

Homeless women: demographics and interventions



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Homeless Women: Demographics and Interventions Introduction Typically I only see men on the streets begging; however the number of homeless women is increasing, especially homeless women with children. In this paper I will focus on homeless women by defining this issue and discussing the demographics of the women. I will address the types of interventions that have been implemented to help homeless women. Then I will discuss what research still needs to be done concerning homeless women.

Finally, I will suggest which social services and social policies should be considered for further intervention and how these suggestions support the core social work values. Characteristics and Demographics Homelessness can be defined as a person without a home. One cause of homelessness among women is domestic violence. Domestic violence within low income households has been reported as a primary cause of homelessness in women. Often times, women in low income housing who are a victim of domestic violence and find themselves with no where to go, do not have appropriate education or job skills to find employment.

Other causes of homelessness can include mental illnesses, depression, and poor health (Chambers, 1999). These can lead to homelessness among women and restrict women in finding proper, affordable housing. The population of homeless women is made up of all ages, races, and ethnicities. Generally, most of the women come from low income households before they become homeless. An average homeless woman is about 35 years old with at least two children (Chambers, 1999).

Living in shelters or on the street is hard enough alone, but when you have to take care of children at the same time it can make it even harder. Almost 58 percent of all homeless people are African American and 29 percent are Caucasian (Chambers, 1999). With the majority of homeless people being African American most homeless women are oppressed based on their race and gender. This does not help these women advance toward being able to afford appropriate housing because they are discriminated against. “[I]n the greater gender inequalities in wages in rural areas, where women workers make only 50% of men’s wages for comparable work” (Cummins, 1998). Females and minority races have been known to earn lesser wages than those of white males, which is discrimination and helps keep women in poverty and homeless.

In a study comparing urban homeless women and rural homeless women, there were several similarities. A majority of the women had been involved in domestic assaults or family conflicts (Cummins, 1998). However, there were also differences. Urban homeless women were more likely to be substance abusers and they had more cases of mental illnesses. Rural homeless women had more cases of economic causes for becoming homeless (Cummins, 1998).

Prevalence and Incidence The best estimate of how many homeless people there are comes from the United States Census Bureau. This number is 1,300,311, or 16.7 percent of the total population. Out of this number, 597,038 of all homeless people are women (United States Census Bureau, 2000). It is hard to estimate the number of new cases every year because that number changes everyday. Women can go in and out of periods of

homelessness through out the year, so it is hard to maintain a good estimate of who is actually homeless and who is not (United States Census Bureau, 2000).

Private Troubles For homeless women there are several private troubles that they may experience. Private troubles, what the individual goes through while experiencing problems (Longres, 2000), for homeless women can include several things. Homelessness among women subjects them to dangers on the streets or can lead to habits such as prostitution and drugs. Having to care for children would be another private trouble that homeless women would experience. Not being able to provide the basic necessities for ones children and ones self can lead to depression and hopelessness. **Public Issues** Public issues, or how the society experiences problems (Longres, 2000), include various types of issues.

One issue concerning the society is the amount of tax dollars going to programs to help the poor and homeless. Society would also be concerned with drug addictions that the homeless may have and worried about that bringing more drugs into the community. Also certain communities, typically major cities, would be worried about the stigma and reputation that homeless people create by sitting with signs at intersections or sleeping next to buildings. **Transactional Perspective** The transactional perspective suggests that people are embedded in their social context or environment (Longres, 2000). This can relate to homeless women by looking at how their private issues can be caused by their environment. If a woman's environment consists of an abusive relationship, low income housing; only a

high school education and no job skills she is at higher risk to becoming homeless.

All of these things can lead to depression and other illnesses and eventually can help lead to homelessness. If a woman lives in such an environment, it more than likely can lead to a variety of negative private issues including homelessness. Interventions There have been several suggestions, organizations, policies and programs developed to help the homeless. However the most common strategies, which include shelters and government assistance, appear to only be short term or temporary and do not solve the issue. Although being temporary, shelters have been important in certain ways besides just being a place to sleep. Staff workers at shelters also helped the women with raising their self esteem and helped them to better deal with their emotions (Toohey, 2004).

The workers at shelters helped the women's emotional state at a critical time in their lives when they have no one else. Multiple-family groups (MFGs) were developed to help families who were homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. The participating families were recommended to the MFG's by their shelter case workers to attend weekly meetings. These groups also attended weekend retreats to help strengthen families and to encourage families to have fun together.

The majority of families, 57 percent, were African American and 77 percent of the families consisted of single mothers with children. The staff of the retreat included several social workers. The weekend retreat had four areas that they concentrated on. These areas were, building trust, effective

communication, managing stress, and decision making responsibilities.

Overall, “[t]he weekend retreat appears to provide the necessary conditions from which social support can be built and an opportunity for families to reduce their feelings of isolation, anxiety, and helplessness” (Davey, 2004).

This retreat helps families realize that they are not alone in their situation. It gives them hope and reassurance that they will be alright. Several of the families involved did not complete the full eight weeks of this program because they had found proper and affordable housing and moved (Davey, 2004). Another type of intervention or prevention that has been suggested is for women to use their social networks, which consist of family members and friends. It is suggested that the women should move in with friends and family members when they are struggling to prevent becoming homeless. However, in most cases, women who are poor and on the verge of homelessness do not have strong social networks to depend on.

The most problematic difference between women who are homeless and housed may actually be that women who are homeless, and their network members, lack access to adequate and affordable housing. ” (Toohey, 2004, p. 12). This states that if low economic statuses occur within one member of the network there is a large possibility that other members will not be able to help with housing because they do not have proper shelter themselves. Further Research and Intervention Suggestions Eliminating the issue of homelessness throughout the world would be a good thing as would be eliminating every other problem. However, this feels impossible.

I believe that the first step to solving any social problem is public awareness and knowing the facts. While trying to research the issue of homeless women, I found a very limited amount of information. Several journals claimed that homeless women are an increasing population, but there still has been little research concerning it. I believe that there should be more research about what is being done to help assist single homeless women, especially those with children.

There are several laws and policies in place today that deal with homelessness. The government keeps saying that they want to help the poor, yet they keep taking away from funds that help assist the poor. There have been laws made against begging and sleeping on the streets (Lynch, 2002). If they have no home and all of the shelters are full, homeless people have no place to go to sleep except for a park or other public area. My suggestion would be for the government and the society as a whole to come together and help not only the homeless, but also everyone who is below or near the poverty line.

We should come together to help make housing and food affordable to those who can not afford it. Without more affordable housing there will always be homeless people. We should have more programs to get the homeless employment and housing and empower them to do well for themselves and their families. We need to reach out as a community to help in any way that we can. We need to make poverty more visible, because it does exist whether we acknowledge it or not and many of our neighbors suffer everyday. Social Work Values These suggestions support social work values in the sense that they are interested in helping others.

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Two values that these suggestions relate to directly are service and social justice. The service value addresses helping people who face problems and the social justice value is concerned with social change concerning oppressed groups (Longres, 2000). Social work values concentrate on helping people in need at critical times in their lives, just like the suggestions I have made above. Conclusion The growing population of homeless women is becoming a concern among researchers. Defining the characteristics of a homeless woman can vary among all races and ages.

Main reasons why homeless women exist consist of domestic violence, mental illnesses, and eviction. There are some interventions in place that help prevent and end homelessness among women, but there is still work to be done. There also needs to be more research invested into this social problem and stronger interventions. Finally, social work values go in hand with how we need to treat the homeless population as a whole and individually. References Chambers, S.

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