

At the Crossroads and in the Crosshairs: Social Welfare Policy and Low-Income Women's Vulnerability to Domestic Violence

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Although research and social policy on domestic violence and poverty have largely focused on factors linked to welfare reform policy goals, low-income abused women have a broader set of needs for which they turn to the state for assistance. Using ethnographic data, I explore the impact of abused mothers' interactions with an array of social welfare policy systems on their ability to protect themselves and their children from domestic violence. Analysis of interview and observational data found that distinctions between positive and negative influences on vulnerability to domestic violence were not clear-cut. Policies that provided protection and security to some placed others at increased risk; some policies mitigated the risk of further abuse for participants at the same time that other policies exacerbated their risk. Findings identify some current policy successes and failures, highlight the important role played by frontline workers, and demonstrate the importance of expanding the focus of research in this area beyond welfare and employment policies and outcomes to include the range of structural forces affecting family life in low-income communities. Drawing on the analyses and findings, I discuss ways in which social policy might be made more responsive to abused women and better ensure the safety and security of our most vulnerable families. Keywords: domestic violence, social welfare policy, welfare reform, vulnerability, ethnography.

Although the abuse of women by intimate partners occurs among all segments of society, research has demonstrated that it is a particularly devastating social problem for low-income women and children (Moore 1997; Tolman and Raphael 2000). In addition to physical violence, domestic abuse includes coercive emotional, psychological, and economic tactics that can be equally and in some cases more damaging (American Psychological Association 1996). The realities of poverty intensify the impact of such tactics and greatly reduce the resources

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available to help cope with both short-term and long-term effects. Women of all socioeconomic backgrounds often remain in abusive situations because of economic dependence on male partners (Barnett 2000); the availability of public welfare assistance has historically offered an alternative to this dependence for some (Raphael 1996). Research over the past ten years has documented the disproportionate impact of domestic violence on low-income families, demonstrated that domestic violence can interfere in women's ability to comply with welfare policy requirements (Brush 2000), affect their work participation (Tolman and Wang 2005), and serve as a significant barrier to their economic advancement (Danziger et al. 2000; Meisel, Chandler, and Rienzi 2003).

Because research and social policy on low-income abused women were initially driven by the momentum of welfare reform, factors linked to welfare policy goals such as program compliance, employment, and the relationship between welfare access and abuse victimization have been their primary focus (Brush 2003). However, recent research into welfare policies designed to address domestic violence suggests that this focus has been too narrow. Studies documenting problems in implementation (e.g., Lindhorst and Padgett 2005) and effectiveness (e.g., Hetling and Born 2005; Postmus 2004) support earlier findings indicating that although current policies provide vital help for some domestic violence victims, they do not provide meaningful assistance to the majority of abused women on welfare (Lein et al. 2001), and may exacerbate risks or harms confronted by some (Scott, London, and Myers 2002). Taken together, this research suggests a fundamental mismatch between low-income abused women's actual needs and the assumptions about those needs that underlie current policy.

As Laura Lein and associates (2001) observe, low-income women have a variety of survival needs for which they turn to the state for assistance, regardless of their abuse experiences or status. Abused low-income women are thus likely to interact with multiple social welfare agencies, in addition to the public welfare system. Although research on domestic violence experiences and outcomes among this population is expanding to other key policy areas, such as housing (e.g., Menard 2001; Raphael 2001) and health policy (Romero et al. 2003), it has yet to focus on the array of social welfare policies and systems with which low-income abused mothers must contend as they negotiate their lives and care for their families.

In this article, I explore this broader intersection of poverty, domestic violence, and social welfare policy in the lives of low-income mothers. Using longitudinal ethnographic data from an urban community study of low-income family life in the wake of welfare reform, I examine how study participants utilized social welfare and domestic violence policies and systems, describe the impact of these interactions on their ability to protect themselves and their children from harm, and identify specific ways in which policies and systems functioned to both reduce and heighten their vulnerability to domestic violence. To contextualize these findings and their implications, I first briefly review the development of domestic violence among low-income families as a social problem, describe concerns raised by feminist theorists about unintended consequences of this history for some abused women, and discuss the framework of policies currently in place to assist low-income abused women. By providing a moving picture of how a sample of low-income, urban African American, Latina, and Euro-American abuse victims and survivors experience the programs and systems designed to help and protect them, and attending to the larger social and structural forces that shape their experiences, this analysis identifies current policy successes and failures, and demonstrates the importance of expanding the focus of research and scholarship in this area beyond welfare and employment to include the range of structural forces affecting family life in low-income communities. It further suggests ways in which social policy might be made more responsive to abused women and more effectively ensure the safety and security of our most vulnerable families.

Background: Social and Policy History

Domestic Violence Policy and Vulnerable Families

Although domestic violence was recognized as a social problem at earlier points in U.S. history, it did not garner significant public attention or resources until it was placed on the national agenda by feminist activists in the 1970s (Pleck 1987). This emergence of domestic violence as a social problem in the feminist grassroots rather than in the social welfare community or the academy has shaped the course of policy development and practice (Rothenberg 2002). Countering prevailing notions of domestic violence as a pathological condition afflicting socially marginal groups, and thus easily dismissed, domestic violence was presented as a universal problem potentially affecting all women (Moore 1997). After an initial focus on public funding for private shelters and legal policy reformations focusing on safety, domestic violence policies and practices were incorporated into healthcare, mental health child welfare, and other social service systems during the 1980s and 1990s (Schechter 1999). Although differing in specifics, domestic violence policies reflect the movement's focus on women as victims in need of physical safety and protection, and tend to equate safety with separation (Josephson 2002). They seek to protect by providing special dispensations designed to make the various policy systems (e.g., legal, housing, child welfare) responsive to needs and dangers particular to their experiences and/or status that would make compliance with policy regulations potentially harmful for them and/or their children.

Reflecting on this policy history, a number of scholars have observed that the universalist strategy has also generated some unintended negative consequences. Feminists of color argue that efforts to win the support of mainstream society and secure government resources did not attend to the experiences and needs of especially vulnerable abused women, those marginalized by their race, ethnicity, and/or social class (e.g., Crenshaw 1994; Kanuha 1996; Richie 2000). Others contend that the view of battered women as victims can lead to denial of support and services to women who act in ways other than those ascribed to "good" victims—e.g., women who actively fight back or express anger rather than responding with passivity, fear, or helplessness (Mahoney 1994; Schneider 2000). Those outside the white middle class are arguably more likely to be perceived as behaving in ways that are outside the bounds of a proscribed victim. These scholars grant that it may have been initially important to de-emphasize the link between socially vulnerable groups and abuse victimization. But they assert that increasing evidence of the heightened risk of domestic violence confronted by women from these groups, in the context of their continued marginalization, calls for specific attention to their neglected needs and experiences.

Existing policies have provided meaningful help to large numbers of abuse victims, including many from marginalized communities, and the universalist approach did enable advocates to begin the process of alleviating some structural inequalities (Rothenberg 2003). Moreover, as other feminist scholars point out, the discourse and principles of the anti-domestic violence movement were not lifted directly into social policy, but were, rather, translated by the state (Ferraro 1996; McMahan and Pence 2003; Schneider 2000). Despite the validity of these points, the critiques raised by Kimberle Crenshaw (1994) and others strongly suggest that current social policies addressing domestic violence are at best ineffective and at worst may increase vulnerability to abuse for the poor and minority women who are so disproportionately affected and harmed by it (Das Dasgupta and Eng 2003). A review of policy and research to date indicates that these concerns warrant further consideration.

Welfare Policy, Domestic Violence, and Poor Women

Historically, public welfare in the United States has embodied a deep-seated mistrust of those in need of assistance (Gans 1995; Trattner 1979). Policies have differentiated between

those “deserving” and “undeserving” of public aid, and a central function of social welfare bureaucracies has been to make this determination (Katz 1986). Although welfare for poor mothers and children throughout most of the twentieth century was distributed via an entitlement program that theoretically provided an economic safety net for all (Aid to Families with Dependent Children [AFDC] and its predecessors), feminist scholars of the welfare state have demonstrated that this safety net was at best partial (Mink 1995), and was premised on the idea that poor single mothers and their children were inherently less deserving than either white men or the mothers and children who had been legally dependent on them (Gordon 1994). Because AFDC, in contrast to other welfare programs (e.g., social security), was subject to state-level funding and administration, it gave tremendous discretion to street-level service providers in making determinations of deservingness for aid (Gordon 1994; Lipsky 1980). This structure permitted the historic exclusion of minority women (Quadagno 1994), as well as the adoption of eligibility requirements that sought to impose moralistic controls on women's behavior and served to further exclude women of color when they were selectively enforced (Abramovitz 1996). By the 1970s, some of this discretion was removed as a result of welfare rights activism; however, some bias persisted (Abramovitz 2000).

Anti-domestic violence advocates recognized that many women who left abusive relationships depended on the welfare system for economic support during and after that process. Although many also acknowledged that the safety net provided by AFDC was far from ideal, or even adequate, its existence enabled the movement to maintain a universalist approach with a primary focus on physical safety and legal protection, operating under the illusory presumption that basic survival needs were secure (Lennet 1997). The successes of the welfare rights movement notwithstanding, mistrust of poor single mothers, and particularly those of color, led to calls for punitive changes to AFDC, which culminated in the 1996 welfare reform. AFDC was eliminated and replaced with a new program, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), which removed any legal entitlement to aid on the basis of need (Mink 1998b).

The advent of welfare reform prompted a surge of feminist research and activism on the intersection of domestic violence, poverty, and welfare (Brandwein 1999a). Despite empirical findings that approximately two-thirds of welfare-eligible women experience abuse from a partner during their lifetime (Tolman and Raphael 2000), advocates were unable to leverage public sympathy for abuse victims to block punitive policy changes. TANF measures such as mandatory work requirements and paternity disclosure were argued to be particularly dangerous for women currently in or fleeing from abusive relationships. Advocates were able to amend TANF to allow states to provide waivers of program requirements that would place an abused woman in danger (via the Family Violence Option or FVO). However, evidence to date indicates that this policy has not been effectively implemented and does not adequately address the needs of many intended beneficiaries (Hetling and Born 2005; Lein et al. 2001; Lindhorst and Padgett 2005; Postmus 2004).

Although TANF sets eligibility requirements at a national level, it is in many ways even more restrictive than AFDC. By increasing the degree of discretion allocated to states and frontline workers, it reproduces and reintroduces key elements of AFDC that might permit the reproduction of historic biases in implementation (Mink 1998a). Studies of the FVO confirm that this discretion results in disparities in abused women's access to policy protections (Hetling and Born 2005; Lindhorst and Padgett 2005). However, as the recent ethnographic work of Sharon Hays (2003) demonstrates, discretion also provides frontline welfare workers the opportunity to mitigate some punitive TANF measures. Thus, the question of how current welfare policy affects low-income women's vulnerability to domestic violence is likely to hinge in large part on individual interactions with frontline welfare workers and the outcomes of these encounters.

Low-income women who are abused have a variety of needs for which they turn to the state for assistance (Allen, Bybee, and Sullivan 2004). Needs related to safety crises resulting

from domestic violence (e.g., immediate refuge, physical safety, legal protection) are fairly well addressed by a range of domestic violence policies (restraining orders, access to shelters, criminal penalties, etc.). Because the income support provided by TANF does not adequately address the full range of needs related to the ongoing struggles of life in poverty, such as adequate child care, transportation, food, housing, and living-wage jobs (Mink 1998b), low-income mothers are likely to engage with an array of systems and providers. Although these daily survival needs may not seem as pressing as needs related to safety crises arising from abuse or violence, research indicates that they are significant enough to take precedence for many low-income abuse victims and survivors who struggle to protect their families (Lein et al. 2001; Pearson, Griswold, and Thoennes 2001). Due to their structural marginalization, abused women of color may be less likely than white women to access domestic violence services (Liang et al. 2005), more likely to rely on welfare and low-wage work as a means of escaping abuse (Brush 2001), and likely have fewer private resources to meet survival needs; social welfare institutions and policies may therefore be particularly significant in their lives. Accurate assessment of the ability of social welfare policy to meet the true needs of low-income abused women thus requires consideration of the range of policies and systems to which they turn for assistance, rather than an exclusive focus on domestic violence policies within the welfare program.

At the Intersection of Domestic Violence and Social Welfare Policy

Although the prevalence of domestic violence within social welfare caseloads has been recognized by social workers since the nineteenth century (Gordon 1988), neither the specific needs of domestic violence victims nor the impact of violence on abused women's ability to meet eligibility criteria or comply with regulations were considered by policymakers in formulating social welfare policies (Lennet 1997). As Linda Gordon (1988) documents, some state aid to abused women came via the child welfare system, but only when women were able to frame their needs through the lens of their children's. When advocates sought to bring domestic violence awareness and policy development into these systems in the 1980s and 1990s, they in effect introduced a new class of "deserving" beneficiary, the abused woman and her children (Chanley and Alozie 2001). As Ruth Brandwein (1999b) notes, the expansion of domestic violence policies within social welfare systems indicates that advocates were successful in articulating and promoting this lens. However, because it was developed from a universalist perspective, the lens through which the social welfare system views abused women is not actually based on the experiences of the particular women most likely to seek its services—those who are poor and come from socially marginalized communities.

One effect of this lens is that policies designed to help abused women may in practice create significant barriers and burdens. For example, eligibility for some domestic violence policy protections, such as domestic violence housing vouchers or waivers of welfare requirements under the FVO, require official documentation of victimization. Depending on state and local practices, this might include restraining orders, official police reports, or medical records. Recent scholarship demonstrates that some abused women, particularly those from marginalized communities, may confront systemic barriers that make obtaining such formal verification difficult (Sokoloff and Dupont 2005). In other cases, seeking help through any sources that might provide acceptable documentation may place women at increased risk of harm from her abuser. Even for those not subject to such constraints, obtaining proof of status requires that a victim personally identify her experiences as "domestic violence" and be willing to either seek formal help as a victim or publicly acknowledge and/or apply this label to herself. Other research suggests that some women may resist such presentations of self either as a means of maintaining the self-efficacy needed to cope with the challenges of their lives (Lempert 1996; Purvin 2003), or because definitions of domestic violence particular to their community or to their experiences may differ from the mainstream definitions of abuse that are codified in these policies (Sokoloff and Dupont 2005).

The prevailing focus on safety and neglect of abused women's other needs within social policy systems gives rise to another set of potential barriers and burdens. Most notably, one form of regulation included in some policies, particularly those providing emergency shelter and operating in the child welfare system (child protective services or CPS) is a requirement that an abused woman separate from and have no contact with her abusive partner as a condition of service receipt. On the surface such policies make sense; they protect by deploying state power to keep perpetrators away from victims, and require victim cooperation and participation in the process in return. However, this approach fails to account for the dire circumstances confronted by many low-income women, who may need to keep even abusive partners in their lives in order to maintain needed childcare or other economic supports, even if they are receiving welfare. Recent ethnographic work suggests that because policies ignore the social and family networks in which low-income women are embedded and the economic realities that bind them, policies intended to foster self-sufficiency (e.g., work requirements) and/or promote private rather than state dependency for low-income women (e.g., marriage promotion) may become instead sources of increased marginalization (Hays 2003) and vulnerability to abuse (Cherlin et al. 2004; Purvin 2003; Scott, London, and Myers 2002).

The work of the anti-domestic violence movement undoubtedly opened up new avenues of protection and support to many abuse victims in the social welfare system. The policy and scholarship reviewed here indicate that despite this significant achievement, the strategies employed by advocates also arguably, if unintentionally, laid the ground for denying assistance to those who do not appear "deserving" or whose structural circumstances conflict with policy assumptions and requirements, as some feminist critiques suggest. But what is the reality on the ground in low-income communities? Are women being excluded from important social policy protections for these reasons? Do social policy requirements and regulations constitute barriers and burdens that increase rather than mitigate vulnerability to abuse? Or are the policies as formulated and implemented doing a relatively good job of meeting low-income abused women's needs? Before turning to the data to explore these questions, I describe the local policy context in which they were gathered.

Massachusetts Policy Climate

Because the policy climate in each state differs, local context is critical to understanding the options and constraints confronted by low-income women trying to cope with domestic violence. Massachusetts is notable for progressive policies and public agencies, and for the strength of its advocacy communities. During the 1980s and 1990s, it was on the forefront in the development of legal protections for partner violence victims, and became nationally renowned for its pioneering work in incorporating domestic violence advocacy into its health and human service bureaucracies, particularly its child protective services agency (Lennet 1997). Compared to other states, Massachusetts is markedly generous with low-income housing assistance in general, and particularly for victims of hardships such as domestic violence (Hirst 2003). Massachusetts was also one of several states granted federal waivers to implement early versions of welfare reform, prior to its formal devolution to the states via the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). Prompted by this early entrée into welfare reform, local advocates played key roles in initiating early research into the overlap between welfare use and partner violence (Lennet and Colten 1999). Although Massachusetts instituted a surprisingly restrictive welfare reform regime, advocates succeeded in securing the state's adoption of the FVO. To implement the FVO, Massachusetts established in 1997 one of the first domestic violence units within its public welfare agency, modeled after the successful innovations in this area implemented in its child protective services agency. In addition to waivers from specific welfare program requirements, welfare recipients in Massachusetts who have experienced partner violence are eligible for support services from domestic violence specialists (Burt, Zweig, and Schlichter 2000). Given its progressive

social policies, strong advocacy communities, and national leadership in domestic violence policy, Massachusetts should provide something of a best-case scenario.

The Study

The research questions driving this inquiry were whether and how social policies, both in general and those specifically targeted at domestic violence, affected vulnerability to domestic violence among women participating in a community ethnographic study of low-income families. Low-income and socially marginalized women have preexisting vulnerability to domestic violence as a product of their location in the social structure, and their economic dependence on the state for various needs subjects them to further institutional constraints that may increase their vulnerability; domestic violence policies aim to increase safety and reduce vulnerability to abuse in part by providing special protections within various existing systems (e.g., legal, housing, child protection, welfare) to make these work better for victimized women and thereby reduce their vulnerability to a range of ill effects of poverty, including domestic violence. But how is vulnerability to abuse to be assessed in the case of individual women? Previous research employing this construct indicates that it is highly subjective (Nurius et al. 2003), and suggests that a denial of personal vulnerability may in fact be crucial to victims' self-efficacy and survival (Lempert 1996). Because ethnographic methods include participant observation in study respondents' lives and communities as well as interviews, they provide a multifaceted lens into their subjective experiences as well as more readily observable life outcomes, and are thus ideally suited to investigate a construct with both subjective and objective dimensions. Although the use of data from a general community study to explore domestic violence means that pertinent data may have been omitted, it also provides a unique window into the lives of a sample of women who experienced high levels of domestic violence but may have been unlikely to identify as such or volunteer for a more explicitly targeted study.

Data Source

The findings reported here are drawn from a larger study (Purvin 2004) that examined the impact of intimate partner abuse on low-income families using longitudinal data from the Boston site of a major ethnographic study, *Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three City Study* (hereafter, the Three City Study). This project was a multi-site, multi-method, multi-year, and multidisciplinary inquiry conducted collaboratively by researchers from several universities, designed to investigate and assess the impact of welfare policy changes on the lives of low-income African American, Latino, and Euro-American urban families with young children in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio. In addition to a random-sample survey and a focused observational study of child development, the project included an ethnographic study of family life within high-poverty neighborhoods in these cities.

Participants in the Three City Study were recruited through a variety of agencies and contacts in specified low-income neighborhoods. For the Boston site, 54 families met eligibility criteria that included having an income below 200 percent of the federal poverty line, a target child between the ages of two and four, and a willingness to have researchers come into one's home. Principal study participants were the focal children's primary caregivers, in most but not all cases, biological mothers.¹ The Boston data were collected by a diverse team

1. An additional 17 families were recruited as part of a sub-study to investigate the impact of childhood disability in this population; these families met the same eligibility criteria, except that the target child age was zero to eight and had to have a disability that was significant enough to have an impact on daily routine. For further details on the design and sample of the Three City Study, see Winston and associates 1999.

of 14 ethnographers, matched in most cases to the participants by race and/or ethnicity. Ethnographers conducted semi-structured interviews on a range of topics related to low-income family life (e.g., parenting, health, work history, welfare history) as well as unstructured interviews and observations of participants' home lives and interactions with social network members, community agencies, and social service providers. Families were recruited into the study from 1999 through 2000. Intensive data collection took place on a monthly basis for 12 to 18 months, and follow-up interviews were conducted at 6 and 12 months after a family completed the intensive phase. The last interviews were completed in 2003.²

Analytic Procedures

All ethnographic data (transcripts, fieldnotes, and memos) were initially coded by ethnographers using a general topical coding scheme developed by the Three City Study principal investigators (e.g., welfare experience, intimate relationships, social support, social service access). Using these indexed data, I sought to examine participants' experiences both in the context of their own lives (a case-oriented approach) and in comparison to others of similar and different demographic backgrounds within the overall sample (a variable-oriented approach) (Ragin 1987). I used the QSR N6 qualitative analysis package (QRS International 2002) to compile case summaries of each participant's abuse-related experiences and to develop a coding scheme that accounted for their experiences of domestic violence and their involvement with the network of policy systems and public and private agencies targeted toward low-income families and abuse victims in Massachusetts. The N6 program facilitated targeted searches of coded data that identified unique and shared patterns of experience across the sample. This modified grounded theory approach to analysis incorporated codes that were based on existing literature (e.g., physical violence, control, isolation) as well as codes derived inductively or "in vivo" (e.g., ambivalence, vulnerability). It included codes that denoted experiences (e.g., domestic violence intervention, injury) as well as codes that identified meanings and interpretations of experiences (e.g., fear, resistance, empowerment).

The concept of women's vulnerability to abuse emerged as a theme early in the data analysis, in participants' descriptions of how they came to become involved and/or had difficulties in extricating themselves from abusive relationships. Dimensional coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998) of this construct revealed that, consistent with other research, women's developmental and life experiences, factors in their social and cultural environments, and economic and structural forces all contributed to vulnerability to abuse (Barnett 2000, 2001). The analysis presented here highlights a key domain of structural vulnerability that has received little empirical attention, the role and impact of social welfare policies. A policy interaction or outcome was classified as decreasing a woman's vulnerability to domestic violence when it contributed to her ability to protect herself and her children from an abuser's control or violence, and as increasing vulnerability when it detracted from or impeded her efforts to do so. For example, the smooth provision of a housing voucher that enabled a respondent to move to a location safe from her abuser was classified as decreasing vulnerability. Conversely, the inability of another woman to obtain the resources needed to move even with a voucher was coded as increasing vulnerability, as she and her children remained easily locatable by their abuser.

Sample Description

Demographics. After excluding families who did not complete intimate relationship history interviews, I retained 59 of 71 participants from the full Boston ethnographic sample for

2. I worked on the Three City Study as an ethnographer and data manager on the Boston site from 1999 through 2003. As an ethnographer, I worked with five of the Euro-American families.

my study. Excluded participants did not differ on any observable characteristics from those retained. Although this sample is not representative, its demographic characteristics are roughly similar to those of the Massachusetts welfare caseload in general at around the time this sample was recruited (as reported in Allard et al. 1997).³ The sample was approximately one-third each African American, Latino, and Euro-American, with slightly fewer Euro-American and slightly more Latino families. Most Latina participants had Puerto Rican ancestry; some had Central American backgrounds. Participants ranged in age from 15 to 54, with the majority (nearly two-thirds) in their twenties and early thirties. Per study parameters, all participants had at least one child; the modal pattern (nearly one-third of families) was two children, fewer than 20 percent had four or more. The sample was split nearly equally among those with less than a high school degree, those with either a high school diploma or GED, and those with some education beyond high school (including community and traditional college coursework as well as vocational or technical training). At the time of their recruitment into the study, just over half of participants were receiving welfare and just under half were not. Overall, about 40 percent of participants were employed at the time of recruitment, and about 60 percent were not.

Abuse Experiences and Status. Although domestic violence was not a primary research topic of the Three City Study, it emerged as a theme early in the ethnography and became a focus of data collection and analysis at all three sites. Participants' abuse experiences were documented in some cases through direct disclosures and in others via ethnographers' observations. To capture information revealed through these different avenues, and to assess the meaning of abuse in participants' lives as well as to record its occurrence, I used a broad definition of domestic violence that included any evidence or disclosure of physical violence and/or patterns of coercive control exercised by one partner in an intimate relationship against the other.

By this definition, 44 of the 59 participants (75 percent) had experienced some type of abuse from an intimate partner during their lifetime, as of the end of data collection. Although this rate is somewhat higher than rates found in other studies (32 to 65 percent lifetime abuse among low-income women, as reported in Tolman and Raphael 2000), it is consistent with them, and it is likely that the longitudinal ethnographic methods employed by the Three City Study yielded a more accurate assessment (Purvin and Burton 2005). Of these 44 participants, 13 experienced abuse in more than one relationship, 12 experienced abuse from a current partner during the study, and 18 experienced abuse or harassment from a former partner during the study.

Findings

In this analysis, distinctions between positive and negative influences on vulnerability were not clear-cut. Policies that provided protection and security to some women placed others at increased risk; some policies mitigated risks for individual participants at the same time that other policies exacerbated their risk. Some cases call into question the ability of the current configuration of social policies to have any effect on the structural susceptibility to domestic violence that accompanies low socioeconomic position. After describing the mix of policy systems with which study participants were involved, I present several ethnographic profiles that illustrate the complex interplay among social policy, structural location, and vulnerability to domestic violence.

3. Demographic information about the current Massachusetts welfare caseload is available on the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Web page (Commonwealth of Massachusetts 2007).

Policy Utilization

At the time this study was conducted, Massachusetts operated its welfare program under a pre-PRWORA waiver that differed from the post-reform federal welfare program in several respects. Like most welfare recipients in the state, most in this study were exempt from work requirements and therefore unemployed. Some participants who were not on welfare were working, some received other public aid such as social security, and some were subsisting entirely on financial support from current partners, child support from former partners, and/or support from other family members. Because Massachusetts welfare recipients had two rather than five years of continuous eligibility, with the option of reapplying after two years off the rolls, there was a fair amount of transition both off of and onto welfare among the sample over the two to three year course of data collection. In addition to the 28 participants who were receiving welfare at recruitment, 13 either received welfare at some time before the study and/or began to receive it during the study, for a total of 41 participants (69 percent) with lifetime welfare usage.

Of the 44 participants with lifetime experiences of domestic violence, 25 reported having sought help from formal sources to deal with safety or other crisis issues related to their abuse, and 36 received welfare at some time during their adult life. Of the ten who might have benefited from FVO provisions during the study (i.e., experienced active abuse-related threats and were enrolled in welfare), just three actually received some form of FVO assistance—one who received a waiver of time limits and some work requirements to address the effects of abuse, and two who were exempted from cooperating with child support enforcement to protect them from ex-partners. One of these latter participants was offered exemptions from work and time-limit provisions but declined, and an additional two others declined to pursue waivers. The domestic violence specialists employed by the welfare department were involved in each of these five cases. Because respondents were not asked about such interactions systematically, it is not known whether the other five were offered help through the FVO and decided against it, or were not informed.

Consistent with Massachusetts's notably generous housing policy, only eight participants were without some type of formal public housing assistance⁴—a teen mother living with her family of origin, three participants who were living illegally in under-housed situations with their mothers in the mothers' subsidized apartments, and four who were independently supporting their housing either alone or with a partner. Of the 51 participants with some kind of subsidized housing, ten were granted them under a domestic violence hardship preference and one was in a transitional housing program for domestic violence victims. Of these 11 participants, seven reported having been homeless due to domestic violence at the time they applied for housing assistance. This includes four participants who spent time prior to the study in domestic violence crisis shelters, and two who went to homeless shelters to escape abusive relationships. All of these women had young children with them while they were homeless.

As anticipated, the study data indicate considerable overlap among participants' involvement with social welfare agencies. The most common pattern, illustrated in Table 1, was welfare receipt, subsidized housing, and involvement with CPS, particularly for women affected by domestic violence.

Simultaneous involvement with multiple systems means that a majority of women in this sample were dealing with competing mandates from at least two different bureaucracies. Some were dealing with others, such as social security, mental health services and/or legal

4. This high rate of housing assistance is likely not an artifact of this sample. In the random-sample survey component of the Three City Study, nearly 75 percent of Boston respondents had either residence- or voucher-based public housing assistance, considerably more than in either Chicago or San Antonio. See Fomby, Estacion, and Moffitt 2003.

Table 1 • Social Welfare Policy Involvement of Study Participants

	<i>Subsidized Housing</i>	<i>Involvement with CPS</i>
No reported DV (<i>n</i> = 15)	11	3
DV victims/survivors (<i>n</i> = 44)	40	21
TANF and DV (<i>n</i> = 37)	34	18
Overall sample (<i>N</i> = 59)	51	24

Source: Author's analysis of ethnographic data from the Welfare, Children, and Families Three City Study.

services, in addition. That the demands of these systems might conflict is undoubtedly a possibility (e.g., Pearce 1999).

Although the majority of domestic violence victims and survivors in this sample were not in abusive relationships during the time that data were collected, all were dealing with long-term effects of abuse. These included emotional trauma, physical injury or disability, and impaired economic viability. Some women endured ongoing complicated and painful relationships with their abusive partners and their partners' families, either because they wanted to maintain these emotional bonds for their children or because their unmet needs for support or child care compelled them to maintain these connections as resources. Thus, even though women's domestic violence injuries might not have been either immediately pressing or apparent to the social welfare bureaucracies to which they turned for assistance, domestic violence was nonetheless a factor influencing many women's needs, their ability to comply with policy mandates, and the impact of policies on their lives and those of their children.

Reducing Vulnerability

Safety and Support. The good news is that for many study participants, social policies worked as intended—to reduce vulnerability. As reviewed above, 11 participants benefited from prioritized access to needed housing assistance that helped them either escape or maintain separation from abusive relationships, and five received either domestic violence emergency or transitional housing. In addition to the protection received by the three women who were granted FVO waivers, 14 participants described situations in which the availability of basic welfare benefits allowed them to exit relationships with abusive partners. Access to free legal services helped six women through the process of leaving abusive relationships and/or obtaining legal protection and financial support, and at least 19 women had obtained a restraining order against a partner at some point. In addition, three respondents volunteered to their ethnographers that their medical providers had demonstrated awareness of domestic violence and offered assistance or support.

Participants' experiences with CPS were particularly notable. Because of its power to remove children from families, and its history of focusing disproportionately on poor and minority families, CPS is viewed quite negatively in some communities (Roberts 2002). As expected, some participants described situations in which CPS responses were not helpful, and the fear of being reported to CPS and/or having one's children taken away was a prominent theme in the data. However, there are seven cases in which policies and structures specifically developed to assist domestic violence victims involved in this system operated as intended. Caseworkers and supervisors acknowledged that the mothers were also victims and, where needed, helped them negotiate and leverage a range of resources (preferential housing, child support, counseling, and appropriate parenting support) to facilitate protection from abusers within ongoing relationships as well as escape and/or recovery in the aftermath.

For some women, CPS was the sole agency to identify the domestic violence and/or link women with needed services. Marla,⁵ a 39 year-old African American mother of two who was a long-term welfare recipient, described to her ethnographer how she got connected to DV services.

- E: Did anybody in your social network tell you that was abuse, that you [were] in an abusive relationship?
 M: No. I just kept it to myself.
 E: You never called something like a shelter or anything like that?
 M: No.
 E: No doctors, no counseling?
 M: Mm-mmm. [No]
 E: But you did go to the battered—
 M: I did go to the battered program, you know, their meetings and stuff like that. They had pretty good meetings.
 E: Who helped you to start on that?
 M: Carla, this lady named Carla.
 E: But how did you get to Carla? Who helped you?
 M: From [CPS] people.

From other data, it is clear that Marla's willingness to acknowledge her experiences of victimization varied; without the awareness of domestic violence within CPS, and the ability of its workers to identify and refer women to services, it is quite possible that Marla would not have obtained the support services that eventually enabled her to get a protective order against her partner.

Protection and Security. Beyond providing a means of exit from abuse, study data reveal that both the promises of protection and the material support offered by social welfare and domestic policies can confer a sense of security that allows women to adopt proactive protective approaches to ongoing intimate relationships. Felicia, a 40 year-old African American mother of three who was on welfare, relied on a potentially violent partner to provide needed resources. In response to the ethnographer's concerns about her risk of abuse, Felicia explained that she was not worried about it because she felt "backed up" by the police, confident that they would respond quickly and appropriately: "I don't go through that no more, I pick up the phone and dial 911 real quick." In explaining why she preferred welfare receipt to marrying her daughter's father, Darlene, a 20 year-old Euro-American mother of one told her ethnographer that welfare was her "security," a reliable source of income, health care, education, and child care for herself and her two year-old daughter Krista. She contrasted this with what it would be like to depend on her steadily-employed boyfriend, Mike, who was prone to refusing to give her money for diapers or other necessities for their child as retaliation when he got angry with her. Darlene did not define Mike's aggressive and threatening behaviors as abusive at this time; however, her insistence on staying on welfare rather than marrying him allowed her to end the relationship more easily when his behavior grew alarming over the course of the study.

Near the end of the study, in commenting on welfare policies that promote marriage as a means of economic security, Darlene made a connection between her own decisions and the vulnerability to domestic violence that accompanies women's poverty.

I mean, that's the way for a woman to get stuck in a bad relationship, I mean, guys are charming at first, but later, and my mother told me, too, she's like, once they marry you, forget about it. She's like, that's what happened to me, and, I mean, her husband beat her, you know, and she was stuck because she had no job, no education, no money, so, I mean, he was, you know, the breadwinner of

5. All names and identifying information have been changed.

the family. So, she hadda stay, and he'd come home every night . . . and, if it didn't go his way, he'd beat the crap outta her, and she hadda stay. And . . . I just wouldn't do that with Krista.

For women with sufficient socioeconomic advantages, employment provides an alternative to the dependency and abuse that Darlene describes. But at the time of the study, Darlene had hardly more education or job prospects than her mother had at the time she was trapped in the relationship described above. The availability of social welfare supports allowed Darlene to maintain sufficient independence to protect herself and her daughter from her mother's fate, guided by her mother's experiences and her own self-protective instincts. Similarly, the existence of an effective domestic violence response within law enforcement helped Felicia feel safe and secure in depending on a potentially violent relationship that was a needed component of her family's economic well-being.

Making Policy Work. Some policies were successful only in conjunction with advocacy efforts. Jana, a white 30 year-old mother of one, left her husband when he became violent, and was able to obtain a restraining order getting him out of the house. However, as a high school dropout and recovering substance abuser, Jana was not able to enter the workforce and get a job sufficient to maintain a household for her and her son, even with child support from her ex-husband. To avoid becoming homeless, Jana applied for a prioritized housing voucher as a domestic violence victim. Her ethnographer recorded in a fieldnote what happened.

When Jana attempted to obtain a Section 8 certificate for her current apartment on the basis of status as a victim of domestic violence, regulations specified that Jana would have to move (to somewhere unknown to her ex-husband, the restrainee). In Jana's case, she argued, this requirement was senseless. As she puts it, "He picks up Ben [her son] once a week, even if I move, he's still gonna know where I live." Jana was insistent on not moving: her child care, and her own [support programs] are nearby, and Ben is settled and secure in his home and neighborhood, which is also near to Jana's mother's home. Most important, Jana was concerned for Ben's sense of stability: he had already suffered one major loss in the break-up of his family, and she did not want him to suffer a second disruption through the loss of the only home the child had ever known. After much self-advocacy, Jana obtained the waiver.

Although a lack of education, impoverished background, severe trauma history, and substance abuse issues left Jana in many ways vulnerable, she also had a number of personal resources that enabled her to be a strong self-advocate for her family. Absent this, she would likely have lost her home and been forced to move away from a community in which she and her son received considerable support, possibly into a shelter if she were unable to locate a new affordable and safe apartment quickly enough—a distinct possibility given Boston's tight, expensive housing market.

Increasing Vulnerability

Policy Constraints. Alongside these successes, the data also reveal notable failures. In some cases, policies increased participants' vulnerability to abuse when they imposed constraints that failed to adequately account for their life circumstances. Darlene, who as described above was able to rely on welfare receipt to protect herself from complete dependence on her daughter's abusive father Mike, was nonetheless kept vulnerable to his abuse because of regulations imposed by Massachusetts' welfare program for teen parents.⁶ In order to receive welfare, which she also needed in order to stay in her GED/job training program and receive

6. Although Darlene was 20 when she entered the study, she entered welfare when she became pregnant at age 18. Because of state regulations, she was considered a teen parent for the duration of her welfare tenure, and subject to those provisions rather than those of the general program.

child care for her daughter, Darlene had to maintain residence with a parent. Her only option was her father, an emotionally abusive, bipolar alcoholic and heavy smoker. His home held memories from Darlene's childhood that exacerbated her post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, and the smoke triggered her asthma. A major reason that Darlene continued her relationship with Mike for over a year after she became concerned about his behavior was to have a place to go when she could not bear being in her father's flat, or when he kicked her out from time to time in retaliation for an imagined slight. Although Darlene had the option of moving into a shelter, she was reluctant and scared to leave the resources of her neighborhood and wanted to keep Krista's life and routines as stable as possible. This situation was only changed after a much-dreaded (and unfounded) allegation of child neglect against Darlene to CPS led to a helpful response, in which CPS recognized that both Darlene and Krista were at risk from Mike as well as from Darlene's father, and helped them access a CPS-sponsored housing subsidy.

Like Darlene, Lorena, a 30 year-old undocumented Latina mother of two, was forced to maintain a relationship with an abuser in order to fulfill a policy regulation. Lorena had a work permit, but was dependent on her husband Rafael's continuing sponsorship to obtain legal residency status (a green card). Although Lorena did not specifically say that Rafael was abusive to her, the behavior she described to the ethnographer was alarming. Believing that Lorena was at risk for violence from Rafael, the ethnographer told her about a legal services agency she could contact to see if she could apply for status without him. But Lorena did not attempt to access this. There are some indications in the data that Lorena did not think of Rafael's behavior as domestic violence because it was not as severe as abuse she had experienced in two prior relationships. Although we cannot know if the requirement to publicly identify Rafael as an abuser, and herself as abused yet again, deterred Lorena from seeking outside help, such acknowledgment might well connote a sense of failure for someone who had worked very hard to escape from two prior abusive relationships. Notably, because Lorena did not seek formal help elsewhere, she did not even learn about this option from any source other than this study. She remained in a relationship in which she and her children were exposed to abuse for over a year into the study, at which point she received her green card.

The experiences of Aida, a 25 year-old Latina mother of four living in public housing, illustrate another way in which policy regulations can increase vulnerability. Although Aida did not think of herself as a victim of domestic violence, she had some concerns about her husband Marcos's controlling and threatening behavior. In discussing her concerns with the ethnographer, she explained why she would not seek help.

E: So, besides me you haven't told anybody else?

A: Nobody . . . I was afraid once because a summer ago that he—because there is a lot of racism here, and there is a man that doesn't like him, and one day they had a problem, and because Marcos is not on the lease so, they called me from the office and they told me that with one more complaint they will take me to court . . . They will put me in the streets.

E: So with this present problem you were afraid?

A: I was afraid that the neighbors could call the police.

E: But it didn't happen.

A: I was scared that they could send me a letter.

Public housing leaseholders are held liable for all problems in their residences. Repeated disturbances, particularly those involving the police, can lead to eviction proceedings. Because becoming homeless with her children was not a consequence she wanted to risk, Aida chose to remain silent about Marcos's behavior. In addition to not disclosing her fears about Marcos to anyone other than the ethnographer, Aida attempted to placate him in his jealous rages rather than risk a fight escalating to the point where neighbors would hear and call the police.

Policy Failures. In addition to the imposition of policy constraints, some participants experienced increased vulnerability to abuse as a result of policy failures. Sharon, an African American mother of two in her early twenties who was receiving welfare, reported that when she decided to leave her abusive boyfriend Neal, she tried as best she could to manage things on her own. Although she knew from the grapevine that the welfare department could provide her with referrals for shelter, she felt so disrespected by her caseworker and other staff that she wanted to avoid going there for help if she possibly could. When she left Neal, she moved with her two sons to a friend's apartment, but realized that she needed to leave when Neal threatened her friend. Having no other options, she then went to the welfare office to look for shelter. The fieldnotes report her experience there.

Sharon had no appointment, so her caseworker made her wait over five hours . . . After talking with a worker, she was given a referral, then had to talk to the housing worker for help. Simply getting this referral is "degrading," according to Sharon. "You have to beg them, and practically sell your soul for a stupid referral!" Sharon reported she was "stuck" in this part of the process twice. "I had to come back to the welfare office two days in a row. He could have killed me while I was waiting for them to do the right thing!"

When she found shelter space in a town 50 miles away, welfare department staff did not give her any assistance with transportation. A bystander who observed Sharon crying informed her about assistance available from Traveler's Aid; if not for that, she might well have gone back.

Helen, an African American mother of four in her mid-thirties, provides a second troubling example of policy breakdown. Helen received an expedited Section 8 certificate to enable her to move away from her current residence, a public housing development where her abuser could easily find her upon his release from prison. Despite an incredibly tight housing market, she was able to locate an apartment fairly quickly. However, even with her combined income from employment and social security for a disabled child, Helen was unable to put together the up-front money (first and last month's rent plus security deposit). She tried unsuccessfully to get financial assistance from the welfare department, the housing authority, other community agencies, and every single one of the more than 30 advocacy programs for abused women in the area. The welfare department could only offer assistance if she were actually homeless and the domestic violence programs could only offer her counseling and assistance with a restraining order. As of the study's end, Helen was unable to locate assistance, and would quite possibly lose her housing certificate, thereby remaining exposed and potentially vulnerable to someone who had attacked her with a machete.

Several participants described having presented with injuries and stories of abuse to different public agencies (e.g., medical providers, the police, the welfare department) and yet not being informed of potential policy options that might have protected them or helped them leave abuse. Reports of such interactions were from prior rather than current or recent relationships, and for the most part occurred when Massachusetts's domestic violence policies were less extensive and developed than they are at present. More women reported positive interactions, indicating that progress has been made. Yet Lorena and Aida's experiences indicate that there are still gaps in informing eligible victims about the policy assistance available to them. And Sharon and Helen's experiences reveal that even good policies fail when they are implemented ineffectively or without care, or do not adequately account for local community circumstances or women's true needs.

Persistent Structural Vulnerability

Other evidence, in addition to that discussed above, suggests an underlying inadequacy in existing policy that exacerbates low-income women's vulnerability to domestic violence and calls into question the capacity of any exemption or waiver-based policy to effectively

mitigate it. Lorena, described above, was very reluctant to discuss her direct experiences of victimization with her ethnographer. But in more general conversations, she hinted at some of the forces that shaped her life. As reported by the ethnographer, during a discussion about the policy changes that accompanied welfare reform:

Lorena talked about mothers needing to rely on a man when there is not a place where they can leave their children for daycare. She said in these situations, a mother will go out and look for a man to help her and her kids. She went on to talk about her belief that this is why many women are in abusive relationships.

Lorena does not suggest that women like herself go out and look for men who are abusive; rather, she observes that in the absence of policies that meet mothers' true needs for support, such as child care, they are likely to seek out male partners to help meet those needs. Because domestic violence is linked with socioeconomic disadvantage, and because some predatory men may seek out partners likely to be vulnerable to dependence on them, women who choose or are forced into this route face an increased likelihood that the men they find will abuse them.

Although Eliza, a 28 year-old Euro-American mother of four children did not seek out a relationship out of economic necessity, she found such needs a barrier to leaving her partner when he became abusive. Her ethnographer described in fieldnotes the conditions that kept Eliza from leaving, and from even calling for help after incidents of violence.

[Dave's abuse] was not a constant thing, but when it did happen it was terrible. She would wish him to leave, but then worry how she would cope caring for all of the kids without him. He worked two jobs to keep the van and pay the rent to support them. She knew that if she called the police, then she would lose his financial input and she did not know how she could do that.

Because one of the children had a severe physical disability, the van was a crucial resource for Eliza's family. It is notable that Eliza's financial circumstances were so dire as to bind her to an abusive man despite income from both welfare and social security (for the disabled child), and residence in subsidized housing for the disabled. Eliza was already receiving the maximum social welfare benefits available to her family; she was already exempt from time limits and work requirements because of her child's severe disability. FVO waivers could do nothing to address her needs.

Analysis indicates that at least 15 participants either maintained some involvement with a male partner who was abusive, or did not report instances of abuse, for fear of losing critical direct (child support, household income) or indirect (housing, child care) economic supports. All were receiving significant public assistance (welfare, social security, and/or subsidized housing) at the time; five were employed. They may have had other reasons, such as emotional attachment, for maintaining these relationships. However, the repeated theme in their stories, illustrated in the details of the cases presented above, is the inability of existing social policies to provide sufficient economic security for these women to make decisions about dangerous relationships based on the physical and emotional safety of their families rather than on financial need and economic dependency. This remained true even for some who were able to access domestic violence waivers and protections. These findings, and the limited applicability of the FVO, reveal a systemic problem not addressed by the current array of limited waivers and exemptions.

Discussion

The data analyzed for this paper, taken from a community-based study of low-income families in Massachusetts, reveal both successes and failures in the effectiveness of the current policy regime's efforts to protect women and children from domestic violence. As might

be anticipated in a state that has a strong progressive tradition and a history of national leadership in domestic violence policy, a majority of participants with some lifetime experience of domestic violence described having received some form of protection from their abusers through public assistance. However, the experiences of a subset of participants reveal notable gaps and failures, as well as a troubling mismatch between policy presumptions and the real circumstances and needs of abused low-income mothers. For these women and their children, social policies failed to provide economic security, and domestic violence policies failed to provide targeted protections that would mitigate risks generated by economic vulnerability and/or policy requirements. The patterns of protection and vulnerability revealed in the analysis have important implications for current debates within feminist scholarship and social policy.

Policy Successes

The degree to which study participants received meaningful protection from domestic violence policies is encouraging. In contrast to concerns raised in feminist scholarship, policy systems were in many cases responsive to the needs of abuse victims and survivors from marginalized communities. Low-income African American, Latina, and Euro-American women in this study described feeling supported by domestic violence and social welfare policies and being able to leverage these systems to protect themselves and their children from harm. The availability of prioritized access to public housing assistance was a notably successful policy. And the ability of child protective services to identify domestic violence in families where it may have otherwise gone undetected was instrumental in achieving safety and protection from abuse for a number of vulnerable families. In seven cases, CPS was able to help mothers obtain needed services and policy protections on the basis of domestic violence victimization without requiring their active acknowledgement of victim status, effectively bypassing what would otherwise have constituted a barrier to services. Some study participants did report negative experiences with CPS policies or personnel, and, as Aida's, Jana's, Eliza's and Helen's stories demonstrate, even an accessible and generous housing assistance policy may not in and of itself adequately protect women in all circumstances. However, the number of cases in which CPS recognized abused mothers as victims and provided appropriate services, and the degree to which housing assistance enabled women to leave and resist involvements with abusive partners, suggest that Massachusetts has had some success in creating an effective response to domestic violence in its social welfare bureaucracies.

Policy Failures

Despite these successes, the findings also reveal several areas of concern. Even though neither Lorena nor Aida chose to avail themselves of domestic violence protections once they were made aware of them, the fact that they were only made aware of them by the study ethnographers indicates a failure to effectively communicate the availability of policy protections. In contrast, Sharon and Helen were aware of domestic violence policies designed to help them, and sought their protection, but were let down by the very systems and agencies they believed were there to help them. That these women were from marginalized groups—in Lorena's and Aida's cases by immigrant status, ethnicity, and language, in Sharon's and Helen's cases by race—supports concerns that such women are rendered particularly vulnerable by the existing policy regime. The experiences of these four women demonstrate that even in a state with progressive policies and a strong advocacy community, policies are only as effective as the agencies and people who implement them.

Notably, available domestic violence policies could have provided special dispensation from the policy requirements that put several of these women at risk. Darlene could have proclaimed herself a victim of domestic violence and applied for a prioritized housing

voucher, which might have gotten her and Krista away from Mike and her father and into a safe home of their own much earlier. Lorena could have accessed legal assistance to apply for legal status under domestic violence policies, without depending on her abuser. If eviction proceedings were started, Aida could have attempted to gain documentation to access domestic violence housing protections. Yet none chose this route. None of the three defined her partner's behavior as "domestic violence" at the time she was placed in this dilemma, and none was willing to change her definition and take the steps to gain victim status (i.e. get a restraining order) that would require separating from her partner. For Darlene and Lorena, their current partners' problematic behaviors did not compare to violence they had been exposed to in other relationships, and they believed that leaving these relationships would cost them and their children more than they would gain from the policy system. Aida's concerns about Marcos's behavior did not rise to a level where she wanted to leave him, which would have been the price for her of seeking any assistance without placing her housing at risk. All three wanted the abusive behavior to stop. Because the policies that were available to help them required actions that were unacceptable to them, they failed to reach them and, by excluding them, exposed these women and their children to further abuse. As Jana's story reveals, it is possible to obtain exemptions that address situations in which true needs conflict with policy presumptions. However, the strong self-advocacy effort on Jana's part that was required to achieve this and the fact that such efforts were not even contemplated by other respondents indicate that these policy assumptions constitute significant barriers for vulnerable women, particularly the most marginalized. And Helen's inability to realize her subsidized housing grant demonstrates that even extraordinary self-advocacy efforts cannot compensate for fundamental gaps in the system.

Implications

The successes and failures found in this study indicate some directions that may improve the current policy response to low-income abused women. Under the prevailing political and cultural climate in the United States, an elemental shift in which domestic violence among low-income families would be treated as a structurally-determined problem requiring the assurance of basic socioeconomic security rather than an individual problem addressed with provisional fixes and waivers is improbable. And the analysis of domestic violence as essentially a safety crisis requiring separation and protection will remain an expedient approach for a social welfare system geared toward cursory short-term fixes rather than substantive long-term solutions. However, the fact that of the 40 participants who experienced domestic violence and received subsidized housing just 11 were granted them under domestic violence provisions indicates that it is possible to create policies that address abused women's basic survival needs by advancing the economic security of low-income families in general. This finding lends strength to evidence from small demonstration projects around the country (e.g., Gennetian 2003; Websdale and Johnson 1997), suggesting that structural approaches that better meet the needs of all low-income women can be effective in reducing low-income women's vulnerability to domestic violence, even when implemented in less progressive policy environments. Short of more profound solutions, the evidence of systemic change within CPS and the notable utilization of legal services by domestic violence victims indicate that targeted efforts to improve responses to and treatment of domestic violence victims within particular social welfare systems can reach women who might otherwise be left unaided and vulnerable. Together with the finding that the FVO did not emerge as a significant source of help for participants, study results indicate that the spectrum of social welfare policy should be considered in assessing and planning state responses to low-income domestic violence victims.

Bearing out the significance of the administrative discretion conferred on frontline social welfare workers (Hays 2003; Lipsky 1980), one of the markers of policy success or failure in

this study appears to be the implementing personnel. A CPS worker who recognized that access to housing would keep Darlene and Krista safe, rather than blaming her for exposing her daughter to risk or abuse, was able to help her access subsidized housing without needing to identify as a victim of domestic violence. Had anyone in the welfare office acknowledged or prioritized the danger Sharon was in, she could have received more immediate and better assistance. These and other findings indicate that well-trained personnel who are able to understand domestic violence as a complex, multi-dimensional problem affecting both women and children can create flexibility within the bureaucracies and make the difference between effective and ineffective policy responses.

Although the successes found in this study are somewhat attributable to the progressive policy climate in Massachusetts, they have implications with potential viability throughout the United States. All states provide some degree of basic human services to low-income families. Policies that attend to basic safety and economic security, such as shelter and housing assistance, provide alternatives to dependence on abusers as well as a means of escape. Better access to needed supports and services for all low-income families would improve their circumstances and reduce the structural vulnerability of low-income women to abuse. But regardless of the availability or level of such assistance, ensuring that social service personnel are well trained and aware of available resources can detect domestic violence that would otherwise remain hidden, and help women access services they might not otherwise know about or view as helpful. This study underscores the need to include the full range of social welfare actors as potential means of reducing poor women's vulnerability to domestic violence.

Conclusion

Overall, this analysis echoes earlier research (Allen et al. 2004; Lein et al. 2001; Scott et al. 2002) finding that although policies attending to emergency crisis needs related to violence provide critical help for some women and children, needs related to the basics of family survival, such as housing and child care, take precedence for many low-income abused women. In this study, as in others, some women chose to keep potentially dangerous men in their lives in order to meet these basic needs—not because they accepted abuse or believed that it was inconsequential, but because the frequency and/or severity of abuse did not from their perspective outweigh the substantive resources and/or economic security conferred by these relationships. Some chose not to avail themselves of domestic violence policies that might have helped them end these dependencies because they did not accept the premise that such behavior required separating from their partners, or because the help proffered in return for such separation was not enough. The fact that women felt compelled to make this choice while they were employed, receiving social welfare benefits, and/or benefiting from domestic violence policy protections indicates that the existing social safety net is inadequate to meet the basic survival needs of many low-income families, and that the current waiver- and exemption-based approach to the particular needs of low-income domestic violence victims does not effectively address this fundamental policy problem.

This affirms some concerns raised by feminist scholars that the universalist approach to domestic violence has left a legacy that ignores the particular needs and circumstances of the low-income women who are most vulnerable to abuse, as a result compounding rather than reducing their structural vulnerability (Josephson 2002). The parameters of this qualitative study do not permit definitive group-level analyses. However, the stories of Lorena, Aida, Sharon, and Helen suggest that, as predicted by the critiques of Crenshaw (1994), Beth Richie (2000), and others (e.g., Sokoloff and Dupont 2005), those who are further marginalized by race, ethnicity, or immigration status may be placed at even greater risk of domestic violence, either through the imposition of institutional constraints or when they fall through the cracks in a social safety net that is inherently incomplete and inadequately patched by

exemptions and waivers. And the resistance to publicly defining their experiences as victimization displayed by Darlene and Lorena recalls concerns raised by Martha Mahoney (1994), Lora Bex Lempert (1996), and others (e.g., Das Dasgupta and Eng 2003; Goodman and Epstein 2005) that dominant conceptualizations of domestic violence may exclude some women from needed protections.

However, findings also reveal that the picture is more complex, and less negative than a reading of this literature might suggest. The fact that nearly all the women in this sample, including 40 of the 44 ever-abused women, resided in subsidized housing, for example, means that one of their most significant subsistence needs was largely if not entirely met by the state. And the subset of cases in which CPS was able to help women recognize their victimization, take steps to protect themselves and their children, and serve as a conduit for policy benefits and protections that these families might not have otherwise accessed indicates that it is possible to help vulnerable families through state mechanisms even when policy presumptions conflict with their personal needs, beliefs, or circumstances. Respondents' experiences demonstrate that well-trained personnel in social welfare agencies, who understand the complexities of victimization as well as the challenges of living with burdens imposed by poverty and social marginalization, can be instrumental in making policy systems work for those who might otherwise be excluded from assistance. These outcomes are perhaps most likely in progressive states such as Massachusetts, but the findings indicate some provisions that might be replicated in other contexts.

Because the Three City Study was not designed to specifically investigate domestic violence, there may be relevant dimensions of experience that were not tapped during data collection. Data on domestic violence and social policy were not gathered systematically, and these analyses are based on experiences of women from a single city, who are likely not representative of low-income women across the country. However, the use of longitudinal ethnographic data from a study of families living in low-income communities brings into focus the experiences of vulnerable women who are targeted by policy makers, yet whose voices have been strikingly absent from current discourse. Analysis of their experiences indicates that despite providing critical protections to many domestic violence victims, current social policy does not adequately meet the needs of low-income abused women, who actually comprise the majority of all low-income women. The ethnographic profiles in particular illustrate how policy requirements and eligibility criteria become constraints, and how domestic violence policies designed to provide dispensation from such constraints may fail to adequately account for the economic needs of low-income women and the ways in which they experience and define victimization. They demonstrate that social welfare policies in general, as well as policies specifically designed to address victimization, can be a significant source of help for low-income families affected by domestic violence, but that the failure to recognize and effectively address the structural conditions that place low-income women at the crossroads of social policy and in the crosshairs of abusive partners can render already marginalized families more vulnerable still.

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