

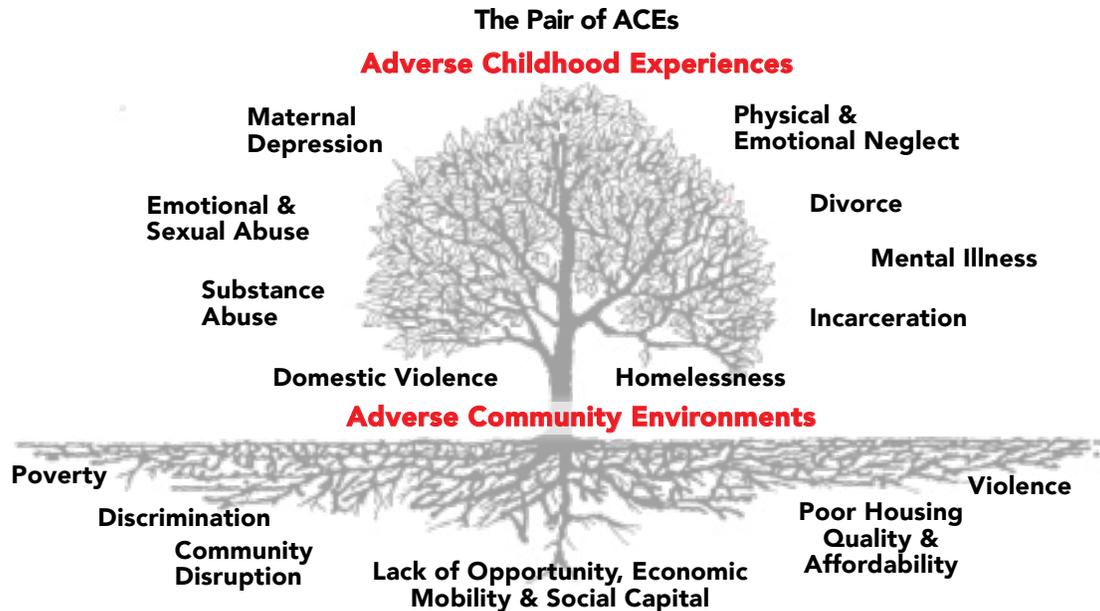
# Visualizing the Issue: Trauma and Inequity

The 'Pair of ACEs' framing – adverse childhood experiences in the context of adverse community environments – is foundational to the work of building community resilience. In 2017 we introduced this image to illustrate the relationship between adversity experienced by an individual or family and adversity experienced within a community.

## The Pair of ACEs Tree

The Pair of ACEs tree illustrates the influence of a community environment on the lives of children and families. It depicts the relationship between adverse community environments (ACEs) – the soil in which the lives of some children and families are rooted – and the adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) of their household environment, or the branches on which children and families grow.

The leaves on the tree represent outcomes of stress and trauma – adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). ACEs are often recognized and observed in medical, educational, and social service settings, such as a well child visit or a child's behavior in class. Exposure to frequent and multiple types of adversity can increase a person's risk for maladaptive behaviors such as poor coping skills, hypervigilance, and early onset of chronic illnesses – such as depression, heart disease, obesity, and substance use disorder ultimately leading to early death. In addition to health impacts, ACEs can have a devastating impact on social behavior, which may result in criminal justice involvement, lower educational attainment, and lower access to economic mobility.



Ellis, W., Dietz, W.H., Chen, K.D. (2022). Community Resilience: A Dynamic Model for Public Health 3.0. *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice*, (28)1, S18-S26. doi: 10.1097/PHH.0000000000001413

The Pair of ACEs tree depicts a community planted in soil steeped in systemic inequities, dysfunction, and systemic racism, which robs it of the nutrients necessary to support a resilient, thriving community. Adverse community environments – such as neighborhoods of concentrated poverty typically offer less

access to economic mobility, and/or increased stress and fear associated with unfair policing practice, community violence and systemic racism. The complex nature of inequities experienced in communities can contribute to, and compound, adversities that children and families experience within their homes.

## What's in Your Soil?

Using the Pair of ACEs image to foster conversation across a range of stakeholders has proven to be a powerful and effective way of getting to the root of our nation's painful history of racial trauma due to systemic inequity. Our coalition partners have found success in using this tool to tailor conversations with parents and families with lived experience, advocates, and individuals working within systems from healthcare to education and social services.

Our partners across the country frame these conversations with the question, 'What's in your soil?' The discussions that follow are essential to developing a shared understanding and shared language around the adversity and trauma experienced in community.

## Using the Pair of ACEs Worksheet

Using our Pair of ACEs worksheet to consider the systems and policies at play in their own communities, collaboratives can uncover, describe, and document root causes driving disparate, place-based outcomes on the leaves and branches of their tree. In doing so, the roles of local systems and the specific policies and practices that drive trauma and disparities are identified and the experience detailed in community voice.

**Download the worksheet here:**

[go.gwu.edu/resiliencetreeworksheet](http://go.gwu.edu/resiliencetreeworksheet).

### Guidance for Completing the Worksheet:

**Identifying the Issue** – The process of completing the boxes on the leaves and branches of the Pair of ACEs tree can help you focus on a place-based issue you aim to address. **Get specific and use both quantitative and qualitative information – stories and data – to describe the inequities experienced in community.** For example, solving 'food insecurity and hunger' may be desired but including a description of how this adversity shows up, including comparisons to other local neighborhoods or populations, will help establish

### Power of the Process: Developing a Shared Understanding

One of the most galvanizing and transformative experiences for coalitions in the resilience journey has been the process of gaining shared understanding of challenges and opportunities using the Pair of ACEs tree.

Through honest conversation, coalitions develop a deeper understanding of systemic barriers that contribute to vicious cycles of poverty and disparity. The frank, often challenging nature of dialogue around these painful truths can ultimately serve to build trust within the coalition.

Using our Center for Community Resilience tools, coalitions identify opportunities for community-driven solutions – harnessing community wisdom and power to lift their own narratives and advocate for change.

Completing the Pair of ACEs worksheet allows coalitions to co-create goals and strategies for systems change. By leveraging relationships built on trust, coalitions are in a strong position to advocate for policy change.

This process of knowledge acquisition and coalition building is an essential element of the resilience movement.

the urgency of your concern. Documenting the differences with data that demonstrate place-based disparities can help you begin to identify change strategies and solutions.

**Example:** *Children and families in the predominantly Black Southside neighborhoods lack access to nutritious, affordable food; there are no major grocery stores nearby, unlike in wealthier, White neighborhoods where grocery stores are abundant. The Northside's 82,000 residents have 10 full-service grocery stores while the 150,000 Southside residents have none. On the Southside, neighborhood corner stores are the only source of food, yet they sell limited fresh produce and an abundance of inexpensive, unhealthy processed foods.*

**Understanding the Leaves and Branches** – These are adverse childhood experiences and can be thought of as the negative outcomes that show up at the family level and have long-term effects on health and wellbeing.

**Example:** *When food insecurity is present, children are more likely to experience difficulties learning and advancing in school due to hunger and malnutrition. Additional stressors accompany food insecurity such as housing insecurity and other effects of living in poverty. Mothers who live in poverty are at higher risk for maternal depression, elevating the household risk for anxiety and depression in children.*

**Describing the Soil** – These are adverse community environments and can be thought of as factors at the systems level that drive community outcomes. These factors include policies, programs and practices that may operate differentially for communities based on race and/or place. These elements include policies and practices associated with lack of resources in local public schools, community violence, discrimination and systemic racism, community disruption due to widespread unemployment, poor housing quality and affordability – all resulting in a lack of opportunity, economic mobility, and social capital.

**Example description from a community partner:** *“The only full-service grocery store closed on the Southside; bus lines and metro service were cut during COVID, making it harder for families to get groceries; corner stores don't sell nutritious foods and produce; when the city appealed to grocery store chains to open on the Southside, they declined citing high poverty and low homeownership.”*

**Envisioning Healing and Resilience** – Creating opportunities for community healing and fostering equity provides a framework of action for your coalition to make communities, children and families feel supported and safe. For this reason, in our work at the Center for Community Resilience individuals with lived experience are centered in these discussions.

**Example of specific action steps toward long-term change:** *Formal acknowledgement by city leaders of systemic inequities preventing Southside residents from accessing healthy and nutritious foods; incentives to ensure the opening of a full-service grocery that provides living wages for residents; economic policies that foster social and economic mobility, including financial and technical support for small businesses and entrepreneurs. Such supports will allow residents a means to celebrate local culture and foster community cohesion through food.*

**What Changes are Needed?** – This section provides an opportunity to brainstorm specific ways adversities described in previous exercises can be addressed through program, practice and policy changes.

**Example:** *All Southside neighborhoods will have access to a full-service grocery store within walking distance from residences or public transportation; these stores will sell high-quality, affordable, nutritious food and produce; small food entrepreneurs will have access to loans and incentives to open businesses that address food insecurity in the neighborhood and increase community access to affordable, nutritious food.*

- **Program:** *Develop a community-driven local food system with new licenses for small businesses – ex. a co-op or farmers market, pop-ups, selling from home kitchens; links to urban / nearby farms*
- **Practice:** *Stores that sell high quality, nutritious, affordable food; new jobs with living wages*
- **Policy:** *City leaders provide incentives for grocery stores to open on Southside; city planning for greater access including increased sidewalks for pedestrian safety and public transportation routes to grocery stores; additional incentives created and barriers removed to stimulate development of small food businesses and ‘food-preneurs’.*

**Who Should Be at the Table?** – When building a coalition for change, consider the individuals and organizations that understand the challenges you would like to address. Aim to create a broad-based coalition that consists of individuals from community with lived experience and/or have a vested interest in the issues. Consider individuals who can provide economic, social and/or economic analysis, and decision makers or individuals working within systems who have access to power and influence. The process of creating community-driven solutions will require a broad coalition to deepen your understanding of the complexity of social and systems issues. Curating the members of this conversation will take time but doing so will increase your ability to influence systems change.

**Example coalition partners:** *Southside community members, local food vendors eager to expand business opportunities; high school students interested in food industry jobs and entrepreneurship; anti-hunger and food access advocates; city council members; local business developers and community planners.*

# Envisioning the Future: Hope, Equity, and Resilience

The CCR Resilience tree was born of a need to illustrate the relationship between resilient community environments – a visual means to illustrate the positive outcomes that result from gaining access to equitable, trauma-informed systems and supports. A companion to the Pair of ACEs tree, the Resilience tree offers a strengths-based approach for coalitions to create a shared vision of what is possible in collaboration and begin to outline a strategy to get there.

## Shifting Focus to Bolster Strengths

The CCR Resilience framework recognizes that to ensure equity and produce community resilience for children and families, we must shift away from a deficit lens to a strengths-based approach that recognizes, bolsters, and invests in the inherent strengths and assets that make up the community. By doing so, we can shift the narrative to one that represents a community's perspective.

## Two Trees, Different Soil

The Pair of ACEs tree depicts a community planted in soil that is steeped in systemic inequities. The cycle of adversity driven by inequity perpetuates and exacerbates trauma, poor health, and negative social outcomes across generations. In contrast, the soil of the Resilience tree is nurtured and cultivated with essential nutrients that yield positive outcomes for children and families. Using these trees in tandem we can demonstrate a community's experience of inequity and adversity, while also presenting a more hopeful outlook when equitable access to housing, education and other resources are in place to prevent adversity and promote resilience.

### Fostering Hope, Antidote to Fear

Hope is not an intangible emotion that springs independent of context—hope is a direct outcome of an environment and experiences from which individuals feel they can access fairness, safety, equity and justice. Fear is an instinctual emotion wired to our survival as a species. The experience of trauma can generate a fear response that lasts a lifetime and just like instinct can be passed down through generations.

**Bottom line:** hope must be nurtured; fear is a natural reaction and as such can be manipulated to destabilize social cohesion in a community. To overcome the power of fear, local collaboratives can use the Resilience Tree to vision an environment that fosters hope through equity and healing:

- How would systems connect to create a community in which positive childhood experiences and social cohesion were the norm?
- How would you measure progress toward this new norm? What would the outcomes look like for children and families?
- Leveraging this new social cohesion, how will your community use hope to perpetuate a cycle of system change?

## The Resilience Tree

Pictured below, the Resilience tree illustrates the relationship between communities with access to equitable, trauma-informed systems and supports, and the positive health and social outcomes they produce for children and families.



## What's in Your Soil?

The soil of a resilient community environment is characterized by a system of supports that nurtures growth and yields positive outcomes. The environment in which this tree is planted also provides buffers that can blunt the effects of trauma, helping children and families bounce back in the face of adversity, and bounce forward to thrive. A critical distinction in the soil of the Resilience tree is the design of equitable, trauma-informed systems and supports. With this as a baseline, the soil of the Resilience tree includes factors that nourish the community and produce positive outcomes that can be measured across multiple systems and sectors. For example, communities have used our tools to advocate for the following:

- Community-driven policy decisions and practices that increase social capital within a community.
- Access to affordable and safe housing to stabilize neighborhoods.
- Fair policing practices and restorative justice developed with community input and oversight to improve community safety.
- Commitment to economic development that supports living wages and fair lending practices to grow financial security, savings, homeownership, and entrepreneurship in community.
- Integrated social services to ensure a network of trauma-informed supports and wrap around services that promote community health and wellbeing.

- Public education systems with financing reforms tailored to the community’s desires and needs, including assets such as high-speed Wi-Fi, improved classroom resources and school facilities that ensure the delivery of high-quality education and enrichment opportunities in a safe environment – regardless of a student’s home zip code.
- Community and city infrastructure and resources that promote physical and mental health, including access to parks and green spaces, and accessible, efficient public transportation.

## Catalysts for Equity

Systemic drivers in the soil that are planted with the intention of closing the equity gap yield healthy, thriving leaves and branches. Acting as a catalyst for equity, systems that promote living wages, fair lending practices and affordable housing will yield a community where families can afford safe and stable housing (an indicator of social and economic mobility) in a desirable area (an indicator of neighborhood safety). Systems that serve community in an equitable fashion can act as economic catalysts, spurring neighborhood investments in small businesses and economic development that creates pathways for individual and community savings as well as access to credit.

## What Would Resilience Look Like?

Using the Resilience tree and its accompanying worksheet to envision an equitable future, collaboratives can map existing strengths and assets, while developing measures of accountability that foster hope, equity, and resilience in community.

**Download the worksheet here:** [go.gwu.edu/resiliencetreeworksheet](https://go.gwu.edu/resiliencetreeworksheet).

### Guidance for Completing the Worksheet:

**Leverage Community Strengths (e.g. social networks)** – Using a strengths-based approach, identify and describe the positive attributes of community that exist but are likely not supported or bolstered by traditional systems and sectors in any formal or organized way.

***Example:** A trusted network exists that organizes and distributes groceries and meals for food-insecure families and elders throughout Southside neighborhoods; a faith-based network of African American churches has organized to support Black-owned businesses and entrepreneurs, developing a foundation for consistent income, growth and financial stability for business owners and employees; a well-established Medicaid program exists in which doctors prescribe fruits and vegetables that can be redeemed with vouchers at a network of neighborhood farmers markets.*

**Leverage Systems & Supports** – Oftentimes cities, municipalities or nonprofit agencies provide supports that are helpful, but not resourced or networked well enough with other assets to meet a community’s needs. Identifying these existing resources can help direct planning for policy changes to support, expand or improve connections with existing systems and supports.

***Example:** Significant federal money was earmarked in the American Rescue Plan Act for coronavirus relief to states, municipalities, cities, and nonprofit organizations; several schools on the Southside have co-located wellness centers at elementary and middle schools and all children are regularly sent home with food staples. These supports to reduce the burden of food insecurity could be expanded with federal funds to additional co-location sites, such as barber shops or braid shops to support community members who don’t have contact with schools.*

**Fostering Hope, Equity and Resilience** – Use this section to envision strategies that would expand or improve connections between existing supports and services in community.

*Example: A local / regional food system that provides jobs with living wages, children, and families with affordable and nutritious food, showcases the range of food culture in Southside neighborhoods, and instills local pride while promoting social cohesion.*

**Setting the Table** – As with the Pair of ACEs tree worksheet, it's essential to consider who understands the challenges you're trying to address, as well as who can help advocate for change. Including input from different vantage points and elevating the expertise of those with lived experience is paramount to this process.

*Example: Southside community members, parents who want healthier options for their families; local food vendors who want to expand; high school students interested in food-related jobs and entrepreneurship; anti-hunger, food, and wellness advocates; faith leaders; city council members.*

**Indicators of Positive Change** – Completing this section is important for tracking change over time, and creating a system of accountability.

*Example: Arrival of new full-service grocery store(s) on the Southside; incentives to create new food jobs in the community; expansion of food industry job training programs; new small food businesses opened; growth of the Medicaid prescriptions for produce program, including additional farmers markets and prescribing doctors.*

**Understanding the Leaves and Branches** – The leaves and branches illustrate the experience of children and families – those elements that support positive childhood experiences, overall health and wellbeing and/or are protective in the face of adverse childhood experiences.

Example: When families have access to healthy food without a worry of hunger, children are better prepared to learn in school; child rates of asthma and other poor health indicators are reduced; children exhibit reduced rates of anxiety and depression; and mothers report reduced rates of mental health issues.

**Describing the Soil** – These elements characterize access to equitable, trauma-informed systems and supports and can be thought of as the positive factors driven by systems, policies, and practices. These policies, practices and programs provide buffers in the face of adversity experienced at the community level and supports for optimal health, wellbeing and prosperity.

Example: Grocery store(s) in walking distance of residences or accessible by efficient, safe public transportation; corner stores stocked with fresh produce; affordable farmer's markets; a thriving local economy that provides jobs with living wages; safe streets; and open spaces for gathering to celebrate, play and connect with neighbors.