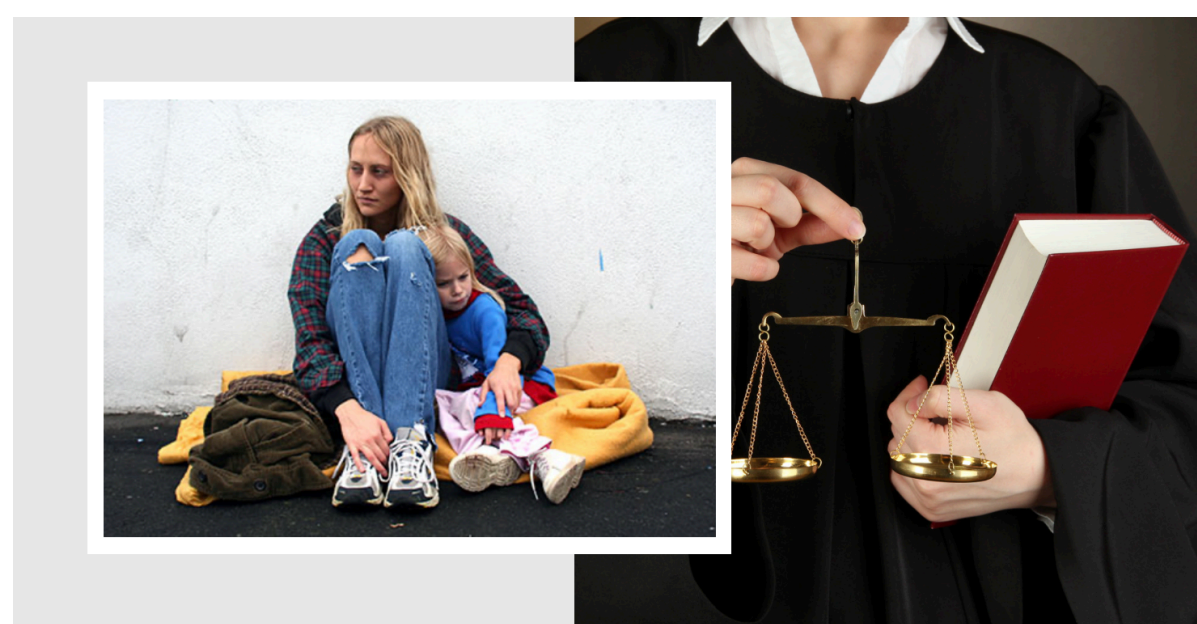


Homeless Mothers on Trial in Washington State Family Courts



In Washington State, the intersection of domestic violence, family courts, and homelessness is a public health crisis. This issue is especially significant for survivors of domestic violence and their children. This demographic is almost 100% mothers and children, provided children are not removed from the mother for any number of reasons via the DV abusers playbook in Family Courts. Current policy remains focused on rent stabilization, tax breaks, and tenant rights– if the majority of women and children are homelessness due to DV– why does policy leave out one of the most important factors of homelessness in the state?

The connection between the family court crises and homelessness is both clear and distressing. A study indicated that 78.3% of homeless women in Florida had experienced rape, physical assault, and/or stalking at some point in their lives (Jasinski et al., 2005). This underscores the urgent need for supportive services for survivors. In Spokane, WA, one shelter estimates that over 90% of women and children they serve are there because of domestic violence. In King County and Kitsap County, mothers with death threats are advised to go into confidential protective housing, and there are no services. These women are effectively left for dead with no organization available to help at their darkest and deadliest hours. This begs the question – How many mothers and children in Washington have died due to these circumstances?

Washington State's social policies have faced criticism for failing to adequately support domestic violence survivors. Family court can order a woman and children from their home, but has no authority to provide alternate shelter or restore housing rights without lengthy and expensive processes for the victim. The allocation of housing funds neglects mothers and children, increasing their risk of homelessness, and forcing mothers and children to live in overcrowded shelters or find refuge in the streets.

Addressing domestic violence and homelessness is a human rights issue, calling for bipartisan efforts. Collaboration across party lines is crucial for developing solutions. In the article "Low-income domestic violence survivors still lack support in WA," published by *Crosscut*, Laurie Davenport from Tacoma Probono Community Lawyers emphasizes the dire need for resources to address homelessness, particularly caused by domestic violence. Davenport states, "We need to take a look at those causes [of homelessness] – of which DV is a huge one – and say, 'Hey, wait a minute. Are we putting enough resources into that thing that's just dumping people into homelessness?'"

The impact of domestic violence on children, especially considering Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), is significant. Children witnessing domestic violence endure trauma, negatively affecting their mental and physical health (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). The belief that children are unaffected if the abuse is only directed at the spouse is a misconception. Homelessness adds to the trauma for children affected by domestic violence, disrupting their sense of stability and well-being.

Victims often face challenges in obtaining court-ordered protection, especially when homeless. Advocates in Washington have observed that homeless victims appearing in court often seem or appear less credible, leading to a high rate of protection order denials, or simply not believing the facts the mother presents as outlined in the Fuller Project, 2021. Advocates and service providers emphasize the need for more funding for housing, shelters, and legal services for domestic violence survivors, and for consistent implementation of new provisions across the state to support low-income survivors.

Understanding and addressing the effects of ACEs in children who have witnessed domestic violence and experienced homelessness is vital for their long-term health and well-being. Dispelling myths and providing comprehensive support are essential steps in helping these children overcome their traumatic experiences. Policymakers must unite to support the most vulnerable populations, particularly mothers and their children who are unwillingly subjected to the terrorization of Domestic Violence.

Signed,
Concerned Citizens of The Family Court Crisis

This Family Court Educational Series was formed from a community-led coalition of organizations, survivors, and professionals. This series aims to address the Family Court Crisis in Washington. The current system not only fails to protect mothers and children but perpetuates abuse and neglect.

[Domestic Violence in WA Family Court Series Archive](#)

[Series I. The Issue.](#)

[Series II. Who Gains Financially?](#)

References

- National Network to End Domestic Violence. (2016). *Domestic Violence Counts: 11th Annual Census Report.*
- Jasinski, J. L., Wesely, J. K., Mustaine, E., & Wright, J. D. (2005). *The Experience of Violence in the Lives of Homeless Women: A Research Report.*
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). *About Adverse Childhood Experiences.*
- Turner, K. (2023, July 4). *Low-income domestic violence survivors still lack support in WA. Crosscut.*
- The Fuller Project (2021, August 16). *Women are routinely discredited: How courts fail mothers and children who have survived abuse*

