

Homelessness Due to Domestic Violence  
Social Work Practice II – Group and Community

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## Executive Summary

Homelessness has become an area of concern in both urban and rural areas of America over the last several years. There are many factors that contribute to homelessness, with domestic violence being one of the most prominent. Domestic violence is often defined as repeated and deliberate acts of violence by an individual's intimate partner. According to the National Coalition against Domestic Violence, one in four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime; however, domestic violence does not only affect women. Domestic violence affects the individuals involved in the violence, and all aspects of the family system.

One of the major reasons that domestic violence leads to homelessness is the inability of the victim to obtain housing on her own. The power and control that is associated with domestic violence often leaves the victim feeling hopeless and helpless. Leaving the batterer often means life on the streets, or a temporary housing situation, which is often inadequate.

A major trend with children who experienced homelessness is homelessness in adulthood. Domestic violence and homelessness appear in a cyclical manner and this cycle needs to be broken.

There are several resources available to victims of domestic violence. According to Jane Doe Inc, there are women's shelters and safe havens in almost every major city in Massachusetts. However, often times, victims of domestic violence are unaware of the resources that are available to them.

As social workers, our group has determined that prevention, education, increased awareness, training, and empowerment of victims are all solutions to ending the vicious cycle of domestic violence. Part of prevention should begin with education about domestic violence at the elementary school level. Increased awareness can be created with social action projects through collaboration with domestic violence shelters. And, empowerment of the community can be facilitated through the training of health care professionals to be more aware of the issue of domestic violence. Addressing domestic violence at

many different levels will help to create a social change, both in ending domestic violence and homelessness.

### Domestic Violence and Homelessness

The problem of homelessness is a growing crisis in many urban, as well as rural communities. For this assignment our small group focused on homelessness, particularly as a result of domestic violence. Our group conducted both library and community-based research on this topic to better understand the issue. We, as agents of change, need to examine the dynamics of domestic violence and assess how it affects the family unit. We also need to create solutions for this population. Through this project we have identified several mechanisms for positive social change in this area.

#### *Domestic Violence*

Domestic violence is defined as the deliberate, recurring acts by an individual's intimate partner who causes bodily, sexual, emotional and financial damage to the individual- usually in a predictive cycle (Ostrander, 1997). Battery by a spouse or intimate partner is the single most common reason a women enters a hospital emergency room (U.S. Department of Justice, 1994). The act of treating domestic violence as a crime is novel theory, but it has not been practiced consistently. Few women come forward to speak with prosecutors and fewer police arrest batterers. It is very difficult to obtain factual demographics, as so few victims come forward to admit that there has been any domestic violence. Domestic violence is a world-wide problem. In Levinson's (1988) research of the topic, it was found that eighty-four to ninety percent of societies had experienced domestic violence. .

According to the National Coalition against Domestic Violence, one in four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime. Additionally, an estimated 1.3 million more women are victims of physical abuse by an intimate partner each year. Domestic violence can occur anywhere and although homelessness and domestic violence is often associated with poverty, domestic violence can also leave middle class women in search of housing. The line between having a place to live and living on the streets is often much finer than most people understand. All communities and all social statuses are impacted by the issue of domestic violence.

A common question that many people ask is ‘why don’t the victims leave?’ Although there are many reasons, safe housing is one reason and fear is the other major reason. The most dangerous time for a battered woman and her family is when she attempts to leave the relationship. Many women have stated that they are told by their batterer, that if they leave, he will kill them and they often believe him. These victims need a place that they can feel hidden and safe. When the victim leaves, the batterer loses the object of his control and can become enraged, sometimes to the point of murder (Ostrander, 1997).

### ***Domestic Violence’s Contribution to Homelessness***

Homelessness is a huge issue impacting many individuals and families in Massachusetts. There are many factors which contribute to homelessness. One issue which is a major contributor to homelessness is domestic violence. As researched by Melbin (2003), battered women and their children are often forced to live in inadequate unsafe housing conditions, or even become homeless as a result of domestic violence. Many of these families are forced to live in their cars, on the streets, or may end up murdered, due to a lack of a safe haven.

Once a woman and her children are on the streets, the problems they face increase dramatically. The mother has to, not only confront the effect of the violence in her life, but also confront the effects that homelessness has on her family, physically, emotionally, and psychologically. A mother has to provide food, clothing, safety and shelter, using all her available energy on these basic needs. Recent research shows that one long term effect of homelessness on children is the increased likelihood that they will experience homelessness in their adult lives. It is a multigenerational problem (Ostrander, 1997). Domestic violence has also been viewed to be multigenerational. The cycle of violence needs to be addressed and destroyed, so that the children that have also been victim to it do not repeat this cycle of violence (Payne & Triplett, 2009).

### ***Economic Impact of Domestic Violence***

Victims of domestic violence are often financially oppressed by their assailant. Batterers may withhold money, forbid their victims from working or may sabotage their partners' employment by disturbing them at work (Lloyd, 1997). Victims of domestic violence are often financially dependent on their partner, thus making leaving a violent relationship much more difficult.

Although, domestic violence can occur in relationships at any socio-economic status, it is often found that there is a connection between domestic violence and poverty. In her study on policy and program challenges associated with domestic violence, Menard (2001) stated that a significant number of people receiving welfare, between 8.5 and forty-one percent, indicate that they have recently experienced some form of domestic violence in the last year (Menard, 2001). These women often have fewer resources available to them and are often isolated from friends

and family, making it even more difficult to find adequate housing. For many, the struggle to escape an abusive relationship and the struggle to escape poverty are intimately linked, compounding the problem even further.

The issue of poverty and a lack of resources are both huge barriers facing women involved in domestic violence relationships. Women leaving abusive relationships not only face issues of short term housing, such as where they will flee initially when they decide to leave, but they also face issues of long term housing, most often when leaving an emergency shelter situation ( Menard, 2001).

### ***Strengths and Resources Available***

According to Jane Doe Inc. ([www.janedoe.org](http://www.janedoe.org)), battered women centers and shelters exist in all major Massachusetts Cities. In Southeastern Massachusetts, the following domestic violence centers and shelters are available: A Safe Place on Nantucket, Brockton Family and Community Resources in Brockton, MA, Cape Cod Center for Women in North Falmouth, MA, Dove on the South Shore, The Women's Center in New Bedford, Independence House in Plymouth, MA, New Hope Inc. in Attelboro, Our Sister's Place in Fall River, South Shore Women's Resources Center in Plymouth, Stanley Street Women's Center in Fall River, Womansplace Crisis Center in Brockton, MA, and Connect to End Violence in Vineyard Haven, Martha's Vineyard.

These types of battered women programs can provide emergency shelter for victims and the victims' children in many cases, however there are often limited available beds. Safe housing in a battered woman's shelter is not meant to provide permanent housing to a family. A typical stay at a battered women's shelter is usually thirty to sixty days. If a woman is financially

unable to support herself and her children, she may find herself back in the same position of being homeless. Many women flee their home with only the clothes on her back and nothing else!

Often times, the victim has to leave any job that she has for fear of the batterer finding her and potentially killing her. A safe house is of no use if the batterer can find her at work and follow her back. This inability to maintain a job causes the victim to not only lose her home but lose her income as well.. Since it may be impossible for the victim to find a new job and put together a deposit on a new apartment, most women have to turn to public assistance, or return to the batterer. This only perpetuates the cycle of violence even further. As stated earlier, women living in emergency shelters may often become homeless because they have no other options when leaving the shelter, or worse yet, they may decide to return to their abuser, because at least with their abuser, they know they will have shelter and food for themselves and their children.

### ***Transitional Housing Programs***

Battered Women's Shelters were designed to be short-term band-aids to a very serious problem. Due to the high amount of domestic violence, which results in homelessness, the shelters can only accommodate battered women and their children for so long. According to Roofless Women's Action Research Mobilization (1997), the average stay at a domestic violence shelter is sixty days; however it takes a homeless family much longer to secure long term housing, typically six to ten months.

The next step in assisting domestic violence victims in their quest for safe and appropriate housing is the concept of Transitional Living Programs. As stated by Melbin, et. al (2003), transitional housing programs exist in every state. Such programs offer victims a longer-

term housing solution, to living at a temporary shelter. The programs generally offer subsidized apartments to women and their children for a period of twelve to twenty-four months.

Catholic Social Services of the Fall River Diocese offers similar programs as described above. New Bedford has the Donovan House, which is a transitional living program, which houses and offers support and case management to several women and their children. A woman can reside at this program for up until eighteen months, or until she has successfully obtained permanent housing. The program assists women in applying for public housing in the community as well.

Catholic Social Services in New Bedford also has a housing program, in which the agency rents several multi-family buildings and then sub-lets them to homeless families for up to two years. The families do not have to pay rent, but are responsible to pay utilities as well as bank one third of their monthly income for future housing needs. The program helps the families to budget their money and also provides case management and support.

In 2005, the Violence against Women Act was passed. This bill allocated \$3.9 billion to be spent on programs intended to end violence against women (National Research Center for Women and Families). As part of this Bill several different forms of discrimination against women were addressed. One of which, was housing discrimination against women living in abusive situations. In many cases, landlords can refuse to rent to tenants who have been involved in domestic violence relationships. Therefore, even if the victims of domestic violence can find housing on their own, they are often turned down due to no fault of their own. This legislation creates protection against this type of discrimination by renters, which provides victims of domestic violence more options when searching for housing.

Prevention and education are also a major part of this bill. The only way to end domestic violence is to face it head on by talking about it and educating people about what it is, and its effects. This bill allows for education of many different populations, including minorities and boys. However, not only does it focus on educating these populations, it also looks at educating health care providers, as well as other professionals that may come into contact with domestic violence situations.

### ***Partners in Change Effort***

As social workers, we are part of the solution for ending domestic violence. We have the knowledge and skills to disseminate this information. The first step in the solution is education. This education needs to begin at the elementary school levels, if not even before that. Education will be the only way to put an end to this cycle of violence. Children need to know that because they see this violence at home, it does not make it alright. We also need to provide safe places for these children to come to and discuss this violence and their feelings towards it.

### ***Social Action***

Domestic violence was once thought of as something that was kept within the home and not talked about. However, slowly, this silence is being broken, and we need to let these victims know that it is okay and right, for them to end the silence. Breaking the silence and ending the cycle of violence starts with education: education of the children, of teenage boys, of offending adults, of victims and more.

We feel that there are several possible solutions to empower the community. This requires many community members and other professionals to offer support. Health care professionals, such as pediatricians, as well as obstetricians, could implement a brief

questionnaire to assess risk in the home. Doctor's offices could have pamphlets available to further educate women on how to keep themselves and their children safe. This should be done not only in low-income urban areas, but also in more affluent communities, as domestic violence does not discriminate on the basis of socio-economic class.

An additional approach in creating change in this issue is to expose homeless and domestic violence shelters to urban law students, as well as master's level students in social work, criminal justice and education. This could be done through a mandatory course with a minimum number of hours in which the student would have to volunteer or intern at a shelter. Reviewing the literature and hearing lectures can only go so far and does not replace actual hands on experience.

Another strategy to assist with this issue is to increase the community's awareness of homelessness due to domestic violence. Public awareness could be done through billboards, public service announcements, outreach workers, etc. Once community awareness is increased, there is a greater chance that the community will pull together to help raise money for additional housing programs for victims of domestic violence.

In conclusion, we have learned through this assignment that homelessness is a major issue that impacts a large number of people in Massachusetts as well as nationally. Domestic violence, which was once seen as a private matter that was not discussed, must be addressed at many levels. With domestic violence being a major contributor to homelessness, education, social support and public awareness of the issue are necessary strategies to create the social change necessary.

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