story form)

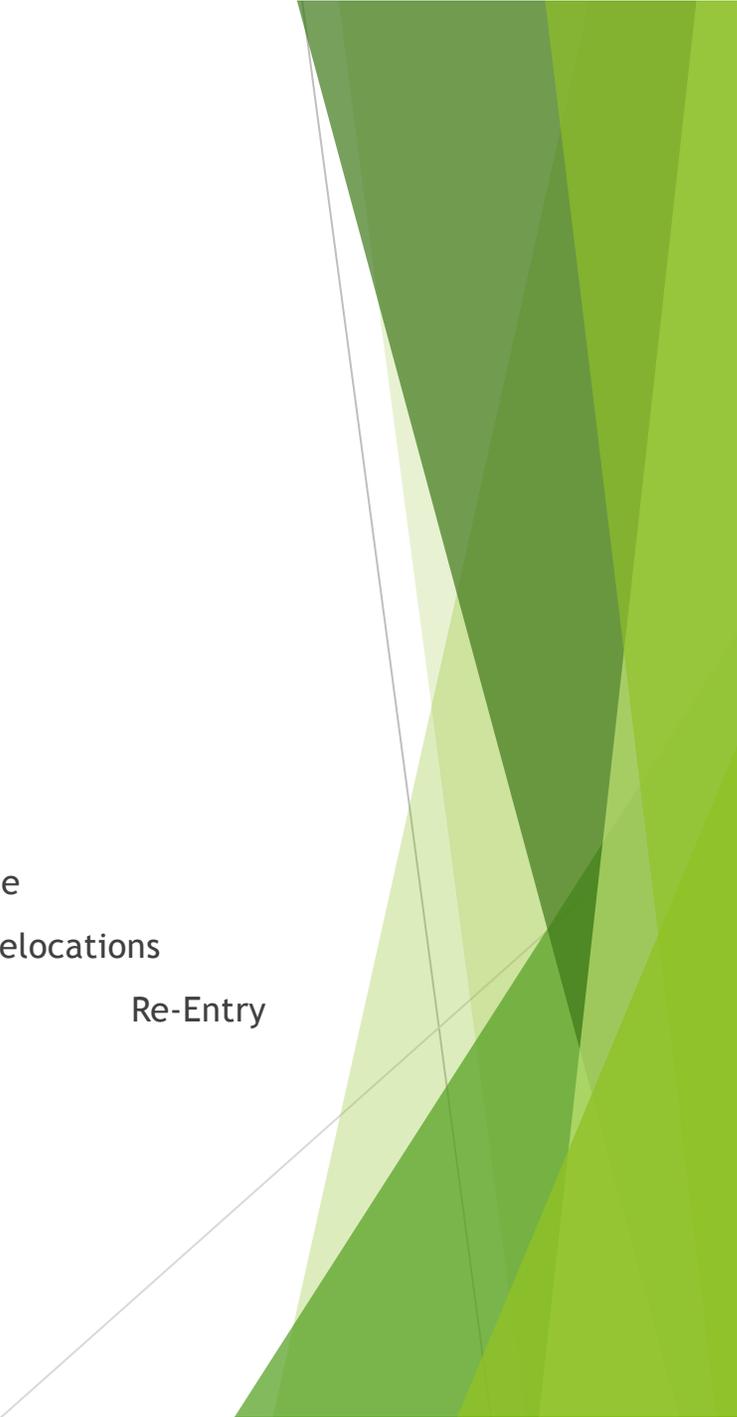


# What is Custodial Trauma?

- ▶ The experiences of being stopped, arrested, detained, prosecuted, convicted are all traumatic and all part of being exposed to the criminal legal system.
- ▶ Actual time spent in custody, away from the outside community is additionally traumatic and is referred to as “custodial trauma.”
- ▶ There are many layers to what makes being in custody traumatic - some are fairly obvious.
  - ▶ Away from family and loved ones
  - ▶ Loss of control of one’s life
  - ▶ Losing connections, resources, supports on the outside (job, housing, car, school)
  - ▶ Living in an unsafe, punitive environment that you are unable to change or escape
- ▶ These, and other, more subtle traumatic stressors actually impact the brain and can shift permanently how people who have experienced custodial trauma function, even years after their release.

# Incarceration Timeline

- ▶ Childhood
- ▶ Prearrest
- ▶ Arrest
- ▶ Detention
- ▶ Court
- ▶ Sentencing
- ▶ Serving Time
- ▶ Relocations
- ▶ Re-Entry



# Psychological Impact of Prison

- ▶ When we imprison the body we alter its relationship to space and time
- ▶ Two timelines - one is tied to controlled, repetitive daily routine (slow) - the other is tied to the external world (out of sync, moving faster)
- ▶ Overcrowding, no privacy, violence, racketeering, lack of sexuality, forced sexuality, fear of kingpins/gangs, fear of prison staff, psychological isolation, deterioration of facilities, gate fever... all impact mental health.
- ▶ Prison is a pyramid with an apex that cant be reached or reasoned with. At the top are emotionless rules and procedures. At the bottom codes and expectations tied to the threat of physical harm or even death
- ▶ There are only two choices, subjugation or “prison freedom” through resistance

[Reflexions - What is the psychological impact of prison? \(uliege.be\)](http://uliege.be)

# Driving Forces of the Culture of Incarceration

- ▶ Survival demands in prison create intense, driving forces of prison “*culture*”
- ▶ Vulnerability in so many aspects of life in prison requires immediate and concrete responses.
- ▶ Relationships inside provide a sense of safety
- ▶ Group unity is based on a shared resistance to authority, systems and other groups.
- ▶ Respect is dependent on removing or hiding all vulnerabilities
- ▶ The driving forces of prison culture include:
  - ▶ Survival
  - ▶ Relationship
  - ▶ Respect

[Respect in Prison Culture - Prison Fellowship](#)

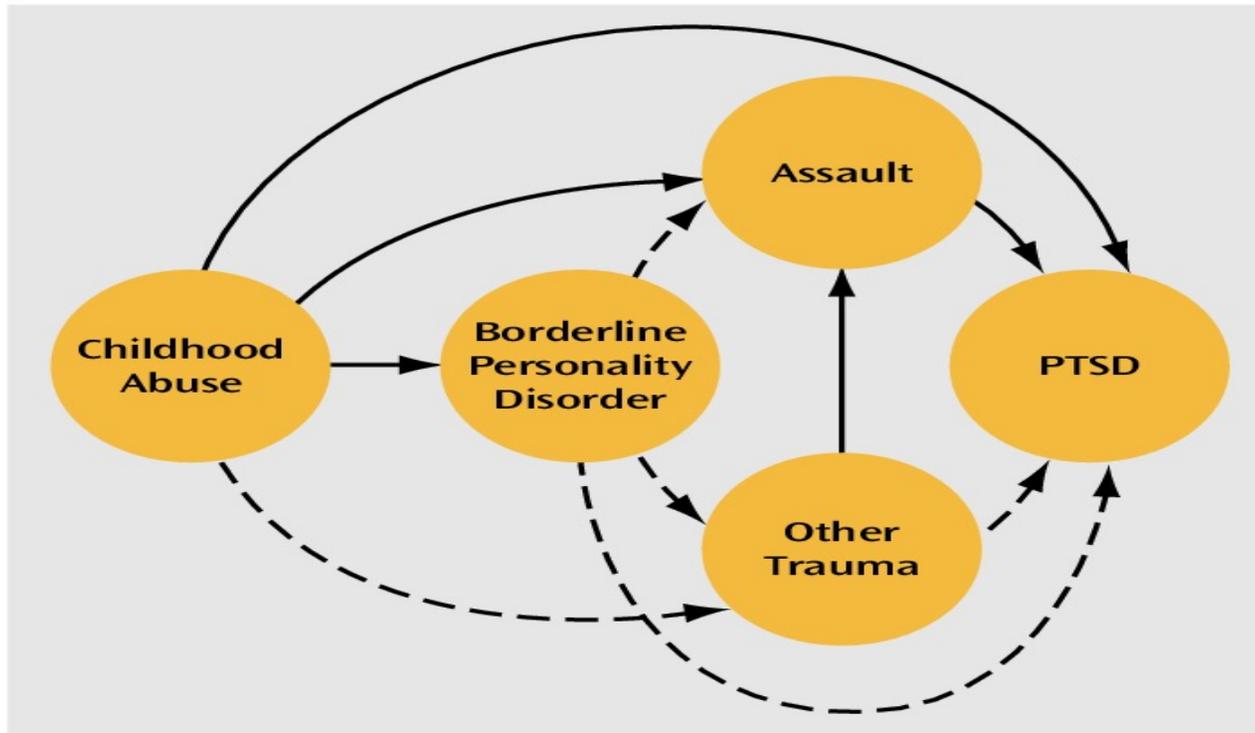
## Prisons are Designed to House Perpetrators Not Victims



# Borderline Personality

- ▶ Characterized by difficulties regulating emotion, mood swings, impulsivity, instability, aggression, unstable self image and unstable relationships
- ▶ 25% to 50% of people in prison suffer from borderline personality disorder (Sansone 2009)
- ▶ Causes include Genetics, Neurological Brain Function and Environmental Factors
- ▶ Environmental Factors include childhood sexual trauma, neglect, separation from parents and other traumatic experiences
- ▶ A person with PTSD might also have Borderline Personality

# Impact of Complex Trauma

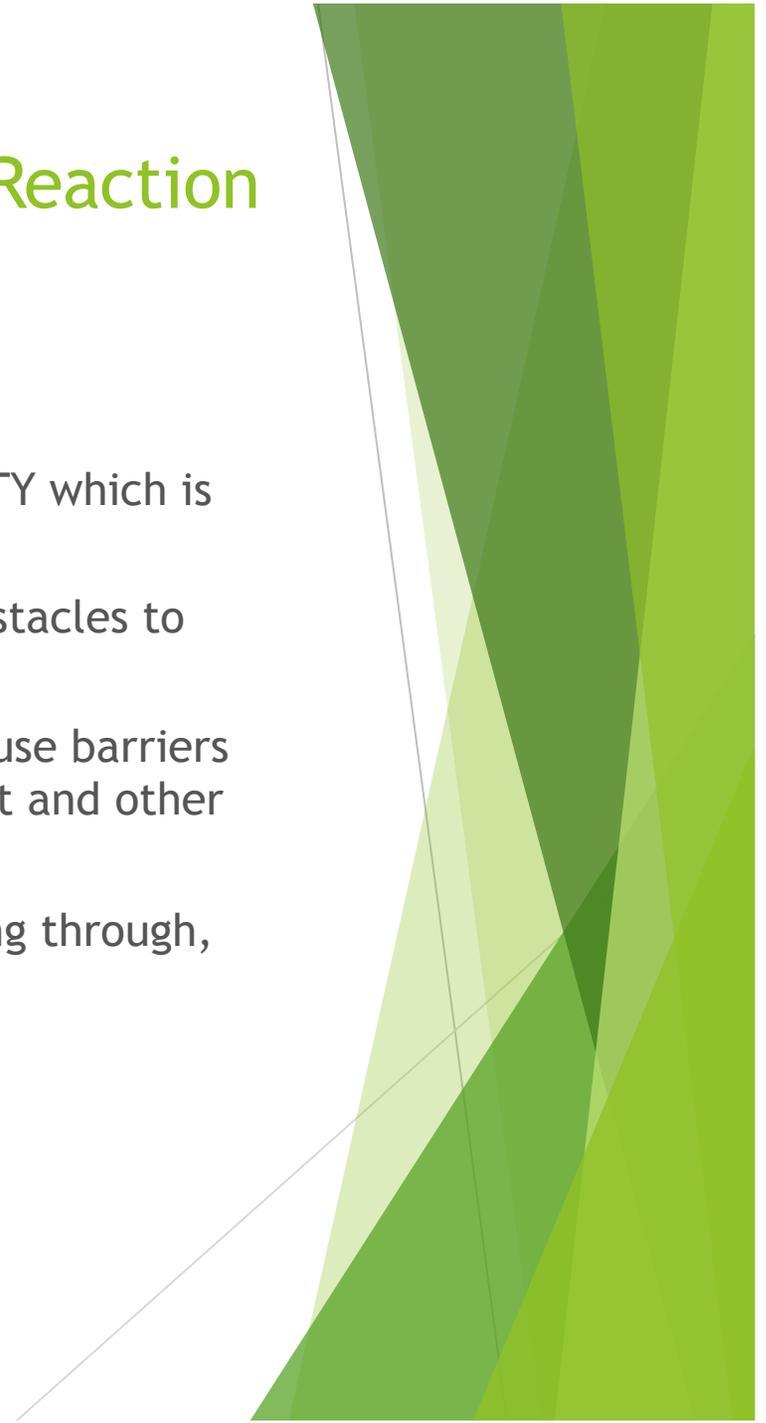


# Custodial Trauma and Personality

- ▶ Trauma may cause development of personality traits as defenses against perceived threats
- ▶ Some who have experienced Custodial trauma may have also experienced complex childhood trauma
- ▶ Some who have been exposed to complex trauma in childhood may present with borderline personality traits
- ▶ The similarity between complex childhood trauma reactions and custodial trauma reactions is that both are perceived and felt as life and death reactions
- ▶ We have seen that some exposed to the trauma of incarceration may adapt certain traits to protect themselves in prison
- ▶ In prison, these traits are prevalent enough to be observed as prison culture

# Housing and Custodial Trauma Reaction

- ▶ Housing resources are key in establishing SAFETY which is primary in reducing trauma reactions
- ▶ Reactions to Custodial Trauma may become obstacles to housing retention
- ▶ Lack of trust for authority and systems may cause barriers to interacting with staff, property management and other tenants
- ▶ This may lead to avoiding support, not following through, missing information or lease issues



## Examples of what Custodial Trauma May Look Like in a Housing Setting

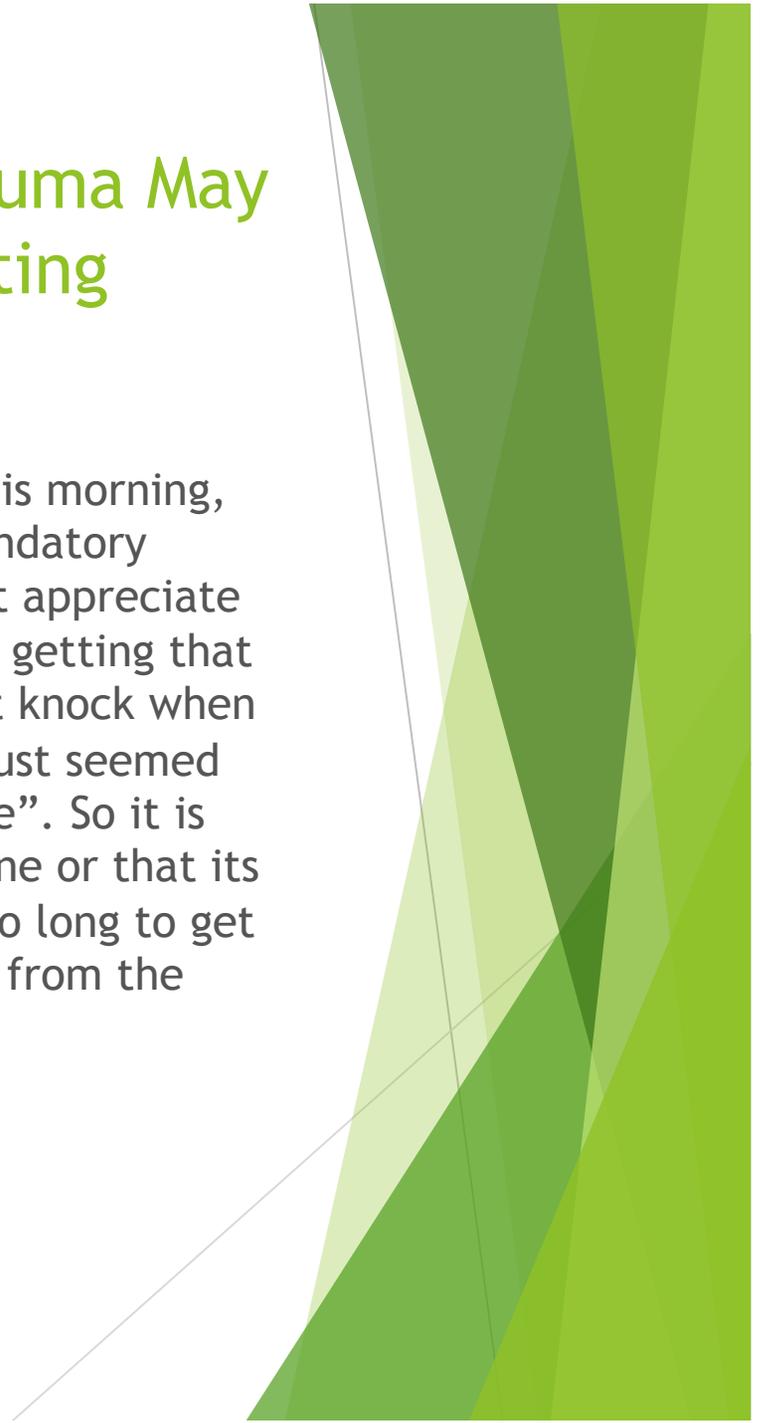
- ▶ I don't know what it is with these dam keys. Seems like everyone has so many keys and when they walk by I hear them jingling. All I can think of is the guards yelling "get back in your cell", "lights out", "yard recall", "everybody down". It feels just like I am still there. I feel it in my chest and my gut. And when the maintenance guy or the apartment manager jingle up to me and start talking to me, I can barely hear them because I'm not even there anymore. I'm back on the yard and all I want to do is run from how it feels. I just say yes so they will go away or I don't even answer the door.

## Examples of what Custodial Trauma May Look Like in a Housing Setting

- ▶ My case manager called and set up a meeting to “discuss” something with me. Apparently my music was loud last night and I got a complaint causing a lease “violation”. So the case manager is asking me all these questions about how it went down and all I can think about is all the levels I have been asked questions that always lead to something bad. The cop when I was arrested and how he used what I said to charge me, the public defender that got me a guilty verdict, the guards asking me questions and causing the other inmates to jack me about it. It never feels safe to me.

## Examples of what Custodial Trauma May Look Like in a Housing Setting

The maintenance guy to the apartments comes this morning, knocks 3 times and just comes in. Says he has mandatory repairs and I was notified in a memo. I should just appreciate that at least he knocked 3 times because I wasn't getting that courtesy inside. But for me, my step father didn't knock when he came in my room as a child. And in prison, it just seemed that nothing belonged to me, I was in "their house". So it is really hard for me to think any of this is really mine or that its going to last, or that I'm even safe here. It took so long to get here but now it doesn't feel like I have moved on from the past at all.



# Safety is Key

- ▶ Feeling safe in housing is critical
- ▶ There may be many barriers to “feeling safe” in some permanent housing settings
- ▶ Some affordable housing units may mimic an unsafe environment to a person that experienced custodial trauma
- ▶ Housing staff have an opportunity to make a big difference through trauma informed support approaches
- ▶ Agencies providing supportive services in housing can install policies that support a trauma informed approach

## Reflections for Providers

- ▶ How do you/your agency use language to minimize retraumatization?
- ▶ How does your agency use legal history information in making program and case management decisions?
- ▶ How does your facility work to minimize potential triggers or stressors?
- ▶ How does your program work to combat the stigma of incarceration?

# What Does a Trauma Informed Approach Look Like?

## The Five Components of Trauma Informed Care

1. **Safety** both physical and emotional
2. **Trust** boundaries, consistency and transparency
3. **Choice** allow for choice and voice in all interactions
4. **Empowerment** identify, recognize and prioritize clt strengths
5. **Collaboration** equal partnership with shared power
6. **Language** positive, conversational, offers options/choice

# Summary of Approaches for Work in Permanent Housing Settings

- ▶ Model compassion (vs demand respect) in our communication
- ▶ Come alongside
- ▶ Use our MI
- ▶ Nonjudgmental (Adult Voice)
- ▶ Learn all we can about what our clients value most
- ▶ Understand what principles support client values
- ▶ Re-define success
- ▶ Validate
- ▶ Maintain expectations

# Reflective Guidance for Providers

Teach the difference between survival skills and success skills.

Approach those you work with as problem solvers versus victims or convicts.

Allow and accept their S/O's, children and friends.

Help them identify and utilize their unique talents, gifts and skills.

Invite them to work on concrete tasks that impact their day to day life.

Give deserved respect and provide/create opportunities to earn respect.

Teach the skill of how to question themselves.

Use incentives that ease the stress of survival mode.

Provide constructive outlets for frustration and criticism.

Redefine success and celebrate each step of the way.

# Summary of Useful Resources

- The San Diego Reentry Toolkit

<https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/hhsa/programs/phs/sdreentrytoolkit>

- San Diego Workforce Partnership

<https://workforce.org/reentry>

- Second Chance

**Employment training, sober living homes**

- McAlister Institute East County Detox and New Connections Program

**For residential detoxification and substance abuse treatment services**

- San Diego Probation Department

**Services provided through their Behavioral Health Unit**

# References

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Haney, C (2002). The Psychological Impact of Incarceration: Implications for Post-Prison Adjustment, University Of California Santa Cruz

<https://positivepsychology.com/albert-ellis-abc-model-rebt-cbt>

<https://www.prisonfellowship.org/resources/training-resources/in-prison/faq-respect-in-prison-culture/>

<https://prisonstudiesproject.org/language/>

<https://www.sdreentrytoolkit.org/>

# Share out

In your chat box, please answer the following question:

What is **something new** that you just heard that **changes how you think** about working with clients impacted by custodial trauma?

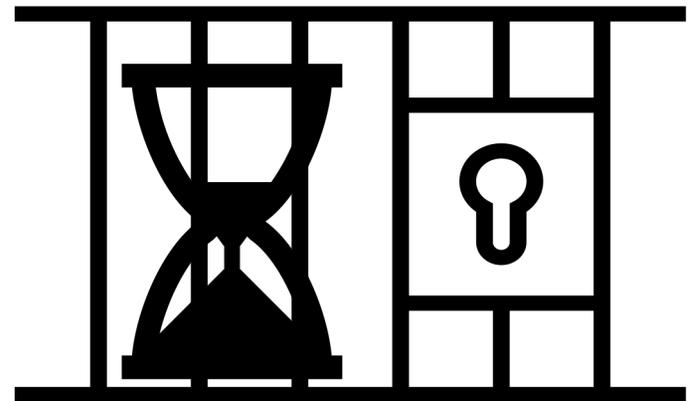
# Working With Clients Who Have Been in Custody

Curtis Howard,  
Lead Organizer, All of Us or None - San Diego Chapter

# Custodial Trauma: **Unique Stressors**

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- Length of time in custody
- Loss of autonomy
- Extended exposure to threats to safety
- Language is weaponized
- Family reunification
- Lost time
- Fears around repeating cycle



# Custodial Trauma: **What This Looks Like**

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- Length of time in custody
  - Lack of familiarity with what's current
  - Discomfort navigating systems
  - Hard to commit to things that aren't sure bets
  
- Loss of Autonomy
  - Not being able to make decisions
  - Needing more structure
  - Wanting fewer restrictions (no longer in custody)
  
- Extended exposure to threats to safety
  - Hyper-vigilance/always on alert

# Custodial Trauma: **What This Looks Like**

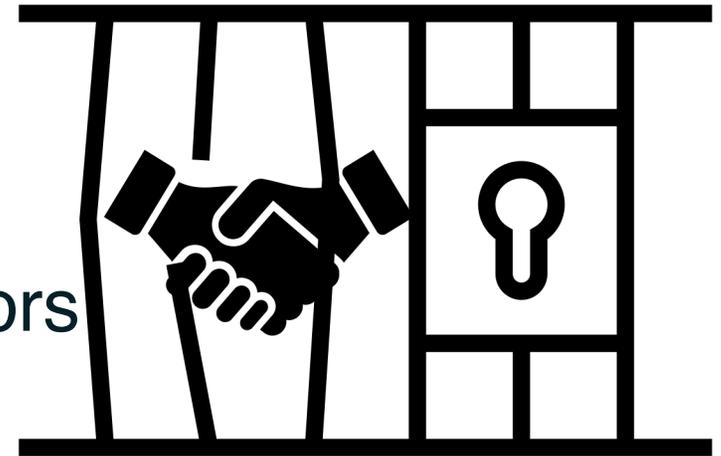
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- Language is weaponized
  - Certain language can alienate/trigger
- Family reunification
  - Dealing with harms caused
  - Expectations versus realities
- Lost time
  - Difficulty “settling”
- Fears around repeating cycle
  - Deep self-esteem and trauma roots

# Custodial Trauma: What Can You Do?

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- Acknowledge and validate systemic mistrust
- Clarify roles
- Address environmental stressors
- Check your own assumptions and biases



# Share out

In your chat box, please answer the following question:

Based on this discussion, what is **one thing** you **plan on starting** to do and **one thing you plan on stopping** that can help you better support clients impacted by custodial trauma?

# Q&A and Discussion

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# Series Wrap Up

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# Thank you!

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## Contact Us

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