



Programa Velasco

TRAUMA AND RESILIENCY IN SAN RAMON

An examination of the intergenerational mental health needs of a Salvadoran community following exposure to adverse childhood events.

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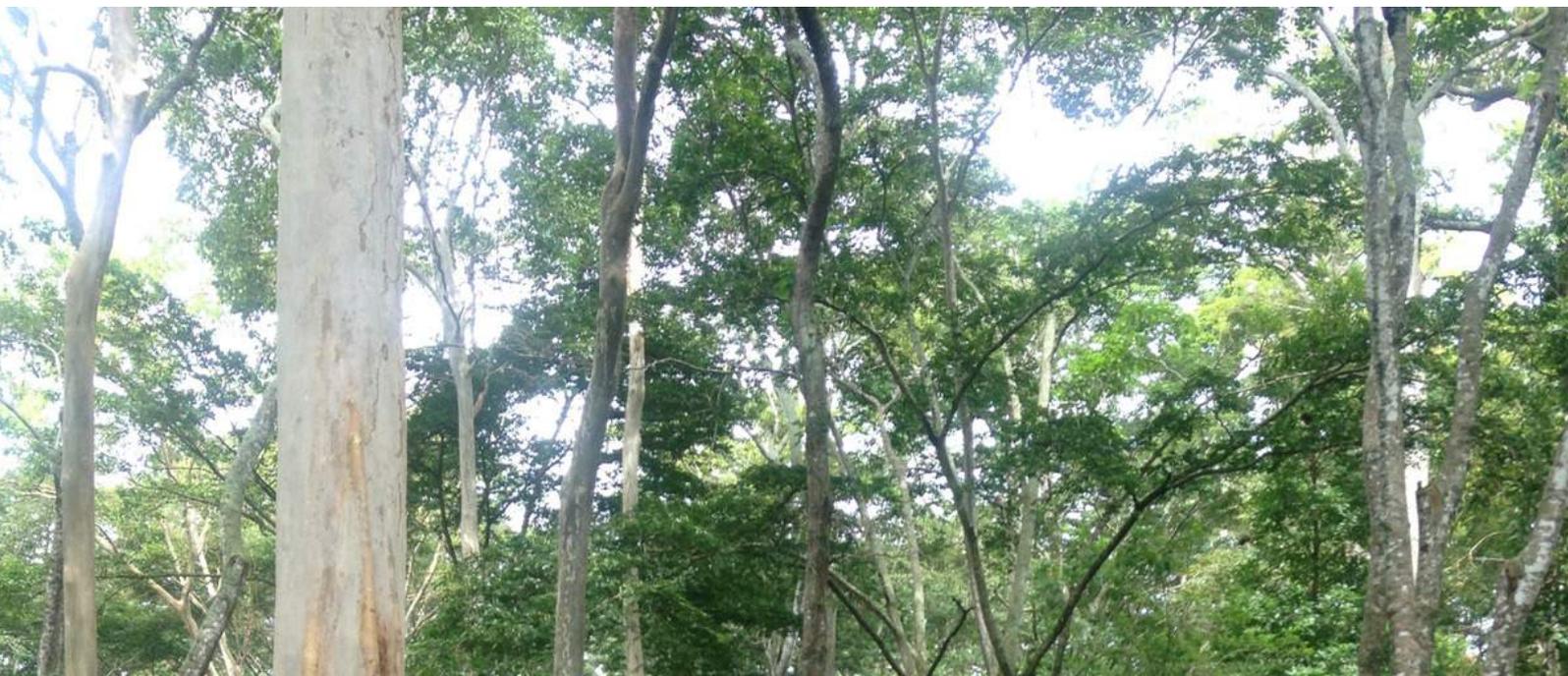


INTRODUCTION

San Ramón is a semi-urban community that sits at the foot of the San Salvador volcano. It is part of the municipality of Mejicanos, a busy and highly populated neighborhood heavily affected by violence located on the northern border of San Salvador, the capital of one of the most violent countries in the world. San Ramón received a surge of internally displaced families first during the Salvadoran civil war and then in the years to follow as families migrated from rural areas seeking work. Inhabitants have experienced many traumatic events which include: environmental disaster, gang related violence, and poverty. These factors have caused many individuals to emigrate out of the country leaving behind the family members they hope to support.

Despite the many challenges the community has faced, there exist numerous groups dedicated to serving and empowering those who are most marginalized. One specific group, the New Dawn Association of El Salvador (ANADES) opened in 1990 as a child development center for children orphaned by the Salvadoran Civil War. Since its inception, ANADES has worked for over twenty-five years in San Ramón, providing early childhood education, medical and social support services for children and families. In 2007, Programa Velasco, a US based non-profit, was founded to help support children and families access early childhood education, social support services, and economic empowerment opportunities. Program Velasco and ANADES have been partner organizations since 2007.

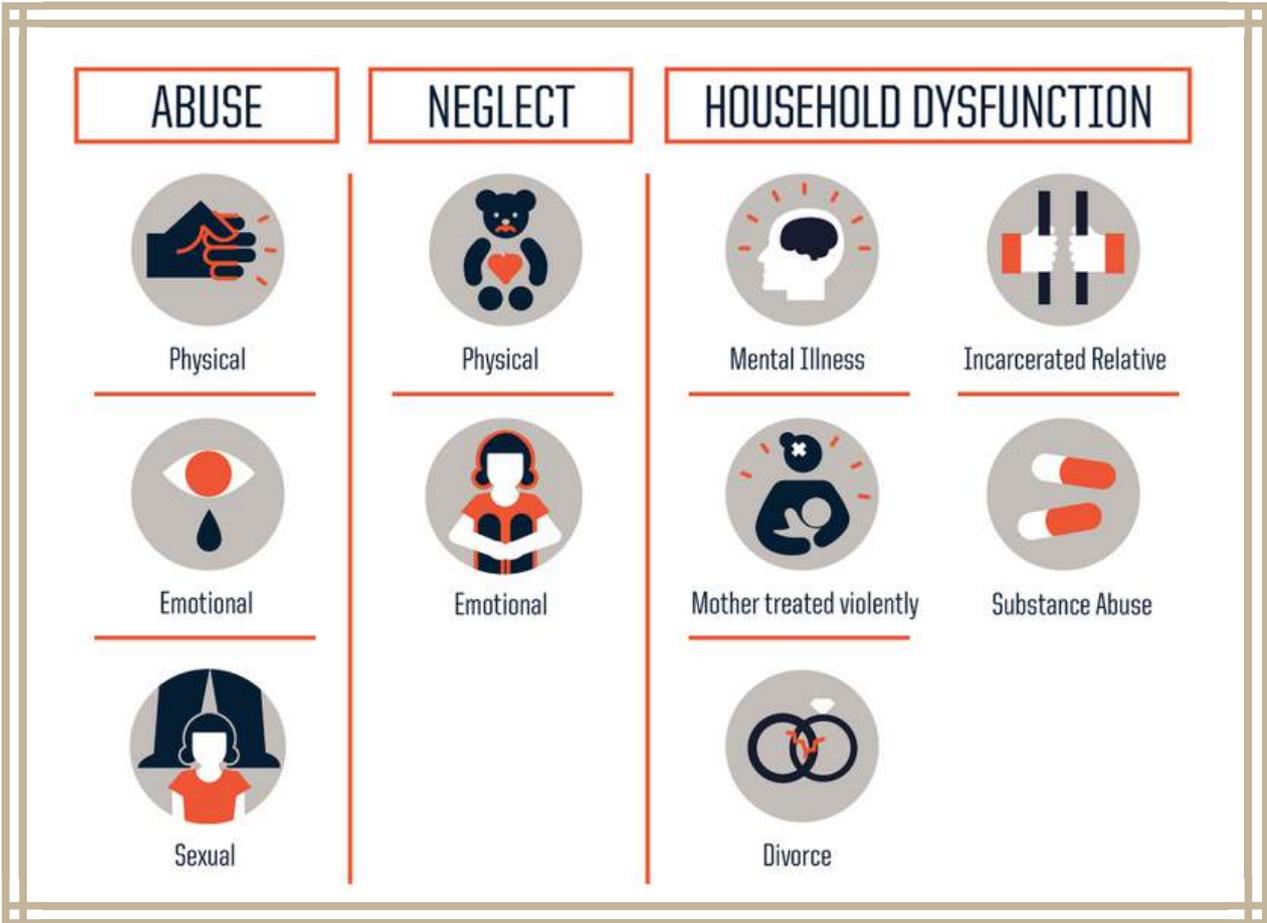
In 2017, after many years of providing mental health services, ANADES, with the support of Programa Velasco, began the process of formalizing and systematizing their mental health program. The objective being that a more formalized program could provide evidence-based treatments to maximize the benefit that families receive.



ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

As part of the work to establish a more formal mental health program, it was essential to identify the mental health needs of the community. Given the history of traumatic events in San Ramón, Programa Velasco chose to assess for exposure to trauma using the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study by Kaiser Permanente and the Center for Disease Control as guide. The landmark ACE study, which surveyed over 17,000 participants between 1995-1997, examined the long term negative effects of ten adverse childhood experiences: physical abuse, verbal and psychological abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, physical neglect, parental separation, domestic violence between parents, and living with an individual who was mental ill, abused substances or went to prison. The study was able to demonstrate that individuals exposed to multiple adverse experiences saw higher rates of mental illness, substance abuse, heart disease, obesity, cancer and early mortality (Center for Disease Control and Prevention).

Since the publication of the ACE study, other studies have been able to establish that protective factors, also known as resiliency factors, such as parental support, healthy relationships, community support and access to services can mitigate the negative effects of exposure to childhood trauma. An understanding of the levels of trauma as well as protective factors that exist among the families served by ANADES would help ANADES and Programa Velasco identify how to best meet their mental health needs.



METHODOLOGY

In November of 2017, ANADES and Programa Velasco team members surveyed fifty-two adults and twelve youth using a questionnaire around adverse childhood events. In addition to the ten adverse childhood experiences identified in the ACE study, the questionnaire asked about additional adverse childhood events such as food insecurity, community violence, lack of access to education and experiences of discrimination. The adults surveyed were parents of children attending ANADES Child Development Center and participants in Programa Velasco's Women's Empowerment Project. The youth all formed part of a youth group run by ANADES' staff. Adults were asked about adverse events from their childhood as well as adverse events that had occurred in the past two years and could have affected children in their care. Youth were simply asked about adverse events that have occurred in their entire lives. In addition to asking about adverse childhood experiences, the questionnaire asked about twelve protective or resiliency factors that exist in the community to help mitigate trauma. Responses were analyzed and categorized into four categories of adverse childhood experiences: Abuse, Family Difficulties, Emotional Challenges and Social Violence. Resiliency Factors were also analyzed. The findings are detailed in this report.

A deeper statistical analysis in which zero order correlations were examined to assess the relationship between the level of exposure to trauma of the parents' children and other variables. Models of logistic regression were conducted to determine the variables that predicted the level of their children's exposure to trauma. *Please see the addendum to this report for a summary of this analysis.*



KEY FINDINGS

The results showed that both adults and youth surveyed had experienced high levels of adverse experiences in their lives.

ABUSE



- 1/2** of the adults reported **physical abuse** as a child
- 1/3** of the adults reported **sexual abuse** as children
- 3/4** of the adults reported being **verbal abuse** as children

FAMILY DIFFICULTIES



- 70%** of adults reported witnessing **physical violence** between their parents during their childhood
- 42%** of youth reported witnessing their parents **insult, curse, or put each other down**

EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES



- 2/3** of adults experienced **food insecurity** during their childhood
- 1/3** of adults report that their family has experienced **food insecurity** in the past two years
- 1/3** of the youth felt at some time they had been **denied a right to their education**

SOCIAL VIOLENCE

Some traumatic events exist at the societal level such as armed conflict, community violence, discrimination and bullying. Participants reported exposure to multiple types of social violence.

2/3 of the adults over the age of 30 reported being affected by the **Salvadoran Civil War**

2/3 of the youth reported experiencing **bullying**

1/2 of the adults and **2/3** of the youth reported experiencing **discrimination**

Both adults and youth surveyed reported high levels of exposure to community violence. In most other categories adults were more likely to report traumatic events happening during their childhoods (such as food insecurity or physical abuse and neglect) but in the area of community violence, adults were more likely to report traumatic events occurring in the past two years than they were to report it during their childhood.

Only **25%** of the adults reported feeling unsafe in their neighborhood during their childhood but **80%** adults AND youth report feeling unsafe in their neighborhood today.

A total of **81%** of adults and **92%** of youth report being affected by gang violence in their community.

83% of youth and **52%** of adults report having seen or heard someone being stabbed or shot.

GENERATIONAL TRAUMA

We see in this population how trauma has been passed down from one generation from the next. The number of adverse childhood events of the children of participants were significantly correlated with the parent number of adverse childhood events.

Adults who experienced traumatic events as children were the ones who were most likely to expose their children to the same traumatic events.

Of the **16** adults who reported incidents of verbal abuse towards children in their care, **13** reported having experienced verbal abuse as a child.

Of the **16** adults who reported that they or another adult in their home had acted in a way that caused a child to feel physically afraid, **14** had experienced that as a child.

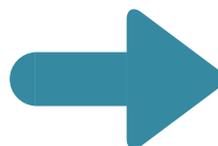
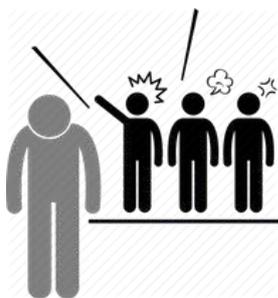
Of the **19** adults who reported that they or another adult in their home had physically abused a child in their care, **15** had been physically abused as children.

Further analysis revealed that the following adverse childhood events of the parents were related to an increase of the number of traumatic events of their children:

- While growing up during the first 18 years of life, if parent or other adult in the household often swore at you, insulted you, put you down, or humiliated you
- If a parent or other adult in the household often acted in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt
- If a parent or other adult in the household ever hit you so that you had marks or were injured
- Saw or heard parents or other adults in the household yelling, swearing, insulting or humiliating each other
- An adult or person at least 5 years older forced you to have sex
- A household member went to prison



Other factors that effected childhood exposure to traumatic events were parental experiences with discrimination and support. The more **experiences of discrimination** of the parents **both** as children and adults, the more their children were exposed to trauma.



parent's experience of discrimination

increases

child's exposure to trauma

The number of adverse childhood events of the children of the participants were not significantly related to their external support, internal strengths, and total support. This means that even if parents reported internal strength and external support, this support did not influence the statistical relationship between parental childhood trauma and their children's trauma exposure.

RESILIENCY FACTORS

Resiliency factors are important to capture as they help to mitigate the negative effects of trauma. Participants surveyed were asked about personal strengths and sources of support. The top resiliency factor reported was: **"I have people I respect in my life."** Most individuals also reported they had opportunities in their lives to make responsible choices and that they were able to solve problems without hurting themselves or others.

Feeling connected to the larger community can promote resilience, though community violence can make this more difficult. A correlation was found between exposure to community violence and feelings of isolation with the community.

Those who reported having experienced at least 4 types of social violence were less likely to report feeling like they were a part of their community and more likely to state that they did not know where to go in their community for assistance.



DISCUSSION

These findings show that this sample of adults and youth who live in San Ramón have experienced significant levels of trauma, especially trauma related to social violence. The ACE study showed that the more adverse events that one has experienced, the more likely the individual is to have negative physical and emotional impacts. The individuals surveyed by Programa Velasco report experiencing multiple traumas in both childhood and in recent years and thus are at higher risk for the negative health impacts of cumulative trauma.

A trend was also detected in generational trauma. Trauma that is not treated is more likely to be passed on. The majority of adults who reported exposing their children to abuse experienced those same abuses during their childhood. ANADES is in the unique position of working with families of young children and thus able to help families break the cycle of abuse through psychological and social support. Results from the analysis suggest that parent exposure to adverse childhood events and parent experience with discrimination are strongly related to the exposure to adverse childhood events of their children.

ANADES and Programa Velasco have developed trusting relationships with the families served and are able to help to promote the resiliency factors that help to reduce the effects of trauma. One evidence-based practice that aims to mitigate the negative effects of trauma and strengthen resiliency factors is trauma informed care. Trauma informed care is defined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration as "a program, organization, or system that:

- 1. Realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery;**
- 2. Recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system;**
- 3. Responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and**
- 4. Seeks to actively resist re-traumatization.**



RECOMMENDATION

An analysis of the results was presented to ANADES and Programa Velasco staff on July 5th, 2018. The team reflected on this information and worked to identify the next necessary steps in their mental health program. Trauma informed care was presented to the ANADES team as a recommendation in how to proceed in formalizing the mental health program. The staff was able to recognize that trauma informed care is congruent with one of their existing core values: creating a Culture of Peace. Implementing practices in all levels of the agency that are trauma informed is a way that ANADES can continue to promote a Culture of Peace. The staff identified steps they can take to address trauma at three different levels:

1) Services for the larger community

2) Direct care for children and their families

3) Self-care and healing personal traumas

Whether it be through promoting community events centered on healing and education on trauma, or trauma-focused therapy for children and families or trauma-informed staff retreats, the ANADES and Programa Velasco teams are ready to move towards a mental health program that focuses on healing and growth.



Programa Velasco and ANADES team during workshop on July 5th, 2018

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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