

HOUSING AND BATTERED WOMEN

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The authors explored the specific housing needs that are faced by battered women. The article begins by examining the barriers that battered women face in getting their housing needs met. These barriers include: consequences of their partner's abusiveness, unintended consequences of federal housing policy, and barriers faced by low-income people. The first part of the article then goes on to develop the how these barriers impact battered women.

One of the abuse dynamics used by many men who batter is the control of economic resources. Battered women thus often face barriers that on the surface seem unrelated to the domestic violence. The lack of financial resources, including the lack of access to joint resources, means battered women face additional barriers to housing needs. Because the larger dynamics of sexism which result in poverty disproportionately affecting women, the lack of financial resources that battered women face result in their lack of access to housing needs.

The article went on to review research that has been completed looking at battered women and housing issues. According to a 2000 study by the U.S. Conference of Mayors, 56% of cities surveyed identified domestic violence as a primary cause of homelessness among women and children. This finding builds on a 1999 study by the National Coalition for the Homeless that found families the fastest growing segment of the homeless population, and most of these are headed by single women. Bassuck, et al, (1996) found that 91.6% of homeless mothers had experienced physical or sexual assaults, and that 63% of these by an intimate partner. This study also found that homeless mothers were twice as likely to lose their housing because of their male partner as were low-income mothers – and the primary reason that homeless mothers lost their housing was due to his violence.

In addition, the behaviors of men who batter can “play a significant role in sabotaging a woman's opportunities for economic stability (p. 2; see also Lyon, 2000). Battered women frequently resort to public assistance as a means of establishing economic independence while they try to escape an abuser (Davis, 1999 and Raphael, 2000).

Recent federal housing policies have also had an unintended consequence of limiting battered women's access to housing. The Housing Opportunity Program Extension Act of 1996, for example, shifted authority over some of the public housing policies from the local level to the national level. Previously, battered women fell under a category of “special needs populations” were given preference for receiving federal housing assistance. After passage of the so-called “Extension Act,” no such policy is in place. This act also created the “one strike policy” for

evicting families from housing programs. In many places of the country, battered women are being evicted from housing programs because the police are called “too often” to their homes as a result of the domestic violence (Renzetti, 2001). In addition to both of these, there has been a dramatic decrease in federal funding for building low-cost housing which means a net loss of affordable low-cost housing. This shift has had a disproportionate impact on women in general, and battered women specifically.

The article goes on to describe how the shift in policies around public housing under the Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act of 1998 further eroded supports for battered women. Under this law, housing authorities are required to develop 5-year plans and one-year annual plans to address the needs of the families they serve. There is no provision in this law for domestic violence. However, under this law, local housing authorities must see public input on the development to their rules and plans. This requirement provides an opportunity for advocates to play a role in the plans, rules and regulations established by local housing authorities.

The article finally describes the three main types of housing programs: direct rental housing assistance, tenet-based programs (commonly known as voucher programs); and public housing which is owned and operated by local housing authorities.

According to the authors, “the bad news is that without federal leadership, funds are not allocated at a significant level and pressure is not exerted...to take the provision of low-income housing seriously. The good news is that advocates and activists can have a significant impact when working on the local level since most decisions are made locally” (p. 6). The authors further suggest that since low-income housing is a community-wide need, not just one for battered women, that advocates can increase their impact by working in coalition with other housing advocates.

References

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