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FOUNDATION

WOMEN'S
RIGHTS
PROJECT

Domestic Violence and Homelessness

When battered women flee from abuse they are often forced to leave their homes, with nowhere else to turn. Other times landlords turn victims of domestic violence out of their homes because of the violence against them. For years, advocates have known that domestic violence is a primary cause of homelessness for women and families. Recent studies confirm the connection between domestic violence and homelessness and suggest ways to end the cycle of violence against women and life on the streets.

Homelessness Facts

- In 2003, **36 percent of U.S. cities surveyed reported that domestic violence was a primary cause of homelessness.** These cities included Denver, Nashville, New Orleans, Phoenix, Norfolk, Portland, Salt Lake City, and Seattle.¹
- In Minnesota, **1 in every 3 homeless women had been driven out of her home by domestic violence** in 2003.²
- In Missouri, **27 percent of individuals in homeless shelters were survivors of domestic violence** in 2001, making domestic violence a primary cause of homelessness in the state.³
- San Diego's Regional Task Force on the Homeless found that in San Diego **almost 50 percent of homeless women are domestic violence victims.** In fact, the study concluded that this number may actually be much higher, due to women's reluctance to report domestic violence because of shame or fear of reprisal.⁴
- In 2003 in Chicago, **56 percent of women in homeless shelters reported they had been victims of domestic violence and 22 percent stated that domestic violence was the immediate cause of their homelessness.**⁵
- A 2003 survey of 100 homeless mothers undertaken in ten locations around the country found that **one quarter had been physically abused in the past year** and almost all had experienced or witnessed domestic violence over their lifetimes.⁶
- In New York City, **almost half of all homeless parents had been abused and one quarter of all homeless parents were homeless as a direct result of domestic violence** in 2002.⁷
- A 2000 survey of parents living in homeless shelters with their children in Kentucky, Tennessee, and the Carolinas found that **two-thirds of homeless parents had experienced domestic violence.**⁸

- **Forty-seven percent of homeless school-aged children and 29 percent of homeless children under five have witnessed domestic violence in their families** according to a 1999 report.⁹
- A 1997 survey of homeless parents in ten cities around the country found that 22 percent had left their last residence because of domestic violence. **Among parents who had lived with a spouse or partner, 57 percent of homeless parents had left their last residence because of domestic violence.**¹⁰
- A Michigan survey of homeless adults in 1995 found that **physical abuse was most frequently cited as the main cause of homelessness.**¹¹
- In Virginia, shelters reported in 1995 that **35 percent of those receiving shelter were homeless because of family violence.**¹²
- According to a 1990 study, **half of all homeless women and children are fleeing abuse.**¹³

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Domestic Violence and Poverty

Poor women, who are more vulnerable to homelessness, are also at greater risk of domestic violence. For instance:

- While women at all income levels experience domestic violence, poor women experience it at higher rates than women with higher household incomes. Women with household incomes of less than \$7,500 are 7 times as likely as women with household incomes over \$75,000 to experience domestic violence.¹⁴
- Women living in rental housing experience intimate partner violence at three times the rate of women who own their homes.¹⁵

Trapped Between Violence and Homelessness

- A lack of alternative housing often leads women to stay in or return to violent relationships. In Minnesota in 2003, for instance, 46 percent of homeless women reported that they had previously stayed in abusive relationships because they had nowhere to go.¹⁶
- Abusers typically use violence as part of larger strategies to exercise power and control over their partners and isolate their partners from support networks. As a result, a victim of domestic violence will often have no access to money and no friends or family to rely on if she flees a violent relationship.

- Because a victim of domestic violence will often leave her abuser multiple times before she finally escapes the violence, she and her children may experience multiple bouts of homelessness.
- Many landlords have adopted policies, such as "zero tolerance for crime" policies, that penalize victims of domestic violence. These policies punish tenants when violence occurs in their homes, regardless of whether the tenant is the victim or the perpetrator of the violence.
- Federal law requires public housing authorities' leases to state that criminal activity engaged in by a tenant's guests or those under a tenant's control will be cause for evicting the tenant. Some public housing authorities improperly rely on these provisions to evict domestic violence victims because of the violence against them.
- Landlords and public housing authorities often only learn about domestic violence when victims seek the help of police or the courts. When victims know that they may face eviction if a landlord finds out about the abuse, they are less likely to seek this assistance and more likely to submit to the abuse.

Protecting Battered Women's Homes

One way to reduce the risk of homelessness for domestic violence victims is to protect them from housing discrimination on the basis of domestic violence. For this reason, the **American Bar Association** has urged lawmakers to prohibit this form of discrimination against victims of domestic violence. As the report accompanying the ABA's recommendation explained, "Until we stop asking women to choose between being beaten and being able to feed and shelter their children, we cannot expect to rid our society of domestic violence."¹⁷

Some states, most notably Washington and Rhode Island, have already adopted laws specifically aimed at reducing housing discrimination against domestic violence victims.¹⁸ Most states, however, either have no laws at all explicitly protecting domestic violence victims' housing rights or have laws that offer only narrow protection in certain circumstances. Some states, for instance, only prohibit housing discrimination against victims who have obtained restraining orders. While states are moving in the right direction, these kinds of technicalities limit many state laws' effectiveness in reducing domestic violence and subsequent homelessness.

What to Do

If you are a victim of domestic violence and need immediate assistance, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE.

If you feel you have been discriminated against in housing because of domestic violence, call the ACLU Women's Rights Project at (212) 549-2615.

If you want to advocate for laws and policies that protect domestic violence victims' housing rights, call the ACLU Women's Rights Project at (212) 549-2615.

Endnotes

¹ National Conference of Mayors, *Hunger and Homelessness Survey* 71 (December 2003).

² Wilder Research Center, *Homeless in Minnesota 2003* 22 (February 2004).

³ Missouri Association for Social Welfare, *Homelessness in Missouri: The Rising Tide* (May 2002).

⁴ San Diego Regional Task Force on Homelessness, *Domestic Violence and Homelessness* (visited Aug. 19, 2004) < <http://www.co.san-diego.ca.us/rtfh/victims.html>>.

⁵ Center for Impact Research, *Pathways to and from Homelessness: Women and Children in Chicago Shelters* 3 (January 2004)

⁶ National Center on Family Homelessness & Health Care for the Homeless Clinicians' Network, *Social Supports for Homeless Mothers* 14, 26 (October 2003).

⁷ Institute for Children and Poverty, *The Hidden Migration: Why New York City Shelters Are Overflowing with Families* (April 2002).

⁸ Homes for the Homeless, *The Other America: Homeless Families in the Shadow of the New Economy*, Family Homelessness in Kentucky, Tennessee, and the Carolinas 3 (December 2000).

⁹ Homes for the Homeless & Institute for Children and Poverty, *Homeless in America: A Children's Story, Part One* 23 (1999).

¹⁰ Homes for the Homeless & Institute for Children and Poverty, *Ten Cities 1997-1998: A Snapshot of Family Homelessness Across America* 3 (1998).

¹¹ Richard Douglass, *The State of Homelessness in Michigan: A Research Study* (1995), as cited in National Coalition for the Homeless, Domestic and Homelessness: NCG Fact Sheet #8 (1999).

¹² Virginia Coalition for the Homeless, 1995 Shelter Provider Survey (1995), as cited in National Coalition for the Homeless, Domestic and Homelessness: NCG Fact Sheet #8 (1999).

¹⁵ Joan Zorza, *Woman Battering: A Major Cause of Homelessness*, 25 Clearinghouse Review 420 (1991) (citing study).

¹⁴ Callie Marie Rennison & Sarah Welchans, Department of Justice, NCJ 178247, *Intimate Partner Violence* 4 (2000).

¹⁵ *Id.* at 1.

¹⁶ Wilder Research Center, *supra*, at 22; see also Kimberle Crenshaw, *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color*, 43 Stan. L. Rev. 1241, 1246 n.13 (stating that one shelter serving women of color reported that nearly 85 percent of clients returned to abusive relationships because of their difficulties finding housing and employment)..

¹⁷ American Bar Association, Young Lawyers Division and Commission on Domestic Violence, Report to the House of Delegates, February 2003.

¹⁸ Wash. Rev. Code § 59.18.600 et seq. (2004); R.I. GEN. LAWS § 34-37-1,-2,-2.4,-3,-4 (2002).