

Trauma: Then & Now

*Illuminating the link between adverse
childhood experiences and
homelessness in Central Iowa*



JUNE 2023

*A five-year survey
conducted by:*



About Our Study



"What's wrong with you?"

In decades past, this was the question most likely at the center of programs and services designed to serve individuals and families experiencing homelessness, drug or alcohol addiction, mental illness and other distressing life challenges. But with a growing understanding of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and advances in trauma-informed care, a new question is at the forefront:

"What happened to you?"

In 2017, Hope Ministries kicked off a survey to quantify the major challenges faced by homeless men in Central Iowa—including traumatic experiences in childhood, and alcohol, substance abuse and mental health challenges in adulthood.

Our survey was completed by a total of 1,002 homeless men participating in the first phase of Hope Ministries' long-term life recovery program between 2017 and 2022. These are individuals who stayed in our men's shelter and went on to join our one-year program in an effort to rebuild their life.

We found that on average, the homeless men we serve have experienced more than four traumatic experiences in their childhood.

Understanding ACEs



As defined by the CDC, Adverse Childhood Experiences are **“potentially traumatic events that occurred in childhood (0-17 years.)”**

Examples include domestic violence, substance abuse, separation, or home instability (parental separation, parent(s) removed from the home, incarceration). These and other examples are experiences that can, according to the Iowa ACEs 360 Coalition, “dramatically upset a child’s sense of safety and well-being.”

According to the CDC, the more ACEs a child experiences, the higher the likelihood they will face long-term impacts in the future. Those impacts can include **chronic health problems, mental illness, financial struggles, and substance abuse into adolescence and adulthood**. And, as our study supports, there’s a high risk of those impacts also including/leading to homelessness.

The CDC defines 10 types of ACEs divided into three categories:

Abuse

- Emotional abuse*
- Physical abuse*
- Sexual abuse*

Household Challenges

- Separation*
- Domestic violence*
- Substance abuse*
- Mental illness*
- Incarcerated household member*

Neglect

- Emotional neglect*
- Physical neglect*



Our Findings



The purpose of our study was to see firsthand the link between adverse childhood experiences and adulthood struggles with homelessness. A total of 1,002 homeless/displaced men served by Hope Ministries completed our ACEs questionnaire, which included questions such as:

Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often push, grab, slap or throw something at you or ever hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?

Did you often or very often feel that no one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special?

Did you often or very often feel that you didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you or your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you?

At the core of our work as a homeless provider is building relationships with the men we serve. Rather than asking every man who walked through the door of our shelter to complete this questionnaire, we waited until men had made the decision to join our long-term life recovery program, indicating that there'd been a beginning level of trust built between our staff and the guest.

According to the CDC, most adults have experienced at least one ACE. However:

On average, homeless men participating in Hope Ministries' life recovery program have experienced more than four ACEs.

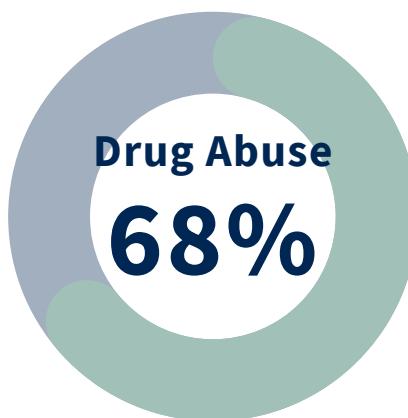
Findings Cont.



Our findings help answer the question, at least in part, of why a person becomes homeless. Based on this study, there is clearly a link between adulthood struggle with homelessness and multiple traumatic experiences in childhood.

But the adulthood struggles of the 1,002 men included in this study are broader than homelessness. We also asked men about their experiences with alcohol abuse, drug abuse and mental illness.

"When you came here, were you struggling with...?"*



Not only have the men we surveyed faced traumatic experiences in their childhood, many of them now struggle with more than one crippling and potentially deadly problem as an adult.

In other words, trauma then often contributes to trauma now.

**These are self-reported results and are likely conservative percentages.*

"Hope Ministries has a long history serving men experiencing homelessness, so we had an inkling of what we'd see in this study. But the results really helped us quantify the dysfunction, abuse and neglect that the men we serve have been exposed to. The more we understand what they've been through, the better we're able to address their needs."

—Dwight Long, Director of Men's Ministries

Why This Matters



Understanding the link between ACEs and homelessness allows Hope Ministries and other providers to hone our trauma-informed approach as we help men experiencing homelessness take their next steps in life. At Hope Ministries, this includes, but certainly isn't limited to:

- Individualized case management
- Compassionate substance abuse counseling
- Access to mental health services/providers
- Access to trauma-informed therapy/therapists
- Work skills training
- Help identifying "safe people" and building a support system
- Parenting classes
- Financial education

According to the 2020 ACEs Report, among adults who reported four or more ACEs/neglect, 52.4% were "rarely able to talk about feelings with family." This illustrates the need for Hope Ministries and similar providers to offer not only practical solutions to a homeless individual's current struggles—i.e. housing or free meals—but also compassionate understanding of the guest's deep-seated hurts.

In essence, this study matters because people matter. To truly experience long-term life transformation, a homeless individual needs more than help for today's struggles . . . the individual also needs healing from yesterday's painful experiences.

MATT'S STORY

When Matt* was a child, his mom was diagnosed with HIV and passed away within a year. Due to misconceptions surrounding HIV at the time, his friends pushed him away. In ninth grade, he dropped out of school and spiraled into addiction, eventually becoming homeless. By the time he was 35, he was living on a concrete slab outside a school and everything he owned fit in a laundry basket.

The link between Matt's childhood experiences and his adult struggles with homelessness and addiction was undeniable. He needed comprehensive help to address long-term hardship. Matt spent a year in Hope Ministries' life recovery program, receiving individualized care and participating in classes, counseling and recovery groups. He worked through his abandonment issues and resentment, while striving for sobriety. Matt earned his high school equivalency diploma while in our program and went on to earn a college degree in Human Services. Today, he's happily married and an involved father. He's a homeowner with rewarding full-time employment.

*Name changed for privacy



Hope Ministries has been serving people in need in Central Iowa since 1915. We provide free warm meals, safe shelter and life-changing recovery programs for men, women and children facing homelessness, hunger, abuse or addiction. **Learn more at hopeiowa.org.**

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Helpful Resources

2020 Iowa ACEs Report

<https://www.iowaaces360.org/2020-iowa-aces-report.html>

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) – Center for Disease Control

<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html>

Adverse Childhood Experiences and Related Outcomes Among Adults: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis

<https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S2468-2667%2821%2900189-4>