

# Working Paper

## Violence in the Lives of Rural, Southern & Poor White Women

Naomi Farber and Julie Miller-Cribbs

Working Paper 02-11

June 2002



## Center for Social Development



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George Warren Brown School of Social Work

# **Violence in the Lives of Rural, Southern & Poor White Women**

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**Working Paper No. 02-11**

**June 2002**

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## Introduction

Much of the research examining poverty and in the United States in recent decades focuses on urban communities. While this rich multi-disciplinary literature has yielded important insight into the dynamics and the problems that characterize poor individuals and families living in urban settings, considerably less attention has been paid to poor residents in the rural south. This dearth of comparative research diminishes the potential for understanding urban poverty itself and results in inadequate information about the lives of poor and rural families, especially single mothers and their children who live in the southern region of the United States. Such a lack of information about these vulnerable women is of particular significance in light of the currently small but fast-growing body of research that has emerged indicating a relationship between poverty, welfare and domestic violence.

Overall, record numbers of children today live apart from their biological fathers in the United States. The result of the significant increase in out-of-wedlock childbearing and family disruptions in South Carolina is that more than *one in four* children in the state live in a single-parent family (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002). Consequently, greater numbers of children now are at risk of the numerous disadvantages and negative outcomes associated with living in a single- mother family.

Until recently, many researchers assumed that the common negative outcomes of many poor children in single-parent, mostly mother-only, homes resulted from their poverty status (Garfinkel and McLanahan, 1986). Some recent evidence suggests that serious short- and long-terms risks to the well being of children who live in a single-mother family result not only from economic disadvantage but also from family structure per se—that there may be independently harmful consequences to growing up with a single parent, particularly in the absence of the biological father (Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986).

Though an increasing and cross-disciplinary literature provides substantial information about some of the overall developmental sequelae of living in a single-parent family, there is little research examining why, in the Southeast, there is such a high incidence of out-of-wedlock childbearing and family disruption among poor white families. And, because the family is the source of so many profound influences on children's physical and psychosocial development over the life span, it is crucial that we understand more fully how women experience the forces that shape important decisions about engaging in relationships with men and family formation, especially when these decisions contribute to long-term and severe family poverty.

A useful conceptual framework for examining the current disadvantaged economic and social status of poor unmarried women emerges from Sherraden's (1991) work on asset development and the importance of human and social capital for well being (Coleman, 1990). In this study we build on Sherraden's ideas about the significance of an individual's ability to accumulate assets over their life course. We examine in detail how domestic violence may inhibit asset development by diminishing single mother's accumulation of human and social capital, thus compromising their well being as adults and as parents.

In the context of limited empirical and theoretical literature examining poverty among white single-mother families in the South, the study was conceived as explicitly exploratory and descriptive. The overarching objective was to identify salient concepts emerging from the women's own perspectives on the experiences and influences contributing to their current economically, socially and often medically disadvantaged status as low-income single mothers. These perceptions were examined through focused life histories. The histories were structured so as to incorporate both the women's descriptions of significant events and circumstances within general domains known from other research to contribute to risk of adverse adult outcomes; and also the women's own understandings of and responses to those events and circumstances. Thus the exploratory and descriptive nature of the research includes examining the salience of current ideas about poverty in relation to this under-studied population and also generating new conceptual foci based upon our findings.

## **Southern Rural Context**

### *Poverty, education and economic opportunities*

The south is home to 43% of all poor rural whites and to 97% of all poor rural African Americans (Rural Poverty Research Institute (RUPRI), 1999). Residents in most rural communities have not shared in the increased economic opportunity found across the country.

Education, a primary form of human capital, is critical for individuals seeking higher wage employment and opportunities in both urban and rural areas. Yet, "levels of educational attainment and human capital endowments differ for rural and urban areas" (RUPRI, 1999). For example, of rural parents who received welfare in 1996, over one-third did not graduate from high school (Cook & Dagata, 1997) and even fewer rural individuals obtain higher education or college degrees. The current high school dropout rate is approximately 30% in South Carolina and the state is experiencing difficulty raising the average SAT scores above the nation's last place. Such a high proportion of potential workers with poor educational attainment raises serious questions about ability of the State's residents to function in the new economic context that includes a highly competitive global economy and fewer public resources for social welfare.

Even when higher levels of education are reached, rural areas often do not provide ample job opportunities for individuals who have managed to further their education. Job training opportunities are also fairly limited in rural areas (RUPRI, 1999). When rural residents are able to secure employment, they remain disadvantaged in several ways. Rural workers are more likely to be working while remaining poor, have higher levels of unemployment, earn low or minimum wages, and receive minimum or no health and other job-related benefits (RUPRI, 1999; Findeis & Jensen, 1998; Parrott, 1998). Rural women are more likely to be under and unemployed than rural men and both urban women and men (Findeis, 1995).

Rural single-mother welfare recipients are faced with many challenges as a result of recent reform. Although declines in welfare caseloads vary by state, in South Carolina, declines in caseloads are higher in rural areas than in urban areas and with the overall welfare caseload declining 68.7% from 1996-2000 (CDF, 2002; RUPRI, 1999). Rural welfare recipients receive TANF for shorter time periods (Porterfield, Pandey & Gunderson, 1999) and are more likely to

be employed while also receiving TANF (RUPRI, 1999). Such declines leave single mothers particularly vulnerable in large part because of the lack of access to quality childcare and other support services, low levels of education, unreliable transportation and few economic and educational development opportunities (Porterfield et al, 1999; RUPRI, 1999; Hofferth et al 1990). The ability of parents to find quality childcare is extremely difficult in rural areas (Hofferth et al, 1990; Porterfield, 1998), particularly for single-parent women and welfare recipients. Of all of the children in South Carolina eligible for childcare assistance under federal law – a mere 8% actually receive this assistance (CDF, 2002).

*Single Parents & Child Poverty.* Consistent with national trends, but greater in magnitude, in 1997 38% of all births in South Carolina were to unmarried women, including 20% of white babies. In the same year, 15,780 divorce decrees were filed, involving 12,839 children. These patterns contribute to the recent Casey Foundation “Kids Count” ranking of South Carolina as 43<sup>rd</sup> nationally in its composite score of indicators of child well being (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002). Poverty levels are higher in rural areas of the U.S. (Nord, 1999), the child poverty rate has declined less in rural areas (RUPRI, 1999) and rural children experience higher rates of poverty than urban children (Dagata, 1999). In South Carolina, the poverty rate among children under age 6 in single-mother families was 60%, nearly five times as high as for young children living with married parents. 34% of South Carolina’s children live in single parent families and 27% live in families where no parent has full-time, year round employment, 20% live with a household head who is a high school drop out and 26% live in low-income working families (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002). South Carolina ranked among the 10 worst states in five of eight measures of a healthy start to life (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002).

### **Violence against women and children**

The health and well being of women and children also are threatened by social norms that appear to condone violence in South Carolina more than in other regions of the country. These are evident in a range of state and local public policies as well as behavioral patterns that cross various social strata, that increase women’s and children’s risk of experiencing violence. For example, in South Carolina corporal punishment is not banned, there are few restrictions on gun ownership (NWLC, 2001; Brady Campaign, 2002; CDF, 2002), and the state lags behind in its domestic violence prevention and policy. Like many other southern states, South Carolina has no law prohibiting corporal punishment in its schools (Discipline at School (NCACPS), 2002) despite that fact that several prominent organizations, including the American Academy of Pediatrics has attributed adverse effects associated with the use of corporal punishment (American Academy of Pediatrics, 200, p.343).

Finally, South Carolina has not kept pace with the more progressive legislation recently enacted in other states to protect victims of domestic violence. South Carolina received a grade of D on the Family Violence Prevention Fund’s (FVPPF) State-by-State Report Card on Health Care Laws and Domestic Violence (FVPPF, 2001). Significantly, in 1998, 584 women in the state of South Carolina were unable to obtain shelter due to full shelters (Governor’s Task Force on Domestic Violence, 2000). As further evidence of the high levels of domestic violence, a report on homicide among intimate partners in the U.S. between 1981-1998 found that South Carolina had the highest rate of intimate partner homicide among white females in the country (Paulozzi et al, 2001).

## **Substance Abuse, Poverty and Family Violence**

There are complex inter relationships among domestic violence, family poverty, substance abuse, child abuse, welfare receipt, mental health problems and rural residence as discussed below.

### *Substance Abuse and Family Violence*

The relationship between family violence and substance abuse has several dimensions. First, individuals abused as children are at increased risk to abuse drugs and alcohol as adults – both males and females (Kendler, 2002; Gortner, 1999; Romans, 2000). Childhood abuse has also been associated with mental health problems in adults (Kendler, 2002; Gortner, 1999; Romans et al, 2000).

Second, research has documented that male perpetrators of domestic violence often come from families where substance abuse is a problem (Corvo & Carpenter, 2000) and that male perpetrators frequently suffer from various mental health problems – including alcohol and substance abuse (Gortner, 1999; Romans et al, 2000). And, although experts generally agree that alcohol and drug abuse do not cause or excuse domestic violence, there does appear to be a relationship between substance abuse and domestic violence.

Third, often women who suffer from domestic violence either begin using substances or increase the use of substances in an attempt to cope with abuse and violence (Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence, 1998; Curcio, 1997). Women who experience domestic violence are also more likely to suffer from a variety of mental health problems including depression and PTSD. Welfare recipients who were either past or current victims of domestic violence have been found to have higher rates of both substance abuse mental health problems (Raphael & Tolman, 1997; Lyon, 2000).

### *Domestic Violence and Child Abuse*

Most of the research indicates that domestic violence is related to child well being in two main ways. First, there is evidence that children experience harmful effects from observing domestic violence. Second, children in the presence of domestic violence are much more likely to experience physical abuse themselves – perhaps 15 times more likely (Edelson, 1999; Stacy & Shupe; 1993; Straus & Gelles, 1990; Peled et al, 1995; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2002; Department of Justice 1993; American Psychological Association, 1996). Some negative consequences of witnessing domestic abuse may include psychological problems, behavioral problems, cognitive difficulties, mental health problems, substance abuse, PTSD and other trauma related symptoms (Edleson, 1999 Spaccarelli et al., 1995; Carlson 1991). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, is the research that indicates that male abusers often witnessed violence in their own childhood (Romans et al, 2000).

## *Rural residence, poverty, welfare and domestic violence*

Although in the past a great deal of emphasis has been placed on the fact that domestic violence affects women across socio-economic strata – and it certainly does – certain sub-groups may be differentially affected by domestic violence. In particular, low income women are more likely to experience abuse (Straus & Gelles, 1990; Schechter, 2000; Department of Justice, 1993; FVPF, 2001). Further, current evidence indicates that domestic violence inhibits the ability of women to obtain financial resources that would enable them to support themselves and their children.

As noted above, poor women are more likely to experience abuse. As male perpetrators of abuse often create situations where it is difficult for their female partners to work – including harassment both off on the job, interference with attempts at education or training and inflicting injuries that cause women to miss work or ultimately unable to be successful at their jobs (FVPF, 2001; Raphael & Tolman, 1997). In large part due to their economic status, domestic violence victims (both past and current) are over represented in the welfare system (Raphael and Tolman, 1997). Poor women also have greater difficulty escaping violent relationships. Such women are inevitably impacted by recent welfare reform and new work requirements that the ‘Family Violence Option’ does not completely resolve. Because male perpetrators are also likely to be unemployed and usually not married to their partners, women have fewer financial or legal options available to them. This evidence indicates that domestic violence may be a significant barrier to sustained labor market participation (Raphael and Tolman, 1997).

Finally, many researchers have noted that certain characteristics of rural life exacerbate the consequences associated with domestic violence. Problems associated with the unavailability of transportation, child care and shelters, isolation both geographic and social, higher incidence of weapons in the household, lack of health insurance and health care services, limited social services, job opportunities and training all contribute to the difficulties many rural women face in their attempts to leave violent and abusive relationships (Chamberlain, 2002; Johnson, 2000).

### **Conceptual Framework of Research**

There are several important concepts relevant to understanding the origins and developmental trajectory of disadvantaged status of poor, white single mothers in the south that are often confused in the literature: *assets, social capital, and human capital*. Though elsewhere we employ an expanded definition, for purposes of this analysis assets are defined as the economic resources such as home ownership or savings accounts that are “typically viewed as a storehouse for future consumption” (Yadama & Sherraden, 1995, p.1). Human capital includes the capacities innate, derived or accumulated in individuals that enable them to participate productively in society. Common examples include level of education, job skills, intelligence or personality. Social capital refers to social relationships that exist both within and outside of the family. In terms of the former, social capital includes “the set of resources that inhere in family relations...that are useful for the cognitive or social development of a child or young person” (Coleman, 1990, p.300). Social capital also develops through relationships with people in both neighborhoods and communities. Social capital exists in the relationships, for example, among viable social and kin networks, that can lead to the development of human capital and assets.

Assets are a form of stored potential that can be used increase social or human capital, which in turn can increase asset accumulation. In order to gain assets capital must be expended. For example, individuals may draw on relationships in order to get a job in order to save some money. However, this relationship is not uni-directional. Sherraden's (1991) work broadens the focus to include the significance of attitudes and behaviors in the "virtuous circle" of asset development. He and others find empirical evidence supporting his contention that assets "(1) have a positive effect on expectations and confidence about the future, (2) influence people to make specific plans with regard to work and family, (3) induce more prudent and protective personal behaviors, and (4) lead to more social connectedness with relatives, neighbors and organizations" (Yadama & Sherraden, 1995, p.14).

Recent literature tells us that women experiencing domestic violence have diminished capacity for economic self-sufficiency. Such disadvantage is compounded when women are poor, on welfare and/or live in rural areas. This paper focuses specifically on selected data from a more comprehensive life history study. Here we extend the examination of domestic violence over the life course of poor, white, single mothers in the south. We examine the many ways in which human and social capital become compromised by domestic abuse over time, thus resulting in women who are asset poor. Their plight is of particular urgency in the context of changing welfare policy.

## **Methods**

### *Sampling*

The sample included 23 women who met the following criteria: age 18 or older; white (self-identified), not currently married or living with a partner; had at least one child; had a very low income; had attained no more than a high school diploma or GED. Participation was solicited in and near two small cities in South Carolina. About one third of the participants live in the state's so-called coastal "Low County" region. The other two-thirds reside in semi-rural communities located in the "Midlands" area that includes the state capitol. Fliers describing the study, including all of the sample inclusion criteria listed above were placed in waiting areas in the two county departments of social services and the welfare-to-work programs.

The original sampling plan called for snowball sampling based upon a core of participants from these agencies. Though most women agreed to make at least one contact on our behalf, consistent with the often-overwhelming challenges of their daily lives, few participants followed through. Consequently most of the participants were self-referred from the public assistance office. Among those women who called for information, all agreed to participate. It is likely that most of the women, many of whom had no steady source of income at all, participated primarily to earn the \$25 that was paid for each interview. This motivation was apparent among several women who agreed to participate contingent upon scheduling the interview, hence receiving payment, within a specified short time, often at the end of the month when cash might be low. Thus, the financial urgency among these women may represent a sample bias and limit generalization of findings.



### *Data Collection*

Data was collected by three researchers, the two authors in the Midlands and a social work doctoral student in social work in the Low Country. Participants were given complete choice over the location of the interview. Nearly all interviews took place in the participant's home or current residence (for example the home of a relative or friend).

Data consisted of focused or modified life histories. The life histories were gathered through face-to-face interviews organized loosely by a topical guide. The interviews primarily were based upon open-ended questions with active use of probes for detail and clarification. The interview also included structured questions to gather basic demographic information, the structure and content of their kin networks and their degree of material deprivation. The latter information was collected for the purpose of comparison with findings from a previous study of kin networks among low-income African American women in South Carolina conducted by the researchers.

The interview guide provided a set of topics that reflected substantive domains. They included detailed historical and current information about: demographic characteristics; number and age of children; subsistence strategies, including sources of income; housing, including residential movement and physical conditions of current housing; family of origin; educational and occupational experiences and aspirations; marriage and other relationships with men; pregnancy and motherhood; and hopes for the future of their children and themselves. These categories were chosen to reveal current experiences in fundamental aspects of the women's lives while examining past critical junctures—events and decisions-- known to influence later well being, conceptualized here in terms of accumulated assets of human and social capital.

The original order of the interview called for historical recollection to the present within the various domains. After a few initial interviews it became apparent that the structure was constraining and interfered with a more natural "telling" of the women's life histories that allowed for their interpretation of connections among experiences. Building on the inherent strengths of qualitative methods in examining individual experience, two major changes were made in the structure and content of the interviews. First, the interviewers became more flexible in guiding the order of topics discussed to accommodate the way each participant seemed to view her past and present. Second, as themes emerged consistently in early interviews, these themes were probed more fully in subsequent interviews. The recurrent history of domestic violence from childhood through adulthood was one such example.

All interviews except one, during which notes were taken, were audio taped and transcribed verbatim.

## *Data Analysis*

The interview data was analyzed in two ways: thematically across interviews and from a developmental perspective through constructing a chronological “time line” of major events for individual participants. The qualitative software program Atlas-ti was used for thematic analysis.

The analytic themes were based on categories that were pre-determined and constituted interview topics and also new themes that emerged from the life histories themselves. An example of an emergent theme is “residential mobility,” based upon the unanticipated frequency with which the women had moved over their adult lives. Interviews were coded initially, line-by-line, by the two authors. Remaining interviews were coded with these categories using Atlas-ti. One advantage to using this software is facility in cross-filing data in multiple categories. In addition, however, excerpts were also examined as part of the whole interview to maintain the contextual perspective.

## **Findings**

### *Sample Characteristics*

The age of the 23 participants ranged from 18 to 46, the majority being in their 20s. Well over half of the women had never been married and the rest were divorced or separated from their husbands; one woman married at age 15 but annulled it when she discovered her “husband” was married. Most women had one or two children; one had 5 (by age 21) and another 4 children. Among those women with more than one child, nearly all of their children had different biological fathers. The earliest maternal age at first birth was 13 and the oldest 31; the average age was 19. In terms of educational attainment, the greatest number had dropped out of school, followed closely in number by those who had dropped out but achieved a GED, while only 3 women had a high school diploma.

By definition of eligibility for inclusion in the sample, all of the women were poor in terms of income and other financial assets. In fact, most of the respondents were not living in their “own home” because they could not afford either the on-going rent or the deposits necessary to rent most trailers or apartments. In the Midlands area, most women lived in trailers, a ubiquitous feature of the landscape statewide, typically within 5-10 minutes from a very small town and 40-45 minutes from the capitol. Only one woman, the sole participant receiving child support consistently, owned her own home. They qualified for TANF (though almost none knew that TANF had replaced AFDC). Many received some combination of Medicaid for their children, childcare (“ABC”) vouchers and/or food stamps but not cash assistance. Typically their sources of cash income were so unpredictable and unreliable that few were able to calculate their annual or even monthly income. All of the women had a history of sporadic, low-wage employment. A few had engaged in prostitution or other illicit means of generating income. At the time of the interview, several women had part-time jobs or were seeking employment. Their jobs included working as waitresses, in fast-food restaurants, convenience stores, nursing homes, cleaning houses and the unusual occupation of delivering doves for funerals. A few women babysat for friends or family—women who themselves worked in low-wage jobs and relied on participants’ help in order to keep their marginal employment. Consistent with other families living in poverty

in rural areas, lack of reliable transportation was cited as a major and chronic source of difficulty in finding and maintaining employment.

### *Childhood Domestic Abuse*

Nearly all of the women describe families of origin characterized by some combination of physical and emotional violence between their parents, physical and sometimes sexual abuse of themselves. Family violence usually occurred against a backdrop of chronic alcohol and/or drug abuse by one or both of their parents. Thus, many of the women were both witnesses to and direct victims of domestic violence as well as being the children of substance abusers.

#### Parental domestic and substance abuse

All but a few of the women reported that their mothers were victims of domestic violence at the hands of their husbands. These participants were acutely aware of the violence between their parents (or step-parents):

[Their marriage was] Horrible. My dad was an alcoholic and he was very abusive to my mom. He was physically—he never hurt any of us, and we never seen it, but he was very physical.

Other women described how the violence between parents affected the quality of life in their family:

Terrible. My father was very abusive to my mother. Hittin'...a lot of yelling, up all night almost every night. We never got a full night's sleep to go to school on because it was always wake up. We were always brought into the show.

Both (parents) drank...I remember in Louisiana he'd get drunk and he was very violent and mean, to everybody. My stepmother used to tell us, she'd hear the truck coming and she'd say to go get into the bed now. And he would wake us up each time they'd get into it. He was very mean. He would scare me.

Um, well, my mom took a lot of crap from my dad. They always fought...my dad is a drinker.

Several women's fathers were unable to work and their only income was from a disability pension. However, as is common with very abusive men, they also limited their wife's activities, including their ability to supplement the family income through work. Thus, family poverty often was exacerbated by domestic abuse:

My dad is not much to talk about. He was an abuser. And he was an alcoholic and he did drugs. It was tough [growing up]. [My mother] wasn't allowed to work when we were growing up because my dad was so abusive. He would beat her. So she didn't work. She stayed home. He would control everything she did.

### Child physical and sexual abuse

A significant minority of participants reported being victims themselves of physical and/or sexual abuse as children. One participant's mother left her family after her abusive husband allegedly attempted to poison her. He then turned to his daughter:

...I think she came back just for a very short while, a couple of weeks, and then [after] she literally left with just the clothes on her back and didn't say nothing. She didn't take us or anything...[He went after her] but then finally he left her alone. 'Cause when she moved out that's when he started abusing me...Since she wasn't there anymore, he took it out on me.

Another woman's father beat her, though never in front of anyone:

It was always after I'd come home from school. I never knew if I was coming home to a Jekyll and a Mr. Hyde.

One woman describes her parents as "trash" who were both substance abusers. They burned her with scalding water and engaged in other forms of severe physical abuse.

At the age of one she was taken into custody by the Department of Social Services after being found abandoned for several days in a trailer. Unfortunately, her maternal grandparents adopted her but provided a harsh and unloving home, which she left in early adolescence.

Several women were sexually abused by family members. In one instance, the participant's mother's drug use prevented her from protecting her daughter from abuse. Though the woman described a strong emotional bond with her mother, her mother's own functional impairment contributed to an early life of instability and risk:

My momma was a heroin addict and I didn't have a lot of things kids had. You know, I couldn't have kids over and stuff. My mom did the best she could for who she was. Which was an addict.... I was molested from 9-13...my uncle. It's life. He was sick. A sick person I don't hate him. I love him...He's just a sick person.

## Marital dissolution

The majority of participants' parents were divorced or separated over the course of their own childhood (very few were born to unmarried mothers). Several women, like the participant above whose mother left her family after being hospitalized for suspected poisoning, explicitly link domestic abuse to their parents' divorce or separation:

...they separated when I was like two or three, and he was a really bad alcoholic and wouldn't hold a job at all...he was real violent. He used to beat her up a lot.

I was 13 when their divorce was final. My dad was abusive to my mother—all of it (physically, emotionally, verbally). He drank a lot.

The woman whose mother was a heroin addict never lived in a stable family, nor in one place very long:

I remember days coming to pick me up on the motorcycle from school. "Come on, baby, it's time to go." We'd just leave. Go to another state. And start all over again...

Even when parents separated in the context of severe violence, the consequences of family dissolution itself frequently were difficult for their children, for example when parents continued to have conflict:

He [father] came around every once in a while, but my mom would always fight him off because he didn't pay child support and he never gave us any money... I think he meant well, like he would write us and say, "I'm going to send you this, I'm going to send you some school clothes," but he never would.

Another young woman became solely responsible for her younger sister after their mother left her husband and two adolescent daughters:

Uh, once my mom left, he [father] kind of sent into like a deep depression, and then he's a severe alcoholic now...he'd come off the truck and working on a in-town job, and it was a every night thing. And he went to the bars. I was still paying the stuff 'cause he was spending all his money to drink...No money for food, no money for lights or anything 'cause he was usin' it all for alcohol.

With her father incapacitated and unable to seek public assistance for his children, this young woman quit school in order to support herself and her younger sister through full-time, low-wage work. Though she had the immense satisfaction of seeing her sister graduate from high school, she was not able to finish or get a GED herself.

### *Developmental salience of childhood family abuse*

Whether or not participants' parents ultimately separated, for most of the women in the study family abuse—in tandem with parental substance abuse—contributed significantly to a home life characterized by financial instability, emotional chaos, and other sources of psychosocial risk. The intent here is not to suggest a direct causal relationship between domestic abuse and particular developmental outcomes among the participants. Nevertheless, the women describe a strikingly similar pattern of familial circumstances, including domestic abuse and specific behavioral responses such as dropping out of school, early sexual debut and high-risk sexual activity, use of drugs and alcohol and leaving home at a young age— core characteristics of what Jessor and Jessor (1977) describe as adolescent problem behavior. No one characteristic or experience, or one type of problem behavior, determined the women's adult status; rather, their impact of their actions combined, or “stacked” over time, cumulatively creating ever greater difficulty in achieving financial, social and physical security for themselves and their children. Below we identify more specifically what the women perceive as the most salient of their experiences and how these experiences affected their actions into early adulthood.

#### High-risk problem behaviors

Abusive and otherwise unhappy family life contributed in many and complex ways to young women engaging in a variety of high-risk problem behaviors, including a process of detaching from and eventually dropping out of school. A few women took on adult responsibilities at a young age. One participant's mother suffered from severe emotional as well as physical illness:

My mom started getting real sick and kept me home a couple of days [a week] just to be with her...

When another woman's mother left her abusive husband, her daughter shuffled between them in two different cities before settling with her father who lived in a poor school district. She attended school sporadically and eventually dropped out because, “There wasn't one teacher in the whole building. It was bad.”

An aversive family environment led many women away from home beginning in early adolescence. Several participants began working part-time while in high school as a way to stay away from their families and gain financial independence. Sometimes long hours at work interfered with their sleep and school work. However, when work became a distraction from school, in each instance it occurred within the context of family problems and an already-increasing detachment from school.

Although the specific circumstances of dropping out of school vary among participants, typically they began to disengage from school in both attendance and work habits by the end of middle school. Nearly all of the participants described themselves as teenagers who were “wild,” “black sheep” and “always in trouble” at school. In part from a desire to avoid being at home, the majority of women spent a great deal of time with friends, universally characterized by themselves now as the “wrong crowd.” With these peers the young women engaged in a variety

of high-risk behaviors: they drank alcohol, used drugs, skipped school and became sexually active:

I was so wild when I was a teenager, from the time I was 13 to the time I was about 16. I was very promiscuous. I would drink, smoke pot...and then I got pregnant with my daughter...

Some women were painfully explicit about how family abuse contributed to a complex of high-risk behavior and troubled outcomes. The woman who began staying out of school to keep her sick mother company explained why she first had sexual intercourse with the father of her baby at age 14:

Due to what was going on with my father, I didn't want to have my virginity taken by my father so I slept with [son's father] instead...I do remember thinking I didn't want my dad to be the first person. I didn't want to have sex, but that was something I was thinking about.

The combination of previously missed days, morning sickness from the pregnancy that resulted from this liaison, and feelings of "confusion" led the young woman to drop out in 10<sup>th</sup> grade. She then left her parent's house to follow an older man to another state, and began several years of drug use and involvement with a variety of abusive men that nearly caused her son to be removed by child protective services.

#### Problems of mental health and substance abuse

The majority of participants have been under psychiatric care and taken medication for some form of anxiety and/or depressive disorder. One woman, whose child's father was violent toward her, suffers from emotional as well as undiagnosed physical problems that she attributes to being sexually abused by her father:

Truly, what I've been going through, because you know, whenever I didn't know what the heck was wrong with me, you know, um, being so weak and, you know, really not being able to get up and everything. They couldn't tell that, you know, that it was my nerves, and that's the reason I'm out [of work].

Another young woman who had 5 children between ages 15 and 21 described her abusive father's impact on her own way of parenting and current emotional well being:

I get all his bad traits from him, and I'm very controlling... That's bad—I try to break myself of it, but I have to be in control of everything that goes on or I get really upset. As far as—I have really bad nerves. I have panic attacks.

Several women report problems with drugs and alcohol use beginning in adolescence. The woman whose mother was a heroin addict herself began using drugs after she "fled" home at age to escape her uncle's sexual molestation. Another young woman who left her adoptive parents' unpleasant home at age 15 became deeply involved in drugs and alcohol with a series of

substance-abusing men—one of whom, though she is not sure which—is the father of her older son. She lost more than one job because of her alcohol use.

Substance abuse contributed to several women nearly losing their children to child protective services:

And medicating only leads me to doing drugs and not being able to take care of my kids...

In several instances, when women felt their ability to function as parent was compromised by abusing substances, often when they were in abusive relationships, they sent their children to live with their own mothers or other relatives:

I went through a time with beatings and I got into drugs real bad. I couldn't take care of myself, much less my child, so I asked Mom to keep him and I think that's the best thing in the world for him. I didn't want him to go into foster care and all that...

### Domestic abuse in adult relationships

Consistent with known risks associated with suffering childhood domestic abuse, many women in this study became involved as adults in similarly abusive relationships with men. Some experienced only one relationship with a violent husband or boyfriend; others have engaged in serial abusive relationships.

One woman was both witness to and victim of years of family violence. She, like several other participants, made the decision to leave home as an adolescent. She chose to “get out” in the most direct way she knew—through marriage:

I met a young man. My dad was really abusive. And this young man was my way out. So I got married at 16 years old...I thought he was my ticket out. So I quit school. I gave up my dreams, I gave it all up.

Unfortunately, her ability to regain what she gave up in the way of her dreams was diminished even further by choosing a husband who was himself a drug abuser and violent toward her as her father had been. She “had a child at 17 [who died], 18 and 19,” and then:

I made an attempt to go back to school. And my ex-husband made me quit. He said it wasn't his place to sit home with the children.

It took eight years, after leaving her ex-husband, of working at numerous part-time low-wage jobs while taking care of her two children, to complete her GED at the age of 29.

The young woman who had sex at 14 to forestall her father being her “first” began running away at 15, and went from one to another physically abusive and substance-abusing man. She says she wanted her son to “have a father.” However, when her son became her boyfriend's victim she felt the price was too high:



He was always under me, had to watch me, didn't want anyone talking to me. He was always around me, didn't give me any space...He used to get mad and hit me sometimes. Once he did that to my son, I was like, "There's no way I'm going to let you do this." So I went back to my mother's house.

A few women believed they could cope with abuse, maybe help the man to change:

I met his [son's] father. I guess I thought I was Superwoman, you know... 'Cause I could tell that he was, um, a violent person and I thought I could handle it. He found out that I became pregnant. I left him and I never really had too much to do with him. Off and on I'll talk to him, you know, because he's so mean.

Similar to many other participants, this young woman has experienced significant mental health problems that she associates with the stress of domestic abuse, recent and past, among so many other forms of stress.

## **Discussion**

One of the most frequently reported occurrences in the lives of these poor, white single mothers in the south is domestic abuse in their families-of-origin and later in their own relationships with men. The salience of this abuse is evident in their descriptions of how abuse contributed to many of their decisions and actions at various points that led to their currently disadvantaged circumstances. Specifically, many of the women left home early to escape negative family environments, dropped out of school, engaged in high risk behavior that sometimes resulted in teen pregnancy and involvement in abusive relationships.

These early problems diminished their abilities to accumulate assets in a variety of ways. Beginning in childhood some of these participants had mothers who were isolated and prevented from working by abusive husbands. These restrictions deprived the women of opportunities to further their education, succeed in the job market or contribute to the family income. In addition, the supportive family relationships that are an essential form of social capital were compromised by the violence and chaos at home. Participants whose parents divorced had less access to mothers' and fathers' time and financial resources. When families were intact, often the negative emotional climate did not nurture the young women's capacities to perform well in school or develop personal characteristics leading to occupational success. One of the consequences of early flight from their families of origin, teen pregnancy and other problem behaviors is that the participants attained low levels of human capital such as education and marketable job skills. External forces such as living in rural areas, community poverty, limited social services, and limited job opportunities compounded the negative impact of individual experiences. Recent changes in the conditions of public assistance due to welfare reform exacerbate the dire economic straits that these women face.

We are not suggesting a linear relationship between early domestic abuse and later adult problems. Rather, the abuse is one of many identified experiences and characteristics that accumulated over the life course that contributed to the observed negative outcomes. We refer to the accumulation as a form of ‘stacking’ of vulnerabilities (see Figure 1). Such stacking appears over time to reduce the women’s abilities to develop human and social capital and accumulate assets.

One of the major contributions of this study is the focus on the ‘cultural-structural nexus’ (Rochelle, 1997) among poor, white, southern and rural women. Neither a cultural pathological perspective nor a purely structural perspective fully captures the dynamic and complex lives of these women in poverty. Through our research, using life histories, we are able to provide in depth information that captures some of this complexity. Further, our research also lays the groundwork for understanding how both human and social capital become compromised over the life course – contributing to the inability of the participants to obtain assets and the positive features that accompany them. In this paper we have identified domestic abuse both during childhood and adulthood as a particularly salient negative influence that compromises the participants ability to achieve economic self sufficiency.

## **Implications**

Several policy implications follow from the findings reported. First, policies aimed particularly at fulfilling the goals of human and social development of poor, southern and rural women are ideal. As Sherraden argues, if policies can assist parents in obtaining assets then they are better able to break a cycle of economic deprivation that often prevails from one generation to the next. This investment is especially important to poor women who experience domestic violence and may be less able to participate adequately in the labor market and become self-sufficient. The narrowing of the definition of ‘work’ under welfare reform has made it even more difficult for women to obtain higher levels of education, thus further limiting their capacity to develop human capital.

Second, it is critical that policies be more responsive to the specific circumstances of poor women who experience abuse. For example, given the greater vulnerability of poor women to domestic abuse, it is important to further examine the efficacy of the ‘Family Violence Options’ that are a part of TANF to protect these women and their children who are at risk. Many states currently have or are considering policies that automatically link child abuse with domestic violence. However, given what we know about the dynamics of domestic violence in the lives of poor women, policies should encourage greater caution in using child protective service interventions automatically in situations of domestic violence. Instead services should be geared to help women safely remove themselves and their children from violence.

In conclusion, this study highlights the salience of domestic violence both in the early and current lives of poor, white single mothers living in the rural south. We demonstrate the ways in which these experiences of violence contribute to reduced human and social capital. Their reduced assets leave them – and their children—economically, socially, and psychologically vulnerable to continued poverty and violence.

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**Figure 1: Stacked Vulnerabilities: Developmental Trajectory of Risks to Asset Accumulation**

