insights EMERGE with the exchange of NEW IDEAS.

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Adverse Childhood Experiences in the Histories of Death Penalty Defendants
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Trauma Resolution & Integration Program (TRIP)
The Ten Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Before the age of 18, was exposed to...

**Trauma**
- Physical abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Physical neglect
- Emotional neglect
- Domestic violence

**General Household Dysfunction**
- Household member alcoholic or drug user
- Household member chronically depressed, mentally ill or suicidal
- Loss of parent due to death, separation or divorce
- Household member in prison
“Slightly more than half of our middle-class population... experienced one or more of the categories of adverse childhood experience that we studied. One in four were exposed to two categories... one in 16 were exposed to four categories. Given an exposure to one category, there is 80% likelihood of exposure to another category.... One may miss the forest for the trees if one studies these categories individually. They do not occur in isolation; for instance, a child does not grow up with an alcoholic parent or with domestic violence in an otherwise well-functioning household.” (p. 361)

Some of the Effects that the ACEs Increase Risk for in Adulthood:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychological/Behavioral</th>
<th>Health Risk Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>High Level of Perceived Stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depressed Affect</td>
<td>Promiscuity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hallucinations</td>
<td>Severe Obesity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleep Disturbance</td>
<td>Substance Abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty Controlling Anger</td>
<td>Current Smoking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk of IPV Perpetration</td>
<td>Multiple Somatic Symptoms</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Dose-Response Relationship

• The more ACEs someone has been exposed to, the greater the risk of each of the psychological and health risk outcomes studied.

• As the ACE score increased, the number of psychological and health risk outcomes increased.

• On average, the life expectancy of an individual with ACE ≥ 4 is almost 20 years less than that of someone with ACE = 0.
# Distribution of ACEs in the General Population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of ACEs</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Cumulative Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>38.0</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>36.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>62.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>78.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>87.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥ 4</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACEs and Adolescent Violence

- Participants were 136,549 students in the 6th, 9th and 12th grades from Minnesota, U.S. who responded to an anonymous questionnaire about health behaviors, socializing domains, and 6 ACEs.
- The ACEs studies were physical abuse, intrafamilial sexual abuse, extrafamilial sexual abuse, familial alcohol abuse and familial drug abuse.
- Each of the 6 ACEs studies was related to adolescent interpersonal violence perpetration and self-directed violence.
- Each additional ACE reported increased the risk of violence perpetration by between 35% and 144%.

ACEs and Serious, Chronic, Violent (SVC) Offending

• Participants were 22,525 delinquent youth referred to the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, of which 10,714 were identified as serious, violent, chronic (SVC) offenders (see next bullet point).

• SVC offenders were operationalized as those with three or more felonies, at least one of which was violent.

• The existing literature repeatedly indicates that SVC offenders are significantly more likely than other juvenile offenders to have been victims of abuse, neglect, and other forms of trauma than less severe and non-offending juveniles.

• Each additional ACE increased the risk of SVC offending by more than 35% when controlling for other risk factors for criminal behavior.

The ACEs in Mitigation Testimony

• In the vast majority of death penalty cases I have served as an expert in, these defendants have 7 to 10 ACEs in their background.

• Explaining the findings of ACEs research in combination with an account of the impact of early traumatization on brain and behavior helps judges and juries understand violent and other criminal offenses in developmental context.

• Conveying illustrative examples of ACE-related experiences in the defendant’s life are crucial in making it clear how the research findings apply to the individual offender.
Conclusion

• The ACEs help to frame complex histories of childhood adversity within a clear, empirically-based format.

• *However*, neither the number of ACEs in the defendant’s history nor the psychological diagnoses manifested by the defendant should be the overriding focus of mitigation testimony. *Rather*...

• The ACEs and related diagnoses are ways to summarize what the defendant’s life has been like and how these life circumstances have impacted the defendant. It is the *story* of the defendant’s history, and especially salient illustrative anecdotes, that should be the focus of (death penalty) mitigation testimony.