



# TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN WHO HAVE RECENTLY EXPERIENCED HOMELESSNESS

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*ABSTRACT: Due to COVID-19, the housing instability crisis is on the rise. It particularly affects women, who are more at risk of victimization, traumatic events, and having a serious mental illness such as PTSD. Yet, existing research does not describe how these events shape women's lives, especially those who have experienced homelessness for shorter periods of time. This proposal aims to gain a better understanding of how women experiencing housing instability are impacted by these traumatic events. Using a qualitative method study design and narrative and phenomenological approaches, one-on-one interviews will be conducted covering multiple topics including participants' feelings of safety, concerns, and substance use. This research seeks to educate and raise awareness about the need for interventions and policies to ensure access to safer environments.*

## Introductions & Background

Homelessness is an undeniable rising issue in the United States. As a result of the last sanitary and economic crisis, COVID-19, hundreds of thousands of people lost their stable housing overnight (Grammatikopoulou et al., 2021). The pandemic also caused shelters to reduce capacity which increased the number of unsheltered people, this has notably been observed in King County where this study will take place (USAFacts, 2023). These issues raise multiple concerns as most people experiencing homelessness will undergo at least one traumatic event during their lifetime according to a study conducted by North and Smith (1992). These traumatic events can result in the development of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, commonly called PTSD, which is a disorder that people develop after experiencing or witnessing a disturbing or shocking event. Their unsecured situation puts unhoused people at higher risks of victimization and traumas, especially women (North & Smith, 1992).

Therefore, it is imperative to gain a better knowledge of how women experiencing homelessness are affected by traumatic events,

in order to find solutions to reduce their exposure to them as early as the first few moments of being unhoused.

## Homelessness and Housing Instability

According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, an unhoused person is someone who does not have stable housing for more than 14 days, trades sexual acts for housing, or is being trafficked (2019). As of 2022, the United States had a homeless population of about 600,000 people (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2023). Unfortunately, COVID-19 played a big role in aggravating the problem as 568,000 people suddenly lost their housing in 2019 with one-third of them residing in unsheltered places (Grammatikopoulou et al., 2021). However, one issue connected with these statistics is the lack of data concerning the ones who live with family members or friends rather than living in public areas, also known as “invisible homelessness” (Tinland et al., 2013). They are considered “invisible” as they do not use services offered for unhoused people and use temporary lodgings which makes them harder to assess during research or data collection (Grammatikopoulou et al., 2021). According to



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a previous study, this issue is more prevalent in women as they are more vulnerable (Tinland et al., 2013). The U.S. crisis of homelessness keeps growing and is still misunderstood because of the lack of accurate data (Grammatikopoulou et al., 2021).

### **Trauma and Homelessness**

For a lot of people, becoming homeless can be a traumatic experience or an onset of PTSD (Price & Glorney, 2022). Firstly, losing stable housing can be a serious source of stress, especially if there are dependents involved. Additionally, many people also lose contact with their families or social networks which can cause a feeling of isolation and loneliness (Babayan, 2021). Losing housing also entails constant questioning about where to find food and shelter. As these are necessities for survival, not being certain to have them every day can be a significant stressor. The National Alliance to End Homelessness also mentions that being homeless can be a “breaking point” for those who had already been traumatized in the past or had behavioral issues (2024.).

People experiencing homelessness are more at risk of experiencing traumatic events than people who are not. Results of a previous study demonstrated that victimization can be both a factor to homelessness but also an impact from it (Tinland et al., 2018). Unhoused women often undergo events that put them at risk for trauma. Some of them mentioned being stalked, sexually assaulted, or even attacked because of their gender. They feel “surrounded by people who wanted to actively abuse or take advantage of them” (Price & Glorney, 2022). Findings from Price and Glorney’s study suggest that there are connections between trauma and female homelessness notably due to high rates of victimization (2022). Furthermore, it is important to mention the stressors of being a parent while being unhoused. Taking care of a child can be an additional stressor as their health is a direct concern for their caretaker.

Some worries are notably related to children’s physical or emotional issues, hospitalization, or placements away from home (Bassuk et al., 1996).

Having PTSD or experiencing traumas can also be an onset or a cause of homelessness (North & Smith, 1992). As mentioned earlier, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a disorder that can be developed after experiencing or witnessing a traumatic or distressing incident. PTSD symptoms manifest in various ways and at various times, they are primarily grouped into three categories (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2024). The first one is symptoms that consist of reliving the event such as nightmares. The second one is avoidance which is often described as numbness (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2024). The third one is changes in reactions and thinking, like feeling emotionally distressed or having severe anxiety for example (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2024). Based on a study, the development of PTSD precedes the onset of homelessness in about three-quarters of both men and women (North & Smith, 1992).

Furthermore, it has been proven that traumatic and adverse childhood experiences are linked to an increased likelihood of homelessness, and critical substance use disorder. Adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs, are traumatic events that happen during one’s childhood (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). They are common in the United States with 64% of adults reporting experiencing one (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023), and can be assessed using one of the official questionnaires, such as the one developed by Drs. Anda and Felitti, that have been made as a screening tool for ACEs (Schulman & Maul, 2019). According to Garfin et al., ACEs can lead to “social and occupational impairments that cause or maintain homelessness” (2022). These impairments include mental health issues, substance use issues, or even familial instability (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,



2023). People who are unhoused are extremely vulnerable as they do not have access to the protection that provides a stable home. They are more likely to experience trauma, whether it is before they experience homelessness or after, than those who do not experience it at all (Tinland et al., 2018).

### Gender Differences

A traumatic event is defined as a shocking and dangerous event that has caused a lot of stress to a person (National Institute of Mental Health, 2024). Unfortunately, those are highly common to people experiencing homelessness with almost 90% of women reporting having experienced one in their lifetime (Davis & Kutter, 1998). According to a study, rape is one of the highest reported traumas in unhoused women (20%) while assault is the highest reported in men (21%) (North & Smith, 1992). Unfortunately, the study does not mention whether the traumatic event happened before or after the onset of homelessness, making the connection unclear. Although women are less likely to experience becoming unhoused compared to men, they are more at risk for many life-threatening factors (Tinland et al., 2013; Statista, 2023). In fact, cis-women represented 38% of the unhoused population in the United States in 2022 (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2024). Women experiencing homelessness are at greater risk of having a serious mental illness which can make them more vulnerable to victimization (Bonugli et al., 2013). In fact, it has been demonstrated that living with a serious mental illness while being unhoused can increase the chances of being assaulted, having physical illnesses, or even suicide (Bonugli et al., 2013). Moreover, women experiencing homelessness lack independent living skills which is crucial to sustaining a stable housing and lifestyle, particularly in the areas of budgeting and money management (Davis & Kutter, 1998).

Women are more likely to develop PTSD than men because of the different exposures to certain types of traumas, such as sexual assault, which are more commonly experienced by women, and also because of culture and gender roles (Vernor, 2019). Although men and women tend to experience PTSD in similar ways, research shows that they are more likely to cope in different ways. Women would internalize more which can cause different disorders' symptoms to develop, like anxiety for example (Vogt, 2023). On the other hand, men are more likely to use externalizing coping mechanisms like substance misuse (Vogt, 2023).

### PTSD and Homelessness in Women

Women experiencing homelessness and housing instability while also coping with past trauma and PTSD are at an increased risk. PTSD is known to be linked with depression which is associated with reduced quality of life and increased suicide risk (Tinland et al., 2013). The disorder's symptoms also impede people's ability to perform daily activities and make them more likely to isolate from their social lives (Davis & Kutter, 1998). That being said, another factor that leads to increased isolation is the victimization of women. Being a victim of many offenses creates a need to be hyper-vigilant and aware at all times, making them avoid certain places and social interactions, and increases symptoms of depression at the same time (Bonugli et al., 2013). A previous study suggests that as a way to feel safer, many women have also tried to gain protection from men which has often led them to form unsafe relationships (Price & Glorney, 2022). A majority of unhoused women will resort to substance use to cope with the constant stress they are going through on a daily basis (Bonugli et al., 2013). According to Bonugli et al., unhoused women know that using substances makes them more vulnerable to victimization, but they would rather numb the pain they are feeling (2013). When women experience homelessness, they are more likely to undergo challenges such as depression,



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isolation, substance use, and domestic violence which are amplified by trauma and mental health issues that naturally stem from housing insecurity.

### **Gaps in Knowledge and Significance of Proposal**

Homelessness has been a constantly rising issue these past years and although we are gaining more knowledge on the topic thanks to previous studies, as of right now, our knowledge about the experiences of recently unhoused women is still limited. It is especially significant to focus on this now as we are slowly coming out of a pandemic but are also transitioning to a more stable economic status. This would be a great time to research this topic as we now know that many were impacted by the pandemic and solutions need to be put in place for those who were affected.

Most research has been about finding a connection between homelessness and traumatic events in women, but to our knowledge, there have been few, if any, studies that have specifically examined new trauma experienced by women who are recently unhoused. This is notably important because “the average length of stays in emergency shelters is 51 days for single women and 70 days for families” (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009). This highlights how little time sheltered women have to find a stable situation before becoming unsheltered.

Moreover, many studies were conducted more than two decades ago and may not be relevant to the present experiences of unhoused women. Oftentimes, these studies were geographically precise which leaves less room for generalization and broader understanding. There was no research found in King County which is one of the counties with the highest homeless population in the United States and could be an interesting location to study (USAFacts, 2023).

Further research is needed, as traumatic events can impact those who survive them for a lifetime and it is known that unhoused people, especially women are more at risk to experience them (Davis & Kutter, 1998). Understanding how women are exposed to trauma in the first moments of experiencing homelessness would allow us to find solutions to prevent any more traumas, keep women safe, and possibly help them find a safer situation. That being said, more qualitative data would be helpful to have a firsthand point of view or interpretation of the ones experiencing it.

### **Research Question & Hypothesis**

Women experiencing homelessness are at an increased risk of traumas such as assaults, infections, or even starvation compared to women with stable housing (Grammatikopoulou et al., 2021). Most of them had been exposed to more traumatic events prior to being unhoused which can have a significant impact on their mental health. Our hypothesis is that even women experiencing homelessness for short periods of time, despite available resources, are still vulnerable and at risk of experiencing traumatic events. There has been little research made on women who have experienced homelessness for a shorter period of time and its relationship with trauma exposure, therefore we will be conducting a qualitative inquiry to investigate the causes and possible solutions to what impacts women experiencing homelessness in King County. This qualitative research will allow us to gain a better understanding of what women who have experienced unhousing for less than six months endure daily since they started experiencing unhousing instability, and what could be done to make sure they feel safer. This study is based on this question: What are the traumatic experiences of women who have recently experienced homelessness or housing instability in King County?



## Research Approach

### Research Design

As mentioned earlier, this study will be conducted as a narrative and phenomenological research. We understand that quantitative data is important, however, this method was chosen because understanding the participants' experiences and emotions is more relevant for this research. We aim to advocate for better resources and think that doing so will allow participants to have a voice that can be useful for future research and findings. Our study also aims to find patterns, if any, that could give us a better perception of what the participants commonly experience.

### Study Population and Sampling

The participants of this study will include around 30 females over the age of 18 who have been experiencing homelessness for at least 14 days and up to six months in King County. Women will be considered in this study if they have not had stable housing for six months or less. They will need to be able to communicate fluently in either English or Spanish to be considered for the study and will be required to demonstrate the ability to give informed consent as assessed by the MacArthur Competence Assessment Tool for Clinical Research. This research will use convenience sampling during the recruitment of the participants. Flyers will be posted on bus stops, street signs, near homeless shelters, and in parks. We also intend to collaborate with different shelters located in King County such as WHEEL Women's Shelter or Operation Nightwatch, where individuals will have the opportunity to learn more about our study, have their questions answered and possibly be recruited if interested.

### Operationalization & Measurement

For this study, the independent variable will be homelessness and the dependent variable

will be traumatic events. Our definition of homelessness will be focused on women who have experienced unhousing instability for at least 14 days and up to six months. Unhousing instability includes women living in temporary accommodations, in shelters, on the streets, in their cars, and with friends and family. Traumatic events will include all events that happened after the onset of homelessness that have caused a great amount of stress to the participants. These variables will not be assessed with any tools but will be self-reported by the participants instead.

### Data Collection and Analysis

For this study, the data will be collected through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with open-ended questions to allow participants to tell their stories freely. These interviews will be conducted in person and will cover multiple topics including participants' feelings of safety, concerns, and substance use over approximately ten questions. They will take place in a location that provides privacy and comfort in the city where participants are recruited. Before the interviews, the participants will be reminded that they have the ability to stop the interview at any point in time. Every participant will be asked the same questions, and their answers will be audio recorded for transcribing purposes. The interviewers will also have the ability to take notes during the interviews. Interviews will last approximately one hour but can be shortened or lengthened depending on the participants' needs.

The data of this study will be obtained using coding from the recordings of the interviews. These recordings will be transcribed and then checked for accuracy. Coding will be done on recordings, transcriptions, and notes in order to find themes, patterns, and similarities.

### Ethical Considerations

This study will require an Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval before any recruitment of



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participants for their protection throughout the research process. The recruitment will be based on voluntary participation and every participant will be allowed to withdraw at any time from the study. Participants will be required to give their informed consent, including both written and verbal, before the interview begins. As the nature of the topics mentioned is sensitive, participants will be given a list of all the questions that will be asked to them during the interview ahead of time and will have the option of not answering any that they are uncomfortable with. Each participant will receive a hygiene kit and a \$20 gift card for their chosen store as an incentive. Participants' safety and health will be our priorities during this study, as a consequence, every participant's identity will remain confidential to the interviewers and on the records which will be destroyed after the study.

### **Discussion**

#### **Significance**

For many people and especially women, developing PTSD and experiencing traumatic events is common before and while being unhoused. This research's results will allow us to gain a better understanding of the types of traumatizing experiences women who have experienced homelessness for a shorter period of time undergo, how often they have experienced them, and how it affects them. King County has one of the highest populations of homeless people in the United States and it is essential to recognize what could be helpful for them at this time to find a way to stop this crisis (USAFacts, 2023). As the pandemic is slowly calming down, these pieces of information will be crucial to finding solutions for those who have been impacted by it and things that could be done to help women and people experiencing homelessness in general to get back on their feet.

#### **Limitations**

Some of the limitations of this study are the small sample size. As the study conducted is qualitative, the ideal number of participants would be around 30 which can be a barrier to generalization. The defined geographical area is a limitation as all participants will be recruited in King County. Participants will also be required to be fluent in English or Spanish which can leave out a lot of other women's perspectives on the topic who could have other experiences due to not speaking one of these languages. Although the study aims to recruit participants with different residence types for diversity purposes, it is expected that most of them will be recruited from homeless shelters which can exclude women who may have undergone different events due to their circumstances. The study could also be limited because of the researcher's implicit bias which is something that will be worked on to prevent it as much as possible.

#### **Future Directions**

Future research could potentially study the effectiveness of the policies or infrastructures put in place to protect unhoused women from experiencing traumatizing events. They could also highlight the differences or similarities, if any, found in different states and their causes. This will help us generalize information and results countrywide to potentially increase national resources. As it is one of our limitations, researchers could look into different residence types and social identities and how they affect the population's circumstances. Future research should determine interventions that women could use to cope with different stressors and traumas they are exposed to on a daily basis including mental health services, community-based services, or assistance to safe housing and employment. They should focus on women's safety and identify support interventions that would create a positive impact.



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