

# HOUSING & SEXUAL VIOLENCE

## Research Brief

The purpose of this research brief is to explore the relationship between housing issues, homelessness, and sexual violence. The research reviewed below indicates that residents of subsidized housing and people who are homeless experience disproportionate rates of sexual violence. This research brief can help stakeholders understand the unique needs and vulnerabilities of survivors who are homeless or who live in subsidized housing.

**DeKeseredy, W. S., & Schwartz, M. D. (2002). Theorizing public housing woman abuse as a function of economic exclusion and male peer support. *Women's Health and Urban Life: An International and Interdisciplinary Journal*, 1(2), 26-45.**

**Aims:** DeKeseredy and Schwartz argue that economic transformations resulting in increased poverty, as well as patriarchal attitudes and peer support networks contribute to violence against women in public housing.

**Methods:** DeKeseredy and Schwartz review literature on intimate partner violence against women in public housing. The authors also draw upon their previous publications on the relationship between male violence against women and patriarchal peer support networks among men.

**Key results:**

- Women in public housing experience more intimate partner violence, including sexual violence, than the general population.
- Economic transformations that contribute to workers' exclusion from

the workforce include elimination of jobs; transitions from manufacturing economies to service-based economies in some areas; a decrease in full-time employment opportunities; low wages; and unemployment/underemployment.

- The inability of men in public housing to find meaningful employment often clashes with patriarchal beliefs that men should be the chief providers for their families, resulting in considerable male stress. When combined with patriarchal peer support networks that encourage men to inflict physical and sexual violence against women, the result is increased violent victimization of women in public housing.

**Summary:** Impoverished women in public housing are at increased risk of intimate partner violence. Several factors fuel men's violence against women in public housing, including poverty, stress resulting from an inability to fulfill traditional male economic roles, and male peer support networks that condone physical and sexual violence against women.





**Application:** Rape crisis centers can direct outreach to women in public housing, given their vulnerability to intimate partner violence and sexual assault. Additionally, addressing patriarchal attitudes that fuel violence against women in education curricula and community outreach may increase success of prevention efforts. Work to end sexual violence can be improved through increased collaboration with housing and anti-poverty stakeholders to provide impoverished victims with opportunities to escape poverty, as well as find safer housing.

**Future research needs:** Future research should determine what, if any, protective factors reduce the likelihood of perpetration by men in public housing. Future research can also look at the role of other support networks in preventing or exacerbating men's violence against women.

**Goodman, L., Fels, K., & Glenn, C. (2006). *No safe place: Sexual assault in the lives of homeless women*. Retrieved from [http://www.vawnet.org/sexual-violence/summary.php?doc\\_id=558&find\\_type=web\\_desc\\_AR](http://www.vawnet.org/sexual-violence/summary.php?doc_id=558&find_type=web_desc_AR)**

**Aims:** This article seeks to synthesize existing research on the relationship between homelessness and sexual violence, allowing stakeholders to develop more effective means of intervention with homeless sexual assault survivors.

**Methods:** This article reviews available literature on sexual violence against homeless adult women, including research on the prevalence of sexual victimization before and during homelessness, homelessness as a risk factor for sexual victimization, barriers to services, and special populations of victimized homeless women.

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### Key results:

- Studies to date indicate that women experience disproportionately high levels of violent victimization before, during, and after episodes of homelessness. Homeless women have often experienced victimization by multiple perpetrators, beginning in childhood and extending into adulthood. An especially strong correlation exists between childhood sexual abuse and adult victimization among homeless women.
- Homeless women who have been sexually assaulted often lack access to legal, medical, and mental health services. Homeless women of color, LGBT women, and women with disabilities face additional barriers to services.
- Homelessness increases a woman's risk of being sexually assaulted. Factors such as childhood maltreatment, substance abuse, mental illness, length of homelessness, and engaging in high-risk survival strategies (i.e., panhandling, prostitution) increase homeless women's risk of sexual victimization.
- The authors offer recommendations for preventing and addressing sexual violence against homeless women, including affordable housing measures, increased funding for homeless services, collaboration between service providers, and the enhancement of trauma-informed homeless services.

**Summary:** Homeless women experience disproportionately high levels of sexual violence before and during homelessness. Homelessness and intertwined problems (i.e., high-risk survival strategies, mental illness, substance abuse) increase a woman's risk of being sexually victimized. Barriers to services often prevent homeless sexual assault victims from accessing assistance after an assault. Affordable housing measures, better funding and collaboration

among service providers, and trauma-informed homeless services can help homeless victims utilize the services they need.

**Application:** This article can assist service providers in addressing the vulnerabilities and needs of homeless sexual assault victims, as well as in collaborating with other stakeholders. Additionally, this article can assist policymakers in constructing policies that benefit agencies that provide services to homeless sexual assault victims.

**Future research needs:** The article observes that there is a dearth of research on the impact of institutional failures on sexual violence against homeless women. Future research on barriers to services or unsuitable services for homeless sexual assault victims would enrich the body of research on sexual violence. Future research on successful services for homeless sexual assault victims would also enrich the body of research.

**Jasinski, J. L., Wesely, J. K., Mustaine, E., & Wright, J. D. (2005). *The experience of violence in the lives of homeless women: A research report (Document No. 211976)*. Retrieved from the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs: <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/211976.pdf>**

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**Aims:** The purpose of this study was to improve understanding of the role of violence in the lives of homeless women. The authors examine the prevalence of lifetime physical and sexual victimization among homeless women, violent victimization as a causal factor for homelessness, and risk factors associated with victimization.

**Methods:** The authors conducted a study in Florida of 737 homeless women and 91 homeless men in which interviewers used survey tools such as the Conflict Tactics Scale, Personal History Form,

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and Addiction Severity Index to gather data on violence in the lives of respondents.

**Key results:**

- Over 25% of respondents indicated that violence was either the main reason or one of the reasons for their homeless status.
- A total of 78.3% of homeless women in the study had been subjected to rape, physical assault, and/or stalking at some point in their lifetimes. Of victimized respondents, over half of the respondents (55.9%) had been raped, almost three-quarters (72.2%) had been physically assaulted, and one-quarter (25.4%) had been subjected to stalking. These rates of victimization were much higher than the national average found in the National Violence Against Women Survey.
- By comparison, when interviewers surveyed 91 homeless men for comparison, they found that 14.3% had experienced completed rape, and 86.8% had experienced physical assault. Over 90% of male respondents had experienced physical assault, rape, and/or stalking at some point in their lives.
- Respondents reported higher rates of intimate partner violence than the national average. One quarter of respondents had experienced attempted or completed rape by an intimate partner, 63% had been physically assaulted by an intimate partner, and 19.8% had been stalked by an intimate partner.
- Over 13% of respondents reported having worked in prostitution, and of those, 22.4% had been forced into prostitution.
- Respondents who were physically and/or sexually victimized were homeless a greater number of times and spent more years being homeless than respondents who had not reported victimization.

**Summary:** In a study of 737 homeless women and 91 homeless men in urban Florida, researchers found correlations between violent victimization and homelessness. Significant percentages of respondents had experienced violent physical and sexual victimization during their lives as well as during their time being homeless. Similarly high rates of violent victimization were found among a comparison sample of homeless men. Over a quarter of female respondents indicated that violence was either the main reason or one of the reasons why they became homeless. Violent victimization was correlated with more episodes of homelessness and more years being homeless.

**Application:** This research highlights the need for trauma-informed services for the homeless, as well as the importance of outreach to homeless populations for domestic violence and sexual assault crisis centers. Additionally, this research points to the need for housing-related intervention for victims of physical and sexual violence, who may be at higher risk for homelessness.

**Future research needs:** Additional research is needed on physical and sexual violence experienced by homeless men across the lifespan. Responses from the comparison sample of men in this study suggest that violence may be a causal or exacerbating factor in male homelessness as well as female homelessness. Also, because this study utilized respondents from urban areas, it is unclear if these findings can be generalized to suburban and rural homeless populations. Future research on violence in the lives of homeless people in suburban and rural settings is needed.

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**Keeley, T. (2006). Landlord sexual assault and rape of tenants: Survey findings and advocacy approaches. *Clearinghouse Review: Journal of Poverty Law and Policy*, 40, 441-450.**

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**Aims:** Keeley analyzes a study by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty about tenants who have been sexual assaulted by landlords. Additionally, Keeley analyzes survey information on landlords who have sexually assaulted tenants. The article suggests legal remedies for victims of landlord sexual assault and opportunities for service providers to assist victims.

**Methods:** A survey on sexual violence in housing was distributed via e-mail to staff members at rape crisis centers and through listservs specializing in fair housing, domestic

violence, and sexual assault advocacy. A total of 112 completed surveys from 29 states were returned. Eighty-seven percent of responses came from rape crisis centers, 5 percent from legal aid providers, and 8 percent from other service providers.

**Key results:**

Fifty-eight percent of survey respondents stated that at least one tenant reported a sexual assault in 2005. Respondents reported that 152 women and 9 men reported that they had been sexually assaulted by a landlord, property owner, or property manager.

- Nearly half of the women who were sexually assaulted by landlords lived in subsidized housing (i.e., public housing, Section 8 housing). Over three quarters of female



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victims reported that landlords had stalked them, sexually harassed them, or ignored requests to make living spaces safe before the sexual assault. Most female victims wanted to move after the assaults but could not because of financial penalties or lack of alternative housing.

- Landlords who sexually assaulted tenants tended to be repeat perpetrators. One third of female victims reported that the landlord sexually assaulted them more than once, and 13% reported that another current tenant had been victimized by the same landlord.

**Summary:** Sexual assault by landlords against tenants is a pervasive problem, especially for female tenants living in subsidized housing with few alternative housing options. Collaboration and cross-referrals among sexual assault advocates, fair housing advocates, legal professionals, and other service providers can assist victims in securing legal help and housing assistance. Laws forbidding sexual discrimination and sexual harassment, such as the federal Fair Housing Act and analogous state laws, may help tenants take legal recourse against landlord perpetrators.

**Application:** Keeley introduces tenants of subsidized housing as a special category of sexual assault victims, providing impetus for sexual assault crisis centers and other service providers to increase outreach to this population. The article also provides service providers with strategies for collaboration and legal advocacy to assist landlord sexual assault victims. Finally, the article points to the importance of housing assistance for victims of landlord sexual assault.

**Future research needs:** Further research into the unique characteristics and vulnerabilities



of rural tenants, urban tenants, tenants with disabilities, male tenants, and other diverse populations could deepen the field's understanding of landlord sexual assault.

**Tyler, K. A., Whitbeck, L. B., Hoyt, D. R., & Cauce, A. M. (2004). Risk factors for sexual victimization among male and female homeless and runaway youth. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 19*, 503-520. doi:10.1177/0886260504262961**

**Aims:** The purpose of this study is to uncover risk factors associated with sexual victimization among homeless youth. Also, this study uncovers the likelihood of homeless youth being sexually assaulted by perpetrators they know versus unknown perpetrators.

**Methods:** Outreach workers interviewed 372 homeless youth in Seattle, Washington, between the ages of 13 and 21. Interviewers asked subjects about the age at which they had first left home, the number of times they had run away, substance abuse, participation in deviant

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subsistence strategies (i.e., shoplifting, mugging, conning), survival sex, sexual orientation, and sexual victimization.

**Key results:**

- Twenty-three percent of female respondents experienced at least one incident of sexual victimization since living on the streets. Male acquaintances constituted 41% of perpetrators against female respondents, followed by male strangers (34%) and male friends (23%). Almost all perpetrators against females were men (98%).
- For each year increase in a female respondent's age, the odds of being sexually victimized increased 72%. The earlier that female respondents ran away from home, the higher their likelihood of being sexually victimized by a stranger. Females who reported higher rates of drug abuse were more likely to have been victimized by strangers.
- Eleven percent of male respondents reported being sexually victimized at least once since living on the streets. Most perpetrators against male victims were strangers (56%), followed by acquaintances (32%) and friends (12%). Most perpetrators were men, although females made up 29% of perpetrators against male victims.
- Male respondents who engaged in survival sex were six times more likely to have been sexually victimized by strangers. Well-groomed males were more likely to have been victimized by strangers. Gay or bisexual males reported higher rates of victimization by friends and acquaintances. The more times male respondents ran away from home, the more likely they were to have been sexually assaulted by a known perpetrator.

**Summary:** In a study of 372 homeless youth in Seattle, Washington, researchers found correlations between sexual victimization, sex, and specific risk factors. Females who ran away from home at young ages and/or engaged in drug abuse reported higher rates of sexual victimization on the streets. Males who ran away from home on multiple occasions, engaged in survival sex, identified as gay, bisexual, or transgender, and/or presented a well-groomed appearance reported higher rates of sexual victimization on the streets.

**Application:** These research results suggest that certain populations of homeless youth (i.e., those who are drug abusers, LGBT, or who engage in survival sex) may have special vulnerabilities to sexual victimization. Service providers who assist these populations, such as drug counselors, prostitution outreach advocates, and LGBT advocates, should be trained in trauma-informed responses to homeless sexual assault victims.

**Future research needs:** Future research can explore what, if any, protective factors lower the risk of sexual victimization among homeless youth. Also, because this study utilized respondents from an urban setting, it is unclear if these findings can be generalized to suburban and rural homeless populations. Future research on violence in the lives of homeless youth in suburban and rural settings is needed.

**Conclusion**

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The research analyzed above demonstrates that sexual violence is a pervasive reality for the homeless and for residents of subsidized housing. Homeless individuals (especially women and youth) not only experience sexual violence at higher rates than the general population, but sexual violence and intimate partner violence

may be a causal or exacerbating factor in their homelessness. Stakeholders who assist victims of sexual and intimate partner violence should be familiar with housing and economic resources available for victims, so as to prevent homelessness among their clients. Additionally, service providers who serve homeless populations should provide trauma-informed care to clients and collaborate with local sexual assault programs.

- Stakeholders should also be aware of the relationship between transactional sex, homelessness, and sexual victimization. Goodman et al. (2006) and Tyler et al. (2004) found a correlation between engaging in survival sex and sexual victimization among homeless research subjects. Jasinski et al. (2005) found that a considerable percentage of homeless respondents had worked in prostitution, some against their will. Given the high risk of sexual victimization for homeless women and youth who engage in transactional sex, sexual assault programs, homeless programs, and prostitution outreach services must collaborate to better assist this vulnerable population.
- Sexual assault programs and domestic violence centers should conduct outreach to subsidized housing residents. Residents of

subsidized housing are not only at higher risk of sexual victimization and intimate partner violence, but may lack legal resources and alternate housing options if they are victimized by partners or landlords. Also, stakeholders should take measures to prevent homelessness among victims in subsidized housing, in light of findings from Jasinski et al. that violence was a causal factor in the homelessness of a quarter of their research subjects.

The research presented in this brief illustrates how sexual violence, homelessness, and housing issues are intertwined with other traumatic phenomena, including victimization across the life span, oppression, and poverty. Sexual victimization among the homeless was correlated with lifetime violent victimization and trauma. Members of traditionally marginalized groups, such as females, people of color, persons with disabilities, and the LGBT community were more likely to experience sexual violence or encounter barriers to services. Finally, poverty not only creates the need for public housing and the conditions of homelessness, but also exacerbates the violence that takes place therein. Stakeholders must address not only the immediate needs of homeless and impoverished victims, but larger structures of domination and poverty.

