

Over Half of the Women on Public Assistance in Washington State Reported Physical or Sexual Abuse *as Adults*

Background

In the fifth annual Family Income Study interview administered in 1992, women were asked if they had been physically or sexually abused *as adults*.

Physical abuse of women by spouses occurs *at least once* in 20 to 30 percent of households nationwide. National research on the sexual abuse of adult women is scarce; however, studies indicate that at least 20 percent of women have experienced sexual abuse and assault at least once during their lifetime.

This issue brief specifically addresses physical and sexual abuse of women on public assistance *as adults*. Family Income Study survey findings show an alarmingly high rate of physical and sexual abuse of women on public assistance in Washington State. Over half of the women surveyed reported being physically and/or sexually abused *as adults*. The majority of those who reported being sexually abused also reported being physically abused by a spouse or boyfriend.

Family Income Study Findings

Abuse reported by women on public assistance in Washington State:

- **60 percent reported some type of abuse (physical and/or sexual)**, compared to 35 percent for the at risk sample.
- **Over half (55 percent) reported being physically abused *by a spouse or boyfriend***, compared to 28 percent for the at risk sample.
- **Nearly one-third (30 percent) reported being sexually abused *by anyone***, compared to 19 percent for the at risk sample.

Discussion

The high number of adult abuse cases in the state's public assistance population suggests the importance of domestic violence intervention for welfare recipients. Making information about intervention services known to women as they apply for public assistance could be beneficial to women living in abusive situations.

Definitions

Physical Abuse was defined as being "*hit, kicked, punched, or beaten up*" by a spouse or boyfriend/girlfriend.

Sexual Abuse was defined as "*unwanted touching, sexual assault, or rape*" by anyone.

Adult was defined as age 18 or older.

The Family Income Study also asked women if they were physically and/or sexually abused while growing up. The relationship between childhood physical and sexual abuse, early sexual activity, dropping out of school, teenage pregnancy and childbirth, and public assistance use will be discussed in a forthcoming Family Income Study issue paper.

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