

A key theme that emerged from the responses is that survivors of childhood trauma can build up emotional barriers leading them to normalise cycles of abuse and preventing them from moving forwards. Early intervention is essential in tackling these barriers and preventing the long term effects of abuse which can lead to further deprivation. As one respondent explained:

"I don't remember a time from my childhood home when I felt happy, safe or secure or received any positive attention. I would have liked if my teacher at primary or secondary school had picked up that I was withdrawn or acting out and asked why that was. I didn't know the support was out there. It didn't even come into my mind to ask for help, as I accepted the abuse and thought it was normal."

The Place2Be highlighted their integrated schools based service providing early intervention and mental health support for 75,000 children aged 4-14 in England, Scotland and Wales. The charity works to tackle poor educational achievement, truancy and exclusion from school through supporting children with emotional and behavioural problem and offering swift access to counselling and other services as well as providing training and advice for teachers, parents and carers.

Support around sexual exploitation of young women

We heard from a number of specialist organisations who work with young women affected by sexual exploitation. One of these is the Rape and Sexual Abuse Support Centre (RASASC) which provides the national Rape Crisis helpline for female survivors of sexual violence in England and Wales. RASASC also provides a face to face counselling and advocacy service for survivors in several London boroughs including Croydon, Greenwich and Lambeth, and also provides a Rape Crisis National Helpline in South London.

CIS'sters, is a mutual support group which facilitates group meetings, workshops and campaigning for improved support services for adult females who have been raped or sexually abused as young girls by members of their immediate or extended family. Gillian Finch, Facilitator at CIS'sters said that: *"Through our work we aware that childhood sexual abuse, particularly by a member of the same family – can lead to very negative coping strategies for women, which can lead to homelessness, and worse."*

Responses to this call for evidence point to the common experiences shared between women who are homeless and those who have been survivors of childhood trauma. It is essential that policy initiatives and service development account for this link if we are to drive lasting change for women in need.

Thank you again to all who submitted

If you would like to view all the submissions in full for this theme, please visit www.rebuildingshatteredlives.org and click on the Childhood Trauma and Women's Homelessness theme.

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Rebuilding Shattered Lives

Rebuilding Shattered Lives theme round up: Childhood Trauma and Women's Homelessness

Led by Expert Group member Jacqui Dillon,
Independent Trauma Specialist



Jacqui Dillon, Independent Trauma Specialist

Introduction

For young women and girls, emotional, psychological and sexual abuse in early relationships is too often ignored, until as adults they are left still coping with the after effects, excluded and stigmatised by society.

The many overlapping ways in which childhood trauma can impact on adult lives is not widely recognised, including complex needs such as serious mental health difficulties, substance use and homelessness.

That is why I am delighted to be supporting the Rebuilding Shattered Lives campaign, which makes a clear link between childhood trauma and women's homelessness, and draws together the interrelated challenges which women can face as adults, including ongoing abuse and sexual exploitation, mental health and substance use issues and involvement in the criminal justice system.

I am pleased that we have heard from both early intervention services that work to prevent and address childhood abuse and trauma, and adult support services that work with women to process the impact that childhood trauma has had on their lives and therefore move forward with their lives.

Peer support and understanding are essential elements of recovery and I would like to thank all the women who shared their stories and opinions with us in order to help others.

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Summary of Submissions

Psychological support for childhood trauma

We received detailed evidence from practitioners and clients to support our long held knowledge and understanding that female homelessness, and the complex issues surrounding it, including mental health and substance use, are often preceded and fuelled by childhood trauma. For many women without access to psychological support, the long term implications of childhood sexual, physical and emotional abuse mean they are vulnerable to continued exploitation and entrapment in cycles of deprivation.

In the words of one respondent: *“Abuse stopped me taking my own space in life. I lost the ability to stand up for myself and was manipulated, exploited and beaten. Some people who are abused can go on to abuse others, but most just beat themselves up inside. I turned to drug use to fill the void and I looked at my house it was unmanageable and I reflected it looked like me – totally unmanageable.”*

Access to therapy and time to reflect on past experiences were highlighted by many as key to helping women build up resilience, but are not always available in homelessness service.

“When I first came into the homelessness services the focus was on sorting out the practicalities of moving forward rather than mentally looking back. It is futile to deal with the symptoms without looking at the catalyst.”

Resident, St Mungo's Outside In Women's Group

At the same time, there was consensus amongst members of the St Mungo's client involvement group that support should be optional and tailored to the particular needs of the individual.

“Moving on is about overcoming fear. Women need the option to talk about it but there needs to be no pressure, so they can start to deal with it but not be overwhelmed.”

There is a need for specialised psychotherapy services that are specifically tailored to meet the needs of women suffering from complex trauma. St Mungo's LifeWorks is one example of this. The project aims to tackle social exclusion through providing clients with access to individual psychotherapy/counselling with fully-qualified and registered psychotherapists.

Practitioners and women themselves acknowledged that psychological therapy alone is not the solution *“In my experience if someone opens up about their emotions then goes back to somewhere where they are lonely or isolated then this can do damage.”*

Resident, St Mungo's Outside In Women's Group

Physical Security

Jon Bird, Operations Manager at the National Association for People Abused in Childhood, said that *“people generally need to have some degree of basic physical security before they can address the causes of homelessness and other problems that have their roots in childhood trauma.”*

The first step to processing traumatic memories in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde Trauma Service's phased trauma model is ensuring physical security. Yet for some women even engaging with the support services proves difficult. The Service has designed a pre support intervention programme to encourage women to engage with services. It involves a creative group which uses art related activities to improve self-esteem and build confidence in relationships. Early intervention work such as this is a critical element in the path toward recovery for survivors of childhood abuse and trauma.

Peer Support

Respondents also recognised the importance of running peer support programmes alongside counselling.

“Women should be able to access support groups around childhood trauma with other women so they no longer feel isolated and they don't feel judged and can learn from others. It is good to vent and even chat with a group of friends. In supported housing people have been though a lot. Counselling is not for everyone, and keyworkers should be able to help in a more informal way.”

Resident, St Mungo's Outside In Women's Group

Support for girls entering and leaving the care system

Children and young people in care need support to develop the practical life and employability skills to successfully move beyond the care system. The Who Cares Trust runs a support service for children in care and care leavers which actively engages them in the delivery of projects designed specifically to meet their needs.

“As well as listening to children, and empowering them to campaign, we run weekly workshops – from careers advice to cookery – to help them gain the experience, skills and confidence that other children might learn from their birth parents. These workshops help children and young people with experience of care to, for example, manage their money, write their CVs, develop their interview and employability skills, and talk about their experiences in a supportive environment. We have had feedback from young women saying that, without this support, they would have dropped out of college, and given up on their studies.”

Oliver Wilkinson, Head of Communications, Who Cares Trust.

The Catch 22 National Advisory Service (NCAS) is also working hard in this area to facilitate young people's transition from care to adulthood through improved policy and practice.

Intergenerational factors and early intervention

Gabrielle Brown, Psychotherapist for St Mungo's Life Works Team offered her insight into the intergenerational factors affecting homeless women: *“These are often the granddaughters of women who have had adverse life experiences and it's gone from generation to generation.”* She identified a common theme that those affected by sexual and other forms of abuse in childhood experience further hardship as they often find themselves in positions of parental responsibility at a young age.

Action for Children shared a number of research documents on intergenerational factors and the value of early intervention including *Deprivation and risk: the case for early intervention* and *Effective relationships with vulnerable parents*. These reports focus on the impact of deprivation on the lives of children and families, and seeks to redress their stories, which are often reduced to a single cause e.g. irresponsibility or State negligence. The findings indicate that the lives of individual children and families are shaped and directed by a complex interplay of policy initiatives, personal experience and resources.

