

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/police-perspectives/building-trust-through-trauma-informed-policing>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

For many victims and witnesses, a police officer is the first criminal justice official they encounter. In order to cultivate and sustain effective relationships with these individuals and ensure effective and swift case processing, it is critical that police are able to recognize and address trauma.

Trauma results from physical and emotional harm and [impacts an individual's](#) functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. How a person responds to trauma often depends on what kinds of internal and external resources they have to help them cope.

Unaddressed trauma can lead to behavioral and physical health conditions, including mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, and substance use, which can lead to contact with the criminal justice system. For law enforcement officials, trauma-informed policing practices that enhance officers' understanding of trauma and its effects can facilitate criminal investigations through a greater awareness of a victim's needs, reduce the potential recurrence of criminal behavior through early intervention and community trust in police, and connect traumatized individuals to appropriate community services and supports.

Officers should look out for these signs of trauma in victims and witnesses:

When encountering someone who appears to be experiencing symptoms of trauma, law enforcement must first address the victim's safety and security needs by ensuring his or her physical concerns are acknowledged and addressed. Next, officers should allow the traumatized person to vent about his or her feelings, and should validate those feelings. Listen attentively with a non-judgmental demeanor. Approach victims by asking, "What has happened to you?" instead of "What is wrong with you?" Finally, enable prediction and preparation by explaining to the victim what happens next in processing of the case and his or her role in that process. Identify information about the criminal justice system that will help victims heal and prepare for their future.

Victims of and witnesses to crime are not alone in experiencing trauma. Police officers and suspected perpetrators can also be traumatized by a particular event or long-term history of or exposure to violence. In both cases, access to services and supports should be made available to help the individual heal.

All people experience trauma in their lives. As varied as traumatic experiences may be—being a victim of a crime, witnessing violence, or experiencing the death of a family member or friend—so too are the ways in which people deal with and move forward from that trauma. Understanding trauma and its symptoms can only serve to benefit the work of law enforcement.

The [Police Perspectives: Building Community Trust](#) blog series explores the importance of and provides guidance on how to build and enhance positive relationships between law enforcement agencies and the diverse communities they serve.

VIDEO

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