

# Trauma and U.S. Urban clergy: Experiences Shared from the Urban Pastors' Study



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## Abstract

Pastors serving low-income urban areas in the United States are first-responders to emotional issues by default, since fewer mental health resources are available. Thus, it is important to understand how pastors serving urban resource-poor areas reflect on their counseling role.

Forty-eight Black, Hispanic and White pastors with urban congregations in Los Angeles or Chicago reflected on their pastoral calling and its relation to their counseling role. Through phenomenology, the pastors' lived experiences as they counseled in an urban context were explored.

Qualitative analysis revealed complex feelings about their counseling role in light of their resource-poor environments, and themes surrounding trauma emerged. The clergy themselves provided recommendations, based on the findings.

## Background

Trauma exposure percentages rise significantly for individuals who live in urban, violence ridden areas of the U.S.A.<sup>1</sup> People are able to achieve trauma symptom alleviation if they are amenable to treatment and have treatment access.<sup>2</sup> However, racial minorities and low-income groups living in urban areas are underrepresented in mental health treatment.<sup>3-5</sup>

Some people seek help for emotional issues from their church long before they seek help from a health or mental health center.<sup>6</sup> Reliance on clergy for counseling occurs even more often for underrepresented racial and ethnic groups and for low income individuals.<sup>7-8</sup>

Since resource-scarce communities often rely on pastors for counseling assistance, it is important to know what types of training correlate with a pastor feeling equipped to address behavioral issues that come up.<sup>9-10</sup>

There are few published studies which have sought pastors' input on their views on how to handle present psychological and societal issues. This study is unique in that it refrains from defining counseling based on health, mental health, psychological, or theological assumptions taught in seminaries. Instead, the study's objective is to discover the lived experience of pastors and how they counsel based upon their own paradigms.

The general (overarching) research questions included:

- What phenomena have urban pastors experienced when counseling individuals with emotional issues?
- What service do urban pastors provide to individuals with emotional issues in their congregations/ communities?

## Methods

### Sample

- Pastors were solicited via purposive sample between Jan 2013 – Jan 2016.

- 48 Protestant pastors (Black, White, and Hispanic) from Chicago Illinois or Los Angeles California were chosen.

### Method

- Pastors participated in 90 minute qualitative interviews (in-person or by phone).

- Phenomenological methodology: to obtain the lived experiences of pastors counseling in the urban context.

### Analysis

- Data was audio-recorded, professionally transcribed, and explored via the use of Atlas.ti organizing software.

## Discussion

Pastors mentioned that the following trauma-related issues often do come up in their congregations:

- Drugs/ drug dealers selling near the church
- Serious financial issues/ unemployment
- Prior incarcerated individuals needing help
- Ongoing community violence via gangs/ gun violence
- Extremely high funeral eulogy requests
- Domestic violence/ relationship issues

Since some pastors experienced past traumas themselves and felt vicarious revictimization as first responders to these issues in their own churches, pastors said that they would benefit from the following helps:

- mentoring by senior pastors who have dealt with similar issues
- obtaining standardized [vignette-based] training on certain issues
- training on healing one's own emotional scars/ avoiding vicarious trauma
- the ability to shadow clinicians in hospitals and mental health centers
- actual reference guides/ practical written resources.
- a systematic way of knowing available community resources that are faith-friendly, affordable and effective.

## Results

### Emerging Themes

Pastors' prior experiences with trauma

Pastor's trauma revictimization experiences

Figure 1. Emerging Themes from Qualitative Study.

### Theme #1: Pastors' Prior Experiences With Trauma:

"... I have those issues in my family too, so I cannot act as if those issues aren't there with one of God's own... I have to be sensitive. The same dog that bit them bit me. I just came to Jesus, had my rabies shots first." – Pastor J

### Theme #2: Pastors' Trauma Revictimization Experiences:

"You know some of the younger guys [in my congregation] who have gotten killed, and it's just heartbreaking. Just even thinking about it is so emotional. And I have had to really back off, because I, sometimes I have said, "Now, you know, I can't ... I would be worse than the family here, sitting up here bawling." It just brings tears to my eyes just thinking about..." [started crying]

- Pastor P

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