

"Poverty, Homelessness and Domestic Violence among Poor Mothers: Issues and Opportunities for Programs" Olivia Hetzler, Sociology

Recently I attended the Midwest Sociological Society's Annual conference to share my research that centers on homelessness, domestic violence and mothering. The project was a ten month ethnography of a domestic violence shelter. I spent the first month shadowing the shelter counselors and staff, noting patterns in how they interacted with residents, hurdles in working with victims and a general overview of how the shelter operated. Gradually I made my way to the "back of the house" where the residents lived. The shelter had a large living room area with multiple couches, a kitchen with multiple refrigerators and ovens, a large playroom for kids, large laundry room and a communal dining room. My goal was to understand the experience of mothers that are were experiencing homelessness after leaving abusive relationships.

Early on in the research I attended a staff meeting that was discussing the dynamics of abuse, and while it is noted that abuse does not know any boundaries in terms of gender, sexuality, social class, race or age, those that experience homelessness when exiting abusive relationships are far more likely to be poor. In this meeting, a staff member noted "these women wouldn't be here if they had other choices" referring to the divide in experience between poor and middle or upper class victims, in which the latter may have more financial resources to draw on in order to obtain alternate housing or legal assistance to avoid homelessness. Further, middle or upper class victims may be more likely to have networks that can assist in the transition through loaning money or providing housing, options that are not as available to victims in all socioeconomic positions. The staff member went on to say, that although the shelter at "New Beginnings" as I refer to in my research, does have middle and upper class clients that they are more likely to attend counseling sessions or utilize the services for legal advocacy, rather than utilize the shelter services. As the research progressed, I noted a commonality among residents that echoed the staff member's statement—the majority of the women had few financial resources, were unemployed or underemployed (sometimes as a safety precaution in leaving the relationship), and were split between having obtained high school degrees or having less than a high school degree. While domestic violence was a significant issue in the women's lives, this issue was also coupled with poverty and the related issues of affordable housing supplies, availability of fulltime low wage labor, transportation issues and affordability of childcare.

New Beginnings did a wonderful job of providing temporary housing through a 90 day program, as well as connecting women to counseling and case management, but did not have the resources or ability to solve the looming issue of financial stability for post-shelter stay. A number of women noted frustration with the shelter feeling that there should be more knowledge of community programs to assist residents in "getting back on their feet", a phrase that was used often among the residents. This critique of the shelter came to be one of the most surprising findings in the research, whereas the shelter was able to provide the core necessities: food, shelter, safety and respite, it was actually the relationships built between the residents that resulted in successful transition from shelter to independent housing through information sharing, favors and reciprocity among the residents, rather than the shelter. Of course, this is not to downplay the work of the shelter on other important aspects of the program dedicated to healthy relationships, developing positive self-image and independence, but these

programs did not translate to jobs, housing and solutions to everyday issues (such as childcare, transportation, etc).

To illustrate the helping relationships between residents the example between two residents, one resident had a driver's license, but no automobile (Lindsay)—while the other had an automobile, but no license. Lindsay had four children, ranging in age between one year and 10 years of age, which required her to ride the city bus to three separate locations to drop her children at daycare and preschool before she was able to attend courses at the local college. To and from, was estimated to 1.5-2 hours each day. The two residents made an arrangement, if Lindsay would drop the resident that owned a car and her daughter to school and work this would then free Lindsay to use the car to take her own kids to daycare and herself to school. This arrangement allowed both to pursue employment and educational opportunities and work towards economic stability through work and education.

Residents also provided great support to each other emotionally; they were well informed of each other's lives, including upcoming court dates and job interviews. As well, they had a great deal of knowledge that was unknown to the case managers and would serve as informal counselors that did not carry the authoritative power of the case managers—as care managers had the power to evict if an act was deemed a violation of the rules. Further, women were a great source of advice for job seeking, in fact after one resident was hired at a local fast food restaurant she was able to refer three other residents for employment, resulting in a wonderful carpooling network. Other sources of advice were activities and programs for housing and child care, this was one area that residents were critical of staff, as they felt that the supports that would enable to become financially independent were limited, or even non-existent, at New Beginnings. Thus, there appeared to be a mismatch between the role of the shelter and the needs of the residents. Most importantly, the support of fellow residents extended beyond the shelter stay—women continued to babysit each other's children, provide rides and advice to allow women who often had fragmented social networks to continue on their paths to independence.

In presenting this research some wonderful points were raised in regards to the relationship between staff and residents, as well as the power of personal agency on part of the residents both as victims and mothers. While the barriers towards economic independence at times appeared insurmountable these women were able to develop powerful networks and strategies to combat many of the difficulties faced.