



Welfare and Domestic Violence Against Women: Lessons from Research

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Studies of the connections among poverty, public assistance, employment, and violence against women have increased dramatically in recent years, partly spurred by the changes in welfare passed in 1996 as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). Despite the increased attention, this research is still in its early stages. It has involved different samples of women, and used varying ways of measuring violence and its impacts. This paper provides a succinct summary of the research, with a focus on the aspects that have implications for advocates and others who work with women who receive TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families—the program established under PRWORA). It is a shorter, updated, and more advocacy-focused version of two previous summaries by this author (Lyon, 2000; Lyon, 1997).

While physical and psychological violence against women occurs in all social groups (as defined by age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or economic circumstances), poor women experience violence by their partners at higher rates, partly because they have fewer options (Davis, 1999; Greenfeld et al., 1998; Kaplan, 1997; Kurz, 1999; Ptacek, 1999; Raphael, 2000; Russo, Denious, Keita & Koss, 1997). The combination of poverty and violence creates particular difficulties for women's well-being and ability to achieve self-sufficiency. Access to independent economic resources, including welfare, is central to abused women's decision-making and safety planning (e.g. Brandwein, 1999; Davies, Lyon & Monti-Catania, 1998; Gondolf, & Fisher, 1988; Raphael, 1995).

As the following summary of research demonstrates, women who experience both recurring vio-

lence and poverty are likely to have more, and more complex, needs than those who have more resources, and those who seek support from public assistance may have even more complex needs than other abused women living in poverty. However, the evidence also shows that women who have experienced violence and poverty are resilient and use resources strategically. The findings demonstrate the importance of careful, individualized attention to women's situations, and the availability of a range of specific supports or temporary relief from TANF and program requirements.

How Many Women Receiving Welfare Have Experienced Intimate Violence?

Nearly all of the studies that have investigated the issue have found that over half of the women receiving welfare said they had experienced physical abuse (defined as a continuum from slapping or hitting through more physically injurious acts) by an intimate male partner at some point during their adult lives. When they were asked, most of the women receiving welfare also reported physical and/or sexual abuse in childhood. In contrast, about 22% of women in the general population have reported experiencing domestic violence at some time in adulthood (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). When women receiving welfare have been asked about abuse from their male partners *in the past year*, rates have ranged from about 9% to over 23%. Although the specific behaviors and time frames differ across studies, the studies have consistently shown that rates of physical and sexual violence for women receiving TANF are significantly

higher than for other low-income women from the same neighborhoods (e.g. Honeycutt, Marshall & Weston, 2001; Lloyd & Taluc, 1999). Women who have experienced difficulties with welfare program compliance also report higher rates of domestic violence. (See Appendix 1 for descriptions of many of the major recent studies.)

What Are the Health Problems of Women Welfare Recipients Who Have Been Abused?

Over all, research has found that poor women experience more physical and mental health problems of most kinds than women in general (Tolman & Rosen, 2001). Women who have also experienced domestic violence have these difficulties at generally higher rates. A state-wide Massachusetts study (Allard, Albelda, Colten, & Cosenza, 1997), for example, found that 32% of abused women and 21% of non-abused women reported a current “serious physical, mental, or emotional problem.” A Michigan study (Tolman & Rosen 2001) found that 18% of the women who had been abused in the past year reported a “physical limitation” or rated their health as “poor,” compared to 9.5% of those who said they had never been abused.

Studies have also found that abused women on welfare have higher rates of depression and “post traumatic stress disorder” (PTSD) than do women who report no abuse, and that those recently abused have higher rates than those whose abuse occurred in the more distant past (e.g. Lloyd, 1997). The Michigan study (Tolman & Rosen, 2001), for example, found that 59% of the women who had experienced severe abuse in the past 12 months had a mental health disorder, compared to 43% of those whose abuse was more distant, and 20% of those who reported no severe abuse. Similar significant differences associated with abuse and its recency were found for women’s ratings of depression, lifetime and recent PTSD, and need for treatment.

Drug and alcohol issues have not been included as consistently in these studies, and have been measured in different ways. Nineteen percent of the currently abused women in a study of AFDC recipients in Passaic County, New Jersey, also reported current drug and alcohol “problems,” for example, compared

to 10% of the entire sample (Curcio, 1997). In the Michigan study (Tolman & Rosen, 2001), researchers found that 12% of the women who had experienced severe abuse in the past 12 months were also either drug or alcohol “dependent,” compared to 6% of those whose abuse was less recent, and 2% of those who reported no severe abuse.

As dramatic as these elevated rates of emotional distress and drug and alcohol problems are for women whose abuse is recent, the substantially lower rates among women whose abuse is not recent suggest that these effects often diminish – for a variety of reasons, possibly including supportive interventions. While it is important to note that the scores for abused women did not reach those of the never-abused group, the evidence of recovery shows resilience among many women, and demonstrates the importance of not making assumptions about the health and emotional well-being of women who have experienced abuse. Again, however, it also indicates the importance of offering services and supports to women who disclose abuse.

How are Violence Against Women and Work and Training Experience Connected?

The newest studies show a complicated relationship between women’s experience of abuse and their involvement in welfare to work activities. Several studies have found that, in general, women who have experienced even recent domestic violence are interested in working and are as likely to be employed as those who have not. However, some women have partners who actively interfere with their efforts to work or attend school or training; such women have more difficulty sustaining their participation. Similarly, women whose partners threaten to kill them, or threaten their children, are more likely than others to have reduced work involvement.

Partner Interference

The evidence of abusive partner interference with women’s efforts to obtain education, training, or employment, and to sustain these efforts over time found in some studies has been disturbingly high. Raphael (1999b), drawing from interviews across the country, listed work sabotage strategies she found, and reported

that “fights” before key events, such as tests or job interviews, were the most common. More specifically, the following studies demonstrate the range of types of interference (see also Allard et al., 1997; Barusch et al., 1999; Curcio, 1997; Lloyd & Taluc, 1999; Riger, Ahrens & Blickenstaff, 2000; Sable et al., 1999):

Western Pennsylvania study. 46% of the women in a job readiness program reported their partners were jealous about the possibility of their meeting someone new at work, 21% were threatened or harassed while they were at work, and 32% were told that they would never be able to succeed at work or school. In addition, 12% were told that “working women are bad mothers,” and 8% had partners who said, “You may work only if you keep up with the housework.” Women whose partners expressed these last two views were significantly more likely than others (5 times and 3 times more likely, respectively) to drop out of the program. Similarly, women who sought a protective order (PO) dropped out of the program at six times the rate of others who did not seek a PO – 31% compared to 5% (Brush, 2000).

Michigan study. 23% of all the women recipients said their partners had harassed them at work, training, or school, or interfered with their efforts to go; 7% reported this had happened in the past year. In addition, 23% reported they had had to stay home because of something their partner had done; 6% said this had happened in the past year. Most dramatically, 48% of the women who had experienced *recent severe physical violence* reported direct interference in the past year, compared to 6% of past victims (Tolman & Rosen, 1999).

Wisconsin study. This study of women who experienced current or past abuse found that 43% reported they don’t feel safe from their abusive partner at work, 30% reported they have been fired or lost a job because of domestic violence, and 35% said their education and training efforts have been hampered by the abuse. More specifically, 84.5% said their abusive partner had kept them from sleeping, 58% said his threats had made them afraid to go to work or

school, 47% said he had refused to provide promised child care at the last minute, 41.5% said he had called them repeatedly at work, 34% had been refused promised transportation at the last minute, and 34% had been beaten so badly that they could not work (Moore & Selkove, 1999).

Work Experience

The studies show that most women on welfare want to work and have work experience. At least three-fifths of the women report having worked in the past, including 99% in the Utah study (Barusch et al., 1999). Of the women in the Massachusetts study with abuse histories, 73.5% had been employed full-time, compared to 64.5% of the women who had never been abused. (Allard et al., 1997). In addition, 89% of the mothers in this study (both abused and never-abused) reported that they would rather go to school or work than stay home full-time.

Some studies have reported that the *patterns and timing* of work and welfare receipt differ for women who have been abused, however. For example, an early study of poor women in Worcester, Massachusetts found that women who had been abused were significantly more likely than those who had never been abused to remain on AFDC for a combined total of five years or longer (Salomon, Bassuk, & Brooks, 1996). It also found that women who had housing and had experienced physical violence by a partner were significantly more likely than others to “cycle” (experience more than one episode of welfare support). This finding may suggest that women use welfare strategically in response to their partners’ violence; it may also reflect the impact of their partners’ interference or direct abuse.

Clearly, the relationships among welfare, work, and domestic violence are complex. A Chicago study provided some of the earliest evidence of this complexity. The women who had experienced abuse were similar to those who had not in current employment, job status, days absent from work, and number of weeks unemployed in the past year. However, 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. Further, while some of the women who had ex-

perienced abuse decreased their employment efforts due to their partner's interference, others *increased* their labor force participation, and still others did not change (Lloyd, 1997).

The evidence is clear that most women who experience abuse continue their efforts to work. In his analysis of Washington data on women who were receiving AFDC or were at risk for such support, for example, Smith (2000) found that the women who experienced both physical and sexual abuse had held *more* jobs than other women, but were employed for fewer total months. This finding suggests that the women continue to try to work, and the violence is associated with problems *keeping* their jobs, "thereby limiting [their] chances of skill acquisition and promotion" (pg. 20).

Connections between Abuse and Work

Several studies have reported analyses that examine the influence of domestic violence on employment or welfare experience in combination with other factors. These analyses attempt to *separate* the influence of domestic violence from other factors that researchers often find are connected to work, such as education, job skills, and physical health. Researchers have defined work and welfare involvement in different ways, have used different lengths of time to measure duration, and have included different explanatory variables. Nonetheless, they agree that while domestic violence *can be* devastating, it is not the only, or even always the most influential, factor associated with women's experience of welfare and work, as the following studies demonstrate:

The Chicago study of low-income women found that women who had experienced partner violence were generally no more or less likely to be currently employed than women who reported no abuse. However, women whose partners had directly prevented them from going to school or work, or had threatened to hurt their children, were less likely to have been employed in the past 12 months than were other women (Lloyd & Taluc, 1999).

The Washington study of households receiving AFDC or at risk for such support (Smith, 2000) ex-

amined the impact of different types of abuse on work experience. It found that women who were *both* physically and sexually abused as adults were least likely to work at least 30 hours a week for six or more months, even when other factors were controlled statistically.

The Texas study of poor women found no clear relationship between abuse and current employment. However, when other factors were controlled, Anglo women with a *history* of physical abuse were less likely than other Anglo women to be employed; Chicana women who were being physically abused *currently* were less likely than other Chicana women to be employed; and past sexual abuse also had a negative impact on Chicana women's employment. The effects varied, then, by the type and timing of abuse and the woman's race/ethnicity (Honeycutt et al., 2001)

The Worcester, Massachusetts Study found that women who had experienced physical violence or aggression in the past year were no more or less likely than others to be currently employed. However, researchers also found that just 12% of women who had experienced recent violence or aggression worked 30 hours a week or more for a minimum of 6 months ("sustained full-time employment"), compared to 27% of those who had not experienced such abuse. Further, even controlling for other factors, *women who received job training were about 7 times more likely than others to be working, and those who received job placement services were about 4 times as likely to be working*; these two factors were the strongest predictors of sustained full-time work (Browne, Salomon, & Bassuk, 1999).

However, ***the Michigan study*** of welfare recipients, in a recent analysis, looked at factors associated with "welfare reliance" over time. It found that women who had experienced "severe domestic violence" in the past year or had experienced persistent violence over time were more likely to be welfare reliant or to have left welfare and not be working than women whose abuse occurred exclusively in the past; they were nearly twice as likely as those who had never experienced severe violence. Women who experienced abuse only in the past did not differ in their work/

welfare pattern from those who never experienced severe abuse (Tolman, Danziger & Rosen, 2001).

Together, these studies show that, while experience of abuse can make “sustained employment” more difficult, the type, timing and persistence of violence may be important considerations, and there are many other factors that are influential as well. Education, work experience, physical and mental health problems, lack of transportation, discrimination, and race and ethnicity have all been found to affect employment, and *may* be more influential than whether or not a woman has experienced domestic violence. However, domestic violence may have more impact on women’s options, and on the *quality* of the employment they obtain. Certainly, services such as job training and placement have been found to be critically important for all women.

What Do Women Say Are Their Major Barriers?

Several studies have questioned women directly about their barriers to work or to cooperation with TANF requirements. In general, domestic violence is not a common response, even when results are reported separately for women who have experienced abuse. Instead, women consistently cite transportation, child care, and lack of job skills as their major obstacles (e.g. Becerra, 1999; Merrill et al., 1999; Sable, Libbus, Huneke, & Anger, 1999). However, Connecticut data from a study of the first 226 clients who were discontinued from cash assistance after failing to follow program rules found that 35% of these clients listed domestic violence as a barrier to employment, although they were only marginally less likely to be employed (Canny, 2000).

What Do We Know About Women’s Response to the Family Violence Option?

As of August, 2000, 39 states had adopted the Family Violence Option (FVO), a provision of the federal welfare legislation that allows states to exempt victims of violence temporarily from work requirements while they receive services and take other steps toward self-sufficiency; it also allows women to apply for a waiver from cooperation with child support en-

forcement efforts (Nazario, 2000; Raphael & Haennicke, 1999). Among the states that have adopted this provision, methods of notification, assessment, the types of services, and the types of waivers and other responses have varied widely (Raphael, 1999a).

Disclosure Rates

While increasing attention has turned to the rates at which women report domestic violence to TANF or child support enforcement (CSE) staff, it is important to remember that women consider many things before they talk about abuse. Disclosure does not ensure their safety, nor is it an indicator of success of the FVO. In general, rates of disclosure to researchers have been substantially higher than disclosures to AFDC or TANF workers (which have ranged from 3% to 10%). In addition, states report that most disclosure is of past, not current, abuse (Raphael 1999a). However, to date, only a few studies have reported women’s rates of disclosure of violence in response to the FVO.

A Wisconsin study of domestic violence victims found that 70% did not disclose the violence or its impact to a TANF worker. Their reasons for non-disclosure were that 1) they did not think it was the worker’s business (32%); 2) they were ashamed (24%); 3) they didn’t think the worker had time to help them (10%); 4) the worker seemed insensitive (6%); and 5) they were afraid of losing their benefits (4.5%). Wisconsin relies on client-initiated disclosure, and that may contribute to the low rates, as well (Moore & Selkove, 1999).

The most comprehensive investigation of domestic violence disclosure rates—the “three-state study”—has provided data from different stages of the process in Colorado, Minnesota, and Massachusetts (Griswold, Pearson, & Thoennes, 2000). It found rates of 40% in Colorado, 35% in Massachusetts, and 38% in Minnesota. It found, further, that rates were substantially higher in response to direct questioning by workers than they were from providing information about the FVO and waiting for women to self-disclose (35% vs. 9% in Massachusetts and 38% vs. 6% in Minnesota). More important, this study reported that the women themselves said that it is better

to be asked directly about violence.

Interest in the Child Support Exemption

Child-related issues are often a source of conflict between women and their abusive partners. The Massachusetts study, for example, 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. Nonetheless, the three-state study found that interest in applying for an exemption (or “good-cause waiver”) from cooperation with child support was quite limited, even among women who disclosed domestic violence. In Colorado, just 7% of those who disclosed domestic violence expressed interest in a waiver, as did 15% of those who disclosed in Minnesota.

In general, however, the studies report that women say they are not interested in a waiver because they want to receive child support. This was true for 77% of the women in Massachusetts who disclosed domestic violence and were not interested in a waiver; 71% of this group also agreed strongly that “the violence happened long ago, and there is no current danger” (Griswold et al., 2000).

Pearson and her colleagues looked more closely at women’s interest in good-cause waivers in Colorado (Pearson et al., 1999; Pearson & Griswold, 1997). Of the 7% of abused women who applied for a waiver, just one-third were successful; the rest had their application denied due to insufficient documentation. Of the women who wanted to apply, most wanted child support, but 76% said that their abuser was dangerous, and child support would make their situation worse. Thirty-eight percent said that he did not know where she lived, and 72% had moved to avoid him. Researchers found that there were 8 factors that predicted that a woman would want to apply for a waiver: threats to harm the children; threats to harm, isolate, or hit or beat her; preventing her from working; monitoring her telephone calls; abuse in the past 6 months; and having called police. The women whose children were threatened were most interested in good-cause waivers (Pearson et al., 1999).

Experience with Services

A few studies have investigated services sought and obtained by women in connection with their experience of welfare. The three-state study, for example, reported that 30% of the women in Massachusetts who said that they had experienced domestic violence said they would have liked to see an advocate or other person who specializes in domestic violence work. However, about half did not remember being told that such a specialist was available, and nearly half of those who told researchers they wanted to see a specialist had not mentioned it to their worker. A large majority of women who actually saw specialists in Massachusetts and Minnesota found that they were helpful (Griswold et al., 2000).

A domestic violence program in Chicago designed to provide support to interested women receiving TANF benefits found that screening procedures, poor interagency communication, TANF worker roles, and workers’ attitudes toward domestic violence seriously hampered referrals (Levin, 2001). After changes were implemented, 19% of the women expressed interest in specialized services, and one-third of these attended at least one session with advocates. Over half (57%) of those who attended at least one session were placed in work activities: 37% entered paid employment, 11% enrolled in school and 10% entered training programs (Levin, 2000).

A Utah study reported that 87% of the women receiving welfare had a self-sufficiency or employment plan, and 72% overall were participating in program activities. Of those who said their partner objected to their working, however, only 27% had talked about it with an employment counselor, and 47% of these found that talk to be helpful (Barusch et al., 1999).

In Wisconsin, 27% of the women who disclosed domestic violence to a worker were referred to counseling; workers asked nearly one in five (19.5%) of the women who disclosed for further proof of abuse. Just 15% of women who disclosed were told that funds were available if she was homeless because of the abuse; and less than 5% were told about the child support exemption (Moore & Selkove, 1999). Similarly, a study of California’s program in six counties found that only half of the women who were receiving domestic violence services were informed about the

FVO (Meisel & Chandler, 2000).

The data currently available about rates of disclosure and women's subsequent experience, then, remain limited. It is clear that most women who have experienced domestic violence have not so far disclosed it to their caseworkers. The available evidence about what happens after women disclose demonstrates that subsequent services and interventions have sometimes been helpful and sometimes not. When services have been provided by referral to domestic violence specialists, such services have been helpful (Burt, Zweig, & Schlichter, 2000). Researchers and advocates are increasingly calling for systematic access to advocacy services, and for more individually tailored, comprehensive services to be available to women who want them (see, e.g., Cole, 2001; Lein et al., 2001).

Implications of the Research for Support and Advocacy

The available research on the connections among welfare, employment and violence against women clearly show that women's interests and needs are complex and highly variable. Some of them face extreme circumstances and will need special supports and considerations, such as additional advocacy and services, or short- or long-term waivers/exemptions from welfare or child support time limits or requirements. These women are most likely to be those who are experiencing current or persistent severe abuse, and whose abusive partners are directly interfering in their efforts to move toward self-sufficiency or are seriously threatening them or their children. Safe procedures, policies, and programs are essential for these women. Even though the available data suggest that these special considerations will not be needed by a majority of women receiving TANF support, some women clearly experience long-term consequences and ongoing danger, and will require additional services, including individualized support from advocates.

It should be clear that *passage* of the FVO has not been enough to assure women's safety; instead, the way it is implemented is central. Since the studies also clearly demonstrate women's interest and involvement in work, it is crucial that they be provided with

maximum options through flexible policies that can respond on a case-by-case basis. Economic independence and employment are vital 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. Sensitivity to women's concerns about their children should be central; threats to children interfere significantly with women's participation in work and training, and increase their interest in child support exemptions.

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. Women should be given the opportunity for voluntary and confidential disclosure of domestic violence, and be assessed for other issues that have been identified as barriers to employment. Women also need to be informed of all the implications of disclosure, and must have the opportunity to explore the consequences of disclosure for their ongoing safety. In order for TANF staff to engage in such initial screening safely and effectively, it is important that they receive specific training about the dynamics of domestic violence, and women's highly variable reactions and sources of risk.

Further, safety considerations should be reflected in TANF protocols covering the entire process: initial screening, all written notices, all program referrals and job placements, and all sanctioning considerations (see Davies, 1998a, 1998b, and 2000). The use of on-site specialized domestic violence advocates should be expanded, and protocols for regular referral to off-site programs, when women are interested, should be adopted. In addition, states should consider allowing ongoing financial support for battered women, as well as options for restarting benefits when women experience abuse after benefits have been exhausted.

Since women who have been abused have many concerns that are similar to those held by all recipients, such as child care and transportation, services and supports in these areas are likely to benefit battered women, as well. Similarly, comprehensive mental health services and systematic access to health care

could potentially help all recipients. Job training and placement services have been identified as particularly important. In fact, programs that provide financial incentives for work and participation in employment-focused services to all recipients have been found to be associated with reduced rates of reported domestic violence (Knox, Miller, & Gennetian, 2000).

While recent research has added substantially to our knowledge of abused women's experience with TANF and work, still more will be needed to identify what policies will be most helpful to assist women in their path to self-sufficiency. Research is still needed to investigate how women's age, race, ethnicity, ability/disability, religious affiliation, and immigration status affect their experiences and decisions. In addition, more studies need to distinguish among different types of violence by partners and family members: including physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. Research that includes opportunities for women to describe their experiences with TANF staff, programs, and policies, as well as specialized advocates, and what these have meant in the context of their efforts to ensure safety and well-being for themselves and their children, is especially important. These efforts are crucial if we are to learn more about how waivers, exceptions, or special services are used, and how they can help battered women continue to move toward enhanced safety and self-sufficiency.

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Suggested Citation: Lyon, E. (2002, August). *Welfare and Domestic Violence: Lessons from Research*. Harrisburg, PA: VAWnet, a project of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence/Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Retrieved month/day/year, from: <http://www.vawnet.org>

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Appendix 1: Selected Major Recent Studies & Prevalence of Violence

- **California.** *Immigrant Women and Welfare Reform*, a study of 75 Mexican and 75 Vietnamese women who were current or former recipients of AFDC/welfare, found that 40% of the Mexican women and 16% of the Vietnamese women had experienced domestic violence (Becerra, 1999).
- **Colorado.** *Child Support and Domestic Violence*, a study of 1,082 applicants for public assistance in Colorado, found that 40% of the women reported current or past abuse by a male partner. Of the women who reported abuse, 74% said it was by a former partner only; 24% involved both current and former partners (Pearson, Thoennes, & Griswold, 1999).
- **Florida.** *A Study of the Florida WAGES Population*, a sample of 740 randomly selected participants in the state's TANF program interviewed in 1998, found that 36% said they had been physically abused and 17% had been sexually abused by a partner in adulthood (Merrill, Ring-Kurtz, Olufokunbi, Aversa, & Sherker, 1999).
- **Illinois.** *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 33.8% of the AFDC recipients and 25.5% of the non-recipients had experienced "severe aggression" by a partner in adulthood. Further, 19.5% of the recipients and 8.1% of the non-recipients currently in a relationship had experienced serious aggression in the last 12 months (Lloyd & Taluc, 1999).
- **Massachusetts.** *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 by an adult male partner during their lives, and 19.5% reported such abuse during the past year. (Allard et al., 1997).
- **Massachusetts.** *The Worcester Family Research Project*, a study of 436 homeless and housed women (409 received AFDC), found that over 60% reported severe physical violence by an adult male partner; 32.4% had experienced such violence by their "current or most recent partner" in the past two years (Browne & Bassuk, 1997).
- **Michigan.** *The Women's Employment Study*, an interview study of 753 randomly selected single female welfare recipients with children in an urban Michigan county, found that 62.8% reported moderate or severe physical abuse in their lifetime, and 23.2% reported such abuse in the past year (Tolman & Rosen, 2001).
- **Missouri.** *Domestic Violence Among AFDC Recipients*, a survey of 404 AFDC recipients in 6 offices in Missouri in 1996, found that 29% reported they had been hit, slapped or kicked by an adult partner – 10.6% in the past year (Sable et al., 1999).

- **New Jersey.** *The Passaic County Study of AFDC Recipients in a Welfare-to-Work Program*, a sample of 846 women in a New Jersey AFDC Job Readiness program, found that 57.3% reported they had been physically abused by an adult male partner, and 19.7% of those currently in a relationship (65% of the sample) said they were being abused physically (Curcio, 1997).
- **Pennsylvania.** *Job Readiness Program Participants*, an interview study of 122 welfare-to-work program enrollees in western Pennsylvania, found that 38% reported their current or most recent partner hit, kicked or threw something at them, and 27% were cut, bruised, choked, or more seriously injured (Brush, 2000).
- **Texas.** *Project HOW: Health Outcomes of Women*, a 1995 longitudinal interview study of 836 low-income women (18.3% receiving AFDC, and 42.6% receiving food stamps) in a metropolitan community, looked at rates of violence across race and ethnicity. It found that 85.8% of African American, 84.2% of Anglo, and 76.9% of Chicana women reported past abuse by an intimate partner, and 60.1% of Anglo, 47.5% of African American, and 36.5% of Chicana women reported a history of sexual assault involving physical force or a weapon. Differences in rates of violence by the women's current partner were not significant statistically; they ranged from 67.3% for African Americans to 69.2% for Chicanas (Honeycutt, Marshall & Weston, 2001).
- **Utah.** *Understanding Families with Multiple Barriers to Self-Sufficiency*, a multi-method study that included interviews with a stratified random sample of 325 welfare recipients in Utah, found that 79% reported that sometime during their adulthood a partner had pushed or grabbed them; 60% had been slapped or kicked. Twenty percent of recipients had been pushed or grabbed in the last 12 months, and 21% reported one of these acts of domestic violence by their current partner (Barusch, Taylor, & Derr, 1999).
- **Washington.** *Washington State Family Income Study*, a random survey of women in 1,300 households receiving AFDC and 800 "at risk" households interviewed annually between 1988 and 1992, found that 24% reported physical abuse in adulthood, 5% reported sexual abuse, and 19% reported both (for a total of 47.8%). Forty percent reported physical and/or sexual abuse in childhood (Smith, 2000).
- **Wisconsin.** *Barriers to Self-Sufficiency and the W-2 Response*, a survey of 274 current or former AFDC/TANF recipients who sought help from a Wisconsin domestic violence program in 1998, found that 68.9% reported current physical abuse (Moore & Selkove, 1999).



In Brief:
**Welfare and Domestic Violence Against Women:
Lessons from Research**

Studies of the connections among poverty, public assistance, employment, and violence against women have increased dramatically in recent years, partly spurred by the changes in welfare passed in 1996 as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). Despite the increased attention, this research is still in its early stages. It has involved different samples of women, and used varying ways of measuring violence and its impacts. This paper provides a succinct summary of the research, with a focus on the aspects that have implications for advocates and others who work with women who receive TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families—the program established under PRWORA).

Nearly all of the studies that have investigated the issue have found that over half of the women receiving welfare said they had experienced physical abuse (defined as a continuum from slapping or hitting through more physically injurious acts) by an intimate male partner at some point during their adult lives. When women receiving welfare have been asked about abuse from their male partners *in the past year*, rates have ranged from about 9% to over 23%. Women who receive TANF and have experienced abuse report physical health problems, depression, and PTSD at higher rates than those who have not experienced physical abuse; those with recent abuse experiences report these symptoms at higher rates than those whose abuse occurred in the more distant past. This pattern suggests that these effects often diminish over time.

In general, women who have experienced even recent domestic violence are interested in working and are as likely to be employed as those who have not. However, some women have partners who actively interfere with their efforts to work or attend school or training; such women have more difficulty sustaining their participation. Similarly, women whose partners threaten to kill them, or threaten their children, are more likely than others to have reduced work involvement.

The studies show that, while experience of abuse can make “sustained employment” more difficult, the type, timing and persistence of violence may be important considerations, and there are many other factors that are influential as well. These include education, work experience, physical and mental health problems, lack of transportation, discrimination, and race and ethnicity. Women consistently cite transportation, child care, and lack of job skills as their major obstacles to work. However, domestic violence may have more impact on women’s options, and on the *quality* of the employment they obtain.

The studies also show that most women who have been abused do not disclose their experience to TANF workers, despite the Family Violence Option (FVO). Further, women’s interest in applying for an exemption (or “good-cause waiver”) from cooperation with child support has been found to be quite limited, even among women who have disclosed abuse. Instead, they want to receive child support, unless they perceive imminent risks to themselves or their children.

Implications for work with women who receive TANF are discussed in some detail. They include the importance of sensitive assessment of women’s risks and needs, clear communication of the implications of all choices, and supportive resources, including specialized advocacy.