

An Open Letter to Police Chiefs: The Need for Trauma-Informed Policing

Dear Police Chief:

In my 23 years with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, right up to the day I retired, my personal mission was to champion the FBI's mission: *To protect the American people and uphold the Constitution of the United States.*¹

I consider the FBI's mission equivalent in many ways to the well-known mission of most police agencies first adopted by the Los Angeles Police Department in 1955: *To Protect and Serve.*²

We have been told the level of trust between police departments and communities has been on the decline. Without trust, citizen cooperation plummets resulting in underreported crimes, disappearing suspects, reduced investigative leads, and unsolved cases.³

I believe much of the reduction in trust is a result of trauma – trauma experienced by subjects, victims, and even police officers. The rates of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse or physical and emotional neglect do not exclude law enforcement officers! There is no immunity from trauma simply because a person pinned on a badge and strapped on a gun.

Some people want you to believe that recognizing this trauma and understanding its effects go against sound and proven evidence-based techniques.

However, I know there is scientific evidence to support the need for law enforcement officers to be trauma informed. Being trauma informed can build or rebuild trust with the community and fulfill the mission to protect and serve.

I want to share with you four reasons why trauma-informed policing is an effective model for police:

1. Being Trauma Informed is Scientifically Researched and Evidenced Based

- Individual trauma often occurs in childhood when the brain is most malleable. These adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) affect a person's physical and mental health as well as their ability to gain employment, maximize education, or succeed in the workplace.
- In the criminal justice system, trauma has been scientifically linked to an increase in the odds of arrest and incarceration. Studies have "found that individuals who experience more types of ACEs are also more likely to be serious, violent, and chronic offenders."⁴
- **The correlation between trauma and encounters with law enforcement is undisputed. The question isn't whether being trauma-informed is an important law enforcement model, the question is, "When is my agency going to embrace a trauma-informed approach to policing?"**

¹ <https://www.fbi.gov/about/mission>

² https://www.lapdonline.org/history_of_the_lapd/content_basic_view/1128

³ P. Colin Bolger and Glenn D. Walters, "The relationship between police procedural justice, police legitimacy, and people's willingness to cooperate with law enforcement: A meta-analysis," *Journal of Criminal Justice* 60 (2019): 93–99.

⁴ Jessica M. Craig, Michael T. Baglivio, Kevin T. Wolff, Alex R. Piquero, and Nathan Epps, "Do Social Bonds Buffer the Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences on Reoffending?" *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice* 2017, Vol. 15(1) 3-20.

2. Being Trauma-Informed is a Widely Recognized Approach to Domestic Violence Investigations

- 1 in 3 women and 1 in 6 men have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime. Unfortunately, in 2019, 64% of rapes or sexual assaults were not reported to the police.⁵
- The IACP recognizes the importance of being trauma informed through its program, “Trauma Informed Sexual Assault Investigation Training,” which “provides information on the neurobiological impact of trauma, the influence of societal myths and stereotypes, understanding perpetrator behavior, and conducting effective investigations.”⁶
- Being trauma informed and conducting sound investigations are not incompatible or mutually exclusive. Rather, being trauma informed actually helps explain a victim’s state of mind and ability to recall facts after a violent event.
- **What is required is a paradigm shift from asking “What’s wrong with you?” to finding the complete story of a person’s behavior and motivation by asking, “What happened to you?”**

3. Being Trauma-Informed is Vital for Addressing Officer Suicide

- Law enforcement officers do not have to be social workers or therapists to understand that many people, including themselves, have been traumatized and victimized. Being trauma-informed acknowledges a person’s life history affects their present actions, attitudes, and lives.
- One byproduct of trauma experienced by officers is that the law enforcement profession has the highest level of suicide among all professions. It is so prevalent, recently three times the number of police officers died by suicide than were killed in the line of duty.⁷
- **Being trauma informed helps explain why officers struggle in their profession, how their responses may be triggered by childhood events, and how they can effectively build resilience.**

4. Being Trauma-informed is Necessary for Effective Leadership

- The rates of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse or physical and emotional neglect do not exclude law enforcement officers! There is no immunity from trauma simply because a person pinned on a badge and strapped on a gun.
- **Being trauma informed builds trust, builds relationships, and builds the foundation for effective policing in the twenty-first century.**

Your communities, your departments, and your officers demand and require an improvement in trust from law enforcement as a whole. Your willingness to implement policies and procedures which incorporate trauma-informed principles will help your agency conduct better investigations, build better relationships, and ensure better results.

Respectfully,

Christopher Freeze
FBI Special Agent in Charge (Retired)

P.S. If you would like to learn more about how to become trauma informed, please download this free resource guide: [The 38 Websites, Books, and Podcasts You Need to Become a Trauma-informed Leader](#).

⁵ <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cv19.pdf> page 8.

⁶ <https://www.theiacp.org/projects/trauma-informed-sexual-assault-investigation-training>

⁷ <https://www.addictioncenter.com/news/2019/09/police-at-highest-risk-for-suicide-than-any-profession/>