



Domestic Violence/Abuse and Homelessness

Andrew Stahl

On one night in 2015, 31,500 people (adults and children) fleeing domestic abuse sought shelter in a domestic violence emergency center; 12,197 of those requests were denied due to lack of funding, space, or staffing. 63% of those unmet requests were for housing. They were thus faced with a choice many victims of domestic violence encounter: return to the abusive home, or be homeless for an uncertain amount of time, often with their children.

The connection between domestic abuse and homelessness is well-documented by advocates and researchers. Over 80% of homeless mothers with children have experienced domestic abuse at some point, and between 22 and 57% of all homeless women report domestic violence as the cause of their homelessness, depending on the study. Additionally, 38% of domestic violence survivors are homeless at some point. Once on the street, homeless women are far more likely than those in homes to experience violence.

The causes of this prevalence are manifold, but many are solvable. For instance, many landlords have adopted harmful zero crime tolerance policies that result in domestic abuse victims being evicted far more often than non-victims, despite them being the victim, not the perpetrator of the violence. Many landlords also refuse to rent to survivors: a 2005 investigation in New York City found that 28% of housing providers flatly refused housing to survivors, or failed to follow up to an investigator posing as a housing coordinator for a domestic violence housing assistance program. These harmful policies both discourage victims from coming forward and mean that they are more likely to lose their housing if they do. In 2005 a federal law passed, prohibiting discrimination against victims of domestic violence in public housing, but the practice remains common in private housing.

Furthermore, lack of housing assistance, whether it be rental assistance or emergency shelter space often leads survivors to return to abusive homes, allowing the violence to continue. 46% of homeless women reported that they had previously stayed in abusive homes because of a

lack of alternative places to stay. In 2014, 196,467 unmet requests for shelter were reported – representing the number of requests above the capacity of shelters for survivors. A lack of funding is largely to blame for this. Survivors who fail to find housing outside the abusive home are faced with homelessness, losing their children, and scarcity.

Homeless children are also highly likely to have been abused or witnessed abuse in their families. Almost half have witnessed abuse in their family, including 29% of homeless children under 5.

Survivors need both short-term and long-term assistance in avoiding both homelessness and returning to violent homes. Short-term housing assistance, from emergency shelters to rental assistance, is key to allowing them to escape abusive homes and heal in the long-term. Laws preventing housing discrimination, and vigilance to ensure they are followed, is also crucial to prevent victims from being evicted. Further awareness is also needed, as domestic abuse, despite being a leading cause of homelessness, is often not mentioned in discussions of causes and solutions.

References

<https://monarchhousing.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/dvhomelessness.pdf>

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/fysb/resource/dv-homelessness-stats-2016>

<https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/what-causes-homelessness/domestic-violence/>

<https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/clear25&div=56&id=&page=>