



Making the case: Why do we need to consider suicide prevention during catastrophic events?

Catastrophic events like the COVID-19 pandemic, a hurricane, or other disasters can have monumental impacts across a population and the infrastructure of communities. Module 1 dives into the impact of these disruptions on communities and why suicide prevention is important both in this context and in long-term recovery. This activity packet contains exercises and reflection questions from the module. To access the full contents of the module, visit:

<https://preventioninstitute.org/suicide-prevention/modules>.

Learning outcomes:

- Identify the impact of catastrophic events on communities, including impacts on critical infrastructure and how this affects a community's ability to flourish emotionally.
- Place the impact of catastrophic events in historical and cultural context.
- Recognize the connections between catastrophic events and suicide.
- Explain the importance of suicide prevention in the midst of catastrophic events and as part of long-term recovery.



What's your relationship to suicide prevention?

Check the boxes that correspond with your relationship and/or your sector, agency, or department's relationship to suicide or preventing suicide in your city or community.

- ☐ Lived experience / survivor of suicide attempt or loss (i.e. a loved one in your community)
- ☐ Primary work includes preventing suicide
- ☐ Primary work includes dealing directly with suicide and its aftermath.
- ☐ Work includes enhancing protective factors or reducing risk factors associated with suicide (<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/suicide/riskprotectivefactors.html>).
- ☐ Works with a population at risk for suicide, but the main focus is something other than suicide or preventing suicide.
- ☐ Work includes reaching a lot of people with information.
- ☐ Work relates to informing or setting local priorities.
- ☐ Work includes emergency response to catastrophic events/during periods of infrastructure disruption.
- ☐ No obvious relationship to preventing suicide.



Critical infrastructure

The Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency lists 16 critical infrastructure sectors vital to the United States: <https://www.cisa.gov/critical-infrastructure-sectors>. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how much we depend on some of these sectors—such as healthcare and public health, transportation, and food and agriculture—in our daily lives.

We also depend on social infrastructure, which comprises “the physical places and organizations that shape how people interact,” and includes trusted local groups and institutions that step up to fill gaps in times of crisis.¹ These groups, such as a local food bank or faith-based organization, often already are important connection points supporting individuals and are able to scale up efforts in times of crisis.

Reflection question: *Whether or not your sector is listed as a critical infrastructure sector, what roles does or could your sector play during catastrophic events?*

¹ Klinenberg, Eric. *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life*. Broadway Books, 2019.



Pillars of Wellbeing

Prevention Institute developed the Pillars of Wellbeing in collaboration with community-based organizations across the country that focus on the mental wellbeing of men and boys. The Pillars are core stabilizing elements needed for people and for communities to flourish emotionally.

Activity: Use the Pillars of Wellbeing as a way to think about a catastrophic event/infrastructure disruption that has occurred or is occurring in your community. An example is included for the pillar of belonging/connection.

Pillar of Wellbeing	How might the Pillar be impacted by this catastrophic event? Who is most impacted?	How can the Pillar be reinforced during an infrastructure disruption due to a catastrophic event?
Belonging / Connection	EXAMPLE: Physical distancing and sheltering-in-place help prevent the spread of coronavirus but can interfere with our usual ways of connecting in-person with friends, family members, and coworkers. Those who live alone and those without broadband internet access may be especially affected.	EXAMPLE: During the COVID-19 pandemic, community-based organizations have helped reinforce a sense of belonging/connection by engaging in activities like sending care packages, check-in calls, virtual meetings and more.
Safety		
Trust		
Dignity		
Hope / Aspiration		
Control of destiny / Self-determination		



Historical and cultural trauma

Historical trauma refers to a complex and collective trauma experienced over time and across generations by a group of people who share an identity, affiliation, or circumstance. Cultural trauma is a related concept and occurs when members of a group feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks on their group consciousness, forever marking their memories and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. Large-scale infrastructure disruptions are a form of cultural trauma that if left unaddressed, can become the historical trauma of subsequent generations.

Reflection Questions:

- *How do historical and cultural trauma show up in your community?*

- *How might these traumas show up during infrastructure disruptions?*

- *What does that mean for collaboration and partnership?*



Risk and protective factors

Risk factors are characteristics associated with suicide, while protective factors insulate individuals from suicidal thoughts and behavior. For example, financial loss or easy access to lethal means may increase suicide risk, while family and community support may buffer individuals from suicidal thoughts and behavior. See the full list of risk and protective factors here:

<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/suicide/riskprotectivefactors.html>.

Reflection questions:

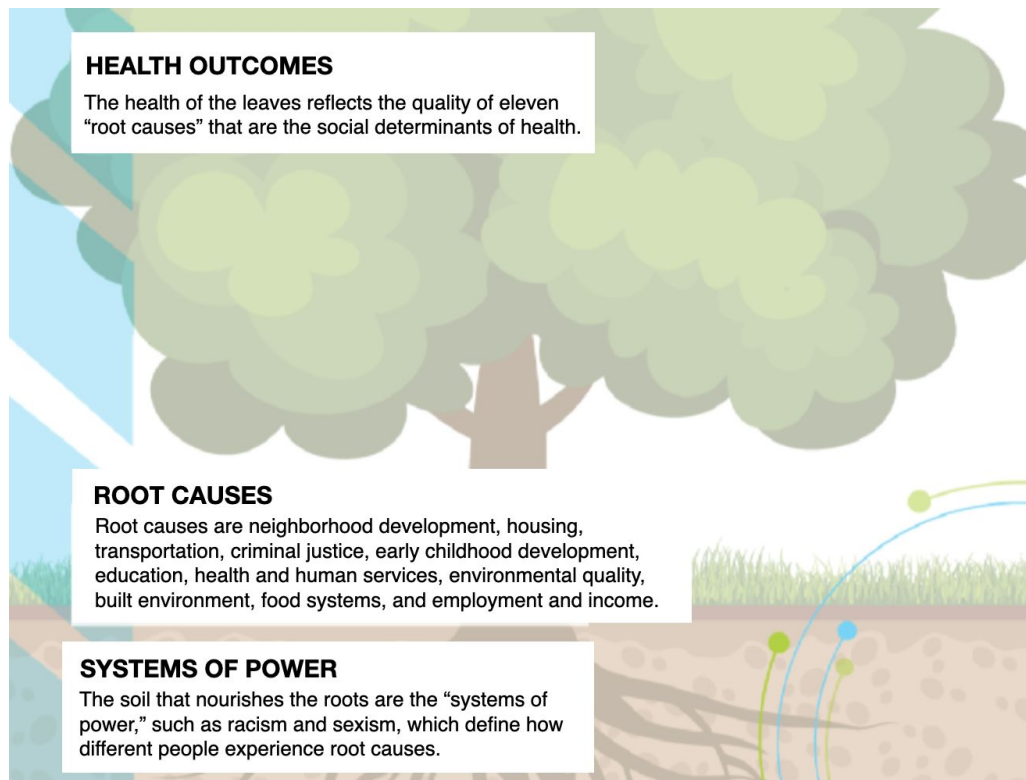
- *Which risk factors do you think are pronounced during infrastructure disruptions?*
- *Which protective factors do you think are compromised during infrastructure disruptions?*
- *How have agencies and organizations in your locale taken action to address these factors during the coronavirus pandemic?*
- *What can/does your agency or organization do to counter trauma and other risk factors for suicide?*

The need for systems change: Systems of Power, Root Causes, and Health Outcomes

To fully understand health outcomes, we must analyze root causes. Using the analogy of a tree, health outcomes are represented by the leaves of the tree. The health of the leaves reflects the quality of eleven “root causes” that are the social determinants of health:

- Neighborhood development
- Housing
- Transportation
- Criminal justice
- Early childhood development
- Education
- Health and human services
- Environmental quality
- Built environment
- Food systems
- Employment and income

The soil that feeds the roots are the “systems of power,” such as racism and sexism, which define how different people experience root causes.





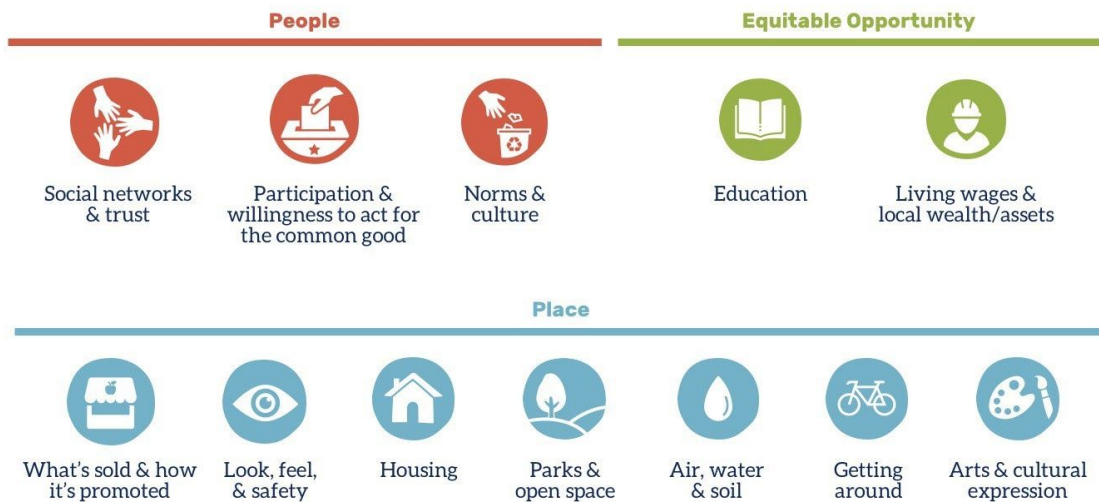
Reflection Questions

- *What are some of the key root causes of suicide in your community?*
- *What is the impact of systems of power on these root causes?*
- *What does the course of the COVID-19 pandemic in your community show about the state of the “roots” and the “soil”?*
- *How might hazard mitigation planning shore up the “roots” and the “ground” in your community as a proactive approach to catastrophic events and infrastructure disruptions?*

Lack of basic supports such as housing and income stability makes life difficult during “normal” times and can be especially detrimental to wellbeing during infrastructural disruptions.

THRIVE (Tool for Health & Resilience In Vulnerable Environments) enables communities to design their own strategies to improve health and safety, and promote health equity. The assessment tool (<https://preventioninstitute.org/sites/default/files/uploads/THRIVE%20Community%20Assessment%20Worksheet.pdf>) can be adapted to engage community members and practitioners in assessing and prioritizing the community determinants of health, safety, and wellbeing, and taking action to change them.

THRIVE Factors



Reflection Questions: Consider how you might begin an assessment in your community. What information do you already have? What more do you need to learn?