SYSTEMIC OPPRESSION AND TRAUMA:
WHY HEALING-CENTERED TWO-GENERATION APPROACHES ARE CRUCIAL TO POVERTY ALLEVIATION

OVERVIEW

Systemic racism and discrimination are forms of systemic oppression found to be root causes of poverty and hunger in the United States. Systemic racism is a form of violence that places or keeps people of color in conditions of hunger and poverty through the structural withholding of resources and opportunities, hyper-surveillance, and unjust incarceration inflicted on racialized individuals and communities. Racial discrimination consists of interpersonal and individual interventions with a person's physical, emotional, economic, or social wellbeing because of biases against someone's race, often in by way of access to public space, employment, housing, and healthcare. Both systemic racism and discrimination create conditions of economic insecurity that then exacerbate and foster a cycle of poor health and exposure to violence stemming from this systemic trauma. Many health professionals and policy advocates have called for approaches that seek to address, remediate, and prevent individualized trauma.
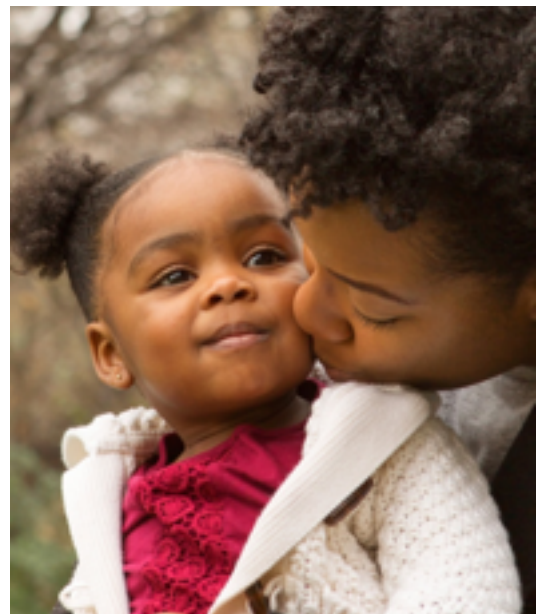
Recently the Center for Hunger-Free Communities (The Center) has sought to follow the lead of those who have shifted away from trauma-centric language toward "healing-centered" language. Rather than pathologizing trauma, healing-centered approaches engage with trauma more holistically in identifying resilience in the face of trauma and working to hold space for justice by way of transformative healing practices that enhance well-being.[1] While not fully realized in The Center's programming and materials, we acknowledge that we are in the beginning stages of changing our own language to be more resilience-based and healing-centered.

Healing-centered, two-generation approaches intervene in economic insecurity imposed by systemic oppression and begin to heal the lasting impacts of its trauma. This brief will be on the necessity of healing-centered two-generation approaches in solutions to food insecurity and poor health. The brief provides historical framing of the generational trauma of U.S. systemic racism, evidence around the impact of experiences of discrimination on food insecurity, and recommendations for policies that intervene and disrupt our economic, educational, political, healthcare, and public service systems that perpetuate social and economic violence and help to heal their effects.
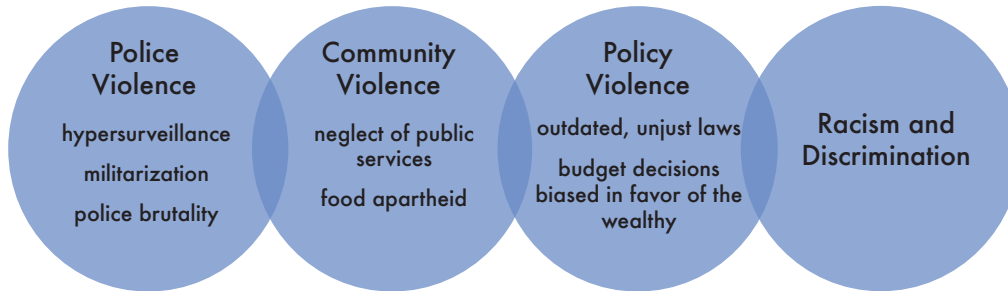
WHAT ARE THE LINKS BETWEEN FOOD INSECURITY, DISCRIMINATION, AND TRAUMA?

Food insecurity is a lack of access to affordable, quality food for an active and healthy life. Based on the Center's research, it is clear that interpersonal and systemic discrimination in many arenas of public life are root causes of food insecurity.[2] The experience of racial and ethnic discrimination is also an experience of trauma that causes serious mental, emotional, and physical health problems. [3,4]
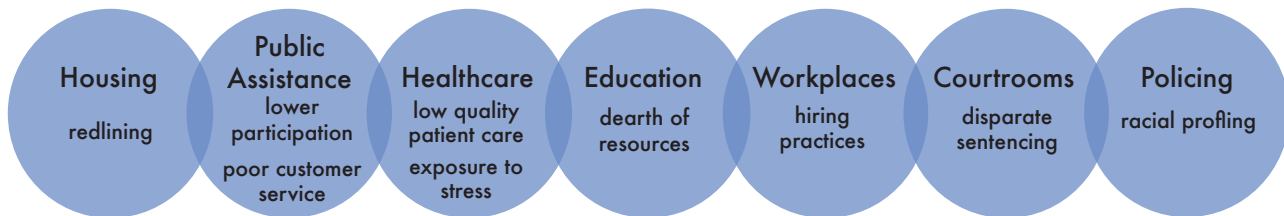
Trauma symptomology associated with racial discrimination and racism is connected both to health issues caused and worsened by the horrible quality of physical spaces that people are delegated to through withholding of funding to redlined communities as well as interpersonal interactions.[5] For example, experiences with racism are associated with anxiety, depression, and other psychiatric symptoms.[6] Trauma has generational effects that reproduce poverty,[7] especially trauma inflicted by systematic oppression as discrimination works to perpetuate conditions of poverty. Trauma generates poverty by negatively impacting physical and mental health which, in turn, increases barriers to employment.

Police Violence

hypersurveillance

militarization

police brutality

Community Violence

neglect of public services

food apartheid

Policy Violence

outdated, unjust laws

budget decisions biased in favor of the wealthy

Racism and Discrimination

ARENAS OF RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION THAT NEGATIVELY IMPACT FOOD SECURITY EXCLUSIVELY FOR PEOPLE OF COLOR INCLUDE:[8]

Housing

redlining

Public Assistance

lower participation

poor customer service

Healthcare

low quality patient care

exposure to stress

Education

dearth of resources

Workplaces

hiring practices

Courtrooms

disparate sentencing

Policing

racial profiling

HEALING-CENTERED TWO-GENERATION APPROACHES

Trauma impacts families and contributes to the transfer of poverty across generations. Being trauma-informed includes preventing, recognizing, and responding to many types of trauma. Crucial to this recognition is understanding that different forms of systematic oppression, including discrimination and exploitative practices, are traumatic. This cycle of trauma and oppression calls for healing-centered solutions that have an impact on multiple generations simultaneously.

Trauma Informed and Trauma Responsive Approaches

According to reports from the Alaska Resilience Initiative, "when an individual, agency or setting is "trauma-informed," they realize how widespread trauma is, recognize the signs and symptoms, respond by including a trauma perspective in policies and practices, and resist unintentionally re-traumatizing clients or staff."[9]

The approach addresses traumatic experiences and facilitates healing in a safe and transparent environment that fosters community and peer support.[10] For example, the Building Wealth and Health Network (the Network) found that blending their financial empowerment programming with peer support groups that engage with issues of trauma, including those that stem from systemic oppression, produces better health and economic security outcomes than programming that does not incorporate a trauma informed approach.[11] The Network uses the S.E.L.F. curriculum, which focuses on addressing general exposure to violence instead of individual events. S.E.L.F. standing for Safety, Emotions, Loss, and Future, helps when communities are experiencing concerns related to these topics.
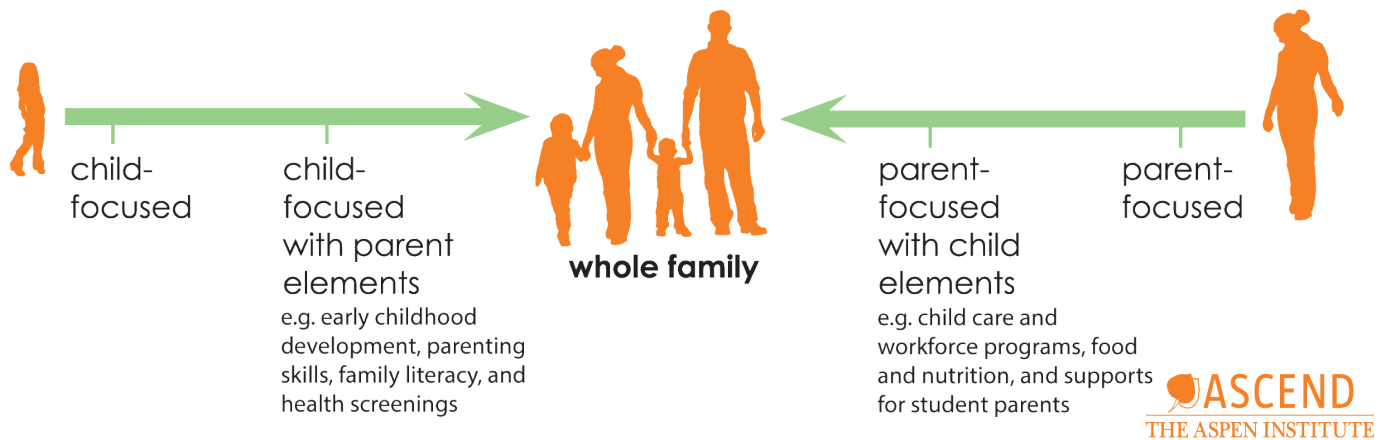
Two-Generation Approaches

Trauma, especially when systematically reproduced by racism and discrimination, has generational impacts on the health and well-being of people of color. Two-generation approaches "focus equally and intentionally on services and opportunities for the child and the adults in their lives."[12] These approaches are necessary because they acknowledge that conditions that affect caregivers and children and interrelated, thus strengthening and widening the impact of services, policies, and initiatives on the health and well-being of entire families.[13]

The Center has found in their research that mothers who experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) were more likely to report that their own children were at developmental risk.[14] ACEs included physical and emotional abuse and neglect, sexual abuse, and adversity such as witnessing domestic violence or having a parent in prison. The Network seeks to break that type of intergenerational transfer through a two-generation approach with caregivers of young children. Through asset building and trauma-informed peer support, the Network intervenes in generations of economic barriers and exploitation imposed on people of color in the US.[15]

The Two-Generation Continuum

child-
focused

child-
focused
with parent
elements
e.g. early childhood
development, parenting
skills, family literacy, and
health screenings

whole family

parent-
focused
with child
elements
e.g. child care and
workforce programs, food
and nutrition, and supports
for student parents

parent-
focused

ASCEND
THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

Avoiding Re-traumatization

- **Trauma-informed systems**
  People who are food insecure and experience discrimination in the places where they go for services can be re-traumatized by the systems that are supposed to help them.[16] Public assistance professionals should be trained in trauma-informed approaches to social services, like the Sanctuary Model™, consisting of tools and practices that ensure opportunities for transformative healing.

- **Validation of experience**
  People's experiences with oppression and the accompanying trauma have been invalidated for many generations. This invalidation comes from people with the power and privilege enacting oppressive behavior and has also led to people of color internalizing trauma.[17] This invalidation and internalization fosters nihilism, negatively impacts mental health, and halts the process of healing (both emotionally and socially) that would alleviate the conditions that agents of systemic oppression and trauma construct for people of color in the U.S.

CONCLUSIONS

Healing-centered, two-generation approaches are key in intervening in economic insecurity imposed by systemic oppression. They're also crucial to healing the historical and contemporary consequences of its trauma. Though two-generation, trauma-informed approaches are useful for poverty alleviation, they also have limitations as they do not get to the root of social, political, and economic violence in the US.

For issues of hunger and poverty, preventative measures are needed in addition to treatments. We need to take on the task of transforming our economic, educational, political, healthcare, and public service systems to not allow the continuation of the trauma they currently inflict in order to move toward a truly flourishing society. If our systems cannot sustain transformation, new systems must be taken up–systems that are liberatory rather than surveillant, like Universal Basic Income,[18] which provides a baseline of cash without need of plea or justification of circumstance. Systems that support cooperative work, community justice, social connection, healing, equity, and possibility, like those imagined by Afrofuturist movements.[19] It is unacceptable to be satisfied with patchwork responses to the systemic injustices that purposefully and strategically keep people marginalized, and thus poor and hungry.

If we could develop new systems that take a healing-centered approach, we could end poverty, food insecurity, and promoting a flourishing society for generations to come.

Policy Recommendations

Acknowledge and address systematic oppression and discrimination as trauma to inform the necessary steps toward healing the trauma that millions of people of color face and the circumstances of poverty that exacerbate and reproduce this trauma.

- Facilitate emotional and social dialogue for remediation that involves meaningful stakeholder engagement.

- Include healing-centered two generation approaches in policymaking with anti-oppressive goals, like building equity in hiring practices, transportation accessibility reform, redlining reversal, and creating equitable access to nutritious food; include community members in all stages of policy development.[20]

- Require states to utilize trauma-informed, two-generation approaches in addressing racism and discrimination in all systems.

Facilitate the success of mental health professionals of color as well as accessibility of educational resources to shift negative stigmas around mental health in communities of color. Allow utilization of Medicaid behavioral health funding to provide trauma-informed behavioral health support within public assistance and programs to improve health and economic security.

- Secure funding to bolster mental health in schools, starting at primary education levels.

- Create incentivizes for states to connect individuals with behavioral health services alongside public assistance and employment programs.

Seek out opportunities to support community coalitions, racial equity initiatives, and direct action organizations that are run by people of color, who are often underfunded and overlooked in their efforts.

- Recognize and support community-forward food sovereignty and economic justice political formations that are lead by people of color.

- Secure funding to incentivize city-wide coordinated approaches to poverty alleviation to decentralize ad-hoc efforts that ultimately function to maintain conditions of poverty to keep poverty alleviation organizations sustainable but ineffective in their siloes.

- Claim meaningful accountability to the public and stand for collective responsibility in taking multifaceted approaches to healing collective trauma.

- Create incentives at all levels of government to deliberate on and commit to a reparations process that facilitates the economic, social, and emotional healing needed from generations of exploitation, discrimination, and colonizing that have been inflicted on people of color in the US. Possibilities for this process include forming a national Truth and Reconciliation Commission, restructuring state budgets with equity frameworks that allot more resources to economically marginalized communities,meaningful stakeholder engagement in closing the racial wealth gap, and enacting testimonies from Black people in the United States of how they feel reparations should be met.[21]

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