

## Family processes in the midst of urban poverty: What does the trauma literature tell us?<sup>☆</sup>

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### Abstract

Consistent with a family systems framework, this paper examines the clinical and research literatures to clarify the connection between chronic trauma exposure and family processes with a focus on the social ecology of low-income, urban neighborhoods. Strong empirical evidence demonstrates the impact of chronic trauma on individual family members and, in turn, on multiple family subsystems. Additionally, there is evidence that living under chronically harsh, traumatic circumstances slowly erodes family processes, specifically structure, relations, and coping. However, existing research reflects the problems inherent in sorting out relationships among multiple, often interrelated factors. Future research requires comprehensive theoretical models, such as systemic, transactional, or ecodevelopmental, along with sophisticated research designs, prospective, longitudinal or intervention, and multilevel analytic methods.

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*Keywords:* Emotional trauma; Family processes; Parenting skills; Urban environments; Violence

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**Contents**

1.	Definition of terms . . . . .	727
1.1.	Chronic trauma within low-income, urban neighborhoods . . . . .	727
1.2.	Family processes . . . . .	727
1.2.1.	Structure . . . . .	728
1.2.2.	Relations. . . . .	728
1.2.3.	Coping. . . . .	728
2.	Impact of trauma on the family . . . . .	729
2.1.	Effects on individual family members . . . . .	729
2.1.1.	Child reactions. . . . .	730
2.1.2.	Adult reactions . . . . .	730
2.2.	Effects on dyadic processes. . . . .	731
2.2.1.	Couples reactions . . . . .	731
2.2.2.	Parenting and parent–child relationships. . . . .	732
2.2.3.	Sibling reactions. . . . .	734
2.3.	Effects on the family unit. . . . .	734
2.3.1.	Structure. . . . .	734
2.3.2.	Relations. . . . .	735
2.3.3.	Coping. . . . .	736
3.	Summary of findings. . . . .	737
4.	Complexities in research on chronic trauma and family effects . . . . .	738
4.1.	Impact at multiple levels . . . . .	739
4.2.	Adaptation across time . . . . .	740
4.3.	Nature of impact . . . . .	741
5.	Implications for clinical practice . . . . .	741
	References. . . . .	742

As demonstrated in the risk factor research, a child's response to trauma is heavily influenced by family context (Banyard, Rozelle, & Englund, 2001; Cohen, Berliner, & Mannarino, 2000; Cohen & Mannarino, 1996; Deblinger, Steer, & Lippmann, 1999; Pynoos et al., 1993; Wyman et al., 1999). In fact, disruptions in family functioning following trauma predict development of symptoms better than event-related variables, such as duration or extent of loss (Pfefferbaum, 1997). Identification of specific family characteristics that effect trauma outcomes has received a great deal of attention; however, less consideration has been given to the impact of trauma exposure on family functioning.

This paper examines the clinical and research literatures to clarify the connection between chronic trauma exposure and family processes with a focus on the social ecology of low-income, urban neighborhoods. Consistent with a family systems framework, this critical review explores the strength of existing empirical knowledge regarding the impact of trauma at multiple levels within the family including data supporting a direct, casual link. To conduct this review a search of data bases including PsychINFO, Academic Search Premier, Journals @ OVID, MedLine, and PILOTS (maintained by the National Center for PTSD) was run using the following keywords: psychic trauma, chronic trauma, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and family functioning, family processes, parenting, couples, siblings, coping. [Tables 1 and 2](#) summarize relevant studies related to parenting and family functioning following a

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