



Dublin City Community Cooperative, Register Number 5628 R, Registered Charity Number (RCN) 20107079, Unit 1  
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## Briefing Document

# Understanding Community Trauma

“Trauma in a person, decontextualised over time, **looks like personality**. Trauma in a family, decontextualised over time, **looks like family traits**. Trauma in people, decontextualised over time, **looks like culture**”<sup>1</sup>

### *Definition:*

Community trauma refers to the psychological and emotional impact of a distressing event or series of events on a community or a group of people from a specific area. This type of trauma can result from, acts of violence, social injustice, forced migration or other collective experiences that disrupt the safety, stability, and well-being of a community. Trauma is a significant public health issue, negatively impacting a range of health outcomes that disproportionately impact vulnerable populations including individuals and families with low incomes, those who come from racial, ethnic or immigrant minority backgrounds, and those who are homeless<sup>2</sup>. Ireland is not immune to the effects of community trauma. Colonisation, famine, partition of the island, the ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland, and significant religious oppressions are to name but a few<sup>3</sup>. More recent events such as the Covid 19 pandemic, drug related violence and the riots that occurred in Dublin city centre on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November 2023 have also been seen to have a significant impact on communities. An evaluation of the Hopscotch programme in CASPr<sup>4</sup>, an inner city after schools’ project, was undertaken in 2017

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<sup>1</sup> Resmaa Menakem, American author and psychotherapist specialising in the effects of trauma on the human body and the relationship between trauma, white body supremacy, and racism in America

<sup>2</sup> Hughes, K et al. (2017). The effect of multiple adverse childhood experiences on health: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Lancet Public Health*. 2(8), p.356–366. [Online]. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(17\)30118-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(17)30118-4)

<sup>3</sup> Cotter, P & Callery, P. (2023). A process-oriented psychology (POP) approach to processing collective trauma in an Irish context. *Psychotherapy & Politics International*. 21(1-2), pp.1-22. [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.24135/ppi.v21i1and2.06>

<sup>4</sup> CASPr is one of 12 member organisations of Dublin City Community Co-operative

and several of its findings were stark<sup>5</sup>. Certain issues in Dublin's inner city were acutely evident-the prevalence of drugs in the area, children aware of shootings, deaths and threats made and recognising Gardaí who were constantly stationed in particular places<sup>6</sup>. These issues can lead to a complex environment with many layers of trauma which can be difficult to effectively address.

#### *Key Features of Community Trauma:*

1. **Collective Impact:** Unlike individual trauma, which affects a single person, community trauma impacts a group of individuals who share a common experience. This shared experience can create a sense of solidarity but also magnify the emotional toll of the event. These global and community-based traumas impact our lives in complex mechanisms through the many systems we interact with daily<sup>7</sup>. A collaborative approach is often discussed when addressing the collective impact of community trauma. This involves coordinated efforts between various organisations, community groups and individuals to decrease the impact of trauma and promote resilience in the community.
2. **Disruption of Social Fabric:** Traumatic events can fracture the social cohesion and trust within a community. People may experience feelings of fear, grief, anger, and helplessness, leading to a breakdown in interpersonal relationships and community bonds. The decrease in social interaction within communities can cause increased situations of isolation, mental health issues and anti-social behaviour. The way in which human connections are disrupted through traumatic experiences changes the focus of one's nervous system. This change can often result in physical, mental, and emotional symptoms<sup>8</sup>.
3. **Long-Term Consequences:** Community trauma can have enduring effects on individuals and communities, influencing mental health, physical health, social dynamics, and economic well-being for years or even generations. Unprocessed, untold, and unconsidered trauma can be transferred to subsequent generations and re-enacted in different ways at an individual, group, or collective level<sup>9</sup>. Collective trauma differs from that of individual trauma as it can live on beyond the lives of those directly impacted by the event and continue to affect future generations. In this way, a lack of trauma informed practices or procedures can perpetuate community trauma through generations.
4. **Vulnerability Factors:** Certain factors, such as socioeconomic status, racial or ethnic background, access to resources, and prior exposure to trauma, can increase a community's vulnerability to the impact of traumatic events. Minority groups in society are often disproportionately impacted by collective trauma due to a range of issues such as discrimination and inequalities. Two groups within Irish society that are deserving of special

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<sup>5</sup> Community After School Project (CASPr). (2023). [Online]. Available at: <https://caspr.ie/>

<sup>6</sup> Kinlen Macdonald Research Consultancy. (2017). *Evaluation of Hopscotch Capacitar Project Report Presented to Community After Schools Project (CASPR)*. [Online]. Available at: <https://capacitarirelandass.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/caspr-evaluation-reportjuly-25-2017.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Stone, J et al. (2024). *Trauma Impacts: The Repercussions of Individual and Collective Trauma*. [Online]. John Wiley & Sons, 2024. Available at: <https://books.google.ie/books?id=o2H2EAAAQBAJ>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Cotter, P & Callery, P. (2023). A process-oriented psychology (POP) approach to processing collective trauma in an Irish context. *Psychotherapy & Politics International*. 21(1-2), pp.1-22. [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.24135/ppi.v21i1and2.06>

mention in this regard are the Travelling Community and the Roma Community<sup>10</sup>. Both the Travelling Community and Roma Community experience some of the greatest degrees of disadvantage among minority groups. When discussing the Roma Community evidence suggests the inability to engage in Irish society is attributable to marginalisation, discrimination, lack of English language, poor access to health and social services, and lack of a political voice<sup>11</sup>. In the Irish context there are numerous groups that are at higher risk of experiencing the negative effects of communal trauma, these groups can include but are not limited to, those from disadvantaged backgrounds, communities exposed to long periods of crime, drugs and violence, members of the travelling community, members of the Roma Community, refugees, asylum seekers, migrants and Irish people from migrant backgrounds.

#### *Impact of Community Trauma:*

1. **Psychological Effects:** Community trauma can lead to a range of psychological symptoms, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. Individuals may struggle with intrusive memories, hypervigilance, and avoidance behaviours. Evidence to date shows that the combined effect of the Covid-19 pandemic and associated restrictions is that approximately one person in every five in the general population in Ireland (and elsewhere) has significantly increased psychological distress (e.g. anxiety, depression)<sup>12</sup>.
2. **Physical Health Consequences:** Chronic stress and trauma can contribute to physical health problems such as cardiovascular disease, autoimmune disorders, gastrointestinal issues, and chronic pain. The toxic stress response associated with trauma can weaken the immune system and increase the risk of illness. Emerging research has documented the relationships among exposure to traumatic events, impaired neurodevelopmental and immune systems responses and subsequent health risk behaviours resulting in chronic physical or behavioural health disorders<sup>13</sup>.
3. **Social Disruption:** Traumatic events can disrupt social networks, family dynamics, and community relationships, leading to social isolation, distrust, and conflict. Communities may struggle to rebuild trust and cooperation in the aftermath of trauma, impeding recovery efforts. The Troubles that occurred in Northern Ireland starting circa 1968 had a huge impact on community relationships, social networks in addition to the physical injuries that occurred. The conflict has created economic costs, increased community division and psychological impact on those affected directly or indirectly. Communities are ethnically divided, and the post agreement generation still resides in terrain that continues to be

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<sup>10</sup> Dublin City Community Co-op implements a Roma Employment and Training (ReaT) Project in Dublin's north inner city. Details available at [Roma Employment and Training Programme \(REaT\) – Dublin City Community Co-Op \(dublincitycommunitycoop.ie\)](https://romaemploymentandtrainingprogramme.com)

<sup>11</sup> Villani J, Daly P, Fay R, (2021). A community-health partnership response to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Travellers and Roma in Ireland. *Global Health Promotion*. 28(2):46-55. [Online]. Available at: doi:10.1177/1757975921994075

<sup>12</sup> Kelly, B.D. (2020). Impact of Covid-19 on Mental Health in Ireland: Evidence to Date. *Irish Medical Journal*. 113(10), pp.1-6. [Online]. Available at: <https://imj.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Impact-of-Covid-19-on-Mental-Health-in-Ireland-Evidence-to>

<sup>13</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) (2014) SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach. U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources. [Online]. Available at: [https://ncsacw.acf.hhs.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA\\_Trauma.pdf](https://ncsacw.acf.hhs.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA_Trauma.pdf)

haunted by memories of the conflict, reminding them in their everyday lives of harm inflicted on one community by another<sup>14</sup>.

*Principles when designing a trauma informed Programme:*

There is no one approach in treating trauma in communities, there are a range of widely discussed principles that can help to build capacity and promote community resilience and well-being. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) identifies the indications of trauma and takes action by incorporating awareness about trauma into policies, protocols, and actions, while actively striving to prevent re-traumatisation<sup>15</sup>. There is broad agreement that Trauma Informed Care (TIC) is underpinned by a set of practice principles that SAMHSA has identified: safety, transparency, peer support, collaboration, cultural issues, and empowerment<sup>16</sup>. The six principles are outlined as follows:

1. **Safety:** Safety within a programme or organisation ensures that all involved in the programme feel safe and secure in the space. To be able to best serve those dealing with collective trauma, they need to feel supported and safe both physically and psychologically. Those suffering with any form of trauma may find it difficult to seek help, therefore a safe and secure space is essential in aiding those who need it.
2. **Transparency:** Transparency within organisational practices and protocols are paramount in building trust and confidence with clients and communities. It is important that all information given to staff, communities and clients is accurate and is relevant so that everyone is aware of exactly what is expected and how the programme will run. This allows for clients and communities to build trust in the organisation and continue to engage in programmes.
3. **Peer Support:** Mutual support amongst trauma survivors can be crucial with moving past the traumatic experience and building trust and hope within a supportive community. Peer support and mutual self-help are key vehicles for establishing safety and hope, building trust, enhancing collaboration, and utilizing their stories and lived experience to promote recovery and healing<sup>17</sup>. Peer support can create a solidarity amongst trauma survivors as it promotes a 'we're all in this together approach'.
4. **Collaboration:** Collaboration involves staff, communities and clients to create a healing environment where all can participate. Collaboration requires all members of the organisation to play a role in the healing journey and promote community resilience. Importance is placed on partnering and the levelling of power differences between staff, communities, clients and among all organisational members, demonstrating that healing happens in relationships and in the meaningful sharing of power and decision-making<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Ferguson, N & Halliday, D. (2020). Collective Memory and Legacy of the Troubles. In: Ray Vollhardt, J. (Ed). *The Social Psychology of Collective Victimhood*. New York: Oxford University Press. pp.56-77.

<sup>15</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) (2014) SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach. U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources. [Online]. Available at: [https://ncsacw.acf.hhs.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA\\_Trauma.pdf](https://ncsacw.acf.hhs.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA_Trauma.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Lotty, M. (2021). Making sense of the practice of trauma-informed care: A response to the need to implement trauma-informed care into front-line practice. *Irish Social Worker*, pp. 160-171. [Online]. Available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/10468/12362>

<sup>17</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) (2014) SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach. U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources. [Online]. Available at: [https://ncsacw.acf.hhs.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA\\_Trauma.pdf](https://ncsacw.acf.hhs.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA_Trauma.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

5. **Cultural issues:** Historical, cultural and gender issues need to be considered and cultural and historical wounds recognised in trauma informed care. Without taking cultural issues into consideration when implementing trauma informed practices, the risk of re-traumatisation of individuals engaging with the organisation is heightened. The organisation needs to move past biases and implement policies, provide information, and adopt procedures in relation to cultural, historical and gender issues which may arise.
6. **Empowerment:** Promoting empowerment of individuals and wider communities within the programme to allow their voice to be heard, when in many cases it may have previously been silenced. Individuals and communities taking part in a programme should be encouraged to have opinions and recommendations for programmes moving forward. Communities and clients should be supported in shared decision-making, choice and goal setting to determine the plan of action they need to heal and move forward<sup>19</sup>.

*Ways the Co-op has incorporated a Trauma Informed approach:*

The Dublin City Community Co-op has several programmes currently being implemented within inner city Dublin. These programmes work with a range of minority and disadvantaged groups in the community. The Co-op aims to provide safe spaces for all individuals and groups accessing services and to encourage and support engagement of the more difficult to reach groups and individuals in the community. As an example, the Co-op's Healthy Communities Project implements two programmes on a weekly basis that take a trauma informed approach, these include the weekly coffee mornings and the Capacitar Stress and Wellbeing programmes (see below an explanation of Capacitar).

The weekly coffee mornings run by the Healthy Communities team aims to provide a safe space for individuals to meet and have a chat with other members of the community. They have the freedom to discuss issues that may have been impacting them and to also socialise and build relationships with others in their community. It acts as a medium for peer support and to allow people to feel they have a support network. The individuals that take part in the coffee mornings come from a range of backgrounds and experiences and may have differing levels of trauma impacting their lives, including both individual and community trauma. This acts as a starting point for which people in the community, who otherwise may not have a stable social network, to engage in a community group, and begin building relationships and trust within the Co-op and with other individuals from their community.

The Capacitar Stress and Wellbeing programmes are designed to promote stress management and wellbeing practices through a trauma informed approach. The Capacitar workshops are a holistic approach to healing trauma through body, mind, and spiritual practices. Capacitar incorporates the following principles in its practice:

- Collaborates with established groups and with other economic and social development efforts.
- Models alternative uses of power, as well as sensitivity to culture and traditions.
- Trains and empowers people to be the popular educators and multipliers in their own communities.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid

- Develops programmes collaboratively with local people recognising that an idea conceived and born within a group has the energy to move that group<sup>20</sup>.

The Capacitar Stress and Wellbeing programme implemented by the Co-op incorporates these principles while also adapting the practices to fit a course that follows a HSE supported stress and wellbeing management plan. In this way it uses a trauma informed and multi-faceted approach to aid healing trauma in the community. From *The Healthy Communities Project: Impact Evaluation Report 2023*, it was shown that the Co-op's Healthy Communities Project (HCP) helped reduce stress and anxiety, while also improving sleep, tension and increasing flexibility<sup>21</sup>. Throughout the implementation of the HCP it has been evident that a holistic trauma informed approach has helped the participants not only psychologically but physically as well. This can have far reaching positive results on both the individual and the entire community.

In addition to programmes that have been implemented in the Co-op using a trauma informed approach the Co-op also incorporates facilitative and reflective spaces for its staff members in order to be better able to respond to complex situations. For example: in late 2023 the Co-op office team (a microcosm of the inner city, which is made up of people whose families have lived in the community for generations, people who are non-Irish born but to whom Dublin is home, and those who work in the inner city and live elsewhere) participated in a facilitated session to reflect on the events and impact of the November 23<sup>rd</sup> 2023 Dublin city riots and to share their unique perspectives on what happened<sup>22</sup>.

This *brave space*<sup>23</sup>, a term which refers to a supportive place where people are enabled to share honestly and equally to facilitate individual and collective learning, was an important step in facilitating staff to reconnect with their shared, resolute commitment to overcoming social exclusion, disadvantage, racism, and poverty in all its forms while at the same time supporting staff to process the horrifying events of the 23<sup>rd</sup> November.

There is no doubt it can be argued that the regular practice of 'a brave space' within communities is urgently required. This is necessary if we are to overcome the polarisation and division that threatens not only individual communities but the integrity of Ireland as whole and the safety and wellbeing of all its inhabitants. The risk of abandoning an entire generation of communities to a new layer of collective trauma is becoming ever more real.

#### *Conclusion:*

There is no denying that collective trauma is a complex and multi layered issue that effects communities. It breeds the deterioration of psychological and physical health whilst also impacting social structures. Community trauma can live on long past the traumatic event and can be passed down through generations, therefore making it vital to incorporate trauma informed practices in programmes and continue to develop our knowledge in this area. Although inner city Dublin has

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<sup>20</sup> Capacitar International. (2020). *How Capacitar Works*. [Online]. Capacitar International. Available at: <https://capacitar.org/work/> [Accessed 8 May 2024].

<sup>21</sup> Tasc (2023) *Healthy Communities Project: Impact Evaluation Report*. [Online]. Available at: <https://dublincitycommunitycoop.ie/programmes/healthy-communities-project-north-east-inner-city/>

<sup>22</sup> The Dublin City Community Co-op (2023) *Events of 23rd November 2023-Dublin City Centre-Compilation of staff thoughts, reactions and feelings*. [Online]. Available at: <https://dublincitycommunitycoop.ie/reports/events-of-23rd-november-2023-dublin-city-centre-compilation-of-staff-thoughts-reactions-and-feelings/>

<sup>23</sup> A concept advocated for and practised by Racial Justice Trainers, of which one is a staff member of the Co-op team. Shared by kind permission of the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI).

been impacted by many traumatic events such as endemic disadvantage, inter-generational poverty, a 40-year drugs crisis, gang related violence, homelessness, a state created *poverty hub*<sup>24</sup> and Covid 19, through our research the Co-op has found very few studies that have captured the full effect collective community trauma has had on the members of the community living in the area. Further research studies specific to the impact of community trauma in inner city Dublin would be very beneficial when incorporating trauma informed practices into organisational programmes and government policy. Overall, it is evident that collective trauma exists in Dublin's inner city and that it is multi-layered, historical as well as contemporary and ever evolving. Collective trauma impacts the people of the community in a myriad of complex, different and interconnecting ways. The exact extent is hard to gauge and define with certainty in the absence of detailed and comprehensive research.

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**Dublin City Community Co-operative social media platforms:**

[Dublin City Community Co-Op – An alliance of Dublin inner city community development organisations \(dublincitycommunitycoop.ie\)](#)

[dublincitycommunitycoop \(@dublincitycomm1\) / X \(twitter.com\)](#)

[\(26\) Dublin City Community Cooperative: Company Page Admin | LinkedIn](#)

[Dublin City Community Co-op \(@dublincitycommunitycoop\) • Instagram photos and videos](#)

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<sup>24</sup> Dublin City Community Co-op contends that the Irish State, through a combination of poor planning, indifference and a lack of coordination, has created a *poverty hub* in Dublin's inner city. This manifests in a disproportional concentration of homeless accommodation, drugs & alcohol addiction services and Refugee/International Protections Applicants accommodation in an area already suffering decades long deprivation, crime and poverty.

<https://capacitarirelandass.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/caspr-evaluation-reportjuly-25-2017.pdf>

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