

*For sexual violence victims, safe and affordable housing is often further out of reach, due to the effects of trauma, economic insecurity, and lack of resources in the aftermath of sexual violence. The majority of sexual assaults take place in or near victims' homes or the homes of victims' friends, relative or neighbors (Mindlin & Vickers, 2007).*

### **Impact of housing costs**

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According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, a household should pay no more than 30% of their income on housing (called the Fair Market Rent or FMR). More than half (18.5 million) of America's renters do not earn enough to afford the average FMR in their state (Pelletiere, Wardrip & Crowley, 2008). The minimum wage does not translate to a realistic housing wage, leaving millions of people in unstable and/or substandard housing conditions in this country. Homeless shelters are full in many localities throughout the nation with predictions of bed shortages in the future.

### **Housing and oppression**

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As with many social and economic issues, barriers to obtaining safe and affordable housing are magnified for traditionally oppressed groups affected by racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, heterosexism, classism, ethnocentrism, and adultism.

The research findings that follow help to illuminate these connections between sexual violence, housing and oppression.

- Sixty-one percent of homeless girls and 19% of homeless boys report sexual abuse as the reason for leaving home (Estes & Weiner, 2001).
- The amount of LGBTIQ homeless youth in the U.S. ranges from 35% to 50% of all homeless youth (Ray, 2006).
- According to the National Runaway Switchboard, "LGBT homeless youth are seven times more likely than their heterosexual peers to be victims of a crime" (Ray, 2006, p. 3).
- According to a study about sexual assault and people with disabilities, women with severe disabilities were four times more likely to be sexually assaulted than women without disabilities " (Casteel, Martin, Smith, Gurka, & Kupper, 2008).



- According to a study of homeless and marginally housed people, 32% of women, 27% of men, and 38% of transgendered persons reported either physical or sexual victimization in the previous year (Kushel, et al., 2003).
- In a national study of sexual assault advocates, 58% of respondents reported incidents of tenants being sexually assaulted by landlords (Keeley, 2006).
- In a study of rural women who had been sexually assaulted, the women indicated that without housing, other services to address the violence were not likely to be helpful (Logan, 2005).
- According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development's (2010) Resident Characteristics Report, thirty-four percent of residents living in public housing have a disability.
- Keeley's (2006) study revealed that "of the women reporting rape or sexual assault by a landlord, 30 percent had one or more physical or mental disabilities" (p. 444).
- In a sample of racially diverse homeless mothers, 92% reported that they had experienced severe physical or sexual violence during their lives; 43% reported child sexual abuse in childhood (Goodman, Fels & Glenn, 2006).
- Forty-two percent of Black women residents in a low-income housing development had engaged in unwanted sex because a male partner had threatened or actually used force to obtain sexual access (West, 2006). Seventy-six percent of Black survivors attributed their rapes to the riskiness of their living environments (e.g., "I was living in a bad neighborhood") (West, 2006).

- Native American communities often experience high rates of poverty and geographical isolation without adequate transportation or access to services (Hamby, 2004). If sexually assaulted in or near their homes, Native victims' isolation and lack of confidentiality within communities can exacerbate their victimization.

## Housing and perpetration

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While we know that adequate housing is linked to an increased chance for victimization, it is also linked to increases in perpetration. Residency restrictions regulate the housing options for sex offenders. "When considering all the residency restrictions, housing choices for sexual offenders are very limited, and what limited options remain mostly consist of rural/agricultural areas," (Zandbergen & Hart, 2006, p15.).

The research also indicates that recidivism is more likely to occur when a sexual offender is socially isolated and lacking access to basic support systems. Zandbergen and Hart (2006) indicate, "isolation, financial and emotional hardships, and a decrease in stability have been linked to recidivism." "Limiting housing options for sex offenders to a few locations in low-density rural areas may produce such outcomes," (p. 20).

## What advocates can do

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Safe and affordable housing can be a protective factor against sexual victimization. Advocates can help to prevent homelessness and increase housing resources through a variety of efforts:

- Know your community's housing assistance programs and tenants' rights within those systems.



- Advocate for safe, affordable housing in your community and state by forming coalitions with housing and anti-poverty advocates and educating legislators about sexual violence victims' housing needs.
  - Know your state, territory, and tribal compensation benefits available to victims. There may be compensation for victims that need to relocate due to a crime. Advocates can support victims by explaining the requirements of the program and assisting with filing claims.
  - Advocate for trauma-informed policies and practices in shelters and public housing communities to ensure victims/survivors have access to services and support.
  - Screen victims/survivors for housing barriers and struggles and advocate for their needs.
  - Advocate for state and national policies that prohibit discrimination against sexual violence victims in housing arenas as well as increases in minimum wages.
  - Provide training and resources to local homeless shelters and housing providers about sexual violence prevention and intervention.
  - Collaborate with local and state housing advocates, housing providers, legal aid attorneys, and others to expand and protect sexual violence victims' housing rights through cross-trainings, public policy advocacy, program development, and coordinated client referrals.
  - Know your community's housing assistance programs and tenants' rights within those systems.
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