

Poverty, Welfare and Battered Women: What Does the Research Tell Us?

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While domestic violence cuts across social groups defined by race, ethnicity, and economic circumstances, it is clear that the combined experience of poverty and violence raises particularly difficult issues for women. Several studies in the past ten to fifteen years have documented the importance of economic resources for battered women's decision-making. Gondolf's (1988) study of the exit plans of 800 women who had used Texas battered women's shelters, for example, found that access to an independent income, along with child care and transportation were primary considerations; only 16% of the women with their own income planned to return to their batterers. Similarly, shelter programs have reported that a majority of shelter residents use welfare in their efforts to end the violence in their lives (Raphael 1995). Despite these indications, research which explores the connections between domestic violence against impoverished women and their use of welfare is still in its early stages.

What follows is a brief summary of several very recent studies, focusing on the extent and impact of domestic violence among poor women and women on welfare. The overview concludes with implications of this research for the new TANF welfare program. This review is not exhaustive (see Raphael and Tolman 1997, for a more detailed summary), and necessarily does not include research which is currently in process but incomplete. The studies were originally conducted for varying reasons; they use different samples of women, and document violence and its impacts in different ways. All of them show disturbingly high rates of domestic violence in the lives of impoverished women, along with high rates of physical and mental health and other problems. In combination, however, the studies also provide indications of women's astounding resiliency. The picture which emerges at this stage of knowledge is complex: a majority of women on welfare have experienced violence by intimate partners and in childhood, and have been affected in widely different ways and to different degrees. These impacts, in turn, have varying implications for women's use of welfare and need for particular supports or temporary relief from TANF/program requirements.

How Prevalent is Domestic Violence Among Poor Women and Women Receiving Welfare?

In nearly all of the studies which have addressed the issue, well over half of the women receiving AFDC reported that they had experienced physical abuse (defined as a continuum from causing fear of being hurt to slapping or hitting through more physically injurious acts) by an intimate male partner at some point during their adult lives; most also reported physical and/or sexual abuse in childhood. When women were asked about more recent violence from their male partners, the rates remained high—from 19.5% to 32%. The specific behaviors counted differ from one study to the next, and measures of recent violence vary, as well. The studies agree, however, that current or recent domestic violence is prevalent among poor women and especially among those receiving AFDC. More specifically:¹

- ***In Harm's Way? Domestic Violence, AFDC Receipt and Welfare Reform in Massachusetts***, a probability sample of 734 women receiving AFDC in 40 of 42 welfare offices in the state, found that 64.9% had experienced physical abuse (using the state's legal definition of "hit, slapped, kicked, thrown, shoved, hurt badly enough to go to a doctor, used weapon in a frightening way, forced sexual activity, or 'made you think you might be hurt'") by an adult male partner during their lives, and 19.5% reported such abuse during the past year. (Allard et al. 1997).
- ***The Passaic County Study of AFDC Recipients in a Welfare-to-Work Program: A Preliminary Analysis***, a sample of 846 women in an AFDC Job Readiness program in Passaic County, New Jersey, found that 57.3% reported they had experienced physical abuse by an intimate male partner as adults, and 19.7% of those currently in a relationship stated they were being abused physically (just over 65% reported they were currently involved in a relationship with a man). In this study, the term "physical abuse" had been discussed during the program, but was not defined on the survey (Curcio 1997).
- ***The Worcester Family Research Project***, a study of 436 homeless and housed women, of whom 409 received AFDC, found that over 60% of the entire sample reported severe physical violence (slapped at least 6 times, kicked, bit, hit with a fist, hit with an object, beaten up, or more injurious acts) by an intimate male partner in adulthood. Nearly a third (32.4%) reported such violence by their "current or most recent partner" within the past two years (Browne and Bassuk 1997).

- ***The Effects of Violence on Women's Employment***, a random survey of 824 women (one-third currently receiving AFDC, two-thirds not) in one of Chicago's low-income neighborhoods, found that women who were receiving AFDC were more likely than the others to experience domestic violence: 33.8% of the AFDC recipients and 25.5% of the non-recipients had experienced "severe aggression" (kicking, hitting, biting, beating, injuring, raping, and threatening with or using a weapon) by a partner in adulthood. Further, of those currently in a relationship, 19.5% of the recipients and 8.1% of the non-recipients had experienced severe aggression (the same acts, excluding biting and raping) in the last 12 months (Lloyd 1996).
- ***Other studies of AFDC recipients*** have reported similar findings (see Raphael and Tolman 1997). For example, 60% of a representative sample of the Washington state caseload reported some type of physical or sexual abuse as adults; 55% stated they had been physically abused by an intimate partner. In 50% of Oregon AFDC cases reviewed because of apparent lack of progress toward work, women reported they had been physically or sexually abused at some point during their lives. Finally, 58% of women who entered a Chicago welfare-to-work program over a one-year period reported current domestic violence (Raphael 1995).

These studies demonstrate that women receiving welfare have experienced high rates of violence of varying kinds by a male partner; the Chicago study found that the rates were higher than those experienced by other low income women from the same neighborhood. More recent abuse has been measured in multiple ways: most studies have asked about events during the last year, but the Worcester study reported recent violence for the past two years; only the Passaic County study asked about current abuse.

What Is the Connection Between Welfare and Domestic Violence?

While these studies have documented high rates of domestic violence among welfare recipients, most research has not yet thoroughly investigated the role that welfare plays in the lives of abused women, or the role domestic violence plays in their use of welfare or their ability to sustain employment. Two recent studies have begun to shed more light on these questions.

First, the Worcester study (Saloman et al 1996) looked at length of stay on welfare, and at the number of episodes of welfare receipt. Over all, less than a third of the women had remained on welfare for a cumulative total of five years or more. However, the study found that women who had experienced physical violence by a partner were more likely to have remained on welfare for a combined total of five years or longer; this relationship was strongest among homeless women. Nearly 82% of the homeless longer-term recipients had experienced domestic violence, compared to just over 56% of those who had received welfare less than five years.

The Worcester study also investigated “cycling” (more than one episode of welfare receipt) among those who had combined totals of two years or more. It found that a lifetime history of violent victimization was a strong determinant of cycling. Women who had experienced physical or sexual abuse in childhood were significantly more likely to “cycle,” as were housed women who experienced physical violence by a partner. While it is far from definitive, this last finding could support perceptions that women may use welfare strategically in response to their partner’s violence.

The second study started with a sample of 3,147 domestic violence incidents reported to Salt Lake City police. Over three years, between 24% and 27% of the women victims sought AFDC. More to the point, between 38% and 41% of them had their cases opened within a year (before or after) of the reported incident. This proximity suggests a possible connection between domestic violence and welfare receipt for some of these women: they sought AFDC as a way to gain independence following a reported incident, or the independence they found through welfare contributed to a subsequent episode prompted by an abuser’s desire to regain control (Brandwein 1997). More research is needed to explore the meaning of these connections.

In short, the data that address the ways that women who turn to welfare include it among their immediate responses to domestic violence are still limited. The available data suggest that most recently-battered women receiving welfare have not been long-term recipients, although they are more likely to have multiple episodes of violence.

What Effects of Domestic Violence Are Found Among Women Receiving Welfare?

Some research has investigated welfare recipients' physical and mental health, aspects of their current and past intimate relationships that could affect their participation in training and employment, and their work experience. Again, the studies have measured and analyzed these characteristics in different ways. Although AFDC recipients who have ever experienced domestic violence have generally higher rates of difficulties than others, the potential implications for TANF waiver or exemption policy are complex.

Impacts on Physical Health. Across studies, many AFDC recipients have reported physical health problems. The Worcester study (Bassuk et al. 1996), for example, found rates of reported asthma, anemia, hypertension, ulcers, and histories of alcohol or drug abuse or dependency at substantially higher rates than among the general population, but comparisons between abused and non-abused women have not been published. Asthma, at over 22%, was the most prevalent health problem. The Massachusetts study (Allard et al. 1997) found that 31.7% of abused women and 21.4% of non-abused women reported a current "physical disability, handicap, or other serious physical, mental, or emotional problem." However, there was no difference between the abused and non-abused groups in having "a condition that makes her unable to work." Finally, the Chicago study (Lloyd 1996) found that 19.8% of the total sample had a "work-limiting disability," compared to 23.9% of those who had experienced severe aggression in the last 12 months.

Impacts on Mental Health. The impact of domestic violence on AFDC recipients' mental health has also been measured in multiple ways. In general, the studies have found higher rates of depression and drug or alcohol abuse among abused women than among those who report no abuse. Current drug and alcohol problems, for example, were reported by 18.7% of the currently abused women compared to 10.1% of the entire sample in the Passaic County study (and about 4% of the entire Worcester sample). That study also found current "severe depression" among 54.1% of those in an abusive relationship, compared to 31.8% of the total sample. Similarly, current depression was reported by 42.3% of the women in the Chicago study who had experienced severe aggression in the past 12 months, compared to 37.3% of those who had ever experienced severe aggression, and 24.8% of the entire sample.

AFDC recipients who have experienced domestic violence are more likely than others to be depressed and show other signs of emotional impact. However, the lower rates for those whose abuse is not current suggest that these effects are not permanent. The Massachusetts study compared women who had been abused within the past 12 months with those whose abuse occurred more than 12 months previously, and found that the second group had significantly higher scores of self esteem and “mastery,” and lower levels of symptoms of depression and anxiety than those who were most recently abused (Allard et al. 1997). While these scores still did not reach those of the never abused group, the suggestions of recovery are important, especially since not all of these women had received sustained professional or other support. It is likely that more evidence of recovery would be found after a period longer than 12 months.

Potential Impact of Relationships on Training or Work. AFDC recipients who are currently being abused report substantially more potential interference with work or training than those who are not. The Passaic County study (Curcio 1997) is clear on this issue. 39.7% of the currently abused women (14.6% of the sample were currently abused) reported that their partner tries to prevent them from obtaining education and training; this was reported by 12.9% of the total sample. About two-thirds of the currently abused women in this study also reported that their partner controls their life. Similarly, the Massachusetts study (Allard et al. 1997) found that 21.7% of the women who had been abused in the past 12 months (19.5% of the total sample) reported having a current or former partner who wouldn’t like her going to school or work, compared to 12.9% of those whose abuse occurred more than a year ago, and 1.6% of the women who had never been abused. More dramatically, the Chicago study (Lloyd 1996) found that, among recipients who were currently in a relationship, 8% reported that their partner had prevented them from going to school or work in the past 12 months, 2% said that their partners had harassed them by telephone at work, and the partners of 1.7% had appeared at work to harass them. These women were employed significantly fewer hours than the others.

Not surprisingly, the research also shows that AFDC recipients who have been abused are more likely to have a variety of kinds of conflicts with their current or former partners. The Massachusetts study (Allard et al. 1997) found that over half (52%) of

the women who had been abused in the last year had also argued with a man about child support, visitation or custody in the past year, compared to 20% of those who had never been abused. Such arguments are commonly protracted, can include violence or its threat, and play a part in abusers' efforts to control mothers' behavior. However, comparisons between women who had been abused in the past year with those who were abused more than a year prior to the study found that the second group was also significantly less likely to have had such arguments in the past year. This suggests again that the recent abuse is a critical consideration to women's current well-being, as well as an abuse history. The impacts of abuse do diminish with time, and reductions can be seen within 12 months for significant numbers of women. Current studies have not yet indicated what factors are associated with these reductions, however.

Work Experience and Interest. These studies document high levels of employment interest and experience among AFDC recipients. At least two-thirds of the women report having an employment history—over 88% in the Massachusetts study. In fact, over 70% of the recipients in this study had held full-time jobs, and the women with abuse histories were significantly more likely to have been employed, and employed full-time (73.5% compared to 64.5%), than the women who had never been abused (Allard et al. 1997). Further, 89.4% of the women in this study reported that they would prefer to go to school or work, rather than stay home full-time with children; there was no difference in this respect between women with abuse histories and those who had never been abused. The two groups were also equivalently likely to have had schooling or training for particular work and to be currently enrolled in a program.

The Chicago study (Lloyd 1996) also looked closely at the relationship between employment and abuse in its low income neighborhood sample. It found no significant difference between women who had experienced physical abuse by a partner (either in the past 12 months or ever in their lives) and those who did not report such abuse in current employment, job status, days absent from work, or number of weeks unemployed in the past year. Notably, in response to an open-ended question, just 20% of the women who had been abused reported that the abuse had had negative effects on their education and employment.

However, the women in this study who had experienced abuse were more likely to have ever been unemployed when they wanted to be working, to have lower personal income, and to have received AFDC, food stamps, and Medicaid in the past year. In addition, the women whose partners had threatened them with physical harm or had used a weapon against them were employed in significantly lower status jobs than others; this effect was especially pronounced among women whose partners had used a knife or gun against them.

Notably, Lloyd (1997) also found that some of the women who had experienced abuse increased their labor force participation, while others decreased their employment efforts due to partner interference. Still others did not change. Women make decisions about work involvements based on the combination of options they have available.

In sum, the evidence available to date suggests a complex relationship between domestic violence and employment experience, and there is still more to learn about the role of a woman's race, ethnicity, ability/disability, immigration status, religious affiliation, and age in employment experience. Among AFDC recipients, women who report abuse are at least as likely to have work experience as those who have not, to have received job-related training, and to express a preference for school or work. Among poor women, those who experienced domestic violence had more spells of unemployment, more job turnover, lower personal incomes, and were more likely to receive AFDC and other assistance than others; nonetheless, they had equivalent levels of current employment, absenteeism, and job status.

Summary Considerations

As these studies document, women who have experienced domestic violence are prominent among AFDC caseloads. Women who have experienced abuse are more likely than others to have a variety of physical and mental health problems, to have ongoing arguments with their partners, to have partners who oppose or interfere with school or employment, and to have more frequent periods of unemployment and welfare receipt; in some cases, the physical, emotional, and employment effects have been

prolonged and extreme. However, the studies also provide evidence of many women's remarkable resiliency: over time the physical and emotional effects have declined, and women have continued to seek and achieve employment. The studies also document their active efforts to use available resources, such as police and protective orders, to stop their partners' violence.

Clearly, some women face extreme circumstances and will need special supports and considerations, such as additional advocacy and services, or short or long term waivers/exceptions from welfare or child support time limits or requirements. The studies just reviewed, while providing a wealth of valuable information, do not say what percentage of ever- or currently-abused women will require special considerations — there is no definitive profile or formula to identify them. However, it is unlikely that they will constitute a majority of women receiving TANF support.

Given the myriad ways women may seek support, it is important to provide women seeking financial assistance with maximum options through flexible policies that can respond on a case-by-case basis. Economic independence and employment are central considerations in women's safety: options should include training and placement which respond to immediate and longer-term needs, as well as safely enforced child support where appropriate. Assisting battered women will require sensitivity to differences in women's strengths and needs, which can be achieved by providing safe and confidential opportunities for communication, and attention to what individual women say they need to achieve both safety and self-sufficiency. To build helpful responses, agencies will also need to recognize that abused women, depending on a complex array of circumstances, will operate according to different time frames. More research will be necessary to identify what will be most helpful policy to assist their route to self-sufficiency. Such research will need to investigate more thoroughly how women's race, ethnicity, age, ability/disability, religious affiliation, and immigration status affect their experiences and decisions. Such research, however, will not replace the importance of listening to and being guided by the women themselves and responding to the differences in their histories and circumstances.

Drawing on the studies outlined in this paper, as well as the research about battered women in general, TANF and Child Support Enforcement agency staff should assume: 1) that not all abused women coming into contact with their offices will have problems that interfere with their ability to take steps toward self-sufficiency; 2) that some formerly abused women will have lingering safety concerns or trauma that will interfere with job training or employment or make paternity establishment or vigorous child support dangerous; 3) that not all women who have left an abusive relationship are now safe (the post-separation period can be very dangerous for many battered women, with significant numbers experiencing ongoing threats and abuse); and 4) that not only women who experience current or past abuse have the kinds of problems reviewed here: these studies show that, while these difficulties are found at higher rates among women who have been abused, they are also found for other impoverished women and women receiving welfare benefits.

States can play a critical role in identifying the prevalence of domestic violence in their caseloads, in tracking and evaluating the granting of waivers or exceptions to TANF and child support enforcement requirements, and in documenting the success and difficulties of battered women in attaining employment. We need to know a great deal more about how waivers, exceptions, or special services will be used by states and how battered women are helped to move to a situation of safety and, ultimately, from welfare to work.

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NOTE

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