
Domestic Violence and Poverty

Deborah Satyanathan and Anna Pollack

Background Data and Research

Families who experience domestic violence are often also victims of poverty. Studies examining the association between domestic violence and poverty have found:

- Of current welfare recipients in Michigan, 63% have experienced physical abuse and 51% have experienced severe physical abuse during their lifetimes [12].
- Physical abuse/being afraid of someone was cited as the primary cause of homelessness (in a survey of homeless adults in Michigan) [7].
- Half of homeless women and children report being victims of domestic violence [5,7].

Research shows that a variety of factors may contribute to the poverty of women and children who have experienced domestic violence, including lack of affordable housing and lack of accessibility to legal assistance. Some of the most significant factors are barriers to employment. Because of these barriers, many victims of domestic violence may not be able to leave welfare for work within the imposed time constraints of the recent welfare reform. These barriers consist of:

- Psychological effects of domestic violence (Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, depression, or anxiety)
- Sabotage by the abuser (destroying homework assignments, disabling cars and alarm clocks, interference with child care efforts, or harassment at work)
- Manipulation by the abuser (leaving marks and/or bruises that prevent the woman from attending work or an interview, or undermining self-confidence)

These employment barriers can lead to tardiness, absenteeism and lack of productivity. Research shows that between 23% and 42% affected by domestic violence report that the abuse had an impact on their work performance [4,5,12].

A study conducted by the University of Michigan suggests that domestic violence by itself is not a barrier to employment, but that the more barriers one has, the more difficult it is to leave welfare for work [2]. Further research is needed on multiple barriers to employment resulting from domestic violence.

A recent study found that approximately 70% of domestic violence victims did not disclose the abuse to their TANF caseworkers [10]. The same study found that 75% of those that did reveal information about the violence did not receive the appropriate support or services. These results imply that without the proper services, many victims of domestic violence and their children are forced to return home to their abuser.

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In October 2000, the federal government reauthorized the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). This act provides \$3.3 million over the next five years to address issues pertaining to violence against women, such as transitional housing and civil legal assistance [6].

Policy options to protect victims of domestic violence from poverty include training Family Independence Agency caseworkers to recognize the symptoms of domestic violence and to provide families with the proper resources to decrease their multiple barriers to employment.

How have program developers responded to the link between domestic violence and poverty?

Domestic violence shelters traditionally provide services to women and children who seek assistance. These shelters may provide emergency housing, counseling and/or support groups. However, many shelters do not provide women with the financial resources that they need to become economically independent.

SAFE House, located in Ann Arbor, Michigan, provides many needed services to victims of domestic violence, including a 24-hour crisis line, emergency shelter for one month, support groups, children's services, public education and policy development. Services that assist women in becoming financially independent consist of:

- Legal services, including advocacy, referrals and court accompaniment
- Counseling on emotional issues, housing, employment and transportation
- A Families First program to assist women in becoming financially independent

SAFE House services have not been formally evaluated but the outcomes so far have been positive [11].

How have policymakers responded to the link between domestic violence and poverty?

The federal government has responded to the problem of domestic violence and poverty by allowing states to adopt the Family Violence Option (FVO). Under the FVO, victims of domestic violence would be allowed an extended time-period to obtain employment. Michigan has chosen not to adopt the FVO but has other provisions for domestic violence in its welfare legislation such as allowing agencies to provide a renewable work exemption waiver for victims of domestic violence.

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Policy Options

In light of the conflicting current research and lack of specific program outcomes, recommendations to protect victims of domestic violence from poverty include:

1. Funding the evaluation of current policies and programs.
2. Funding the development of new programs to help victims of domestic violence find and maintain employment.
3. Training Family Independence Agency caseworkers to recognize the symptoms of domestic violence and to provide families with the proper resources to decrease their multiple barriers to employment.