

Running head: FORGOTTEN WOMEN

Forgotten Women: Women Living on the Edge of Society

Adam Kilgore

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Introduction

In 1994, women were named the fastest growing segment of the homeless population. At the time, they made up 20-25% of the homeless adult population. By 1998, the percentage had grown to 50% with female-headed families recognized as the fastest growing segment of the homeless population (Cummins & Toomey, 1998 p.1).

As such, it is still a topic worth exploring, although many studies have been conducted in this area. For example, what are the environmental and social factors that increase the risk of women becoming homeless? What are the interpersonal factors (mental illness, substance abuse, divorce, etc.) that increase this probability? There are several factors that can be attributed to the female homeless population. For many women, homelessness follows years of violence and abuse, leaving them with a negative self-esteem and self-worth. Many women become homeless as a result of fleeing from violence in their family of origin (Montgomery, 1994). Poverty, substance abuse, and mental illness are also causations of homelessness in female populations (1994).

Have social mores changed so that these factors are becoming more prominent than in previous years, causing the number of homeless women to increase? For example, women no longer feel trapped in abusive relationships. They are choosing life on the streets instead of being a victim.

The following pages will explore the above questions and take a closer look at these factors. They will also provide a personal insight into 'the day in the life' of a woman living on the street.

Theoretical Perspectives

Ecological theory and feminist theory will be utilized to explain, explore, and define the population of homeless women. Ecological theory was chosen because it explains human development by describing aspects of the individual, the environment, and interactions between the two. Ecological theory argues that people are active participants and are not passive in their lives (Rogers, 2006 pg. 37). Women who are homeless are subjected to rapidly changing environments for various reasons; one reason may be that the shelter is full that night or the presence of children in her life or a domestic partner. The fundamental tenet of ecological theory is the way people perceive their environments and the transactions that occur in these environments. Many women who become homeless have been victims of abuse in their family of origin. Often times, they later have suffered abuse at the hands of a domestic partners. Both of these scenarios lend themselves to examining these experiences by looking at the role of power in ecological theory.

Ecological theory can be overwhelming for the social worker because of its complexity and scope. Two different social workers working with the same client can end up choosing two completely different realms on which to focus. It can also be argued that the ecological theory does not pay enough attention to the biological aspect of the client (2006).

On the opposite side of the spectrum, the ecological theory has some compelling strengths. It is comprehensive and goes beyond the psychological and attends to the larger environment. This theory is also less likely to place blame for the problems the client is experiencing entirely on the individual. For example, many people are

forced into a homeless situation because of some sort of illness. Statistics suggest that 70% of homeless adults have a history of some form of mental health disorder (Boes & Van, 1997 pg 6). As a homeless person, they receive minimal, if any health care, leaving them at risk for health issues.

Feminist theory was chosen as feminist thought can be applied to many different areas of a homeless woman's life. Feminist thought is best described as the advocacy of social, economics, and political equality between men and women. Feminist theory provides an avenue to examine inequality, oppression, and disenfranchisement of homeless women (Rogers, 2006 pg. 99). Many homeless women have endured years of oppression and discrimination from the men in their lives as well as society. The feminist theory is limited in that it focuses on women at the expense of other minority groups. Also, it can be difficult to test and it does not predict behavior (2006). Many of the women that are forced onto the street are there because of a strong presence of male domination and discrimination that has been placed upon them by a male dominated world. They are considered less valuable and are often demeaned by the men with whom they form relationships. Homeless women are living on the edge of society and are forced to suffer daily from what one could argue as male oppression.

Literature Review

Perhaps one of the most powerful definitions of home was provided by Robert Frost in "The Death of the Hired Man" penned in 1914. "Home is the place where, when you go there, they have to take you in." (Boes & Van Wormer, 1997 p.1) This paints a picture of much more than a roof over one's head. However, an unprecedented number of women, including mothers with children, are unable to afford a place to call 'home'.

While some people refuse to go to shelters, claiming to enjoy the freedom of live on the streets, most people, especially women, are forced to live on the streets by cruel circumstances and not by choice (1997)

For many years the plight of the homeless woman went unstudied because “social scientists conducting analyses of homelessness virtually ignored women.” (Bufkin & Bray, 1998 p. 228) As with other areas of academic study, women were given little attention because their lives were considered unimportant when compared to that of men. With initial studies in this area showing that women comprised 20-30% of the existing homeless population, as well as being the fastest growing segment, social scientists began to turn their attention to this area (1998).

As research continued and information became more available, common characteristic and qualities that differentiated this population from their male counterparts emerged. Six characteristics, outlined below, have been identified to help explain the particular housing and service needs of the various members of this cohort of women (Grimm & Maldonado, 1995 p.20).

Violence and Abuse

A much higher percentage of homeless women suffer from some form of sexual or physical abuse as compared to men (1995).

Mental Illness

Mental illness is more prevalent in the female population, including major mental illnesses and psychiatric hospitalization. The increase in mental illness in this group may be explained by the higher rates of abuse as well as the exhaustion of the female’s social support networks prior to seeking professional assistance. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to turn to a professional health provider, as opposed to family or friends for

assistance. Thus, they are more likely to gain treatment in the earliest stages of their illness (1995).

Inadequate Health Care

While homeless people in general tend to suffer from common ailments such as hypothermia, malnutrition, and communicable diseases, women tend to report more acute illnesses and injuries but less substance abuse. The following conditions are not only unique to women but are often complicated by the lack of privacy, health care and money: Prenatal care, childbirth, infant care, menstruation and menopause (1995).

Inadequate Childcare

As most children that are living on the streets live with their mothers, not their fathers, the need for childcare becomes of particular interest to the homeless female population (1995).

Lack of Social Support

Studies have shown that homeless women were more likely to have grown up without having lived with either parent. More commonly, they were more likely to have grown-up in foster homes or institutions, than that of the male population. As they also have a tendency to seek assistance from family or friends prior to reaching the streets, they often feel their resources have been completely exhausted and are uncertain of where to turn for assistance (1995).

Limited Education and Work Experience

While homeless men and women have similarly low levels of education, less than 50% of the homeless women have graduated from high school. Homeless women also struggle with having recent work experiences. Factors other than education and work experiences that contribute to their

lack of employment include: the need for childcare, transportation, clothing, and laundry and shower facilities (1995).

While the articles researched all refer in some scale to the above information, they failed to discuss the strengths and/or competencies of this marginalized population. Homeless women have an amazing ability to adapt to their changing environment, which is discussed further in the theoretical perspective portion of this paper.

The oppression of this group was not openly discussed in the research. However, today's society continues to devalue this segment of the population by forcing them out the public's eye. Current social programs are not structured to fulfill the needs of the female homeless population. Although changes have been, programs are still primarily geared toward the male demographic. While women with children have gained more services than single women, there is still room for improvements.

Interview

Armed with a list of approved questions and a need to gain more insight into the life of homeless women, I went to a local soup kitchen and homeless shelter--The Chattanooga Community Kitchen. The Chattanooga Community Kitchen is an organization that helps support the area's homeless population. On the day of my visit, there were more males in attendance than there were females. A petite blond woman, dressed neatly in jeans and a summer blouse, sat apart from the rest. She was clean and wearing make-up. I approached her to see if she would consent to an interview. She

agreed. She introduced herself as Angel; who at the age of 33, decided that being homeless was better than living with an abusive husband. Today, Angel is 36 and still confesses to being content with her living arrangements.

Angel grew up in a middle class family and admits to having a very happy childhood. She voiced there was no abuse while growing up but did admit to an abusive marital relationship, although she opted not to discuss it in detail. She also discussed the fact that she was an alcoholic. However, she made sure that I understood that this was a disease and not “her fault”. Angel admitted that she made some bad choices but again would not be specific in nature.

Shortly after meeting Angel, I realized she was very confident. She was almost confrontational when she felt she was not in control of the interview. She wanted to make sure I knew being homeless was her choice and not a situation forced upon her. It seemed very important to her that I understood the fact that she was in control of the situation around her. It was also important to her that I know she was different from the people around her. Several times she indicated that “she was from a good family and had the option to go home anytime she wanted, as long as she would agree to live by their rules”. She stated she did not socialize with many of the homeless people. It was her impression that most people did not think she was homeless.

Angel tried to paint a rosy picture of being homeless, indicating the housing was adequate and that she had access to health care. She also indicated there were no restrictions on the amount of time she could stay. She indicated that as long as she attended the church service she had “a clean bed and food”. As for job opportunities, she indicated she didn’t need a job nor did she want one.

As for hopes for future plans, she did not want to discuss the subject. She indicated she did not “think about things like that”. However, she indicated that she hoped to have an apartment with a waterbed within the next five years—“no biggie, but (she) will be secure.”

As the interview progressed, I rarely got the answers that I expected. Angel felt that there are no stereotypes placed on the homeless population. She voiced that she felt she had it easier because she was a woman. She indicated the men around her were very “good” to her. When questioned about whether she ever felt oppressed as a homeless person, or a woman, she immediately stated no.

The literature used during the initial research of this project completely contrasted the information that was received during this interview. The literature highlighted how the homeless population was oppressed and marginalized. It emphasized the difficulties women face while being homeless. However, Angel voiced never feeling scared or in danger. She even stated that it was an advantage to be a woman in the homeless population.

The feminist and ecological theories were chosen for discussion in the frame work of this paper. It was difficult to understand how Angel did not feel oppressed or discriminated against. She would not admit to either of these. Angel’s early life was “normal”, growing up in a middle class family, never suffering from any type of abuse. However, she admitted to both physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her ex-husband. She concedes that her marriage environment and bad choices made on her part contributed to her current situation. Overall, the interview data collected supports the ecological theory but refutes the feminist theory.

Recommendations & Conclusion

The homeless population is marginalized and often forced to the edge of society. The topics discussed in this paper are the environmental factors that contribute to the female homeless population and the interpersonal factors (mental illness, substance abuse, divorce, etc) that increase this probability.

Angel, the young woman I had the opportunity to interview, did not feel she was being oppressed or discriminated against because she was a homeless woman. She stated that being a female was an advantage while living as a homeless person. Angel stated that she was homeless by choice and in control of her life. The literature reviewed for this project refuted her personal observations. It stressed the many risks the homeless population faced, especially the female homeless population, which is in greater danger of physical, sexual and verbal abuse.

Although I have only had brief encounters this population, I was stunned and disappointed at the treatment they received. They seemed to be treated with little dignity or respect. I would like to see the individuals who support this fragile population receive more in-depth training for the specific needs of the homeless. This would allow for more professional and effective service. The implications for the practice of social work with this population would be improved greatly with federally funded educational opportunities and community awareness programs.

The housing opportunities for the homeless population are limited, leaving another area of opportunity. The availability of affordable housing would be a tremendous improvement as a percentage of this population holds steady employment. However, their salaries will not support their current responsibilities along with housing.

The availability of job training and childcare would also help the members of this group who are trying to pull themselves out of poverty. Many lack adequate job skills, not to mention the necessary social skills, which would allow them to find employment. The lack of childcare is yet another issue facing those that want to find gainful employment. Many homeless families are headed by females. They often struggle to find care for their children while they are at work. The availability of either of the above, would provide more opportunities, as well as alleviate external stresses on this population.

It is important when working with the homeless population to understand each person is valuable and has the ability to become a productive member of society. Angel felt that she was master of her destiny. One may wonder if her bravado was learned behavior or a defense mechanism. Angel admitted to substance abuse and past physical abuse from her ex-husband. Possibly some of her belief about her current situation is denial.

The homeless population needs better representation on a national level to bring forth more awareness of their plight and struggles. To achieve social justice for this diverse population, communities need to become involved. As more involvement is achieved, changes in the way the homeless population is stereotyped, dismissed and forgotten will be made.

Appendix

Transcript of interview

1. How long have you been in your particular homeless situation?

“I have been homeless since 2003”

2. What would you say is the cause of you being in this situation?

“I went through a divorce and made some bad decisions.”

3. What opportunities are offered for healthcare, and do you take advantage of them.

“Yes I get free health care, I can see an eye doctor and I get my prescriptions for free. I use it for anything I need”.

4. What opportunities are offered for employment, and do you take advantage of them?

“No, I don’t need a job and don’t want one.”

5. What were your dreams before you became homeless?

“I don’t know if I ever had any I married had a home and children but I haven’t seen my children in years.”

6. What are your hopes for the future?

“I don’t think about things like that. Next question”

7. How would you describe the way you are treated by the community who are not homeless?

“I am treated fine I don’t think about it. No body treats me differently.”

8. Were you given a time limit on how long you can stay here?

No

9. Are there any mandates to staying at a shelter which violates your civil rights?

“Yeah so what I have to sit through a church service to stay here. I get a clean bed and food no big deal”.

10. What is your opinion of the residential housing project for the homeless?

“It is great no complaints, they treat us alright.”

11. How many members made up your family of origin?

“Four, two brothers and a sister. I am the youngest”.

12. Do you feel comfortable discussing your home environment in your family of origin?

“I had a good childhood I am middle class my dad died when I was 6 but he had insurance and we lived very comfortable. I had a good life”.

13. Have you ever been abused?

“Growing up, no never. My husband used to beat me when I was with him but that was it and I don’t want to talk about it.”

14. Where do you see yourself in five years?

“In an apartment with a waterbed no biggie but I will be secure”.

15. What do you consider your fondest memory from childhood?

“My picture was taken sitting on a sideboard in the dinning room with a new white dress on”.

16. What do you consider your strengths?

“I am intelligent and have a great since of humor”.

17. What are your weaknesses?

“I drink and make poor choices sometimes.”

18. Is there anything that you would like to communicate about the homeless population and stereo types that people place on them?”

“No, I don’t care what anybody else says about me I don’t think most people even think I am homeless.”

19. Do you think that being a woman puts you in a vulnerable spot living in this population?

“No, the men are very good to me I think it makes it easier”.

20. Have you ever felt oppressed?

“No, I don’t think of things like that”.

Confidentiality Form

A signed and dated confidentiality form is on file in the office of Ms. Kathy Purnell, MSW.

Sources Cited

- Anderson, E. A. and Koblinsky, S. A. (1995, January). Homeless Policy: The Need to Speak to Families. *Family Relations*, 44(1), 13-18. Retrieved October 8, 2006, from <http://www.jstor.org>
- Boes, M. and Van Wormer, K. (1997, Winter). Social work with homeless women in emergency rooms: a strengths-feminist perspective. *Affilia Journal of Women and Social Work*, 12(4), 408-427.
- Bufkin, J. L. and Bray, J. (1998). Domestic Violence, Criminal Justice Responses and Homelessness: Finding the Connection and Addressing the Problem. *Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless*, 7(4), 227-240.
- Cheung, A. M. and Hwang, S. W. (2004, April, 13). Risk of death among homeless women: a cohort study and review of the literature. *CMAJ*, 170(8), 1243-1247.
- Cummins, L. K., First, R. J., & Toomey, B. G. (1998, Winter). Comparisons of rural and urban homeless women. *Affilia Journal of Women and Social Work*, 13(4), 435-454.
- Grimm, K. G. and Maldonado, J. C. (1995, Spring). No Home of Her Own: Gender and Homelessness. *Women and Environments*, 14, 20-22. Retrieved October 9, 2006, from http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com.proxy.lib.utc.edu/hww/results/results_single_fullt_ext.jhtml
- Pardeck, J. T. and Rollinson, P. A. (2002). An Exploration of Violence Among Homeless Women with Emotional Disabilities: Implications for Practice and Policy. *Journal of Social Work in Disability & Rehabilitation*, 1(4), 63-73.
- Rafferty, M. (1989, December). Standing up for America's Homeless. *The American Journal of Nursing*, 89(2), 1614 – 1617. Retrieved October 9, 2006, from <http://www.jstor.org>
- n.a. (2006). Homeless. *Women and Global Human Rights*. Retrieved September 17, 2006, from <http://www.webster.edu/~woolf1m/homeless.html>