



## **VIOLENCE IN THE LIVES OF HOMELESS WOMEN**

The National Center on Family Homelessness conducted a six-year research project on family homelessness and poverty in Massachusetts. The study was conducted by the National Center on Family Homelessness and the University of Massachusetts Medical Center at Worcester with support from the National Institute of Mental Health and the U.S. Maternal and Child Health Bureau.

This research project is one of the most comprehensive to-date, gathering information over time on a broad range of issues including: demographics; income, benefits, and employment; housing; life events; violence; social support; parenting; and physical and mental health status and service utilization. Study participants included 220 homeless female heads of household, 216 housed low-income female heads of household, and 627 of their children aged 3 months to 17 years. Reflecting the racial/ethnic composition of the study site (Worcester, Massachusetts, pop. 169,000), 43% of the participants were Latino, 33% were White, 23% were Black, and 1% were of other races. Study findings can best be generalized to small to mid-sized American cities with similar populations.

Study findings provide critical insight into the prevalence of violence in the lives of homeless women and the impact of childhood and adult victimization on women's physical and emotional well-being.

### **Violence is pervasive in the lives of homeless women.**

- A staggering 92% of homeless women experienced severe physical and/or sexual assault at some point in their lives.
- For many homeless women, abuse started at an early age. Over 66% of these women experienced severe physical violence by a caretaker and 43% had been sexually molested during their childhood. In fact, 60% of homeless women had been abused by the age of 12.
- Abuse often continues into adulthood. 63% of homeless women have been victims of intimate partner violence and 32% are current or recent victims of domestic violence.

### **Violence profoundly compromises the physical and emotional well-being of many homeless women.**

- More than half of homeless women who have been abused by an intimate partner were physically injured as a result of the abuse and 27% required medical treatment.
- Abuse often results in serious emotional consequences for its victims. Over 39% of homeless women who have been abused have experienced Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), more than three times the level of the general female population. 47% have had a major depressive disorder, more than twice the rate of the general female population.

- One-third of homeless women who have experienced violence have attempted suicide at least once.
- 45% of homeless women who have experienced abuse during their lives have struggled with alcohol or drug dependency at some time.

**Violence and its sequelae often impact women’s ability to be economically self-sufficient.**

- Children who are abused experience severe disruption during their childhood which often prevents them from obtaining adequate levels of education and training. 41% of homeless women who were victimized as children did not complete high school and 49% had a high school degree or GED.
- Research suggests that 34-65% of women on public assistance have experienced partner violence at some point in their lives. Violence also is strongly associated with repetitive and longer welfare use.
- For many homeless families, domestic violence was a major cause of their homelessness.
- Homeless women who have been victimized face significant barriers to employment. Abusive partners often sabotage training and employment efforts. Furthermore, without appropriate support services, the emotional consequences of abuse, such as PTSD and depression, may interfere with women’s efforts to work.

**National Center on Family Homelessness**

The National Center on Family Homelessness is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization working to end family homelessness in America. We design, pilot and evaluate innovative programs and services that provide long term solutions for family homelessness. We share our knowledge by educating service providers, policy makers, and the public.

For more information, please contact:

**The National Center on Family Homelessness**  
*Publications*  
**181 Wells Avenue**  
**Newton Centre, MA 02459**  
**617-964-3834**  
[www.familyhomelessness.org](http://www.familyhomelessness.org)