



Health and Social Well-being in Chronically Homeless Women

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Background

Homelessness encapsulates complex challenges and extends beyond the loss of physical living space. Individuals who become homeless have often experienced traumatic life-events, violence, unemployment, disconnection from friends, family and community, and are exposed to multiple stressors that can have a negative impact on physical and mental health, social well-being, and which in turn impair abilities to handle multiple problems related to homelessness. Yet, data and insights into gender-specific challenges, and potential solutions, are less well understood. In response, we assessed gender-specific factors related to homelessness: *How do women become homeless, and how is women's health and social well-being impacted by chronic homelessness? How can communities create innovative and holistic solutions that support women's pathways out of homelessness to sustainable lives?*

Methods & Research Site

We chose a Community-Based-Participatory Research (CBPR) approach in conducting a community needs and challenges assessment by face-to-face interviewing 50 chronically homeless women, who frequently visited the Sister José Women's Center (SJWC)* in Tucson, Arizona. Women were interviewed during Winter and Spring 2017. With a survey that inquires grief, loss, and environmental stressors (GLES) over the life course, as well as current personal functioning, and open discussion, we were able to gather detailed insight into the complexity of homelessness – understanding supportive ideas for potential gender-specific solutions for women. Following the data collection phase, participating women found opportunities for support via a pilot program focused on moving women out of homelessness through curriculum, mentoring and case management. *Confidence, Readiness, Empowerment, Action, Transformation, Engagement (CREATE)* is a six month program unique to SJWC.



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*SJWC is a Non-Profit Organization, serving chronically homeless women only, providing drop-in services (e.g. breakfast, showers, laundry facilities, visiting outreach from local agencies, free Wi-Fi, and leisure activities during the day), and offers a year around overnight shelter program.

Why Do Women Become Homeless?

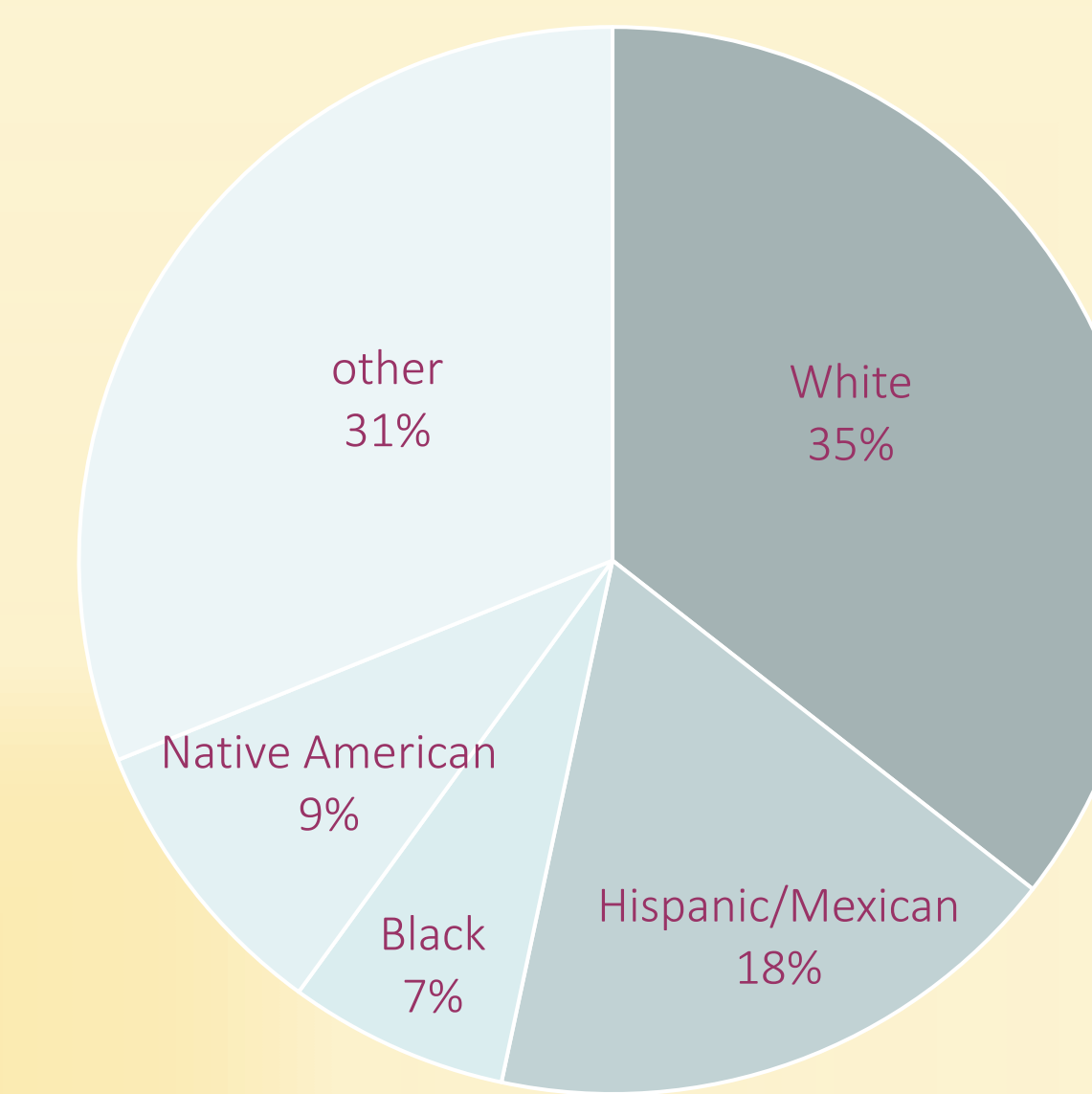
• **Domestic violence** is the primary cause of homelessness for women (U.S. Conference on Mayors, 2007).¹ In addition to that, exposure to interpersonal and community violence is oftentimes cumulative. A majority of homeless women:

- have experienced or witnessed greater numbers of **abusive events**
- Report higher rates of **eating-related problems**
- Greater incidence of **STDs and hepatitis**
- Overall **poorer self-rated health status**
- Earlier involvement in **crime and more arrests**
- Often early onset in life of **drug and alcohol use**

Our literature review further revealed that, alcohol and drug abuse is not only a cause, but an effect of homelessness, and that housing without a transitional period of support and recovery results in **recurring homelessness**.

Participants

Race and Ethnicity



- Ages 22-66 years
- 53 % stayed at the night shelter and day program, while 44 % only attended the day program

Conclusions/Implications

This assessment² exposed homelessness through women's eyes and as a social justice issue that requires holistic and integrative solutions, and the engagement of the community to create opportunities for women to sustainably transition out of homelessness. Our findings suggest need for:

- **Programming that is responsive to homeless women's histories of trauma and needs**
- **Policy implications of how homelessness is screened**
- **Developing pathways to housing that include supportive services**
- **Longitudinal evaluation of effectiveness of different housing types**

Since September 2017, our collaborative (SJWC and SIROW) provides a unique pilot program (*CREATE*) to empower homeless women by creating opportunities for women to move out of homelessness. *CREATE* allows homeless women to

- **Live within and build a supportive and nurturing community (at Sister José Women's Center in Tucson)**
- **Find stability and safety as foundation to begin a process of moving forward**
- **Engage in curriculum where creativity is used to empower and promote change (e.g. free writing, cooking, etc.)**
- **Engage in building work life skills and pre-employment skills (e.g., IT classes, applying for SSN card and ID, etc.)**
- **Engage in community through internships and trainings**

Impact of Being Homeless on Health and Social Well-Being

<i>In the past 30 days, how troubled have you been by...?</i>	extremely %	considerably %	moderately %	slightly %	not at all %
Problems finding a place to live	62	7	7	7	16
Problems finding work	44	18	2	13	18
Physical or medical problems	29	24	18	13	16
Problems with family members	27	11	2	13	40
Problems with strangers	24	18	2	16	38
Problems with people wanting something from you	20	13	4	24	31
Problems finding a safe place to sleep	20	11	13	11	42
Legal problems	16	4	9	2	67
Problems with men being aggressive towards you	13	9	13	16	47
Alcohol or drug problems	9	7	2	16	64
Problems with other women being aggressive towards you	7	7	2	36	44

References

1. U.S. Conference of Mayors' report on Hunger and Homelessness. *A Status Report on Homelessness and Hunger in America's Cities*, December 2016. Retrieved from: <https://endhomelessness.atavist.com/mayorsreport2016>
2. Andrade R. and Frank F. (2018). White paper #5 "Health and Social Well-being in Chronically Homeless Women: Tucson and Southern Arizona's Current Risks and Future Opportunities". Making Action Possible MAP Dashboard. University of Arizona.

Acknowledgments

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