

# Exploring the Impacts of Community Trauma and Toxic Stress on Our Well-Being

Dr. Crystal L. Brandow, Policy Research Associates, Inc.

Cathy Cave, Inspired Vision, LLC



# An Invitation

*It doesn't interest me what you do for a living, I want to know what you ache for and if you dare to dream of meeting your heart's longing...*

- Oriah Mountain Dreamer



*How can this conversation be shared  
in communities?*

# Wellness First Approach

An approach to community wellness that makes use of the wellness resources *already available* in that community



# Taking a Wellness First Approach

- Human capital

- *“Education, training, and health are the most important investments in human capital”* – Becker, 1975

- Social capital

- Social networks have value
- Turn “I” perspective and mentality into “we”



Becker, Gary S. *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education*. 2d ed. New York: Columbia University Press for NBER, 1975.

Putnam, R. (2017). Social capital primer. Retrieved from <http://bowlingalone.com/>

# The Problem With Outside-In Approaches

Experience Can Impact Connection



Cave, 2014

# Wellness as a Social Justice Issue



- Marginalized communities are at higher levels of risk for mental health challenges and related chronic diseases
  - High levels of stress
  - Allostatic load

# A Public Health Approach to Wellness and Mental Health

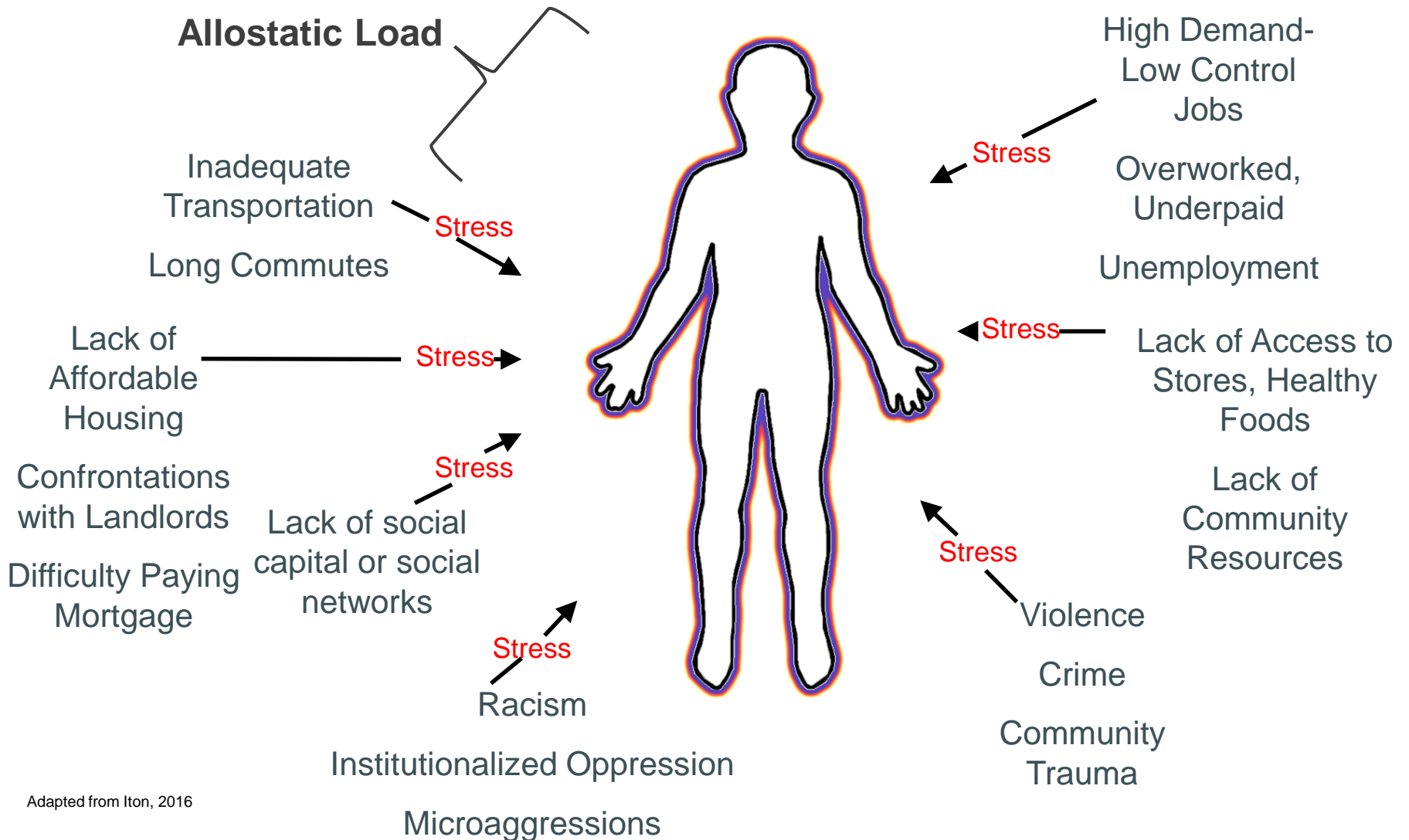


- Public health is defined as “what we, as a society, do collectively to assure the conditions for people to be healthy”
- Not about us vs. them
- Not about their problem
- Socioecological approach

Institute of Medicine. *The Future of Public Health*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press; 1988  
[CDC, 2015](#)



# Community Factors That Influence Mental/Health Status

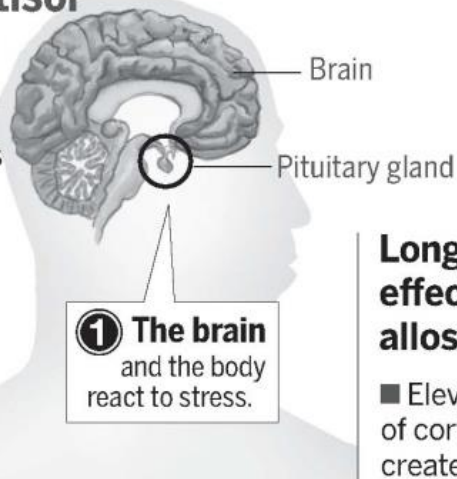


## The stress effect

Middle-class people aren't living as long as wealthier people in the same area. One explanation is **chronic stress** — those experiencing more financial hardships and dealing with more everyday worries aren't as healthy as wealthier people. Over time, chronic stress can lead to a condition called **allostatic load**, which becomes even more pronounced in people lower on the socioeconomic ladder.

## Stress and cortisol

In response to stress or perceived danger, hormones produced by the adrenal glands (including cortisol and adrenalin) work together when the body must react quickly to sudden threatening situations.



**1 The brain**  
and the body  
react to stress.

### Long-term effects of high allostatic load

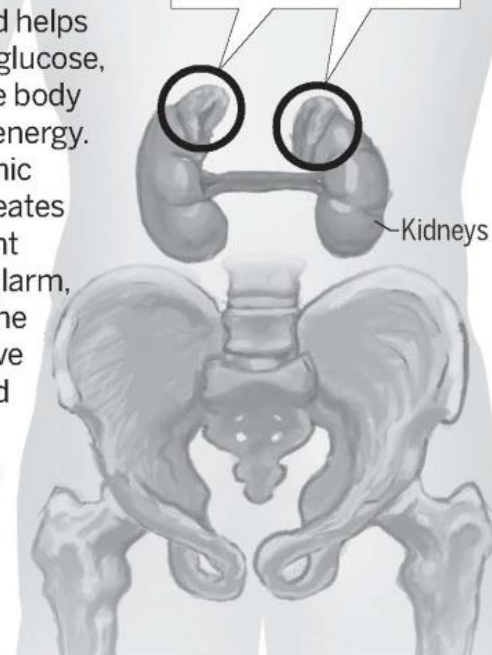
■ Elevated levels of cortisol can create a feeling

## Cortisol and craving

The hormone cortisol is secreted from the adrenal gland and helps regulate glucose, which the body uses for energy. But chronic stress creates a constant state of alarm, making the body crave sugar and carbohydrates.

### 2 Adrenal glands

In a flight-or-fight response, the adrenal glands produce cortisol (and other hormones) to give the body more energy.



of hunger, leading to overeating and obesity.

■ High blood pressure

■ Poor glucose regulation: Under stress, people crave sugar and carbohydrates, which give a quick boost, but then lead to a drop in energy. Over time, this increases the risk of developing diabetes.

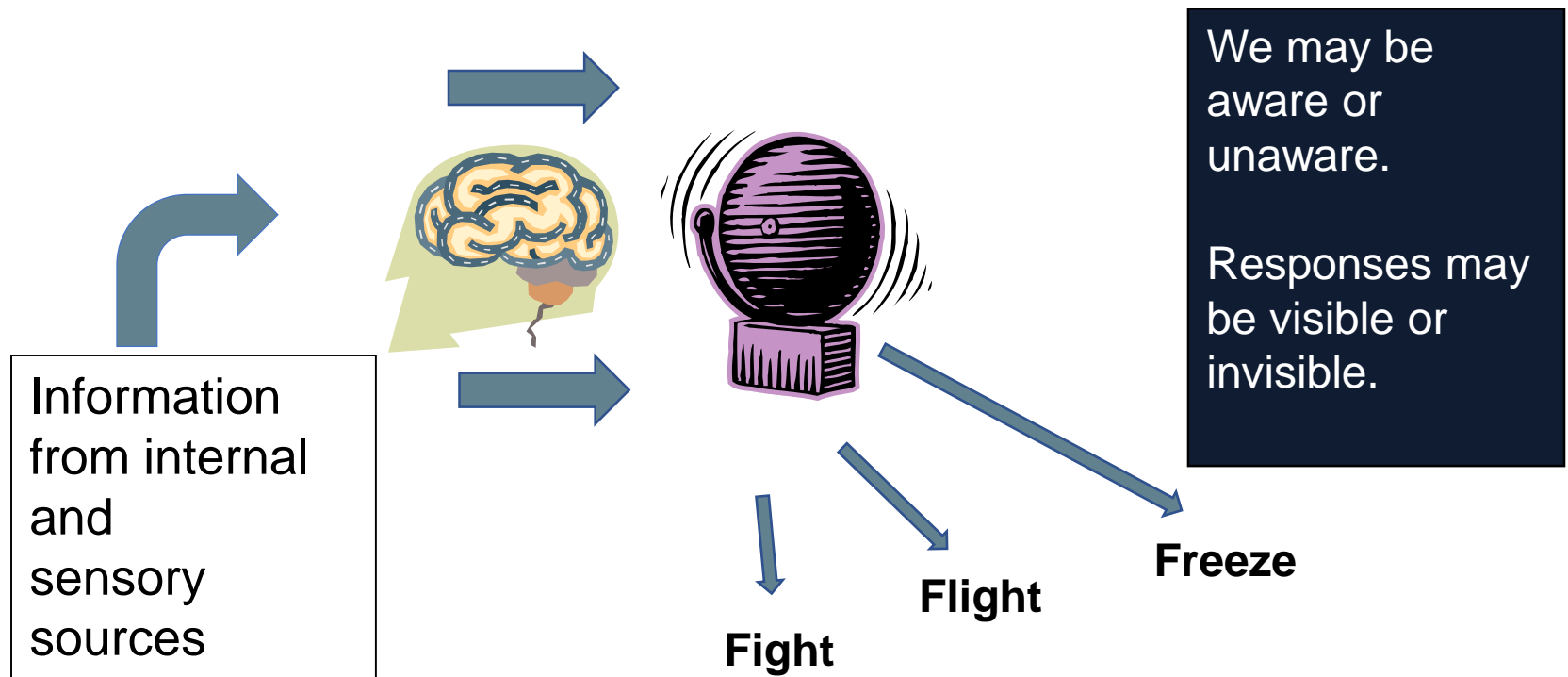
■ Lowered immune system resistance: can lead to inflammation and increased odds of developing many diseases.

# Toxic Stress

- Stress that creates additional challenges for a person's functioning is known as toxic stress, creating potential challenges over a lifespan
- When toxic stress is the result of an adverse community experience, community members may be impacted in different ways, and some will experience trauma and its symptoms

SAMHSA's Program to Achieve Wellness. (2018). Fostering community wellness: Addressing toxic stress and adverse community events [Fact Sheet].

# Accessible Conversation: We are Wired for Survival...

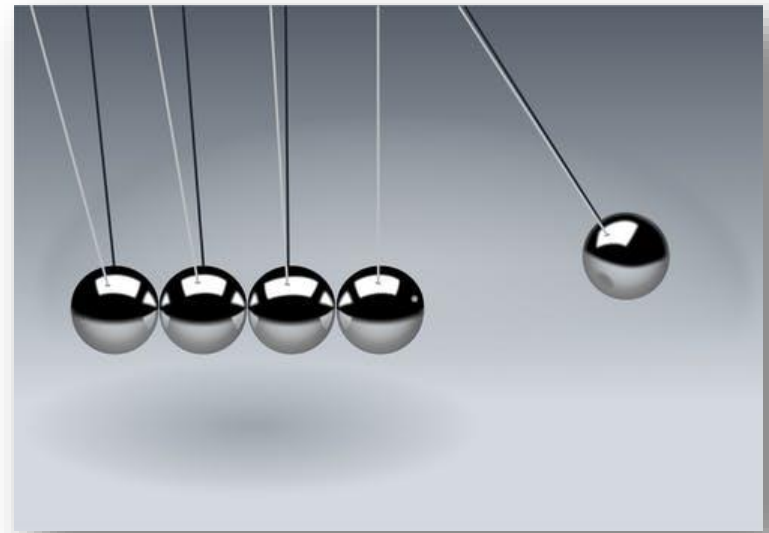


There are neurobiological and developmental impacts!

Moss 2013,  
Cave, Curley and Johnan 2015

# Allostatic Load

- Refers to the wear and tear that the body experiences due to repeated cycles of allostasis as well as the inefficient turning-on or shutting off of these responses
- Allostasis
  - "maintaining stability (or homeostasis) through change" was introduced by Sterling and Eyer to describe how the cardiovascular system adjusts to resting and active states of the body



# Weathering

- Early health deterioration
- One study found poor and nonpoor Black women had the highest and second highest probability of high allostatic load score
- “Persistent racial differences in health may be influenced by the stress of living in a race-conscious society; these effects may be felt particularly by Black women because of “double jeopardy” (gender *and* racial discrimination)”

[Geronimus et al., 2005](#)

# Why America's Black Mothers and Babies Are in a Life-or-Death Crisis

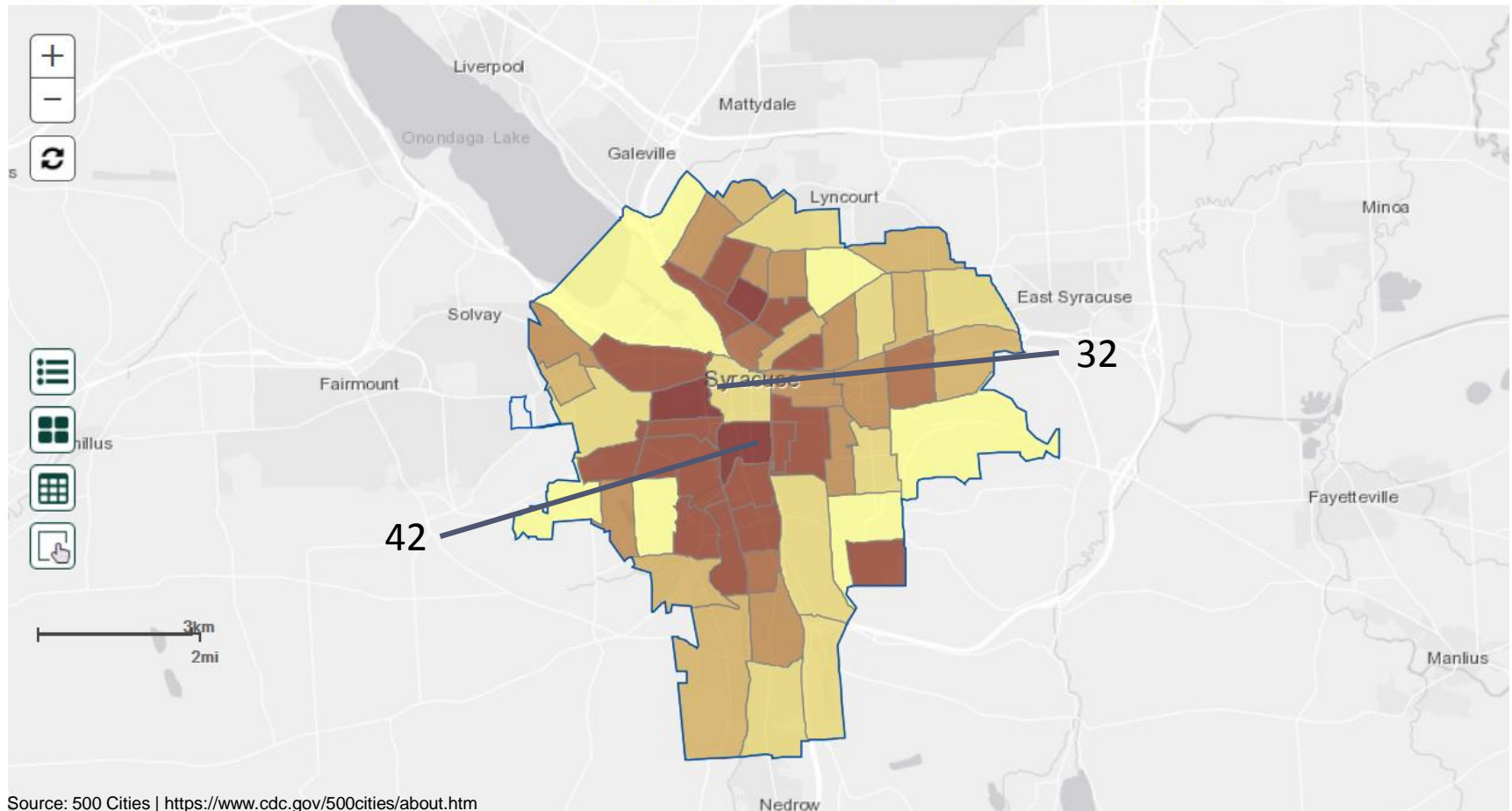
- The United States is one of only 13 countries in the world where the rate of maternal mortality is now worse than it was 25 years ago

**“For black women in America, an inescapable atmosphere of societal and systemic racism can create a kind of toxic physiological stress...”**

Villarosa, L. (2018 April 11). Why America's black mothers and babies are in a life-or-death crisis. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/11/magazine/black-mothers-babies-death-maternal-mortality.html>

# Why Wellness First is Necessary

Model-based estimates for mental health not good for  $\geq 14$  days among adults aged  $\geq 18$  years - 2015

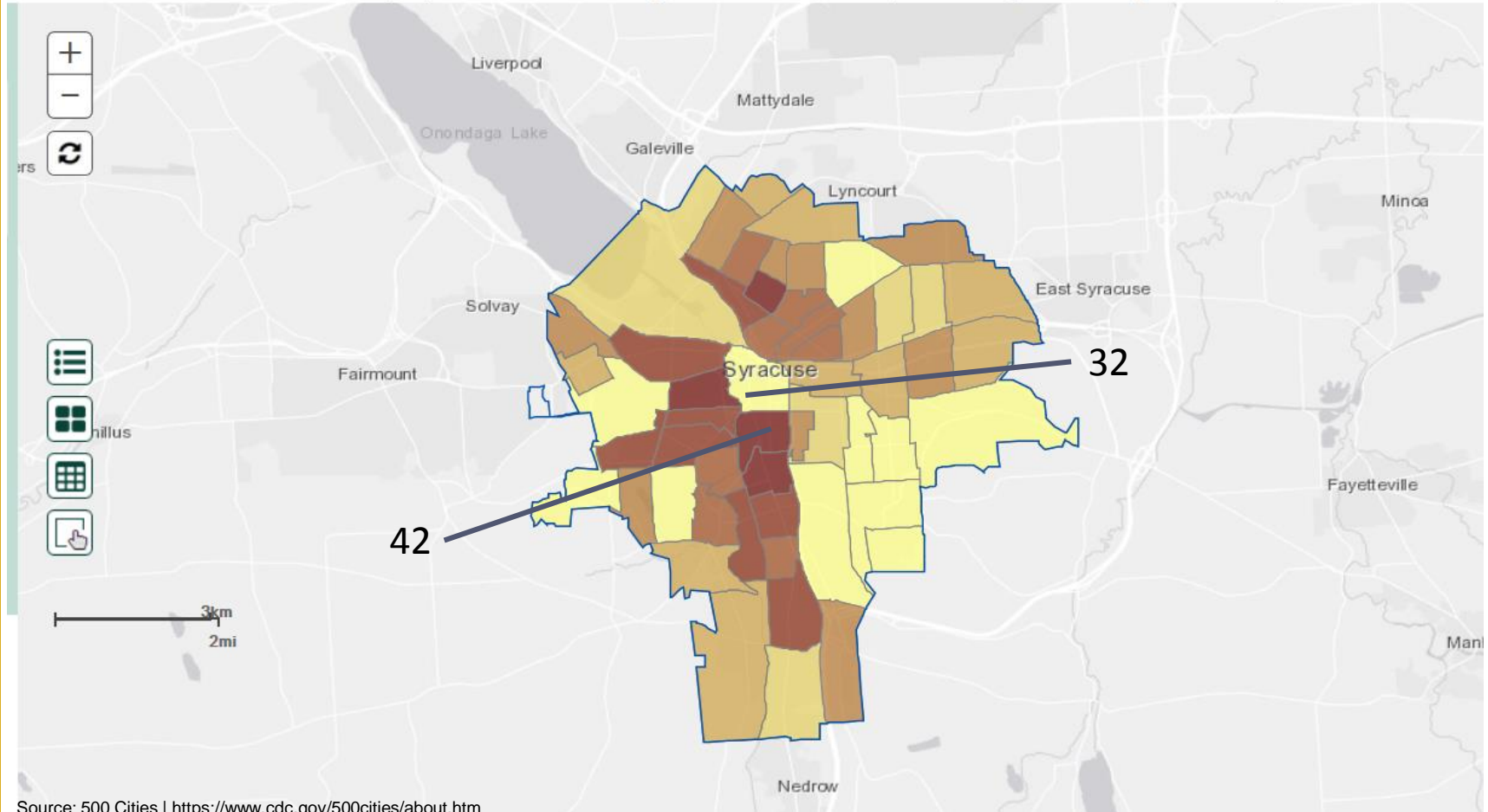


Source: 500 Cities | <https://www.cdc.gov/500cities/about.htm>



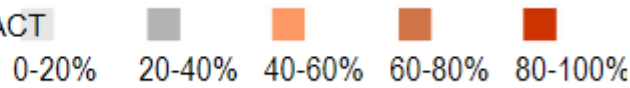
# Why Wellness First is Necessary

Model-based estimates for physical health not good for  $\geq 14$  days among adults aged  $\geq 18$  years - 2015



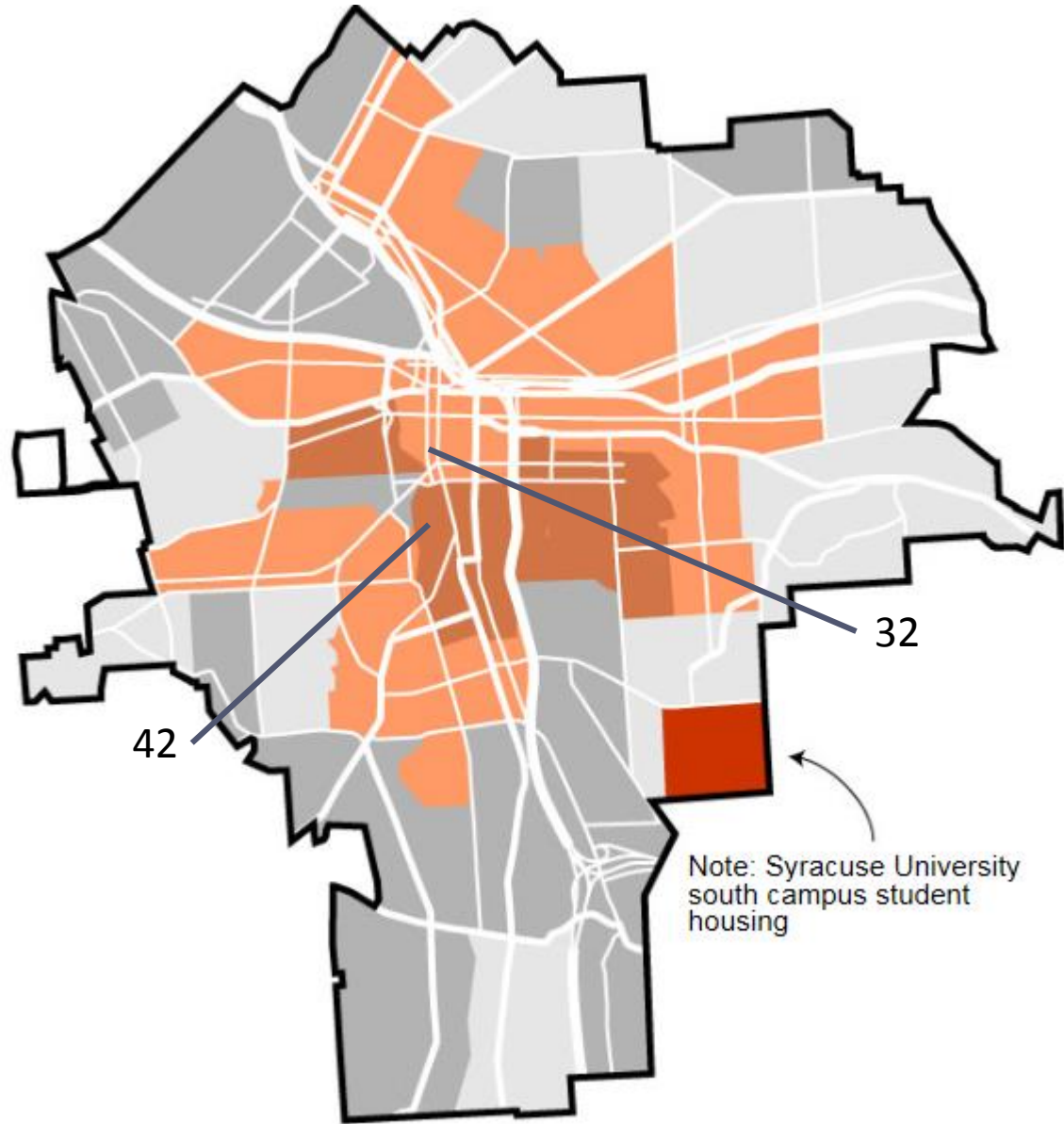
Source: 500 Cities | <https://www.cdc.gov/500cities/about.htm>

POVERTY LEVEL BY CENSUS TRACT



Syracuse now has the highest level of poverty concentration among blacks and Hispanics of the one hundred largest metropolitan areas.

– [Paul Jargowsky, The Century Foundation, 2015](#)



# Lack of Wellness Has an Impact

- Wellness is everyone's job
- Not being well can influence our ability to:
  - Work
  - Socialize
  - Be present
  - Cope



# Mobilizing Community Wellness Resources

- Who's already in the community that can move a wellness agenda forward?
  - Community Action Agencies
  - Food Pantries
  - Community Gardens
  - Hospitals
  - Shelters
  - Elected Officials
  - Housing Groups
  - Faith-based Organizations



# Existing Resources Can Transform Social Determinants

## • Examples of Negative Social Determinants

- Poverty
- Discrimination
- Social Exclusion
- Poor Quality Education
- Lack of Access to Quality Health Care
- Little or No Access to Quality Foods



Adapted from Manderscheid, R. (2014). Role of social determinants in prevention, trauma, and recovery. [PowerPoint]

# Existing Resources Can Transform Social Determinants

- **Examples of Positive Social Determinants**

- Social Support and Inclusion
- A Nurturing Family for Children
- Good Health Education
- Positive Role Models
- Opportunities for Engagement in the Community



Adapted from Manderscheid, R. (2014). Role of social determinants in prevention, trauma, and recovery. [PowerPoint]

# The Five Key Determinants

- Economic Stability
- Education
- Social and Community Context
- Health and Health Care
- Neighborhood and Built Environment



Image source: Healthy People 2020: <https://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/topics-objectives/topic/social-determinants-of-health>

# Supporting Community Emotional and Physical Wellness

- Trauma-informed Communities
- Asset Based Community Development (ABCD)





***I want to know if you  
will stand in the  
center of the fire  
with me and not  
shrink back...***

- Oriah Mountain Dreamer



# Trauma-informed Communities

- Focused on conveying understanding about “What happened to you?” not “What’s wrong with you?”
- Seek to understand the meaning people make of their experiences
- Teach everyone about trauma
- Planning and actions are based on understanding trauma and its impact



# Trauma-informed Communities



- Facilitate non-threatening ways of being in relationship
- Incorporate knowledge about trauma in all aspects of community support and service delivery
- Avoid revictimization, minimize retraumatization

# Trauma-informed Communities

- Take particular care to create welcoming, culturally-responsive, and accessible environments
- Hold transparent conversations about what is happening and create inclusive opportunities for participation



# Trauma-informed Communities



- Focus on resilience, healing, and mutual support
- Discuss definitions of safety and work collaboratively to honor what people need

# Building Communities From The Outside In: Asset Based Community Development

ABCD's three essential qualities:

- Asset Based
- Internally Focused
- Relationship Driven



There are resources in every community that are not utilized or are under-utilized. Why is this true?

Kretzmann, J. P., & McKnight, J. (1993). *Building communities from the inside out: a path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets*. Evanston, IL : Chicago, IL: Asset-Based Community Development Institute, Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University.

# Tapping Into Community Willingness to Learn, Grow, and Act

- Help people to discover the strengths, gifts and talents they have to give to their communities.
- Once engaged in conversations they care about people respond in remarkable ways.
- Extend the invitation, create accessible and inclusive conversations about wellness!

# Asset Based Community Development

A process to facilitate relationships that generate productive connections among the five building blocks of community

- Individuals
- Volunteer Associations
- Institutions
- The Local Economy
- The Physical World





# Rethink Accessibility

- Physical
- Cultural and Linguistic
- Attitudinal



**Support Community Leadership. When we  
come together, we are powerful!**

# The Emerging Pillars of Wellbeing

- Belonging, Connectedness
- Control of Destiny
- Dignity
- Hope and Aspiration
- Safety
- Trust



Prevention Institute. (2017). Back to our roots: Catalyzing community action for mental health and wellbeing. Oakland, CA: Prevention Institute.

# What Action Will You Take?

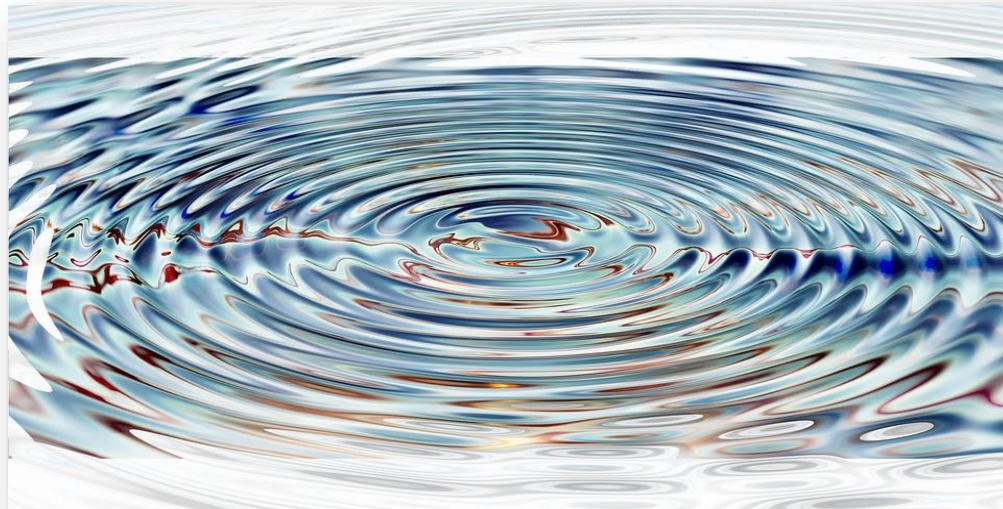
- What can you learn?
- What can you share?
- What will you do?

- Later
- Tomorrow
- Today
- NOW

- What will your commitment be?

***You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time.***

**- Angela Davis**



**Dr. Crystal L. Brandow**  
**[cbrandow@prainc.com](mailto:cbrandow@prainc.com)**



**Cathy Cave**  
**[cathycave55@gmail.com](mailto:cathycave55@gmail.com)**

