Poverty And Trauma

Poverty can present a formidable barrier to people trying to escape violence. This is particularly true for women and people of color.

Women in the United States are more likely to be poor than men. In 2007, 13.8 percent of women lived in poverty compared to 11.1 percent of men (Cawthorne, 2008). People of color face particularly high rates of poverty. African-American, Latino, Alaska Native and American Indian people all are about three times more likely than Caucasians to live in poverty (Davies, n.d.; Almanac of Policy Issues, 2001).

Many factors contribute to the high rate of poverty, including unequal opportunities in education and employment, the high number of jobs that do not provide adequate wages and benefits, the time many women devote to unpaid family care-giving, lack of access to affordable child care, insufficient child support and an inadequate network of public benefits (Montgomery County Commission for Women, 2009).

And employment does not always provide an escape from poverty. Employment statistics show that in 2002, women held 79.8% of lower wage jobs while men held 65.3% of managerial positions (US EEOC, 2002a). It is possible to work full-time at minimum wage and still have an annual income that falls below the poverty level if one has dependents.

The role of trauma in poverty

Violence and poverty are interwoven. Significant numbers of low-income people face interpersonal violence, and the violence they experience can make the climb out of poverty nearly impossible. Poverty, in turn, makes it more difficult to end violence and abuse, and to heal from their effects (Davies, n.d.).

Here are some of the ways trauma and poverty are interwoven:

• Studies show that over 50 percent of women receiving public assistance report having experienced physical abuse at some point in their adult lives, and most of these women also report a history of physical and/or sexual abuse in childhood (Lyons, 2000).

• Mental and physical health problems caused by violence or abuse, whether temporary or more long-term, can diminish some people’s ability to work, participate in job training or education programs, or comply with government benefit requirements (Davies, n.d.).

• Efforts to escape violence can have a devastating economic impact, says Jill Davies in a policy and practice paper “Policy Blueprint on Domestic Violence and Poverty”:

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From Real Tools: Responding to Multi-Abuse Trauma
Alaska Network on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault
“Leaving a relationship might mean a woman will lose her job, housing, health care, child care, or access to the partner’s income. Often, criminal and civil legal remedies are necessary to safely leave a relationship. Criminal remedies typically have no monetary cost to the victim, but may take time away from work or job training, sometimes resulting in lost wages or loss of employment. The pursuit of civil legal strategies, such as divorce or custody actions, often drains family financial resources. Unable to afford litigation, some battered women concede financial and property demands in order to settle the case, further undermining their families’ security” (Davies, n.d.).

- Violence and abuse can push people into a cycle of poverty. Experiencing domestic or sexual violence can lead to job loss, poor health, and homelessness. It is estimated that victims of intimate partner violence collectively lose almost 8 million days of paid work each year because of the violence perpetrated against them by current or former partners (Cawthorne, 2008).

- Keep in mind that even in families that are not technically considered low-income, the victim of domestic violence may not have equal access to the family funds (Foley, 2010).

### Barriers to service

People experiencing poverty may face a number of barriers when seeking help, either in the form of public assistance or safety from violence:

- **Fear of being judged.** Some people are reluctant to seek public assistance or disclose that they receive it because of repeated suggestions that they are lazy and simply need to pull themselves up by the bootstraps, or that their poverty is caused by poor spending decisions, bad behavior or lack of moral character. People living in poverty often have encountered service providers or other people who minimize the degree of hardship that they experience on a limited income.

- **Fear of being denied services.** People who receive TANF or other public assistance may be reluctant to disclose domestic violence to these providers because they fear losing benefits if it is discovered they are living with a partner. A recent study found that approximately 70% of domestic violence victims did not disclose the abuse to their TANF caseworkers (Satyanathan & Pollack, n.d.). The same study found that 75% of those that did reveal information about the violence did not receive the appropriate support or services.

- **Barriers to employment.** Some social service programs require that an individual be seeking employment or participate in “work readiness” activities as a condition for receiving services. Victims of domestic violence who receive public assistance may not be able to leave welfare for work within the time constraints imposed by welfare reform for a variety of reasons. These include the psychological effects of domestic violence (such as depression or anxiety), and sabotage and manipulation by the abuser.
SAFETY ISSUES: POVERTY

A person experiencing poverty may find it much more difficult to implement a safety plan. Jill Davies says:

“A woman must be able to financially support herself and her children after leaving an abusive partner. In many locations there are programs that provide housing, temporary cash assistance, child care, and free legal representation. However, most of these programs have limited funding, offer short-term resources, and regularly turn away applicants. As a result, some low-income battered women simply are without the income, government support, or access to services necessary to fully implement a safety plan” (Davies, n.d.).

To promote safety, be aware of the unintended consequences of standard interventions, Davies says. Each person experiencing domestic violence has a unique set of circumstances. Some face life-threatening violence and others much less severe forms of abuse and control. For some victims, prosecuting an abuser brings increased protection, but for victims who face poverty, prosecution may bring more hardship than help, particularly if loss of the abuser’s job would mean a loss of financial support.

(interference with child care, harassment at work, or leaving marks or bruises that prevent the victim from going to work). These issues can lead to tardiness, absenteeism and lack of productivity – and ultimately to loss of a job (Satyanathan & Pollack, n.d.).

- **Inability to afford services.** Even if services such as domestic violence advocacy, sexual assault counseling or mental health services are offered free of charge by advocates or other professionals, some people may not be able to afford babysitting costs or transportation to get to appointments. A fragmented system makes services harder to access, particularly for people who must use public transportation or lack transportation altogether.

Empowering people who are experiencing poverty

Here are some ways to empower people who are experiencing poverty:

- **Tailor plans to an individual’s needs.** For some low-income people, obtaining housing is the largest challenge, and for others it may be finding employment or health care. Some have strong support networks while others have little support. Systems tend to respond to people facing interpersonal violence as if they share common experiences, languages, abilities, and cultures. This is not the case. Some survivors will access and use
systems differently, and some may wish to avoid a particular system altogether (Davies, n.d.). Shirley Moses, Shelter Manager at the Alaska Native Women’s Coalition in Fairbanks, AK, says:

“The women that we see are very fiercely independent for the most part. They can’t get unemployment a lot of times, or they can’t even get housing or Medicaid or anything, unless they have an address to go to. Sometimes we will take them just long enough for them to apply for all those things, and then they transition to family. Once they have a mailing address or someplace stable, they can apply for that and then get it. Most of them will then transition to a place that is not identified as a place where they are getting welfare. They want to be on their own. They want to take care of themselves” (Moses, 2010).

• Respect autonomy. Assist people in defining their own needs, so they can make informed decisions and choices and actively participate in strategies to enhance their financial security and safety. Many systems look for opportunities to provide uniform or even automated services. In this context, providing several generalized categories of responses with an opportunity to choose among them or opt out of them altogether offers a step toward more effective interventions. Paperwork and automated services can also create a barrier for survivors experiencing literacy, language or technology challenges.

Working with other providers

When working with other providers:

• Include financial advocacy as part of services. Ensure that advocates have the tools, training, resources and supervision necessary to provide financial advocacy (Davies, n.d.). Advocates and other providers should know how to explain resources such as TANF, WIC, subsidized housing and other options available for low-income people. They should help victims of violence access these resources, and be able to provide meaningful referrals to other sources of information and assistance. If necessary, invite these other resource providers to conduct in-house training for staff.

• Refer to appropriate legal assistance that can advise on options. The federal government has responded to the problem of domestic violence and poverty by allowing states to adopt the Family Violence Option (FVO). Under the FVO, victims of domestic violence would be allowed an extended time-period to obtain employment. States that have chosen not to adopt the FVO may have other provisions for domestic violence in their welfare legislation such as allowing agencies to provide a renewable work exemption waiver for victims of domestic violence (Satyanathan & Pollack, n.d.).

• Assess for untreated medical conditions and make appropriate referrals. People living in poverty often present with untreated medical problems, and may have trouble accessing the medical system because they don’t have insurance, many doctors don’t accept Medicaid, or their abuser prevents them from seeking medical attention. There are
clinics in many urban areas that might also be options. Know your community’s medical resources (Obtinario, 2010).

• Increase advocacy at the systemic level. Montgomery County (Maryland) Commission for Women (2009) recommended several public policy changes that would ease the burden of poverty for single mothers. These include a living wage, pay equity, expanded family tax credits, paid sick leave and dependent care leave, and flexible work schedules so that those who have jobs can balance work and family needs.

• Examine your own program’s policies and encourage other agencies and policy makers to do so as well. Policy should focus on financial safety as well as physical safety, says Jill Davies:

  “Legislation, policy, services, and advocacy often focus on physically separating battered women and their children from the abusive partner, but do not guarantee that there will be a roof over their heads, food on their table, or health care available when they need it. Reducing the risk of physical violence will not make battered women and their children ‘safe’ without also providing opportunity for long-term financial stability” (Davies, n.d.).

References


Foley, K., Triple Play Connections, Seattle, WA. Personal interview with Debi Edmund, July 2010.


