



The Prevalence of Trauma in the Lives of Homeless Women and Their Children: A Resource Guide

Violence in the lives of women and children is so widespread that it has been described as an “epidemic” in American society (Browne & Bassuk, 1997). However, prevalence rates of physical and sexual violence against women and girls vary widely due to differing methodologies and definitions of violence. These rates are likely to underestimate the problem because of underreporting resulting from fear of reprisal, self-blame, shame, and fear of losing children (The Commonwealth Fund, 1996).

According to the National Violence Against Women (NVAW) survey, 52% of women have experienced physical violence – either as a child by an adult caretaker or as an adult by another adult. Nearly 18% have been victims of rape or attempted rape at some point in their lives (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). These rates are even higher for homeless women, with 92% experiencing severe physical and/or sexual assault in their lifetime (Bassuk, Weinreb, & Buckner, et al, 1996).

Sadly, abuse often starts early. Population-based studies estimate that physical abuse affects between 13% and 40% of all women during their childhood (The Commonwealth Fund, 1996). Adult retrospective studies suggest that at least 20% of women were sexually abused as children (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Once again, for homeless women, these rates are much higher. Sixty-seven percent of homeless women report being severely physically abused by childhood caretakers or another adult household member before age 18. Forty-three percent report being sexually molested during childhood (Bassuk, Weinreb, & Buckner et al, 1996).

Below are some resources that explore the prevalence of trauma among homeless families. Most resources are available at local libraries or bookstores, except where noted.

“The Characteristics and Needs of Sheltered Homeless and Low-Income Housed Mothers.” (1996). By E.L. Bassuk, L. Weinreb, J. Buckner, A. Browne, A. Solomon, & S. Bassuk. *Journal of the American Medical Association*. 276(8): 640-646.

“Current Information on the Scope and Nature of Child Sexual Abuse.” (1994). By D. Finkelhor. *The Future of Children*. 4(2): 31-53.
Available at www.futureofchildren.org.

“The Extent and Consequences of Child Maltreatment.” (1998). By D.J. English. *The Future of Children*. 8(1): 39-53.
Available at www.futureofchildren.org.

Full Report of the Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence Against Women. (2000). By P. Tjaden & N. Thoennes. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs.

Available at www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/vawprog/pubs.html.

Homeless Children: America's New Outcasts. (1999). National Center on Family Homelessness. Newton, MA.

Available from The National Center on Family Homelessness by calling 617-964-3834 or visiting www.familyhomelessness.org.

Identifying and Responding to Violence Among Poor and Homeless Women: A Health Care Provider's Guide. (1999). By S. Melnick & E.L. Bassuk. The National Center on Family Homelessness. Newton, MA.

Available from The National Center on Family Homelessness by calling 617-964-3834 or visiting www.familyhomelessness.org.

"Intimate Violence in the Lives of Homeless and Poor Housed Women: Prevalence and Patterns in an Ethnically Diverse Sample." (1996). By A. Browne & S.S. Bassuk. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 67(2): 261-278.

"Risk Factors for Major Violence Among Homeless Women." (2001). By S. Wenzel, B. Leake, & L. Gelberg. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. 16(8): 739-752.

Violence Against Women in the United States: A Comprehensive Background Paper. (1996). By The Commonwealth Fund. New York.

Available from The Commonwealth Fund by calling 212-606-3800 or visiting www.cmf.org.