



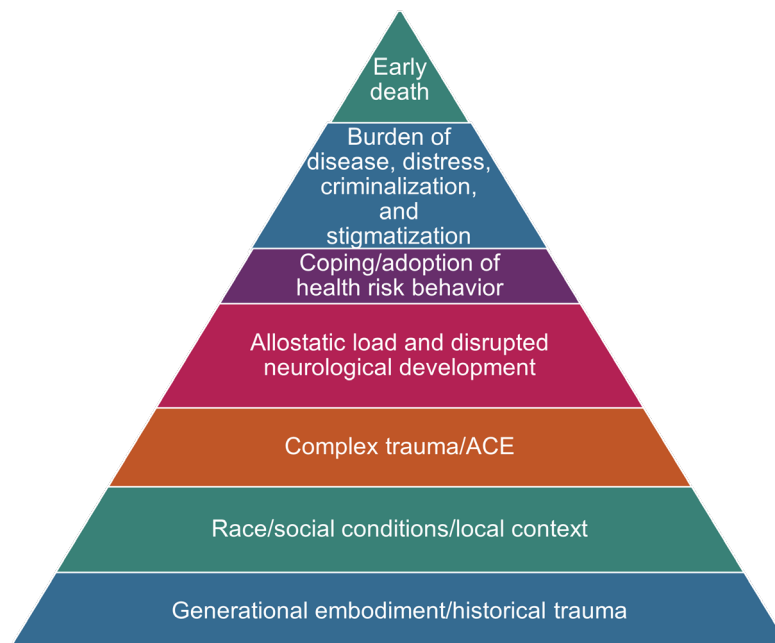
Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Trafficking is usually not an individual's first experience with trauma. Adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs, are stressful or traumatic events that occur during childhood (0–17 years). ACEs encompass several issues, such as abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction, and are strongly related to the development and prevalence of many risk outcomes throughout a person's lifespan, including health problems and trafficking.



Expanding the ACEs Pyramid

Historically, measures of ACEs included childhood trauma exposure across a small subset of items. This early research yielded useful data for examining the impact trauma exposure has on later adult health outcomes. However, it was limited. Expanded definitions of ACEs take into consideration experiences such as bullying, discrimination, racial inequity, community violence, parental death, and economic hardships - and their impact on health, including changes in gene expression (known as epigenetics). In a study conducted by the Philadelphia ACE Project that considered these additional categories, 83.2% of the 1,784 participants had at least one ACE. This social-ecological framework helps us better understand the complexity and interconnectedness of ACEs, the social determinants of health, and outcomes.¹



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2016). Violence prevention: The ACE pyramid (adapted by RYSE Youth Center). <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/about.html>

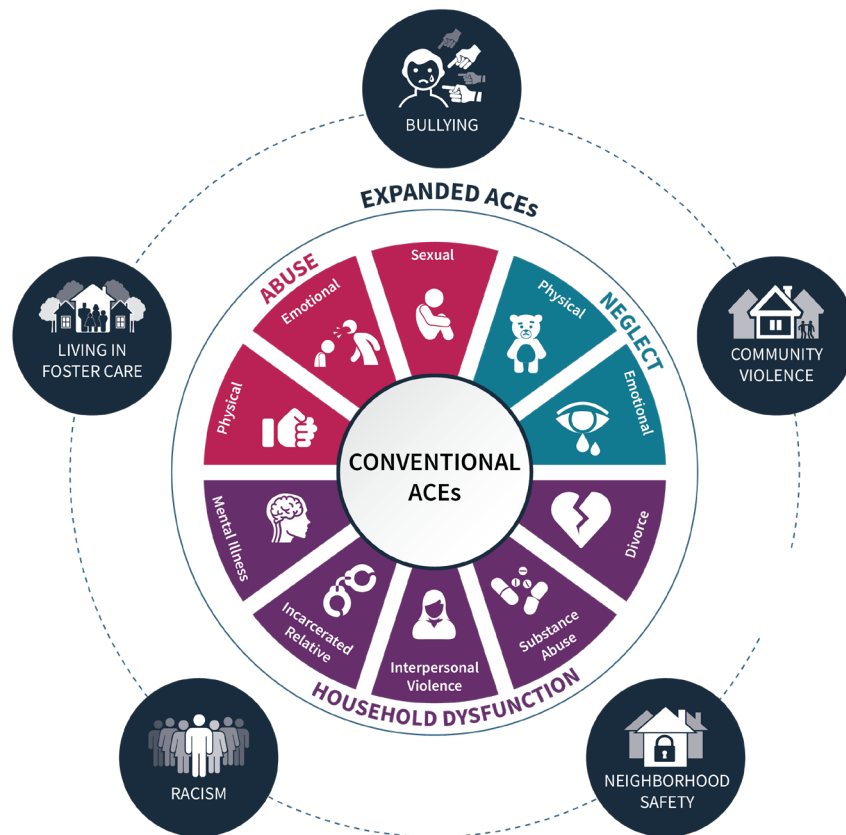
¹CDC uses a four-level social-ecological model to conceptualize violence and how potential strategies might work to prevent it. The model encompasses individual, relationship, community, and societal factors and their interactions, allowing for a more complete picture of the wide range of risk and protective factors related to violence.

Types of ACEs

The image below captures the original types of ACEs (i.e., childhood abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction) as a central nucleus. The surrounding items consist of additional ACEs included in the Philadelphia ACE Project, such as exposure to bullying, community violence, neighborhood safety, racism, and living in foster care.

Consider stories you have seen or heard related to community violence, bullying, living in foster care, and racism on social media or in the news over the past 10 years. While doing so, imagine how these stories might impact the life of a child you are working with. This impact should be considered for those who have personally experienced it and those who have witnessed it.

Now consider that the original ACEs study did not factor in any of these variables, limiting our understanding of the diverse experiences among children who are Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, and other identities that fall outside of cisgender and heterosexual paradigms (2SLGBTQIA+), and other economically or socially marginalized groups.



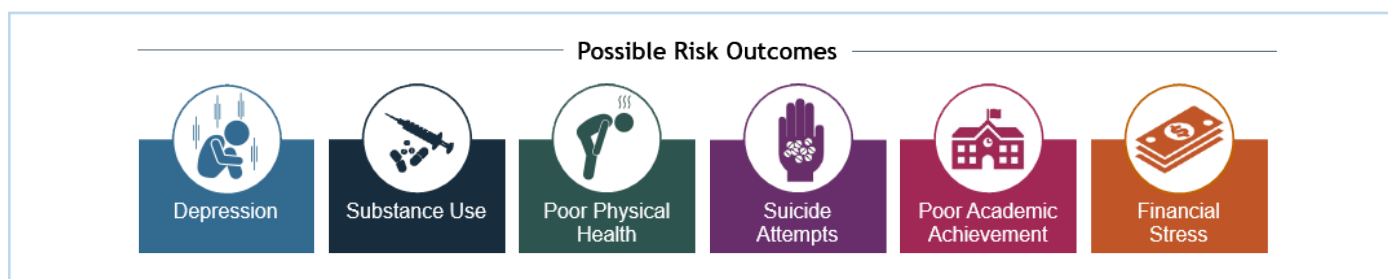
Cronholm, P.F., Forke, C.M., Wade, R., Bair-Merritt, M.H., Davis, M., Harkins-Schwarz, M., ... Fein, J.A. (2015). Adverse childhood experiences: Expanding the concept of adversity. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 49(3), 354–361.



Impact of ACEs

As the number of ACEs increases, the number of risk outcomes increases, including the risk of human trafficking. While exposure to ACEs may impact adult health outcomes and/or vulnerability to trafficking, ACEs are not static predictors of either. Gathered insights that relate to these experiences should be used as a tool in overall evaluation.

For example, most individuals access a variety of services across their lifespan, giving providers the opportunity to intervene and help mitigate the negative impact of ACEs. Providers are uniquely positioned to intervene and provide the appropriate care to ensure that those who have experienced ACEs go on to lead healthy lives.



Naramore, R., Bright, M. A., Epps, N., & Hardt, N. S. (2017). Youth arrested for trading sex have the highest rates of childhood adversity: A statewide study of juvenile offenders. *Sexual Abuse*, 29(4), 396–410. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1079063215603064>

Protective factors and resiliency are explored in greater depth as part of the SOAR Framework in the SOAR *Online* training, [SOAR to Health and Wellness](#).

Intersectional Issues

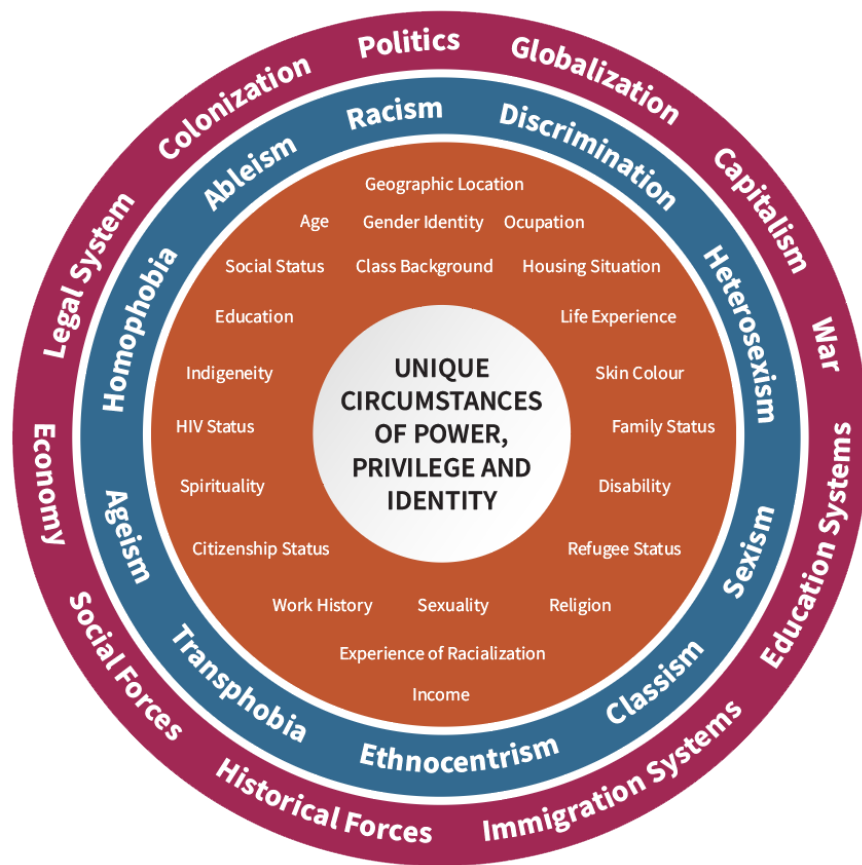
Again, exposure to ACEs alone does not necessarily predict whether someone will experience exploitation. A variety of intersectional issues, including unaddressed ACEs, increases the risk of exploitation, especially when layered. The graphic you see here illustrates other important factors, including the social determinants of health.

When we talk about intersectionality, we are referring to the complex, cumulative circumstances created by multiple inequities. It is important to consider how multiple components of identity (such as race, gender identity, and sexuality), power relations, and life experiences intersect.

For example, youth who identify across multiple groups that have been under-resourced or marginalized face increased vulnerability to coercion and an increased likelihood of experiencing trafficking. Consider that:

- Youth who experience abuse are more likely to run away.
- Approximately 40 percent of youth experiencing homelessness identify as 2SLGBTQIA+.
- 1 in 6 of the more than 25,000 cases of children reported missing to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in 2021 who had run away had likely experienced sex trafficking.





References

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