

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.**¹ 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.²

- **In addition to physical violence, abusers also typically use other strategies to exer-**

- A 2003 survey of homeless mothers around the country found that **one quarter had been physically abused in the past year .**

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cise 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.**³

- 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.⁴

- 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.⁵

- **Women living in rental housing experience intimate partner violence at three times the rate of women who own their homes.**⁶

- **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.**⁷

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

In Fargo, North Dakota, in 2003, **1 in 5 homeless women reported that she had left her home to flee abuse and 45 percent of homeless women had experienced violence from an intimate partner in the past year.**⁸


In 2005 in Iowa, **nearly a quarter of all homeless households in the state reported that they were homeless because of domestic violence.** Homeless service providers reported that **family break-up/divorce was the most significant factor leading to homelessness** in Iowa and domestic violence specifically was among the top five factors leading to homelessness.⁹

In San Diego, **almost 50 percent of homeless women are domestic violence victims.** In fact, this number may actually be much higher, due to women's reluctance to report domestic violence because of shame or fear of reprisal.¹⁰

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

Facts on Homelessness in the United States



In Minnesota, **1 in every 3 homeless women was driven from her home by domestic violence** in 2003.¹⁶

A Michigan survey of homeless adults in 1995 found that **physical abuse was most frequently cited as the main cause of homelessness.**¹⁷

A study of family homelessness in Massachusetts found that **92 percent of homeless women had experienced severe physical and/or sexual assault** at some time in their lives. **One third of homeless women were current or recent victims of domestic violence.**²⁰

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.**¹⁸

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 2002.²¹

In Virginia, shelters reported in 1995 that **35 percent of those receiving shelter were homeless because of family violence.**²²

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.¹⁹

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.**²³

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.²⁴

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.²⁵

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."²⁶

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.²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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].

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⁴ Anti-Discrimination Center of Metro New York, "Center Study Finds Significant Incidence of Discrimination Against Survivors of Domestic Violence" (August 2005).

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

⁶ *Id.* at 1.

⁷ Michael L. Benson & Greer Litton Fox, U.S. Dep't of Justice, Nat'l Inst. of Justice, *When Violence Hits Home: How Economics and Neighborhood Play a Role* 1-4 (2004).

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

⁹ Iowa Council on Homelessness, *2005 Iowa Statewide Homeless Survey* 20, 29 (January 2006).

¹⁰ San Diego Regional Task Force on Homelessness, *Domestic Violence and Homelessness* (visited Aug. 19, 2004) < <http://www.co.san-diego.ca.us/rtrf/vic-tims.html> >.

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

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¹⁴ Homes for the Homeless & Institute for Children and Poverty, *Ten Cities 1997-1998: A Snapshot of Family Homelessness Across America* 3 (1998).

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

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¹⁷ 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).

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

¹⁹ Missouri Association for Social Welfare, *Homelessness in Missouri: The Rising Tide* (May 2002).

²⁰ See National Center on Family Homelessness, Factsheet, *Violence in the Lives of Homeless Women* (summarizing findings of six-year National Center on Family Homelessness study). Available at www.familyhomelessness.org.

²¹ Institute for Children and Poverty, *The Hidden Migration: Why New York City Shelters Are Overflowing with Families* (April 2002).

²² 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).

²³ 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).

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).

²⁵ Héctor Manuel Colón, Juan Carlos Reyes Pulliza & Ibis Carrión, Fundación Chana y Samuel Levis, *Tercer Estudio de Personas Sin Hogar en Puerto Rico* (2007).

²⁶ American Bar Association, Young Lawyers Division and Commission on Domestic Violence, Report to the House of Delegates, February 2003.

²⁷ Violence Against Women Act and Department of Justice Reauthorization Act of 2005, Pub. L. No. 109-162, §§ 606, 607 (2006).

²⁸ Wash. Rev. Code § 59.18.600 et seq. (2004); R.I. Gen. Laws § § 34-37-1, -2, -2.4, -3, -4 (2002); N.C. Gen. Stat. §§ 42-40, -42.1, -42.2, -45.1 (2005).