

# ***The Intersection of Trauma, Racism, and the Criminal Justice System***

February 2019

*Considering the impact of race on traumatic experiences & trauma treatment, plus inspiring resources from individuals of color.*

## ***Complex Trauma & Race***

*Complex Trauma: the experience of multiple, severe traumas which have compounding negative effects. When complex trauma occurs in childhood, it may negatively impact caregiver-child relationships.*

As we consider the ongoing individual, systemic, and institutional racism in our society, it is impossible to deny the impacts of race on mental health and lived experiences. Particularly, black children and youth in urban areas are at an extremely high risk to being exposed to traumatic experiences and complex trauma. This may be due to community violence, interpersonal violence, involvement with the child welfare system, familial

involvement in the criminal justice system, etc. When these children experience trauma, it is not only in the context of a single (or multiple) traumatic events they experienced individually, it is also within the context of intergenerational and historical trauma (See February 2018 Newsletter). As helping professionals, it is our job to navigate the various, intertwined layers of trauma to support healing and improve life outcomes, but this isn't easy for ourselves or our clients. As professionals, we must work to overcome barriers to serve these clients effectively.<sup>1</sup>

**“We have to acknowledge that there are individual incidents that can take place... but also historical trauma ... community trauma (and) understand how racism and white supremacy play a role in trauma reactions and how a lot of times, the trauma reactions we see in our community are misrepresented... as criminal behavior or adverse behavior, as opposed someone who needs support.”**

Kenton Kirby  
Coordinator of Make It Happen

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<sup>1</sup> Complex Trauma Treatment Network of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (2016). Complex trauma: In Urban African-American Children, Youth, and Families. Los Angeles, CA, & Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.

## Resources for Continued Learning:

**Make It Happen** is a program working with young men of color impacted by violence in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. This podcast allows you to hear perspectives from participants and coordinators, regarding the intersections of trauma, the justice system, and race. [Click here to listen to the podcast and find more information about the program.](#)



**Adam Foss** is a prosecutor in the Suffolk County DA's office in Massachusetts. He has presented various TED talks focused on racism and the justice system, including considering the impacts of community, historical, and childhood trauma. For some information about connections between trauma, racism, and the criminal justice system which he has drawn from his work, as well as a call to action, [click here to view his thought-provoking and inspiring TED talk "Who will lead our next civil rights movement? You."](#)

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ijpr.org/post/adam-foss-can-prosecutors-stem-tide-mass-incarceration#stream/0>

**Son of a Saint** is a mentorship program in New Orleans which serves boys and young men ages 10-19 who have lost their father due to incarceration, violence, or death. The program provides positive male adult role models, mentorship, emotional support, life skills development, and more. Learn more about the program and explore their [website](#) or [view the services offered.](#)



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**NCTSN [resource on Complex Trauma and Urban African American Youth](#)** includes more information about complex trauma and implications for helping professionals, as well as brief case examples and tips to overcome barriers for working with this population.

For more information on the context of historical trauma and race, consider revisiting the February 2018 newsletter.

<sup>3</sup> [Sonofasaint.org](http://Sonofasaint.org)