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Story Behind the Story

## Domestic Violence and Homelessness: Reporter's Notebook

By Mia Navarro

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*On Nov. 10, Mia Navarro wrote an article about the connection between domestic violence and New York City's rocketing homeless shelter population. Here she supplies insight into how she put her affecting — and disturbing — story together.*

When news stories broke about the football player Ray Rice punching his fiancée in an elevator, I immediately thought of New York City's homeless shelters.

In the course of my work as a housing reporter, I learned that many of those in city shelters say their homelessness resulted from domestic abuse.

In the Rice case, the battered woman involved not only stayed with her assailant, she married him. But in thousands of other cases, the women leave their batterer and, often with three or four children in tow, have nowhere to go.

The controversy over Mr. Rice presented a good opportunity to call attention to the fact that domestic abuse has fueled New York's record high numbers of people in the shelters.

The problem turned out to be worse than I expected.

I first contacted organizations that run shelters for abused women in order to get an overview of the situation and to gain access to some of the homeless families. I wondered whether the government could do anything to prevent the homelessness in the first place.

I quickly discovered that abuse cases present housing challenges that other circumstances, including evictions, do not.

City officials have tried to control evictions by creating prevention programs and offering financial aid to keep families together and housed. In the case of domestic violence cases, however, the opposite is true: The women involved often need to leave their homes in order to escape harm. Leaving home is the best option for many of these women — even if it involves ending up in a shelter.

Worse, abuse is shrouded in shame and secrecy. It is widely believed to be underreported. But the numbers that are available provide a shocking picture. Police statistics show that, citywide, 40 percent of all felony assaults and 34 percent of rapes are related to domestic violence. And the numbers are even worse in public housing, where the police department attributes 70 percent of the increase in crime in the last three years to domestic violence.

I asked Carol Corden, executive director of New Destiny Housing, a nonprofit group that builds affordable housing for low-income domestic violence survivors, if she had any idea what was going on.

“The violence done to women and children in the confines of their homes would not be tolerated in the public sphere,” she wrote me in an email. “There’s a sense that what happens in the privacy of the home among related or intimate partners isn’t our business and shouldn’t be treated in the same way by the criminal justice system.”

She also said that “because the groups most likely to be the targets of domestic violence are vulnerable and less powerful, they also have access to

fewer resources and are less successful in making their issue heard. It's easier to dismiss them and their issue.”

As I kept reporting on what seemed at times like a pandemic, the de Blasio administration announced several initiatives timed to Domestic Violence Awareness Month in October. City officials now say they will assign a “response team” to 15 public housing projects in an attempt to get abused women to seek counseling, legal services and transfers to other public housing apartments before it is too late. Earlier this year, the city also started a rent subsidy program to help 1,900 abused homeless families find permanent housing.

There are more than 5,000 abused families in the shelters. I found some of the women busy working on their exit strategies when I visited. Their focus, after gaining safety, was finding a permanent home where they hoped to provide a normal life for their often traumatized children.

A mother with three children, who agreed to an interview only so long as she was not identified, came to New York at the urging of relatives who were appalled to learn she was considering giving her youngest up for adoption. The baby was born after violence in her home escalated from insults and forcible sex to shoving and threats to kill her and the children. She fled her home, job and eventually her state.

“You basically ruin your life,” she said.

But she said she didn't regret leaving. The last I checked on the mother, she was looking for an apartment in the city after getting a rent voucher.

Another woman I met at the shelter, a 44-year-old hairdresser and a mother of three, told me that for a long time she didn't even realize what was happening to her nor did she realize that forcible sex and choking constituted domestic abuse. In her culture, she said, men are expected to treat women roughly. But, she said, she woke up when her abuser hit one of

her sons.

“Education about domestic abuse should be part of the curriculum in school, just like you have physical education and health education,” she said.

“Once you put that label on it, you see it totally differently.”

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