

Fact Sheet

Questions and Answers on Homelessness Policy and Research

Domestic Violence

Updated January 2010

Domestic Violence a Cause of Homelessness

Domestic violence is the immediate cause of homelessness for many women. In a national survey of homeless people, domestic violence was the second most frequently stated cause of homelessness for families, with 13 percent of homeless families saying that they had left their last place of residence because of abuse or violence in the household.¹

Data on Victims of Domestic Violence is Limited

In January of 2006, the Violence Against Women Act prohibited domestic violence service providers from submitting personal information to Homeless Management Information Strategies (HMIS), making it hard to find an unduplicated and comprehensive number of people made homeless by domestic violence. The National Network to End Domestic Violence undertook their own count. In a national census of domestic violence services conducted on September 17, 2009, over 30,433 victims of domestic violence received housing services from domestic violence programs, including emergency shelters and transitional housing. This is likely an undercount because only 78 percent – 1,553 of 2,000 – identified service providers participated in this study.²

High Rates of Trauma

The consequences of domestic violence can affect a woman's likelihood of becoming homeless. Domestic violence victims are often isolated from support networks and financial resources by their abusers. As a result, they may lack steady income, employment history, credit history, and landlord references. Women survivors of physical assault also often suffer from anxiety, panic disorder, major depression, and substance abuse.³

Homeless Women Experience High Rates of Violence and Victimization

In addition to domestic violence causing homelessness, many homeless women have been victims of domestic violence at some point in their past, even if they do not identify it as the immediate cause of their homelessness. One study in Massachusetts found that 92 percent of homeless women had experienced severe physical or sexual assault at some point in their life, 63 percent

¹ Burt, M. R., Aron, L. Y., Douglas, T., Valente, J., Lee, E., and Iwen, B. 1999. "Homelessness: Programs and the People They Serve. Findings of the National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients." Washington, DC: Interagency Council on the Homeless.

² National Network to End Domestic Violence. 2008. *Domestic Violence Counts: A 24-hour census of domestic violence shelters and services across the United States*. Washington, DC: National Network to End Domestic Violence.

³ Bassuk, E.L, Melnick, S. and Brone, A. 1998. "Responding to the needs of low income and homeless women who are survivors of family violence." *Journal of American Medical Association*, 53(2): 57-64.

had been victims of violence by an intimate partner, and 32 percent had been assaulted by their current or most recent partner.⁴

Housing is Important

Domestic violence victims have both short- and long-term housing needs that must be met so that they do not need to choose between staying with their abuser and sleeping on the street. Immediately, domestic violence victims need a safe place to stay. Emergency shelters are an important temporary haven for domestic violence victims. Ultimately, domestic violence victims need safe, stable, and affordable housing. An adequate supply of affordable housing is critical to ensuring that survivors of domestic violence can afford to leave the shelter system as quickly as possible without returning to their abuser.

Unmet Needs for Homeless Victims of Domestic Violence

While the basic shelter needs of most people fleeing domestic violence are met, in one 24 hour period, an estimated 3,286 people could not be provided emergency shelter and 1,586 could not be provided transitional shelter.⁵ This shows the ongoing need for additional resources to protect adults and children from domestic violence.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness' Fact Sheets answer common and frequently asked questions about homelessness policy and research. This series draws on the best expertise, data, and research available. For more information about homelessness, please visit www.endhomelessness.org

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ National Network to End Domestic Violence. 2008. *Domestic Violence Counts: A 24-hour census of domestic violence shelters and services across the United States*. Washington, DC: National Network to End Domestic Violence.