

# Trauma takes a toll on half of U.S. kids

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(HealthDay)—Nearly half of American children have faced at least one traumatic experience, such as the death of a parent, witnessing a violent crime or living with someone who is suicidal or abuses drugs or alcohol,

new research reveals.

These events can trigger high levels of stress, which can have serious and lasting effects on children's development, health and overall well-being, according to researchers at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

They noted, however, that effective parenting, supportive neighbors, involved schools and teaching kids how to be resilient can all help reduce these harmful effects.

"Every child deserves a healthy start," said Richard Besser, president and CEO of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which funded the research. "A loving home, a good school, a safe neighborhood—these things are the foundation for a long and happy life, yet too many children don't have them."

"Too often, children experience trauma that can be devastating," Besser said in a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation news release.

"But trauma doesn't have to define a child's life trajectory. They can be incredibly resilient," he added. "With policies that help families raise healthy children, and the consistent presence of caring adults in their lives, we can reduce the impact of trauma on children's health and help them thrive in the face of adversity."

Overall, 46 percent of U.S. children have faced at least one [traumatic experience](#), and more than 20 percent have faced at least two, the Hopkins researchers found.

When looking at states individually, the analysis found that nearly 40 percent of children in every state had experienced at least one trauma and, in 16 states, at least 25 percent of children had experienced at least

two.

The findings came from an analysis of data from the 2016 National Survey of Children's Health, conducted by the Child & Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. The analysis was published in the September/October issue of the journal *Academic Pediatrics*.

Children who deal with trauma face an increased risk for long-term health issues, including smoking, alcoholism, depression and heart and liver diseases.

The researchers found that 33 percent of children who faced two or more traumatic events had a [chronic health condition](#) that required specialized care, compared with about 14 percent of children who never experienced trauma.

The researchers noted that trauma doesn't discriminate, affecting children of all races, ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds. Overall, about 40 percent of white children, 51 percent of Hispanic children and 64 percent of black children experienced one or more traumatic events, the study found.

Traumatic events were more common among low-income families, affecting 62 percent of children whose family income was well below the federal poverty line, compared with 26 percent of children from high-income families.

The age at which children face a trauma matters, according to the researchers.

Preschoolers who had at least two traumatic experiences were more than four times more likely to struggle with managing their emotions, such as

staying calm, avoiding distraction and making friends. Meanwhile, children aged 6 to 17 who faced at least two [traumatic events](#) were twice as likely as their peers to not be engaged at school, the study showed.

"Traumatic events don't just affect an individual child—families, neighborhoods and communities all bear the brunt of these difficult circumstances, which add up over time," said Christina Bethell, with the Child & Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative. "If a child's stress and unhealed trauma leads to acting out in class, that disruption is felt by the other [children](#) in the room as well as the teacher."

"These impacts require the healing of [trauma](#) at a family, community and societal level," she said.

**More information:** SOURCE: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, news release, Oct. 19, 2017

The U.S. National Institute of Mental Health has information on [how to cope](#) with traumatic events.

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