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ADDRESSING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AS A BARRIER TO SELF-SUFFICIENCY: THE RELATIONSHIP OF WELFARE RECIPT AND SPOUSAL ABUSE

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This paper describes the connection between domestic violence and welfare receipt with a focus on the potential impacts of the new welfare program, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), and one of its amendments, the Family Violence Option (FVO), on domestic violence victims. For women experiencing both poverty and violence, welfare is often the common means of escape and the common path to self-sufficiency. This paper first looks into current research documenting and explaining the overlap between the populations of domestic violence victims and welfare recipients. Secondly, it examines the potential ability of welfare programs to meet the special needs of domestic violence victims, thus having a great impact on the ability of women to escape violent relationships and to become financially self-sufficient. The author contends that ignoring this connection between domestic violence and poverty would not only endanger women and children, but also guarantee the failure of welfare-to-work programs for a significant portion of recipients.

INTRODUCTION

Women whose lives are characterized by either domestic violence or poverty face very difficult obstacles to achieving self-sufficiency and

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independence. The combination of violence and poverty in the lives of many women in the United States often creates a situation where achieving a new life is impossible without outside intervention. For these women, welfare is often the means of escaping both poverty and violence and is the common path to self-sufficiency.

Domestic violence plagues approximately four million women per year in the United States (Straus 1978, U.S. GAO 1998). While estimates differ between self-reports and administrative data, it is conservatively estimated that one in five women will experience abuse at some point in her lifetime. However, only six percent of women experience severe or prolonged abuse (Straus 1978). According to national statistics from the U.S. Department of Justice, in murder cases where the assailant was identified, close to half of all women murdered were killed by an intimate (U.S. Department of Justice 1991). Although new research points to the possibility that domestic violence may be mutual or even occur in situations where the man is the victim and the woman is the perpetrator, these results are preliminary and do not hold in an examination of established research and theoretical frameworks. Thus, this paper will focus solely on women as victims.¹

Poverty similarly plagues a shockingly large number of people, especially considering that the United States is among the wealthiest nations in the world. Using the standard federal poverty line, the 1998 Green Book reports that 13.7 percent of the population (or 36.4 million individuals) live below the poverty line (Committee on Ways and Means 1998). And, as in the case of domestic violence, women experience poverty at a disproportionate rate. Over 42 percent of single mother families are poor as opposed to only 8.5 percent of families where a male was present. Additionally, recipients of means-tested welfare programs are almost exclusively women and their children. This segment of the population has been stereotyped as young, usually teen-aged, minority women with many children. In fact, until recently the typical recipient was a white woman in her mid-thirties with one and a half children.²

If it is the case that the population of domestic violence victims and welfare recipients significantly overlap, then in order for welfare to “work,” these programs should be designed to meet the unique needs of this group of women. It also follows then that the ability of welfare programs to meet the special needs of domestic violence victims through education, work experience, counseling, and case management would have a great impact on the ability of women to escape violent relationships and become financially self-sufficient. Ignoring this connection between

domestic violence and poverty would not only endanger women and children, but also guarantee the failure of welfare-to-work programs for a significant portion of recipients.

Original versions of the 1996 welfare reform law did not take into account the barrier of domestic violence (Lennert 1997). In fact, the changes proposed by the law, including the implementation of time limits and work requirements, potentially endangered many victims. Although these changes remained in the final version of the legislation, the law also included the Family Violence Option (PL 104-193). However, the option is not mandatory and adequate services are often not available.

This paper first examines how domestic violence impacts a victim's ability to be self-sufficient and the likelihood of entering and remaining in poverty. The paper then focuses on the potential impact of the new welfare program, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), on victims of domestic violence. The paper is divided into four main sections: explaining the correlation between welfare and domestic violence, documenting this correlation, examining welfare and the Family Violence Option, and finally my recommendations.

EXPLAINING THE CORRELATION

Battered women face innumerable barriers in escaping the violence in their lives and gaining independence. Some stay because of cultural and religious values, or because of pressure from their families. Most women worry about the well-being of their children. Still others have no where to turn. Most importantly, victims often realistically fear for their lives and the lives of their children, as abuse often escalates when women end the relationships. The U.S. Department of Justice reports that divorced and separated women are the victims in 75 percent of all domestic-related attacks (U.S. Department of Justice 1991).

It is commonly accepted that escaping domestic violence often forces women into poverty. Lacking financial resources or the control of those resources, battered women are often faced with the dilemma of choosing violence or poverty (Davis 1999, Raphael 1996). Why, though, does domestic violence perpetuate poverty, or prevent women from leaving welfare and entering work? The direct and indirect consequences of spousal abuse create a complicated situation where finding safety is only the first step in achieving full independence. The barriers created by domestic violence which impact a woman's ability to become self-sufficient include lack of access to financial resources, physical and mental health difficulties, work and educational issues, and the effects of violence on her children.

Lack of Financial Resources

High on the list of obstacles for women escaping abuse is the lack of the financial resources to move and support themselves and their children. As mentioned above, the lack of money, credit, or belongings is the most commonly recognized barrier. Physical domestic violence is most often accompanied by the abuser's excessive control of resources. He usually tries to limit his victim's independence, links to family and friends, and participation in activities outside the family. This dearth of financial and social resources hinders many women's ability to leave abusive situations (Davis 1999, Pagelow 1981). Even when the fear of poverty and homelessness is overcome, battered women often face difficulties in finding shelter space and other assistance.

Improvements in policies and laws and an increase in awareness of domestic violence have encouraged more and more women to break their silence and seek help. Unfortunately, a gap exists between the needs of domestic violence victims and the system intended to meet them. In fiscal year 1996, the New York City domestic hotline received an average of 68 shelter requests each day (representing over 200 individuals) for an average of 5 available beds (New York City Victim Services Agency, 1997). In addition to shelter, battered women often need additional means of financial support. For many battered women, welfare is the only alternate source of income and the only immediate way to free themselves from the abuse.

Physical and Mental Health

In addition to financial obstacles, many battered women have experienced such severe abuse that their physical and/or mental health has been harmed. Severe beatings may cause immediate injuries and lead women to seek medical help in hospital emergency rooms (Straus 1986). While many of these injuries heal, battered and formerly battered women often experience beatings which lead to permanent injuries or chronic physical health problems. Battered women frequently report experiences of recurring severe headaches, ulcers, and back pain.

Additionally, mental health problems including depression, anxiety, substance abuse, suicide attempts, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are very common. The most extreme and most damaging among these problems is PTSD, which has been documented so extensively that there is now a recognized psychological term for this type of mental trauma suffered by domestic violence victims—battered women's syndrome (BWS) (Walker 1993). Some women suffering from PTSD or BWS will be unable to successfully participate in training or work activities (Murphy

1997). Murphy (1997) cites a host of ways psychological trauma interferes with a woman's effort to work and become self-sufficient. These factors include an inability to leave the house, to consider the future, to concentrate or learn new tasks, and to have social interactions. Additionally, women may experience flashbacks, irritability, depression, or numbing.

Ability to Participate in Training and Work

Even when women are physically and mentally able to participate in either training or work, many abusers are threatened by these actions, and they attempt, often successfully, to sabotage these efforts. Domestic violence is rarely characterized by physical abuse alone. The abuser's desire and efforts to exercise total power and control in the relationship complicate the dynamics of an abusive relationship (Walker 1979). A woman's attempt to educate herself or acquire employment is usually viewed (and accurately so) as a means to gain financial independence and to possibly escape the abusive relationship.

Women who are concurrently experiencing abuse and receiving welfare are put in a dangerous situation when required to attend welfare-to-work activities. Their participation in employment and training activities may escalate violence and abuse at home, yet not participating can keep them in a cycle of poverty and abuse. A failure to complete or succeed at these assignments may be a result of a batterer's behavior and not a lack of desire or effort on the part of the women (Curcio 1997).

Lack of Work Experience

As a result of the impact of abuse on both health and work, many formerly battered women lack the necessary education or work experience to find decent employment. Women who have recovered from injuries as well as completely broken free from their abusers and are safe from further violence may continue to have a difficult time achieving self-sufficiency (Shepard and Pence 1988, Raphael and Tolman 1997). Their paltry work histories and lack of education and training needed for the workforce make them unappealing applicants for many jobs.

Impact on Children

Finally, domestic violence has a strong and often long-lasting effect on the children of battered women. Men who abuse their wives are also more likely to abuse their children (Stark and Flitcraft 1988). Moreover, even if they are not victims of physical abuse, most experts recognize that witnessing domestic violence has negative impacts on the developmental

well-being of children. Children living in households with domestic violence are often fearful for their safety and the safety of their mothers, and experience feelings of helplessness, neglect, and self-blame (Jaffe et al. 1990). In the long-term, these children are likely to suffer adjustment problems including depression and anxiety, academic delays, and behavioral problems such as drug use and truancy (Layzer et al. 1986).

Unfortunately, the link between domestic violence and child abuse and neglect serves as a disincentive for many women in reporting their experience with violence. In many states, a woman experiencing domestic violence can be charged with "failure to protect" for failing to shield her child from abuse or neglect at the hands of her abusive partner (Lennett 1997, 189). While she may not be directly at fault, the charge implies that she is also to blame for the situation. Often this inaction on the part of battered women results in foster placement of the children.

To complicate matters, children can be used as pawns by former abusers to continue interaction with their victims or to further harass them. A stipulation for welfare receipt is establishing paternity for children in order to facilitate child support orders. In some cases, this requirement may endanger the well-being of the women and the children the law is intended to help. While the increase in financial support would help the family, revealing their location to a former abuser may lead to stalking or future abuse.

In addition to safety concerns with paternity and work requirements for welfare, formerly battered women often express the need to spend extra time with their children to assist them in recovering from the effects of witnessing violence. Many women feel that helping their children is a more immediate necessity than participating in training or work programs (Raphael and Tolman 1997).

DOCUMENTING THE CORRELATION

Before examining the policy options available to help women trapped in this situation, empirical research must demonstrate that the relationship between domestic violence and welfare receipt exists outside of a theoretical framework. Research must indicate that there is indeed a relationship between violence and poverty and the nature of this relationship. While the field of domestic violence research has grown immensely in the last thirty years, relatively few studies have looked at the link between poverty, welfare, and/or employment and domestic violence. Establishing the nature and widespread presence of domestic violence was often a large task in and of itself; thus research on the subject has focused on the psychologi-

cal and sociological aspects of the problem. More recently, however, researchers have branched out and are looking at implications for social policy.

Preliminary studies have reported a high correlation between the incidence of domestic violence and poverty in the lives of women. Studies indicate that anywhere between 20 percent and 70 percent of women on welfare are current or past victims of domestic violence (Browne and Bassuk 1997, Curcio 1997, Raphael 1996). In Washington State, 60 percent of female AFDC recipients report both physical and sexual abuse by their partners (Washington State Institute for Public Policy 1993). A recent local study in New York City indicates that 63 percent of homeless women were victims of domestic abuse (Homes for the Homeless 1998).

Correlation Studies

To date, there have been a handful of studies based on representative survey samples in different locales. The following four studies are the most well recognized as sound research in this rapidly growing field.

The Passaic County Study of AFDC Recipients in a Welfare-to-Work Program.

Conducted by William Curcio (Curcio 1997)

This study analyzed a sample of 846 female welfare recipients participating in a mandatory welfare-to-work program in Passaic County, New Jersey between December 1995 and January 1997.

- 19.7 percent of the sample reported current physical abuse, and
- 57.3 percent said they had experienced abuse as an adult in the past.

In Harm's Way? Domestic Violence, AFDC Receipt, and Welfare Reform in Massachusetts.

Conducted by Mary Ann Allard, Randy Albelda, Mary Ellen Colten, and Carol Cosenza. (Allard et al. 1997)

This study utilized a random sample of 734 women receiving AFDC in 40 of the 42 welfare offices in Massachusetts between January and June 1996.

- 19.5 percent reported abuse within the past 12 months, and
- 64.9 percent reported experiencing abuse at some point in their adult lives.

The Worcester Family Research Project

Conducted by the Better Homes Fund (Browne and Bassuk 1997)

This study surveyed 436 housed and homeless women, of whom 409 were AFDC recipients, from Worcester, Massachusetts between August 1992 and July 1995.

- 32 percent had experienced abuse by their current or most recent partner, and
- 61 percent of the sample were victims of severe domestic abuse as adults.

The Effects of Violence on Women's Employment

Conducted by the Joint Center for Poverty Research at Northwestern University (Lloyd 1997)

This study, which took place from September 1994 to May 1995, used a random survey of 824 low-income women (one third of whom were AFDC recipients) from the West Humboldt Park neighborhood of Chicago.

- AFDC recipients experienced three times more domestic violence than non-recipients (31.3 percent versus 11.8 percent).

While these studies are not exhaustive, they do consistently indicate a high prevalence of past and present domestic violence among female welfare recipients. The correlation is especially stark in comparison with the general population whose prevalence rates (discussed earlier) hover around 6 percent for severe abuse and 16 percent for mild abuse (Straus 1978, U.S. GAO 1998). Based on these data and on practitioner experience, research topics have evolved to include both the causative link between domestic violence and welfare, and the evaluation of best practices in service delivery.

Causation Studies

Many researchers have begun to examine the interaction between a batterer's control of a relationship and a victim's inability to work. Rapheal (1995) reported that abusers often purposely hinder their wives' or girlfriends' attempts to participate in literacy and job training programs. Other studies have indicated that abusers purposely hinder labor force participation resulting in missed workdays (Lloyd 1997, Curcio 1997 and sometimes loss of employment (Shepard and Pence 1988, Ruckelshaus 1996). An empirical study by Kalmuss and Straus (1982) using the National Family Violence survey found that domestic violence affected both perceived and actual (financial and social) marital dependency.

While these empirical studies are few, and especially lacking on a national level, anecdotal evidence supports the findings. One woman reports that her husband would turn off her alarm so she would miss job interviews. Another told her counselor that her abuser would purposely inflict visible bruises so she would be too embarrassed to go to work. Even

victims who had already ended the relationship found that workplaces were a convenient location for harassment and stalking.³

Programmatic Evaluation Studies

If the research points, as it seems to do, to establishing that domestic violence directly and indirectly causes poverty and prolonged welfare receipt, the next question on the agenda would be how to best serve these women in protecting their safety and aiding their transition to work.

It has been shown that, in a majority of cases, former victims of domestic violence who make a successful transition into the work force tend to be able to stay away from their abusers (Raphael 1999, Murphy 1997). Thus, the ability of welfare programs to develop the skills and employability of battered women is crucial for their long-term health and self-sufficiency. Preliminary research (Raphael 1995, 1996) is now being done on the impact of workfare and job training on the self-sufficiency of welfare recipients—current victims of domestic violence, former victims, and women who have not experienced abuse. Other research (Ruckelshaus 1996) is focusing on the use of unemployment compensation for those with previous work histories.

However, due to the recency of the changes in welfare policy there have not been any studies fully evaluating policies relating to work requirements, time limits, or child support enforcement. A myriad of questions hovers around the ability of welfare programs to serve domestic violence victims. Do programs benefit both current victims and former victims? Are they able to balance concerns of safety with efforts to facilitate work and self-sufficiency? Are state-level policies successfully being implemented at the local level? What types of innovations have been tried?

EXAMINING WELFARE: THE FAMILY VIOLENCE OPTION (FVO)

Before discussing the possibility of such evaluations, one must understand the evolution of welfare policy and in particular the Family Violence Option (FVO). The recent developments in the welfare program in the United States have drastically altered the traditional means used to support poor women and their children. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) passed by Congress in 1996 brought sweeping changes to the structure of welfare (PL 104-193). Most notably, PRWORA ended the national entitlement program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and replaced it with a system of block grants to the states. Since the implementation of this new

program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and its adoption by individual states, the number of families receiving welfare has dropped dramatically. According to the Administration of Children and Family Services of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1998), from August 1996 to June 1998, the nation experienced a 32 percent decrease in the number of individuals receiving welfare. By any standards, these changes are huge and merit further attention.

The main focus of historical and recent reforms of the welfare program in the United States, including the efforts to reform the previous Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), was to offer temporary assistance to families and eventually move them off the welfare rolls. Current changes in welfare law build upon this premise by ending the entitlement status of welfare and imposing time limits and work requirements. The legislation of TANF states that the second purpose of the new program is to “end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage (PL 104-193).”

Although the reduction statistics are good indicators of large decreases in welfare receipt and the achievement of this particular reform goal, these numbers do not demonstrate anything about family self-sufficiency or family well-being, nor is there a guarantee of the continuation of such rapid decreases. Many people would agree that these huge reductions, while accomplishments in and of themselves, do not tell the whole story. In particular, for many of the battered women on welfare, barely a partial story is told.

Both preliminary studies and anecdotal evidence suggest that many families that leave the rolls are not totally self-sufficient either through employment or marriage. Moreover, many service providers and advocates believe that those remaining on the lists are the “hard-to-serve” populations including those with substance abuse problems, mental health issues, and histories of domestic violence. These groups may not be helped with the current focus on work first programs, and may respond better to training or counseling. In fact, as discussed earlier, victims of domestic violence are often hurt by mandatory work programs, time limits, and paternity reporting.

Recognizing that many of the changes in the welfare program, most notably time limits and work requirements, place battered women in danger of either being found by their former abusers or being forced to return to them for financial support, many states have since adopted the Family Violence Option to better meet the needs of former victims. The

Family Violence Option was first presented by Senator Paul Wellstone of Minnesota and Senator Patti Murray of Washington in 1996. The legislation is an amendment included in the federal welfare reform legislation, PRWORA, of 1996 (PL 104-193).

The Family Violence Option obligates states to screen for domestic violence victims, requires them to offer services and referrals to local battered women's organizations, and permits states to exempt battered women from program requirements. Exemptions include good cause waivers from the 5 year life time limit, the 2 year receipt limit, work participation requirements, and paternity related child support requirements. These exemptions are given for requirements that would make leaving an abusive situation difficult, would unfairly penalize formerly abused women, or would put women at risk of abuse by an estranged partner. The amendment does not limit states in the ways to implement any of its components.

As of September 1999, 36 states have formally adopted the FVO, of which 32 have final policies and procedures in place. Two of the 36 adopting states have left the option of implementing the FVO or not to counties. Of the remaining 14 states that have not adopted the amendment: 5 report that they are in the process of adopting the amendment, 6 have other domestic violence policies in place, 1 is developing other policies, and only 2 have no policies specifically related to domestic violence victims, namely Illinois and Wisconsin (Raphael and Haennicke 1999).

Clearly, the domestic violence barrier has important implications for welfare reform. The Family Violence Option is an important step in recognizing the importance of protecting the safety of battered women. However, its emphasis on exemptions as opposed to innovative programming may sacrifice self-sufficiency to safety. Additionally, because the FVO does not provide strict programmatic guidelines or specific suggestions, states are faced with many options and are not clear as to how to implement changes or even which changes to consider.

To date, we do not know how effective either the FVO or local programs have been in meeting the needs of currently and formerly battered women receiving welfare. Preliminary studies of administrative data show that very few women self-identify as domestic violence victims and opt for waivers. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, less than 1 percent of welfare recipients opt for the waiver (Lennett 1997). I have been unable to find any studies that examine how well the FVO has been implemented in different states and the impact of its programs on recipients.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As with many issues within social policy, there is no easy answer in addressing the question of how welfare programs can best serve victims of domestic violence in facilitating their journeys to self-sufficiency. It is a complex picture—one that necessitates individual solutions for the variety of ways that violence and poverty hinder women's ability to achieve self-sufficiency. My recommendations, at this point, fall into two categories—programmatic and research.

First, I would emphasize the importance of both the flexibility and the continuity of services. As discussed, domestic violence has different types and degrees of impact on women and their children, from safety and sabotage issues to mental health problems. The Family Violence Option is an excellent start in addressing these various needs of battered women by recognizing the difficulties battered women face and exempting them from specific TANF provisions. Important as well, the FVO allows and encourages states to exercise flexibility in designing programs. States need first to adopt the amendment, and second, to implement the FVO well. With the opportunity to design programs well suited to both local communities and individual recipients, states can offer individualized services that are tailored to unique situations. This chance at flexible programming is of the utmost importance in dealing with a population with such diverse needs.

Likewise, states need to offer a continuation of services from screening for domestic violence to housing assistance to job placement to mental health services. Financial assistance alone will not be sufficient for many victims who suffer from monetary and work difficulties, physical and mental health problems, and are coping with their children's problems as well. This type of service provision will allow both a wide variety of services as well as additional flexibility in serving individual needs. In assisting domestic violence victims, it is important to have flexibility in deciding which goals should be undertaken first. While safety is always the first concern, full self-sufficiency may be achieved in different ways depending on the specific situation. For example, counseling may be the first service offered in one case, in another medical assistance, and in another, perhaps job training. In short, order and coordination of service delivery are important aspects of the flexibility and continuation of services.

In order to provide this type of service delivery, local welfare agencies will need to form links with local domestic violence organizations for information and referrals and to tap into their expertise in dealing with this population. As welfare caseworkers make the switch from dealing with

pure cash assistance to comprehensive service delivery, linkages with experts in the field will be crucial.

Second, while more studies that examine the link between domestic violence and welfare receipt are needed, simultaneous research should be conducted on the Family Violence Option. Research must now begin to evaluate the effectiveness of the FVO in helping victims of domestic violence obtain self-sufficiency. To date, there is very little research on the programmatic effects of welfare programs on this segment of the recipient population.

In brief, the leeway given to states with the opportunity to adopt and implement the Family Violence Option necessitates a willingness to experiment with innovative solutions and strictly evaluate the outcomes. When states and researchers realize this importance on a wider scale, they will be on their way to achieving both, and thus be in a position to assist victims of domestic violence appropriately and effectively.

Notes

- 1 For a further discussion of the issue of gender in domestic violence research, please see the work of Kurz 1993, Pleck 1978, Browne 1990, and a number of other academic and feminist researchers.
- 2 Recent changes in the welfare program have changed this profile slightly due to the impact of the program on rural and suburban recipients versus those in the inner city.
- 3 These anecdotes come from conversations with counselors and customers at Sanctuary for Families, a nonprofit organization in New York City serving battered women and their children. The author collected these accounts in 1997 while she was working in the development office.

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