Domestic Violence and Homelessness

When women flee domestic abuse, they are often forced to leave their homes, with nowhere else to turn. Landlords also sometimes 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. Studies from across the country confirm the connection between domestic violence and homelessness and suggest ways to end the cycle in which violence against women leads to life on the streets.

Trapped Between Violence and Homelessness

Housing instability and a lack of safe and affordable housing options heightens the risks for women experiencing domestic violence:

- 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. In 2003, in Fargo, North Dakota, 44 percent of homeless women reported that they stayed in an abusive relationship at some point in the past two years because they did not have other housing options.

- In addition to physical violence, abusers also typically use other strategies to exercise power and control over their partners and to isolate their partners from support networks. As a result, a woman who has experienced domestic violence will often have little or no access to money and very few friends or family members to rely on if she flees a violent relationship.

- Many landlords have adopted policies, such as “zero tolerance for crime” policies, that penalize victims of domestic violence. These policies allow landlords to evict tenants when violence occurs in their homes, regardless of whether the tenant is the victim or the perpetrator of the violence. A Michigan study of women currently or formerly receiving welfare found that women who had experienced recent or ongoing domestic violence were far more likely to face eviction than other women.

- Some landlords are unwilling to rent to a woman who has experienced domestic violence. For example, a 2005 investigation by a fair housing group in New York City found that 28 percent of housing providers either flatly refused to rent to a domestic violence victim or failed to follow up as promised when contacted by an investigator posing as a housing coordinator for a domestic violence survivor assistance program.

- Landlords often only learn about domestic violence when victims seek help from the 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 assistance and more likely to submit to the abuse.

Domestic Violence and Poverty

Poor women, who are more vulnerable to homelessness, are also at greater risk of domestic violence. Poverty limits women’s choices and makes it harder for them to escape violent relationships. For instance:

- While women at all income levels experience domestic violence, poor women experience domestic violence 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.

- Women living in rental housing experience intimate partner violence at three times the rate of women who own their homes.

- Women living in poor neighborhoods are more likely to be the victims of domestic violence than women in more affluent neighborhoods. Indeed, women in financially distressed couples who live in poor neighborhoods are twice as likely to be victims of domestic violence as women in equally financially distressed relationships living in more affluent neighborhoods.

MORE FACTS INSIDE
In 2005, 50 percent of U.S. cities surveyed reported that domestic violence is a primary cause of homelessness.

Homelessness Facts

- In 2005, 50 percent of U.S. cities surveyed reported that domestic violence is a primary cause of homelessness. These cities included Burlington, Cedar Rapids, Charleston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Nashville, Philadelphia, St. Paul, Salt Lake City, San Antonio, Seattle, and Trenton.¹¹

- A 2003 survey found that one quarter of homeless mothers had been physically abused in the past year and almost all had experienced or witnessed domestic violence over their lifetimes.¹²

- 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.¹³

- 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.¹⁴

- According to a 1990 study, half of all homeless women and children are fleeing abuse.¹⁵
In Minnesota, 1 in every 3 homeless women was driven from her home by domestic violence in 2003.  

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 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.

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.

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In 2000, a 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.

A 2003 Florida study found that 46 percent of domestic violence survivors reported that they had experienced homelessness as a result of the violence. Eighty-three percent of survivors reported they had difficulty finding suitable and affordable housing.

A study of homeless adults in Puerto Rico found that, in 2006, 48 percent of homeless women had lost their housing as a result of domestic violence—by far the primary cause of homelessness amongst women.
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 (ABA) has urged lawmakers to prohibit this form of discrimination. 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.”

In 2005, a federal law was adopted prohibiting many kinds of discrimination against victims of domestic violence who live in public housing or Section 8 housing. This law states, for instance, that being a victim of domestic violence is not a reason for eviction from public housing or loss of a housing voucher. This law, however, does not address discrimination in other kinds of housing against individuals who have experienced domestic violence.

Some states, most notably Washington, Rhode Island, and North Carolina, have adopted broader laws specifically prohibiting housing discrimination against domestic violence victims. 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 evicting those victims of domestic violence who have obtained restraining orders against their abusers. 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 being abused and need immediate assistance, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at (800) 799-SAFE.

If you feel you have been discriminated against in housing because you have experienced domestic violence, contact the ACLU Women’s Rights Project at (212) 549-2644 or womensrights@aclu.org.

To learn more about laws and policies that can protect domestic violence victims’ housing rights, contact the ACLU Women’s Rights Project at (212) 549-2644 or womensrights@aclu.org, or visit our website: www.aclu.org/womensrights.

Endnotes

1 Wilder Research Center, Homeless in Minnesota 2003 22 (February 2004); 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).

2 Wilder Research Center, Homeless Adults and Their Children in Fargo, North Dakota, and Moorhead, Minnesota: Regional Survey of Persons Without Permanent Shelter 38 (November 2004).


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

6 Id. at 1.


8 Wilder Research Center, supra note 2, at 38.


11 United States Conference of Mayors, Hunger and Homelessness Survey 64 (December 2005).

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


16 Wilder Research Center, supra note 1, at 22.


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


24 Marilyn K. Kershner, When There’s Nowhere to Go: Domestic Violence and the Need for Better Housing Options for Survivors and Their Children 24-25 (January 2003).


