

# More than 7 in 10 students enter divinity school with at least one Adverse Childhood Experience, highlighting the need for trauma-informed care in seminary.



## WHAT WE STUDIED

Research suggests that those entering helping professions, such as therapists, counselors, social workers, and police officers, have more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) than other professions. In a survey of 535 Duke Divinity School students, we set out to discover whether the same held true for ministers.

## WHAT IT MEANS

Although seminarians' overall ACE scores were not significantly higher than a demographically similar sample, the three experiences that were more prevalent are especially important predictors of poor mental health later in life.



## WHY IT MATTERS

Considering the potential "upstream" causes of ministers' mental health is important for understanding the resources needed in seminary. Theological schools have a responsibility to consider how best to care for and equip students matriculating with a history of ACEs, especially given that ACEs make it harder to navigate vicarious and secondary trauma, often unavoidable features of pastoral ministry. Individuals who are better able to address and process their own trauma will be better poised to lead healthy communities.



## WHAT WE FOUND

More than 7 in 10 seminarians reported at least one Adverse Childhood Experience, compared to 6 in 10 among a sample of demographically similar Americans.

However, seminarians were significantly more likely to have experienced **emotional abuse** (52.6% vs. 39.4%), **sexual abuse** (20.2% vs. 9.2%), and **living with someone with mental illness** (35.8% vs. 24.8%) during childhood. On the other hand, seminarians were significantly less likely to have experienced **parental separation or divorce** (11.1% vs. 28.2%) or **living with a family member who'd been incarcerated** (4.4% vs. 8.1%) during childhood.

Within our sample, we also found that the prevalence of ACEs varied among subgroups. To name just a few examples, **women** were more likely than men to have experienced sexual abuse, **sexual and gender minorities** (SGMs) were more likely than non-SGMs to have experienced household mental illness, and **Black students** were more likely than White students to have experienced interpersonal violence.

\*from Holleman, Anna, Laura Upenieks, and David Eagle, "Adverse Childhood Experiences Among Seminarians: Personal Experiences of Trauma and Implications for Pastoral Well-Being and Ministerial Training," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* (2023) 52(1): 3-17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00916471231206361>.

