

# HOUSING AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

## Overview of national survey: January 2010

*In 2008, the National Sexual Violence Resource Center partnered with the Victim Rights Law Center, National Sexual Assault Coalition Resource Sharing Project, Louisiana Foundation Against Sexual Assault, University of New Hampshire, and Pennsylvania Community Legal Services to develop and conduct a national survey on housing and sexual violence.*

### Goals

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The goals of the survey were three-fold to obtain data that would:

1. Further the understanding of the intersections between sexual violence, housing, and homelessness;
2. Help to identify the needs of victims and advocates around housing issues;
3. Help to inform policy and programmatic strategies.

The survey was conducted online using Survey Monkey, an online survey tool, and was launched in February 2009. Links to the survey were sent out to national listservs and other networks, including state coalitions and local sexual violence programs. The survey was also sent out in hard copy form to increase accessibility. There were 239 respondents from 33 states and one U.S. Territory.

This report provides a summary of key survey findings. For more details, contact the National Sexual Violence Resource Center: [resources@nsvrc.org](mailto:resources@nsvrc.org) or 877-739-3895.

### Respondents

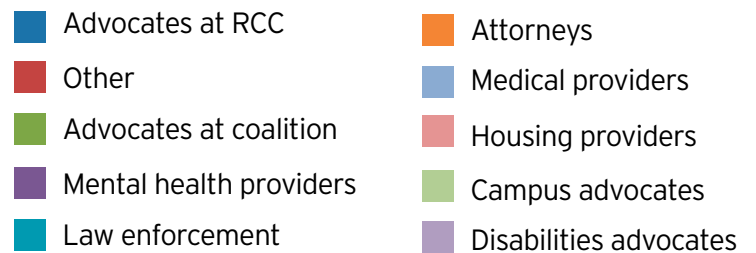
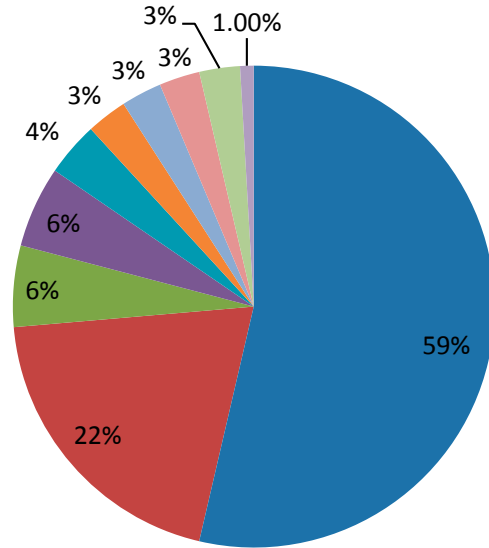
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Two hundred and thirty-nine individuals responded to the survey. The largest percentage of respondents, 59%, identified as advocates at rape crisis centers. The second largest group, 22%, identified as "other." This included a wide range of roles such as social worker, victim advocate in law enforcement, advocate at comprehensive violent crime center, dual program advocate\*, homeless shelter advocate, mental health advocate, therapist/clinician, probation officer, youth advocate, cultural



## Respondents continued

affairs advocate, advocate for immigrant women, prevention educator, funder, planned parenthood educator/advocate, military advocate, Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner, and AmeriCorps volunteer. Six percent of respondents were advocates at coalitions. Six percent of respondents were mental health providers. Four percent were law enforcement officers. Three percent of respondents were attorneys. Three percent were medical providers. Three percent were housing providers. Three percent were university-based advocates. Less than one percent of respondents identified as advocates for people with disabilities.



\*Dual program advocates worked at agencies addressing both sexual and domestic violence.

## Thirty-three states and one U.S. Territory\* represented in the survey

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|-----------------|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| 1.) Arizona     | 11.) Kentucky      | 21.) North Carolina | 31.) Virginia      |
| 2.) Arkansas    | 12.) Maine         | 22.) North Dakota   | 32.) Washington    |
| 3.) California  | 13.) Massachusetts | 23.) Ohio           | 33.) West Virginia |
| 4.) Connecticut | 14.) Michigan      | 24.) Oklahoma       | 34.) Wisconsin     |
| 5.) Florida     | 15.) Minnesota     | 25.) Oregon         |                    |
| 6.) Guam        | 16.) Missouri      | 26.) Pennsylvania   |                    |
| 7.) Indiana     | 17.) Nebraska      | 27.) South Carolina |                    |
| 8.) Illinois    | 18.) New Hampshire | 28.) Tennessee      |                    |
| 9.) Iowa        | 19.) New Jersey    | 29.) Texas          |                    |
| 10.) Kansas     | 20.) New York      | 30.) Vermont        |                    |

\*Gaps in participation occurred in the Rocky Mountain states, deep South, and U.S. Territories. Efforts to bridge these gaps are being developed.

## Questions

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A combination of quantitative and qualitative questions were developed and organized around six main content areas:

1. Housing and homelessness from a broad perspective
2. Housing and people with disabilities
3. Housing and people in later life
4. Subsidized housing
5. Advocates' needs
6. Policy recommendations

## Key findings

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### 1. Housing and homelessness from a broad perspective

#### Quantitative findings

- One third of respondents report that up to 20% of victims and survivors struggle to find or keep housing because of sexual violence.
- Over one third of respondents report that up to 20% of victims and survivors became homeless as a result of sexual violence.
- Twenty percent of respondents report that between 61% and 80% of victims were sexually assaulted where they were living.

The most common forms of sexual violence reported included the following:

- Rape (86%)
- Child sexual assault (78%)
- Marital/partner rape (76%)
- Incest (73%)
- Acquaintance rape (70%)
- Date rape (67%)

#### Qualitative findings

Participants shared a range of qualitative responses, depicting the experiences of sexual violence victims and survivors in the areas of housing and homelessness. Some of the common themes that emerged from the qualitative responses include the following:

- non-offending parents and children losing their homes after perpetrators of child sexual abuse – who are also main breadwinners – leave the home or are incarcerated;
- landlords being unresponsive in making residences physically safe and secure;
- unsafe living environments contributing to rape and other crimes, i.e., robbery;
- lack of awareness and sensitivity about sexual violence among property owners/landlords;
- sexual exploitation of tenants by landlords;
- victims/survivors having inadequate funds to break leases and secure alternative housing;
- victims/survivors couch-surfing and living out of car because of inability to secure safe housing; and
- teen victims/survivors being kicked out of their homes by parents after reporting child sexual abuse.

#### Participants quotes

“This previously thriving and successful individual was forced to jump from couch to couch, occasionally sleeping in her car.”

“We have also worked with women who were being assaulted as a form of ‘rent,’ and were forced to leave when they refused to continue with the assaults.”

“Some victims complain of non-responsive landlords, when they ask for locks to be changed, windows/screens repaired, having buzzers or doors being locked in secure buildings.”

“Many times, victims are asked to leave if the landlord feels the safety of the building is now compromised.”

“We have clients who ... cannot afford to pay for deposits and other moving expenses as a result of being traumatized. They often stay in dangerous relationships due to lack of financial stability.”

“We worked with a few teen women this year who were assaulted by their mother’s new partner and were asked to leave their homes due to reporting.”

“When it comes to children who are assaulted by the breadwinner in the house, the breadwinner is taken into custody and the family is in danger of losing their home because of lack of funds.”

“She was raped in her room by another resident of the hotel who gained entry through the door that could not be locked.”

“I have had clients who had to break leases in order to find safety. This has been very costly to the client.”

“We worked with a woman who was sexually assaulted in her apartment complex. She wanted to move but the property manager was unwilling to work with her.”







## Key findings

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### 2. Housing and people with disabilities

#### Qualitative findings

Participants shared many barriers that people with disabilities experience in the housing arena. Common themes included the following:

- vulnerability to assaults by caregivers who provide essential goods and services;
- lack of culturally responsive, accessible, affordable, safe housing and shelter;
- disabilities create vulnerabilities to sexual violence; and
- caregivers' control of finances and major decisions, i.e., to relocate.

#### Participants quotes

"They are at the mercy of those coming in to help with daily care or provide daily meals. These people are basically strangers and will also lie to them and threaten to not continue services if they tell, or give them a fear that they/the victim will be evicted or have to leave the program. Some also have very poor language, mobility to flee or fight off a predator."

"They are preyed upon because they do not recognize warning signs – I have three clients who were sexually assaulted by neighbors they had entrusted with their keys in the event of medical emergencies."

"Disabled victim needing to move out of current housing due to caretaker agency inability to protect. Challenges finding appropriate housing for a client with specific needs."

"Shelters are not accessible – no ramps, doors not wide enough for wheel chairs, no bedrooms on first floor, no personal care available, difficulty communicating needs to shelter staff, unable to cook [or] clean as other residents are required to do. Other shelter residents' intolerance of disabilities."

"They are asked to leave the housing in which the attack occurred ... they generally cannot find another apartment at the same cost ... they have become adjusted to their apartment with their disability and find it difficult to consider learning how to adapt to another living space."

"Having their finances controlled by a caretaker/family member/intimate partner which prohibits relocation, finding affordable housing that accommodates their physical needs, limited income which prohibits accessing safe, affordable housing."

"It is difficult enough to find buildings that have more than the most basic of requirements for people with disabilities and it is therefore harder to move – which can leave people vulnerable ..."

## Key findings

### 3. Housing and people in later life

#### Qualitative findings

Participants shared a range of qualitative responses about the barriers people in later life experience in housing. Common themes included the following:

- fixed incomes limit individuals' abilities to relocate after sexual violence has occurred;
- physical and cognitive disabilities associated with aging increase vulnerabilities to victimization by caregivers and others;
- vulnerabilities to assaults by caregivers, who are depended upon for essential goods and services by people in later life;
- long waiting lists for safe, affordable housing for older adults; and
- other crimes in housing for older adults contribute to their risk for victimization.

#### Participants quotes

"Living on fixed income. i.e., financial ability to relocate in times of emergencies after a [sexual assault] incident may be difficult."

"Elders who suffer from memory loss or physical mobility issues are usually at a higher risk of suffering sexual violence and not reporting it or recognizing that what is happening is wrong."

"This population, like people with disabilities, may be more confined to their homes or more reliant on people to help them with their care. They, too, are more vulnerable, accessible and less credible. They may also have less options for moving."



"Waiting lists for housing – including those for the elderly – combined with the lack of affordable housing that someone with a fixed income can provide, the difficulty in moving to get away from an unsafe situation and that the elderly under report at even higher rates than the rest of the population."

"Elders struggle with vulnerability because of lack of mobility, fear due to physical inability to fight back, and isolation from friends and family."

"Elders in this community are often forced into unsafe living circumstances where they cohabitate with those who have substance abuse problems. They are in environments that have higher crime rates and greater risk to sexual violence. There is also a large gap for people between the ages of 50 and 65 in obtaining retirement housing."

## Key findings

### 4. Subsidized housing

For the purpose of the survey, subsidized housing was defined as:

- Public housing, which includes programs where the housing authority owns the building and is the landlord.
- Section 8 Voucher, which includes programs where the tenant uses a subsidy (in the form of a voucher) to find rental housing in the private market. The voucher is paid to a private landlord.
- Section 8 Project Based, which includes programs where the subsidy is given directly to the owner/landlord who provides affordable housing to multiple families in the private sector. The subsidy stays with the property, not with the tenant.

#### Quantitative findings

- Forty-five percent of respondents indicate that up to 20% of victims had to break their leases because of sexual violence.
- Twelve percent of respondents report that between 81% and 100% of victims are unable to relocate after sexual assault.

The most commonly identified subsidized housing barriers for sexual violence victims were the following:

- Wanting to move because of perpetrator living in close proximity (61%)
- Wanting to move because of sexual assault occurring in/near residence (61%)
- Long waiting lists (60%)
- Risk of sexual violence because of unsafe

conditions (48%)

- Landlord refusal to repair locks, windows, doors, and other physical features of residence (43%)
- Inability to move quickly enough to escape future risk (42%)
- Not being able to move because of the cost of breaking a lease (41%)
- Eviction for calling police (31%)
- Damage to apartment for reasons related to sexual violence (26%)
- Threats of eviction because of sexual violence-related disruptions (25%)
- Landlord harassment against tenants (22%)

#### Qualitative findings

Participants shared qualitative information to help illuminate the barriers sexual violence victims and survivors experience in the public housing arena. Common themes included:

- sexual violence victims placed on long waiting lists for public housing;
- fear of reporting sexual violence because of dangerous living conditions and fear of being evicted;
- landlords advising tenants not to report sexual violence;
- loss of housing voucher because of sexual violence and inability to move after sexual violence because of public housing voucher being attached to specific property;
- unsafe living conditions and other crimes occurring in public housing;
- landlords refusal to make physical environment safe and secure;
- landlords lack of understanding and responsiveness to sexual violence and domestic violence.



### Participants quotes

"The waiting lists are unbelievable – about seven to eight years out."

"She chose not to report being raped because of the dangerous living conditions in her subsidized housing apartment complex."

"A victim of sexual assault lived in an apartment building where she was assaulted. The person she accused had ties to the apartment management and she was shortly evicted."

"In a sibling sexual assault, mom lost housing voucher, and was ostracized by neighbors and evicted. Assaulting sibling was removed from the residence and mom and other child were left homeless."

"I have worked with a client whose landlord advised her not to contact the police during a sexual harassment situation."

"A survivor was awarded subsidized housing and her place was robbed by a maintenance person. Another survivor was notified of a registered sex offender in her housing and was sexually assaulted."

"One survivor who was assaulted in her apartment was unable to move because her Section 8 was connected to that landlord and that building."

"Survivor sexually assaulted in her public housing unit; she wants to move because she feels unsafe, but cannot find any affordable housing."

"Had a client who was being harassed and stalked by ex-husband. Landlord would not fix the door he kicked in or replace broken window locks without community action agency getting involved."

"We had an issue where a landlord would not honor an OFP [order for protection]. She allowed the perpetrator in the building."

"Landlords fearing the client will 'attract trouble'."

"A survivor was awarded subsidized housing, and her place was robbed by a maintenance person. The safety of these housing units is compromised. Another survivor was not notified of a registered sex offender in her housing and was sexually assaulted."



## Key findings

### 5. Advocates' needs around housing issues

Respondents requested a range of assistance in addressing the housing needs of sexual violence victims/survivors and engaging in prevention or other forms of advocacy. Legal advocacy and/or representation for sexual violence victims on housing matters received the most responses (73%).

Types of assistance requested by respondents included the following:

- Legal advocacy and/or representation for sexual violence victims on housing matters (72%)
- Advocacy and counseling tools related to housing and sexual violence (63%)
- Outreach and public education tools related to housing and sexual violence (61%)
- Screening tools to help identify the housing needs of sexual violence victims (57%)
- Community assessment tools related to housing and sexual violence (51%)
- Prevention tools related to housing and sexual violence (51%)
- Research and statistics on housing and sexual violence (50%)
- Coalition building tools related to housing and sexual violence (38%)
- Other (15%)

Other responses included the following:

- More public housing options and shorter waiting lists
- Financial resources
- Training for law enforcement

- Funding for shelter and housing needs for male victims, transgender victims and same sex violence victims
- Funding to support shelter for sexual assault victims
- Funding for housing sexual assault victims
- Funding for legal services
- Referral information for immediate services
- Leeway for “rule breaking” in a sexual assault situation. Survivors should not be evicted because information came out in a police report about rule infractions occurring during or prior to an assault. (Rule breaking could mean breaking the rules of the housing complex and/or committing crimes prior to or during an assault.)
- Sexual violence victims not being discriminated against because of outstanding utility bills or past housing policy violations.



## Key findings

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### 6. Policy implications

Findings from this survey echo much of what the research on housing and sexual violence reveals:

- Sexual violence can cause a person to lose or have to leave their housing to avoid further violence or trauma.
- Once homeless or living in inadequate or unsafe housing conditions, individuals are at greater risk for further victimization.

Therefore, housing is a critical policy and prevention area for sexual assault advocates and allied partners. Survey respondents identified multiple policy areas they felt were important to the anti-sexual violence movement. A discussion of each follows.

#### **Non-discrimination protections**

According to survey findings, sexual violence victims and survivors experience barriers in reporting, relocating, and accessing safe, affordable living conditions in subsidized housing systems. Currently, the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) provides certain protections to domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking victims within the Public and Section 8 housing systems. Such victims are protected from evictions, terminations, and denials of applications within these housing systems because of their status as victims or their experiences with domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking. One policy advocacy strategy may include educating policymakers and partners about the complex and multifaceted needs of sexual violence victims and survivors within subsidized housing systems.

#### **Priority status**

Sexual violence often creates an urgent need for victims to relocate, due to the violence having occurred in/near their residences, their perpetrators living in close proximity, the general lack of safety they feel living amid other violent crimes, and/or the traumatic effects they may experience following the assault(s). Unfortunately, for many victims and survivors, there is often no place to turn, no affordable or “better” option. In some communities, individuals have to wait seven or eight years for their housing subsidies to be honored. Giving sexual violence victims and survivors priority status when they apply to subsidized housing, as well as creating mechanisms for immediate transfers within those housing systems, may help alleviate much of their trauma, reducing the time they have to wait to access safer housing options. Advocates can be instrumental in providing policymakers and partners with information about the complex ways in which sexual violence trauma can create a dire need for victims to relocate.

#### **Emergency shelter**

Many advocates identified the lack of emergency shelter and lack of funding for such services for sexual violence victims as a major policy need. Currently, sexual violence victims and survivors do not have access to shelters that specifically address their needs. While sexual violence victims may have access to domestic violence shelters in some communities, these services are primarily funded to house domestic violence victims and survivors. In difficult economic times, cuts in funding, and increasing waiting lists for beds, sexual violence victims may experience less access to such services.



Traditional homeless shelters are not always perceived as safe places for individuals who have experienced sexual violence. While some shelters are beginning to provide trauma-informed services, research and information on this is still in its' infancy. Funding for emergency shelter and research, training, and technical assistance on trauma-informed shelter are policy areas to consider.

### **Enforcement of habitability**

Survey respondents identified habitability concerns related to sexual violence victims' residences. Many reported unsafe living conditions, due to broken doors, locks, and windows and difficulties in getting such items repaired by landlords. Collaborating with legal aid providers and other housing advocates to

bridge gaps in the enforcement of habitability may be a policy area to consider.

### **Community notification**

Survey respondents identified concerns about sex offender notification systems, sharing anecdotal information about victims and survivors being unaware of offenders living in close proximity. Offenders that were identified included other tenants, landlords, maintenance personnel, and others living in close proximity and/or having access to victims' residences. Possible policy responses might include developing a system of background checks within subsidized housing systems and providing tenants with notification of sex offenders living in close proximity .

## Key findings

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### 6. Policy implications continued

#### **Relocation funds**

Relocating after a sexual assault is a common need, yet funding and mechanisms to do so are often limited. Survey respondents shared many concerns about the ways in which sexual violence can jeopardize housing and trauma can create urgent relocation needs in the lives of victims and survivors. A policy area to consider might be establishing funding for relocation for sexual violence victims and survivors, mirroring funds that exist for domestic violence victims and survivors.

#### **Supportive sexual assault services**

Sexual violence victims and survivors encounter many barriers to accessing supportive services following their assaults. These barriers are often compounded by issues of oppression, such as sexism, racism, classism, able-ism, heterosexism, and ageism. When working multiple jobs to make ends meet and struggling to put food on the table, making time for counseling can seem like

an impossible luxury. One policy area to consider might be establishing supportive services for sexual violence victims as well as sexual violence prevention within subsidized housing systems and other housing settings.

#### **Access to public and private housing stock**

The supply and availability of affordable, safe housing in both the private and public markets are very limited. Many policy solutions hinge on the availability of such housing. Survey respondents recommended that funding and housing be expanded to ensure that sexual violence victims and survivors have options following their assaults—that safer, more affordable options be within reach to ensure that all victims are able to address their needs and live within a violence-free household.

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For more information about this survey and its findings, or to request technical assistance about housing and other issues related to sexual violence, please contact the National Sexual Violence Resource Center: [resources@nsvrc.org](mailto:resources@nsvrc.org) or 877-739-3895.

