

## **TRAUMA AND POLICE DISCRETION**

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- Many young children are repeatedly exposed to violent, traumatic experiences within their homes, most commonly in the form of various types of child abuse and/or exposure to domestic violence
- Such children who live in violent neighborhoods may also be repeatedly exposed to violent, traumatic experiences outside of their homes
- A significant percentage of these children will develop trauma-related psychological difficulties, disordered brain development, and other related developmental difficulties, each of which interacts with and exacerbates the others, resulting in significant distress and impairments in functioning
- Since children are unable to cope with such violent, traumatic situations on their own, due to psychological and cognitive immaturity, they are even at greater risk of developing such psychiatric and neuropsychiatric difficulties when they do not have access to the type of parental nurture, support and assistance that might help mitigate the effects of repeated exposure to violent, traumatic experiences
- Then, in the absence of any therapeutic intervention, these children continue to exhibit symptoms of their psychiatric and neuropsychiatric difficulties as they become adolescents and young adults
- Their intense fear, hypervigilance, over-reactivity and inability to calm themselves places them at high risk of coming into contact with police, and also increases the risk that their contact with a police officer will be disastrous
- If police fail to recognize that these young people are suffering from such psychiatric and neuropsychiatric difficulties, they are likely to misinterpret the behavior of these young people, and escalate a difficult interaction instead of calming it down
- Various types of implicit bias can render police officers even more likely to misinterpret the behavior of these young people, and a police officer's own trauma history can further complicate the officer's response
- Therefore, police training on childhood trauma and its effects, the development of alternative ways for police to interact with effected children and adolescents, and ongoing police supervision aimed at increasing sensitivity and improving skills are critical elements in efforts to improve the functioning and effectiveness of police, decrease the likelihood that police will be an additional source of trauma for these young people, and improve police/community relationships