

Barriers to Self-Sufficiency

Barriers to self-sufficiency were economic strain, employment challenges, custody and access issues, health effects of violence, ongoing abuse and harassment, and difficulties getting necessary help despite high service use.

After leaving their abusive partners, women's self sufficiency was challenged by a number of barriers, many of which are modifiable. Survivors faced financial, social and personal upheaval, similar to that which occurs with any separation. Women in general who go through separation and divorce face challenges including lone parenting, becoming sole breadwinners, finding affordable housing, and paying for legal costs. Compounding these challenges, abuse survivors were often dealing with persistent harassment and the emotional and physical effects of past abuse, while struggling to raise children with an ex-partner who was a batterer as a parent. While the survivors in the WHES were creative and resourceful, they faced economic strain, employment challenges, custody and access issues, health effects of violence, ongoing abuse and harassment, and difficulty getting necessary help despite high service use.

The study revealed significant economic strain in the lives of participants. Income is a known primary determinant of health. The median income of survivors was \$15,684. For survivors in the WHES with dependent children (57%; n=170), the median income was \$16,785 as compared to \$36,765 for Canadian mother-headed single parent families in 2005. Of the 309 women in the study, 52% reported a decline in standard of living after leaving their partner, and half found it very difficult to live on their current incomes. With respect to employment:

- 55% were unemployed
- 16% worked part time
- 16% were seeking employment
- 16% enrolled in a training or education program.

Only 28% of those with dependent children had ever been awarded child support. In the past 12 months, women awarded support reported having received an average of only 6 of 12 full payments. Within this economic context, women clearly needed help meeting basic needs: 31% had received social assistance the month prior to their first interview, 22% had visited a food bank, and 20% were living in public or not-for-profit housing.

Compounding the economic and health challenges for survivors was the interference from ongoing harassment by ex-partner and domestic legal issues. Of the 309 participants, 81% reported being harassed by their ex-partner after leaving, and 60% reported ongoing harassment at the time of the first interview that took place on average 20 months after leaving. When asked if they had ever had a protective order against their former partner, 35% said yes. At the second interview which took place on average 32 months after leaving, 13% reported having a current protective order. Parenting with a batterer can be especially intrusive for women striving to make the transition toward self-sufficiency. Of the women with dependent children, 28% reported that their ex-partner had used the children as pawns to get close to her in the past month, and 16% said he'd threatened to snatch or have kids taken away in the past month. At the second interview, 21% of survivors with dependent children reported that over the past month, it was "very difficult" or "extremely

difficult” dealing with former partner around custody and access issues. One third of participants accessed domestic violence advocacy or counseling services in the month before the first interview.

Health issues also are a barrier to self-sufficiency. Many women in the WHES had multiple physical and mental health issues which may compromise self sufficiency. When asked about their work status, 12% reported being on disability, and a further 7% reported not working due to health problems. Of the 309 women, 21% had severely limiting pain, losing an average of 90 days from usual activities (such as work and school) in the past six months, while 14% had moderately limiting pain, and lost an average of 24 days. Further, 25% of the women reported their work or other activities being limited all or most of the time in the past month by their physical health. As well, 27% reported doing work or other regular daily activities less carefully than usual all or most of the time in the past month because of emotional problems.

When asked about service use in the past month, 94% of survivors reported using at least one health, social, legal or violence-specific service. Survivors used an average of 4 different services in the past month. Despite this high rate of service use, 65% still had difficulty getting the help they required. Survivors reported inability to access the following needed services:

- Family doctor for personal health problem: 19%
- Psychiatrist: 11%
- Psychologist: 10%
- Counselor: 9%
- Legal Aid: 6%
- Dentist: 21%
- Foodbank: 5%

Reasons or not being able to access services were

- Inability to pay: 50%
- Waiting list: 42%
- Transportation: 32%
- Can't get information about service: 26%
- No child care: 19%
- No service available: 18%
- Service provider non-responsive: 16%

Survivors face significant barriers to self-sufficiency that can be eliminated through changes to policies, programs and services.