THE CRISIS WITHIN: TELLING A PUBLIC HEALTH AND SCIENCE STORY IN FERGUSON

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THE CRISIS WITHIN: HOW TOXIC STRESS AND TRAUMA ENDANGER OUR CHILDREN

• [www.stltoday.com/crisis](http://www.stltoday.com/crisis)
• Followed 3 families for 7 months
• Wrote their stories over that time
• Explained the science of toxic stress
• Explored solutions & prevention
Sad outcomes. Early Trauma.

Child abuse: negative sometimes violent attention

Neglect: lack of attention

Neglect is far more common than child abuse but can be just as damaging
One day a lady and a man from the United States came to the orphanage. They wanted to adopt a sweet little girl. They came to Panama because they had friends who lived there.
YOUNG LIVES WITH HARDSHIP

Homelessness
Substance abuse in the family
Incarceration in the family
No money
Lack of medical care (asthma, diabetes, auto-immune disorders)
Lost trust with relatives
Physical abuse
Emotional abuse
Early neglect: lack of attention
Mental illness

ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

Commonly known as ACEs

A survey given to adults to measure trauma experienced when 18 or younger

10 survey questions
yes or no answer
Tally up the yeses = ACEs Score
## ACEs

Verbal or physical abuse  
Sexual abuse  
Emotional neglect  
Food scarcity and/or other unmet physical needs  
Substance abuse in the household  
Divorce  
Domestic violence  
Mental illness  
Incarceration of household member

| Tabulated ACEs score and analyzed individual's adult health. |
| The higher the ACEs score, greater instances of chronic diseases. |

- Asthma  
- Heart disease  
- High blood pressure  
- Stroke  
- Obesity  
- Heart disease  
- Kidney disease  
- Autoimmune disorders  
- Arthritis  
- Depression  
- Other mental Illness  
- Cancer
TOXIC STRESS

Trauma AND intense everyday burdens

Toxic stress common in poverty

Striking research on:
Adverse changes in chromosome structure and gene expression on DNA – even before birth
Brain size and neural development
Learning and behavioral issues
Chronic physical and mental health issues as adults

Which was what I was seeing in both foster children and foreign adoptees
REPORTING: WHAT WE KNEW

Trauma from protesting, police presence and violence.
Families living in poverty within yards of the turmoil
Parents with strong histories of trauma and poverty
Protests causing PTSD in adults and children
Chronic, possibly toxic stress trickling down to children

“I see all these beautiful babies, and I think of all the statistics, and I can calculate which of these babies is going to have problems because their home environment is so stressed that they are never going to get the right support they need to turn on those genes to get a happy involvement in life,”

- Dr. Ken Haller, American Academy of Pediatrics
HOW DO YOU SHOW TOXIC STRESS TO READERS SO THEY CARE?

How do you make it more than a science or a health story?

What’s going to keep readers engaged?

How do you overcome Ferguson fatigue among mainstream readers?

Poverty is not a popular topic

It was critical to ask Ferguson families, not “What is wrong with you?” but rather: What happened to you?
“This situation — I feel like I can’t fix it....

Akeelah says she is fine...But if you knew her before this all happened, you know that she is not. As a mother, you know that she is hurting.”

- Natash Brown, 30, Akeelah’s mom
DESTINY'S WORLD

“My grandma says if we move, it's just going to be like this on the other streets....”

“If we pray, we won’t get shot.”

- Destiny Sonnier, 9
“The only thing that came over my mind was a voice, like, ‘You had all these other children. You didn’t give them up, why should I give these up?’”

- Darlene Evans, 46, mother of 10
RESILIENCE

• Positive relationships and support = better brain scans
• 5-10 minutes a day quality interaction = prevention
• Stress management + wellness = prevention
• Family connectedness
• Trauma awareness
• Prenatal screening and support
• Home visiting
• Quality early childhood programs
• Community wellness