



**TRAUMA-INFORMED DESIGN:  
GUIDELINES FOR MODERN  
CORRECTIONAL ENVIRONMENTS**

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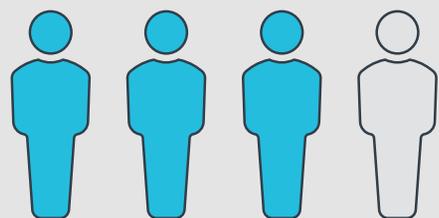
# Impact of Trauma



# Trauma, as defined in the correctional setting is:

“exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violence in one or more of four ways:

- (a) directly experiencing the event;
- (b) witnessing, in person, the event occurring to others;
- (c) learning that such an event happened to a close family member or friend;
- (d) experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of such events, such as with first responders”

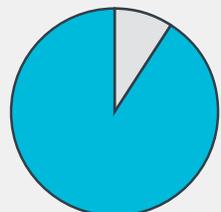


**AT LEAST  
75%**

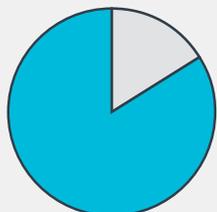
of offenders have experienced traumatic victimization.

### A comprehensive study of youth in detention

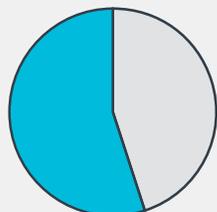
completed in June 2013 by U.S. Department of Justice found that



**over 90%**  
of youth had experienced at least one trauma.



**84%**  
experienced more than one trauma.



**over 55%**  
reported being exposed to trauma six or more times.

(Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency)

**For adults**, a study completed in 2011 found that **APPROXIMATELY 40%**

of young and older adult prisoners reported exposure to violent victimization. Young prisoners were significantly more likely to report witnessing physical assault. In contrast, older prisoners were substantially more likely to report experiencing a natural disaster, life-threatening illness, or the death of a loved one.

(Trauma and Life Event Stressors Among Young and Older Adult Prisoners, by Tina Maschi, PhD, LCSW, Sandy Gibson, PhD, LSW, Kristen M. Zgoba, PhD, and Keith Morgen, PhD, LPC, NCC)

**And, for women:** A 1999 study found that:



of women at New York's Bedford Hills Correctional Facility had a **childhood history of severe physical and/or sexual abuse**.



had suffered **physical or sexual violence** in their lifetimes.



of the women had experienced **severe physical violence by an intimate partner** during adulthood.



Nationwide, more than **57%** of women in state prisons and **55%** of women in local jails report having been **physically and/or sexually abused in the past**.



of female state detainees with **histories of abuse**.



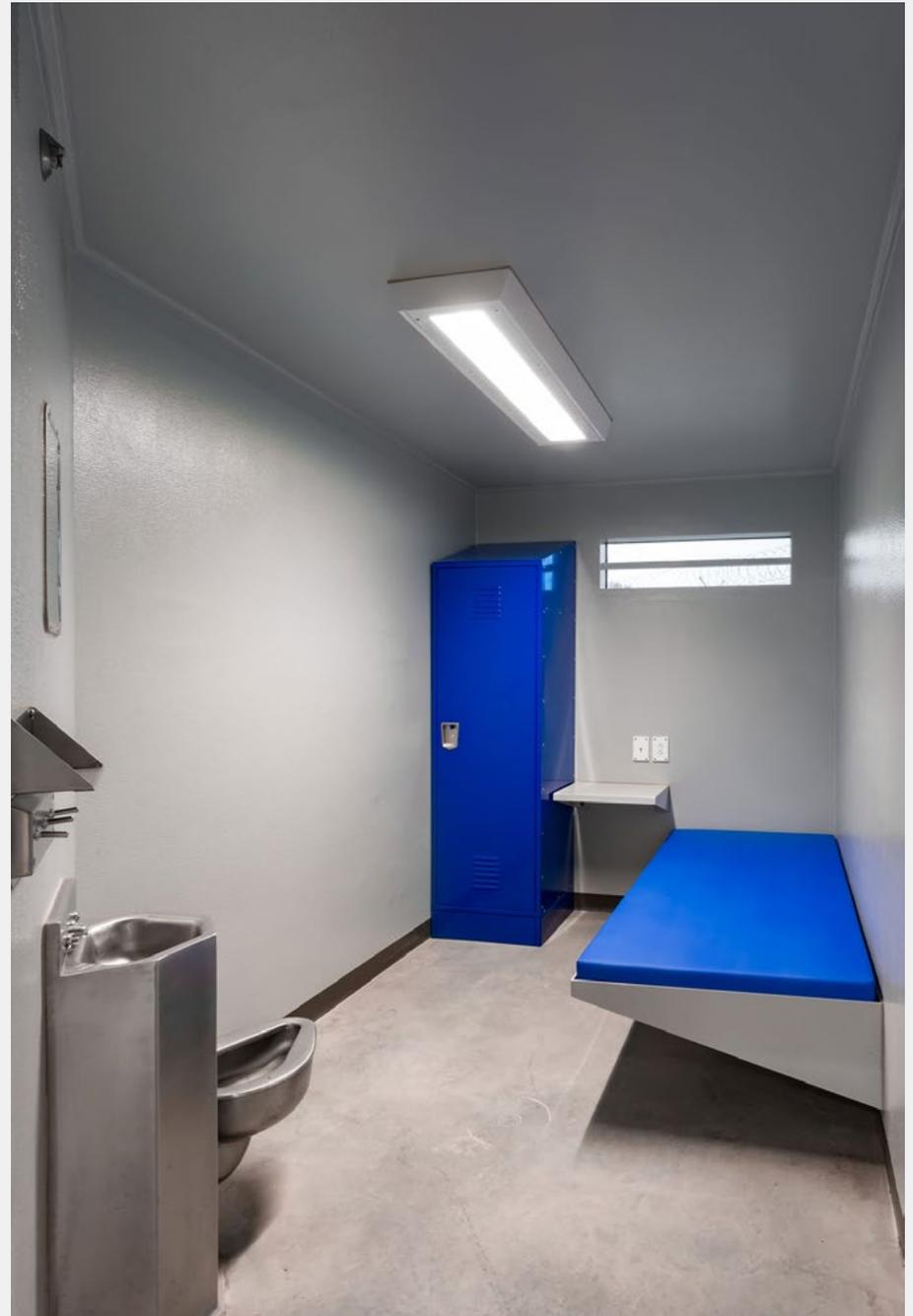
of female jail detainees with histories of abuse report that **the abuse was perpetrated by an intimate partner**.

(WOMEN IN PRISON PROJECT, Fact Sheet, 2009, Correctional Association of New York)

## TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

Numerous articles and statistics have been published regarding this subject. Recent attention to PTSD in veterans has also heightened public awareness. Trauma-informed care, in the correctional environment, is a direct response to the realization, based on actual data, that many offenders suffer from Trauma and that trauma-based treatment models have an impact on offender behavior.

[The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\)](#) contains numerous articles on Trauma-Informed Care Models as does the [National Institute of Corrections \(NIC\)](#).



## IMPACT OF GOOD DESIGN

We believe that the environment cues behavior. Numerous studies on the positive benefits of daylight inside schools, hospitals, and factories demonstrate this principle. This means that design impacts how people feel and behave. The correctional environment is no exception, both for staff and for the incarcerated.

Due to the improved data available and the recent focus on reducing the number of incarcerated individuals, NELSON has recently updated its design standards to reflect the impact the environment has on trauma-informed care models of treatment within a correctional setting. The environment is critical to the well-being of both offenders and staff.

Starting with the Five Core Values of Trauma-Informed Services, define the overall mission for the facility. This is crucial for achieving a successful design and can help establish shared images of the desired outcomes in the design process. It may include considerations such as safety, security, natural light, good sightlines, sustainability, and serenity. The following is a general example that outlines design parameters:

**Design a facility that creates a safe environment for staff and youth and promotes healing, education and training opportunities in as normative environment as possible.**

## FIVE CORE VALUES OF TRAUMA-INFORMED SERVICES

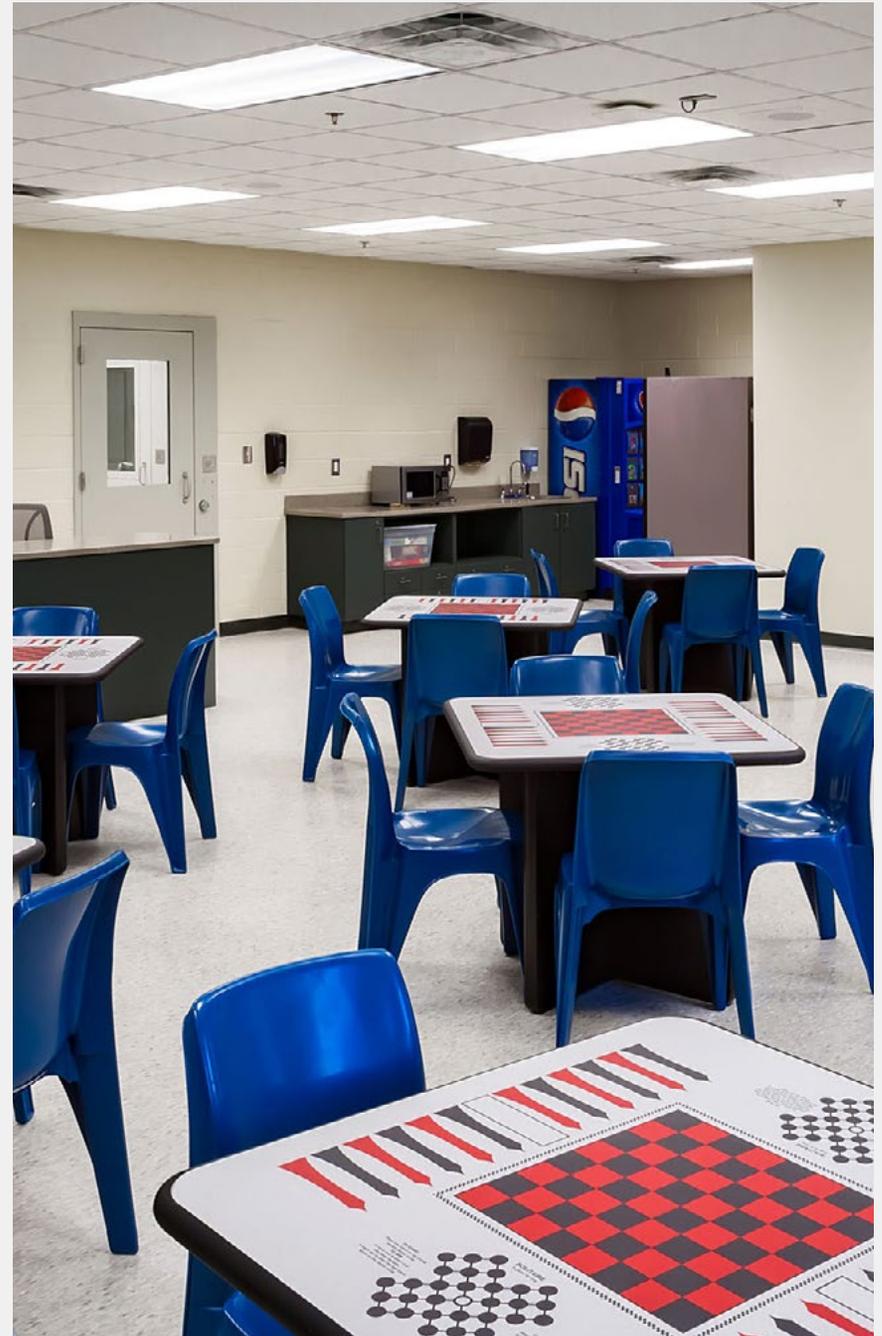
1. **Safety**
2. **Trustworthiness**
3. **Choice**
4. **Collaboration**
5. **Empowerment**

(Fallot & Harris, 2006)

Keep in mind that the environment should be designed to support the operational goals of the facility.

## WHEN CRAFTING DESIGN GOALS FOR A CORRECTIONAL FACILITY, CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING:

1. **Programming**
2. **Staff Accessibility**
3. **Life Safety**
4. **Building Security**
5. **Visibility/Privacy**
6. **Comfort and Amenities**
7. **Incorporating the Natural Environment**
8. **Finishes and Color**





# Programming & Design

The first phase of each project shall be to develop a program that meets the needs of all components of a facility. For example, new facilities may include:

- Facility Administration and Staff Support
- Security and Central Control
- Visiting Rooms
- Programs Related to Religious Services, Education, Vocational Training
- Food Service, Commissary, Laundry
- Medical Services and Infirmary
- Mental Health Services
- Admissions
- Recreation, Indoor and Outdoor
- Living Units
- Facility Maintenance and Support



## PROGRAMMING

Trauma-informed care models should emphasize programs, vocational training, mental health services, and living unit design, with additional staffing and square footage requirements.

Specific care should be taken to address the following during programming:

- **Entry:** Provide an area for evaluations that result in individualized goals and programming for each detainee that addresses each individual's needs and training.
- **Education:** Ensure that the number of classrooms and the necessary accommodations for special needs meet all state and local education criteria.
- **Library:** Having a place for research and recreational reading is important. Consider allowing detainees to checkout tablets for homework and recreational reading.
- **Vocational Programs:** Work with local businesses and technical schools to develop training programs that deliver real jobs and/or a diploma upon graduation.
- **Mental Health:** Working closely with mental health providers, provide spaces that match services for detainees, including group rooms, offices, individual counseling rooms, quiet rooms, and specialized living units when needed by detainee populations. Similarly, mental health needs may additional offices and conference rooms for staff.
- **Living Units:** Living quarters should be designed with the smallest number of detainees as possible, based on actual staffing requirements.
- **Staff Areas:** Generally, staff should be present and accessible at all times; however, areas should be provided for breaks, training, debriefings, and shift change consultations. Where appropriate, based on security levels, consider self-contained units that include laundry facilities, kitchenettes, individual or group dorms for sleeping, as well as TV areas, group rooms, and game rooms for entertainment. At the same time, staff areas should be built with direct visibility and accessibility to detainees in all spaces.



## DESIGN

Design has a direct impact on the environment and the individuals living or working in a space, and a correctional facility is no exception. At NELSON, our goal is to design an environment that supports operational goals and to support rehabilitation goals for occupants.

Below are a few possible examples of design strategies to be considered:

- Implement a residential scale, both interior and exterior.
- Create a welcoming entry.
- Provide upgraded staff support areas.
- Consider a hierarchy of security levels within a facility.
- Keep detainee population groupings small where possible.
- Provide spaces for supervised family interaction.
- Provide accommodations for quiet areas.
- Keep living units' "homey" where security allows.
- Include natural daylight.
- Include color and texture.
- Include natural elements such as wood, stone and landscape areas.
- Include "softer" finishes.
- Include acoustics.
- Include artwork and environmental graphics.
- Eliminate the "maze" of hallways; where necessary, include natural daylight.
- Keep major hallways wide and open feeling.
- Allow access to the exterior.
- Create an environment that reduces stress.



## **INCORPORATE THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT**

Access to nature has been shown to reduce stress levels. In a secure environment, this can be difficult.

Design strategies include:

- Incorporate windows with views to the outside.
- Provide indoor/outdoor space where weather permits in areas such as visitation and dayrooms with attached courtyards.
- Provide courtyards with landscaping and benches.
- Provide outdoor activities and classrooms.
- Provide outdoor recreation areas with grass and other greenery.
- In locations where outdoor access is not possible, include landscape murals and lighting that simulates natural daylight.
- Consider a “pet” program, allowing detainees to take care of animals.
- Consider white noise systems with nature sounds.
- Encourage gardening and horticultural programs, even if the only thing available are container gardens.





# Staff Accessibility & Accountability

In the Trauma-Informed Care Model, staff are immediately accessible to detainees and generally have mental health training in addition to security training. Due to this proximity and familiarity between Staff and Detainee, measures must be put in place to protect both parties.

The design should include:

- Provide view windows in all doors or sidelights to allow casual observation. This includes storage rooms, private offices, janitor closets, and other rooms that might not normally be included.
- Provide appropriate privacy measures at showers, toilets, and other sensitive areas.
- Provide a direct line of sight to all detainee areas.
- Include cameras in all areas not easily visible or where recording capabilities are desired.
- Provide card key access at rooms where tracking of occupants is desired.

- Consider RFID systems that track detainee and staff whereabouts that can notify you when they leave their designated zone, providing additional protection for staff and control over detainees.

Electronic technology can provide an unobtrusive way of monitoring the correctional environment, which is critical in creating a normal environment in a correctional setting.



In conclusion, trauma-informed design is a crucial aspect of modern correctional environments, shaping spaces that prioritize safety, rehabilitation, and long-term well-being for both detainees and staff. By incorporating the **Five Core Values of Trauma-Informed Services**—safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment—facilities can foster a more humane and effective setting. Thoughtful design, enhanced programming, and staff accessibility all contribute to environments that reduce stress, support rehabilitation, and promote successful reintegration.

At **NELSON Worldwide**, we design correctional facilities that align with trauma-informed care, ensuring every space enhances both security and operational efficiency while positively impacting lives.

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[Connect with our experts today](#) to explore how thoughtful design can transform your facility.

Let's collaborate to create correctional environments that foster safety, dignity, and rehabilitation.

**NELSON**

[nelsonworldwide.com](https://nelsonworldwide.com)

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