

Obstacles to Employment of Women with Abusive Partners: A Summary of Select Interview Data

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A Great Cities Institute Working Paper



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Abstract

A high proportion of women who receive welfare are abused by their intimate partners. This paper examines the relationship among welfare receipt, job readiness (i.e., employment history and training), employment resources (i.e., transportation and child care) and intimate violence among women in three domestic violence shelters. These women have few job skills and many barriers to employment. Many reported long-term physical or mental health problems, and most had young children at home, making work difficult. Most of the women were unemployed and few had any kind of job training. Their job histories consisted of intermittent work for low pay in unskilled positions. Many of their abusers disrupted the women's work and school efforts, severely interfering with their attempts at self-sufficiency.

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Introduction

Recent studies have documented a high rate of domestic violence among women who receive welfare (summarized in Raphael & Tolman, 1997). Almost 20% of a random sample of Massachusetts' welfare caseload reported currently experiencing violence from an intimate partner, as did a similar proportion of welfare recipients in a random neighborhood sample in Chicago. Women participating in a welfare-to-work program in New Jersey reported current physical abuse rates of almost 15%, while homeless and housed low-income women in Massachusetts, most of whom were welfare recipients, reported higher rates: 32% were currently experiencing severe physical assault by an intimate partner.

Untangling the relationship between welfare receipt and domestic violence is critical now that welfare reform is being instituted. President Clinton has followed through on his promise to "end welfare as we know it", and control of welfare has passed from the federal government to the states. States are making major changes in welfare policies, including: a) the abolition of the current Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program and its replacement by the Transitional Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, b) a two-year time limit on aid for parents of children age 13 and over; and c) no additional aid to a family even if additional children are born. These policies are likely to eliminate or drastically reduce the extent of support available through AFDC and other government programs.

Welfare reform policies, especially work requirements, time limits on benefits, and mandatory paternity reporting, may have a particularly detrimental impact on women who are victims of domestic violence. For example, work requirements may inadvertently exacerbate domestic violence. Job training providers report that disruptive and threatening actions by their intimate partners may sabotage women's efforts at financial independence, perhaps out of the partner's fear that women will leave the relationship or form other relationships at work. This abuse may take many forms, ranging from administering beatings and highly visible bruises to turning off the alarm clocks and failing to fulfill child-care responsibilities so that women cannot go to work (Raphael, 1996).

To address these issues, we examined levels of welfare receipt, job readiness (such as employment and training), employment resources (such as transportation and child care) and intimate violence (such as physical and emotional abuse, and work interference) among women in domestic violence shelters.

Methods

Research participants were recruited between February and April, 1997, from 4 domestic violence shelters in inner-city Chicago (only 1 participant came from a fourth shelter). All 4 shelters offered housing and services to women for 6-8 weeks. The shelters were located in distinctly different areas of the city ranging from economically depressed to recently gentrified neighborhoods. Differences in the clients served in these locations can be seen in the demographics reported below.

We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 69 women. Of the 69 interviews 1 was dropped due to language barriers, 2 were dropped for incompleteness, 2 were dropped because they were duplicate interviews (the same women completed two different interviews at two separate shelters), 1 was dropped due to apparent delusions, and 1 was dropped because she claimed to be the abuser in the relationship. Additionally, 5 women were excluded because they reported that their abuser was a female relative or female partner and there were not enough cases of female-female violence to warrant separate analyses. Analyses were conducted using the remaining 57 participants.

The Public Policy Committee of the Illinois Coalition Against Domestic Violence (ICADV) provided us with a list of topic areas (e.g. child care, housing, etc.) and questions that they believed were important to understanding the impact of domestic violence on employment. Based on a review of the literature and suggestions from other domestic violence advocates, we then expanded this list. The resulting variables that were measured include the following: demographics, housing, child care, homelessness, health, work history, transportation, financial resources, abuser information, psychological abuse, physical abuse, harassment at work and school, and mental health. These variables were measured with a series of questions requiring short and long answers. This report summarizes only the short-answered questions. Further analysis will be conducted in the future on the questions that women answered at length.

Results**Demographic Profile of Participants**

Variable	Shelter 1	Shelter 2	Shelter 3	Total*
Average Age	32.68 (Range= 24, 44)	29.98 (Range= 18, 44)	32.26 (Range= 18, 47)	31.52 (Range= 18, 47)
% African American	100 ^a	83 ^a	50 ^b	79
% Not Married	89	78	86	84
% High School diploma or more	53	57	57	56
% Unemployed	83	90	85	85
Average income/month	656 (Range= 0, 1500)	568 (Range= 0, 1400)	589 (Range= 0, 2200)	648 (Range=0, 2917)
% on Welfare	78	70	57	68
Avg. # times on welfare	1.72 (Range= 1, 4)	1.09 (Range= 0, 3)	1.29 (Range= 0, 4)	1.32 (Range= 0, 4)
Avg. # children living in the home	2.32 (Range= 0, 8)	2.22 (Range= 0, 7)	1.36 (Range= 0, 5)	2.07 (Range= 0, 8)
# participants	19	23	14	57*

^{a, b} Percentages with different superscripts are significantly different from one another at $p < .05$.

* 1 participant came from a 4th shelter not reported individually in order to retain confidentiality, however, her responses are reflected in the total column.

Our typical respondent was about 32 years old, African American, not married, with a high school education, unemployed, currently on welfare, with one or two children. We used statistical procedures to determine whether there were significant differences among participants from the 3 shelters. The only statistically significant demographic difference was ethnicity. Residents of Shelter 3 were significantly less likely to be African American than the residents at either Shelter 1 or 2. None of the other comparisons were statistically significant, however, all of the residents at Shelter 1 had been on Welfare at least once, while this was not true of the other shelters. Because there were few significant differences among shelters, we combined the participants from the four different shelters for the remaining analyses.

Housing Issues

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Variable	Entire Sample
Average # People living in the home (Range= 1, 16)	4.75
Average # Children living in the home (Range= 0, 8)	2.07
Average Age of Children in home (Range= 1, 12)	5.48
% Her name only on the lease	39
% Considered her place only	35
% She pays all of the rent	44
% Partner pays some of the rent	53
Average rent per month (\$) (Range= 0, 830)	357.71
% Have working telephone	60

The typical respondent lived in an medium sized household with an average of four to five people, including herself and approximately 2 children who were quite young. The majority of the respondents did not have sole control of their housing and were at least partially reliant on financial contributions from their partners. More than a third of the homes did not possess working telephones, indicating a level of financial instability. Lack of a telephone will likely make a job search more difficult.

Child Care Issues

Variable	% of Sample who had Children (n = 48)
Use child care	33
- had relative care for children	63
- had free child care	50
Felt it would be easy to get child care	50
Children had problems	27

Most of the women cared for their own children. Of those who used some form of child care, almost 2/3 had relatives who cared for the children on a regular basis. Thus, very few of the women in this sample used formal child care services. Furthermore, nearly 1/3 of the women indicated that their children had physical or emotional problems that would make it difficult for them to go to work and only half of the women felt that it would be easy to get child care if it were necessary.

Issues of Homelessness

Variable	Entire Sample
% Stayed at a DV shelter	32
% Stayed at a homeless shelter	14
% Stayed with relative/friend	26
% Lived in a vehicle	2
% Camped out when homeless	2
% Lived on the street	2
Average # of times stayed at a DV shelter (Range= 1, 6)	1.94
Average # of times at a homeless shelter (Range= 1, 10)	3.38

Nearly 1/3 of the respondents had stayed at a domestic violence shelter at least once before this current stay, indicating that some of these women had either tried to leave the abuser in the past or had experienced abuse from a different partner.

Although only a small proportion had stayed in a homeless shelter in the past, those who had stayed in a homeless shelter averaged over 3 different stays, indicating recurrent problems with homelessness.

Furthermore, 1/4 of the women had stayed with relatives or friends when they didn't have a place to live, although it is unclear if this was related to an attempt to leave the abusive relationship or was due to problems with housing.

Physical and Mental Health

Variable	Entire Sample
% Felt that overall health was good	75
% Had a physical health problem	61
% Had a mental health problem	63
Average # of sick days in past year (Range= 0, 365)	32.77
% Ever had an alcohol problem	25
% Currently have an alcohol problem	2
% Ever had a drug problem	39
% Currently have a drug problem	0

Although most of the women considered their overall health to be good, the majority of them indicated that they had both long-term physical and emotional problems. Future analysis of some open-ended questions pertaining to their health complaints may help to untangle this seeming paradox.

Furthermore, although 1/4 of the women had a problem with alcohol and 1/3 had a problem with drugs at some point in their lives, virtually none of them felt that this was currently a problem. Although women were assured of their confidentiality at the beginning of the interview, it is possible that women were reluctant to admit to alcohol or drug use, either because it is illegal or because it might violate shelter rules.

Employment Resources

Variable	Entire Sample
% Ever had a job	91
% Had a sales/waitress job	46
Average # of jobs (Range= 0, 20)	5.42
% Currently employed	14
Average # of weeks unemployed in past year when wanted to work (Range= 0, 52)	30.34
Average # of months since left last job (Range= 1, 132)	23.64
% Had full time employment at last job	63
Average weekly earnings at last job (\$) (Range= 5, 750)	215.66
% Supervised anyone at last job	23
% Ever had on-the-job training	19
% Ever had a job training program	30
% Held job they are looking for in the past	53
% Went back to school for a job	40

Most of the women were unemployed. The average woman in the sample had not had a job for almost two years. Few of the women had received any type of job training and just over half of the women had previously held the type of job that they were currently seeking. When the women were working, they tended to get jobs in the sales/waitress field that did not involve supervisory responsibilities. Overall, the women in this sample worked intermittently at relatively unskilled positions for relatively low pay.

Transportation to Work and Child Care

Variable	Entire Sample
% Used public transportation	47
Average minutes to work by car (Range= 15, 120)	45
Average minutes to work by bus (Range= 2, 150)	67
Average weekly driving costs (\$) (Range= 0, 60)	23
Average weekly bus costs (\$) (Range= 0, 130)	25
% Had problems with the transportation	30

Slightly less than half of the women used public transportation to get to work and child care. Women using public transportation spent an average of 22 minutes longer getting to work than those who drove, although the weekly costs were virtually identical. Nearly 1/3 of the women reported having problems with their mode of transportation.

Financial Resources

Variable	Entire Sample
% Had household income above 850 a month	51
Average personal monthly income (\$) (Range= 0, 2917)	647.83
% On Welfare Now	67
% Ever been on Welfare	86
Average # of times been on welfare (Range= 0, 4)	1.32
Average years on welfare (Range= .08, 15.33)	6.76
Average amount from welfare (Range= 50, 436)	259.50
% Referred to Project Chance	37
% Received SSI	25
% Received social security	4
% Received Medicaid	68
% Received food stamps	75
% Received unemployment	9
% Received WIC	39
% Had medical insurance for self (including Medicaid)	53
% Had medical insurance for children (including Medicaid)	72
% Applied for subsidized child care	14

% Received subsidized child care	5
% Applied for public housing	42
% Got public housing right away	5
Average months on waiting list for public housing (Range= 1, 120)	19
% Still wait listed for public housing	21
% Supposed to receive spouse support	5
% Actually received spouse support	2
% Requested help getting spouse support	0
% Supposed to receive child support	41
% actually received child support	5
Average amount of child support (\$) (Range= 50, 800)	302
% Received gifts of money from family/friends	37
% Had others who regularly contribute to living expenses	20
% Had mother on welfare	40

Most of the women received welfare at some point during their lives and over 2/3 were currently receiving welfare benefits. The average amount of welfare received was only \$260 a month. Furthermore, the majority of women were receiving both Medicaid and food stamps. Virtually none of the women were receiving any spouse or child support and few had relatives who contributed to their living expenses regularly. Many women appeared to cycle on and off welfare. The average women received benefits for a total of 7 years or over her adult lifetime. Open ended questions will be analyzed in the future to help determine the influences that led women to go on and off welfare. Only 1/3 of the women grew up in homes where their mother had received welfare.

Relationship with the Abuser

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Variable	Entire Sample
% Married to abuser	26
% Lived with abuser	77
% Ended relationship	77
Average years of relationship (Range= .08, 20.26)	6.06
% Expected to see abuser in future	43
% Believed abuser is likely to threaten her in the future	61
% Abusers arrested for violent crime	28
% Abusers employed	58
Abusers' average monthly earnings (\$) (Range= 4.69, 900)	342.48
% Abusers who regularly gave her money	58
% Regularly gave money to her abuser	51
% Abusers who ever had an alcohol problem	65
% Abusers who ever had a drug problem	61
% Abusers who were drunk/high when abusive	45

Most of the women had relatively long-term relationships with their abusers. The majority of the women lived with the abuser before coming to the shelter, although only 1/4 were married to him. Nearly 2/3 of the women expected the abuser to threaten her in the future and 1/4 of the abusers had an arrest record for a violent crime other than domestic violence. The majority of abusers had either a drug or alcohol problem at some point in their lives and just under half of them were usually drunk or high when they abused her.

Abuser's Interference with Work and School

Variable	Entire Sample
% Abusers who forbid her from getting a job	46
% Abusers who forbid her from going to school	25
	Sample that worked or went to school (<u>n</u> = 35)
% Missed work because of abuse	85
% Were fired/had to quit because of abuse	52
% Missed school because of abuse	56
% Dropped out/were kicked of school because of abuse	38
% Abusers who came to work/school to harass her	40
% Abusers who sent something to work/school	6
% Abusers who left things at work/school	11
% Abusers who bothered coworkers/school friends	20
% Abusers who lied to coworkers/school friends about her	37
% Abusers who threatened coworkers/school friends	9
% Abusers who sabotaged the car	29

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% Abusers who did not show up for child care	41
% Abusers who lied about children's health/safety	41
% Abusers who stole car keys or money	46
% Abusers who refused to give a ride to work/school	51
% Abusers who threatened her to prevent her from going to work/school	46
% Abusers who physically restrained her from going to work/school	37
% Abusers who threatened her to make her leave work/school	34
% Abusers who physically forced her to leave work/school	26

Just under half of the women were forbidden by the abuser to get a job. Of those who worked, half of the women were fired or forced to quit their jobs as a result of the abuse. Additionally, most women who had been employed had missed work at some point because of the abuse. Furthermore, $\frac{1}{4}$ of the women were forbidden to go to school by the abuser. Of those who attended school during the relationship, about $\frac{1}{3}$ were kicked out or forced to drop out of school and over half had missed school at some point because of the abuse. Common tactics frequently employed by nearly half of the abusers to harass women at their place of work or school included refusing to give her a ride, stealing her car keys or money, threatening her to prevent her from leaving, harassing her in person at work or school, not showing up for child care, lying about the childrens' health or safety, lying to coworkers about her, and physically restraining her from going to work or school.

Psychological Abuse

Scale indicating the frequency of abuse:

1= Never 2= Once a month 3= 2-3 times 4= 1-2 times 5= 3-4 times 6= More than 4

or less a month a week a week times a week

Variable	Entire Sample
Frequency that abuser refused to talk to her	2.82
Frequency that abuser accused her of cheating on him	4.07
Frequency that abuser threatened to cheat on her	2.68
Frequency that abuser controlled her money	3.59
Frequency that abuser controlled her activities	4.95
Frequency that abuser lied to her	4.67
Frequency that abuser called her names	4.68
Frequency that abuser humiliated her	4.49
Frequency that abuser ignored her feelings	4.25
Frequency that abuser ridiculed/criticized her in public	3.16
Frequency that abuser criticized her friends/family	4.16
Frequency that abuser harassed her friends/family	2.23
Frequency that abuser discouraged her contact with friends/family	3.63
Frequency that abuser threatened friends/family	2.32
Frequency that abuser broke something important to her	3.43
Frequency that abuser abused pets to hurt her	1.30

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Frequency that abuser punished children to hurt her	2.27
Frequency that abuser threatened to take children	2.45
Frequency that abuser left her somewhere	1.73
Frequency that abuser threatened to end the relationship	3.02
Frequency that abuser forced her to leave home	2.46
Frequency that abuser threatened suicide	1.46

The typical respondent experienced many forms of psychological abuse several times a week. The typical abuser controlled her activities, lied to her, and called her names 3-4 times a week. The abuser also accused her of cheating on him, humiliated her, ignored her feelings, criticized her friends/family and discouraged her contact with her friends/family an average of 1-2 times a week. Other forms of emotional abuse were less frequent, although most had been used by the abuser at least once.

Physical Abuse: Conflict Tactics Scale

Scale indicating the frequency of abuse:

1= Never or less 2= Once a month 3= 2-3 times a month 4= 1-2 times a week 5= 3-4 times a week 6= More than 4 times a week

Variable	Entire Sample
Frequency that abuser broke glasses/tore clothing	2.51
Frequency that abuser pushed her	4.25
Frequency that abuser grabbed her	4.32
Frequency that abuser slapped her with an open hand	3.74
Frequency that abuser hit her with a fist	3.30

Frequency that abuser kicked her	2.35
Frequency that abuser threw something at her	2.89
Frequency that abuser hit her with an object	2.05
Frequency that abuser tried to hit her with an object	2.40
Frequency that abuser drove recklessly	2.33
Frequency that abuser choked her	2.70
Frequency that abuser burned her	1.18
Frequency that abuser tied her up or physically restrained her	1.79
Frequency that abuser beat her up	3.42
Frequency that abuser threatened with a gun/knife	1.72
Frequency that abuser used a gun/knife	1.32

The typical respondent experienced several forms of physical abuse on a regular basis. Women reported being pushed and grabbed an average of 1-2 times a week. They also reported being slapped with an open hand, hit with a fist, having something thrown at her, choked, beat up, and forced to have sex an average of 2-3 times a month. Other forms of abuse were less frequent, although most had been used by the abuser at least once.

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Additional Violence Measures

Scale indicating the frequency of abuse:

1= Never or less 2= Once a month 3= 2-3 times a week 4= 1-2 times a week 5= 3-4 times a week 6= More than 4 times a week

Variable	Entire Sample
Frequency that abuser verbally abused her in front of family/friends	3.39
Frequency that abuser physically abused her in front of family/friends	2.65
Frequency that abuser threatened children	1.67
Frequency that abuser hurt the children	1.33
Frequency that abuser threatened to have DCFS take the children	2.51
Frequency that abuser actually had DCFS take the children	1.16
% Sustained injuries as a result of the abuse	51

Additional measures that were not included in the previous scales measuring physical and psychological abuse indicated that the typical respondent experienced verbal and physical abuse in front of her friends or family and that abusers threatened to have DCFS take her children away an average of 2-3 times a month. Furthermore, over half of the women reported sustaining long-term physical injuries as a result of the abuse.

Depression

Scale indicating the frequency that symptoms are experienced:

1= Most of the time 2= Occasionally 3= Little of the time 4= Only rarely

Variable	Entire Sample
Entire Depression Scale	2.36

The typical respondent indicated that she was at least mildly depressed with an average score indicating that she occasionally experienced symptoms typically related to depression.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Scale indicating the frequency of symptoms:

0= Not at all 1= A little bit 2= Moderately 3= Quite a bit 4= Extremely

Variable	Entire Sample
Entire PTSD Scale	1.13

The typical respondent did not report high levels of symptoms related to PTSD. The overall average score indicates that respondents only experienced these symptoms a little bit.

Summary of the Findings

The 57 women who we interviewed, all residents of Chicago domestic violence shelters, have few job skills and even fewer resources likely to help them obtain jobs. Moreover, their life circumstances provide many obstacles to employment. Most had young children at home whom they tended, and only about half thought it would be easy to get child care if they were employed. Almost a third reported that their children had problems that would make it difficult for the mothers to work. Over a third of the women did not have a working telephone at home, and the majority of the women reported long-term physical or mental health problems.

Most of the women were unemployed, and had been so for almost two years. Few had received any type of job training and close to half had never held the type of job that they were currently seeking. Their job histories consisted of intermittent work for low pay in unskilled positions.

The majority of the women we interviewed experienced considerable abuse, both physical and psychological. Many abusers forbade the women from working (40%) and going to school (25%). Abusers employed a variety of harassment tactics to interfere with women’s work and schooling, resulting in the finding that most women who were employed had missed work at some point and over half were fired or forced to quit because of the abuse. Furthermore, of those who attended to school, over half had missed school and 1/3 were kicked out or dropped out because of his abuse. Thus, the abuse incurred severely disrupted women’s abilities to work and go to school.

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