

# Housing Needs of Survivors of Sexual Assault

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## Issue Summary

Experiencing sexual violence can create complex housing needs. Sexual assault can happen anywhere, at any time, and to anyone. Far too often, the “anywhere” means in a space that was once considered safe; their own home or that of a family member or close friend. Although “home” is one of the places most elevated, we know that sexual violence occurs in spaces outside of the home— at school or work; faith communities; online; in shelters; prisons; jails; and detention centers. Regardless of where a sexual assault occurs, the resulting trauma can create housing need immediately, intermittently, and throughout the lifespan.

The link between sexual assault/violence and housing is irrefutable; experiencing sexual assault can jeopardize what was once safe stable housing while having unstable housing or being unhoused greatly increases risk of experiencing sexual assault. The trauma of sexual violence, whenever it occurred, impacts a survivor's mental and physical wellbeing to the point that their housing may become unstable (commonly due to financial and safety fluctuations).

The housing needs of survivors of sexual assault are complex and vary from one survivor to another. A survivor may need housing because the person causing harm, or who has caused harm in the past, is a threat to them physically or psychologically. They may not feel safe or comfortable remaining in their home immediately following an assault, whether it occurred in

their home. Adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse and survivors of adult sexual assault may have long term economic impacts directly resulting from the trauma making it difficult for them to find and keep safe housing. Other survivors may seek alternative housing to process and plan their next steps.

Additionally housing needs may arise due to:

- landlords or housing managers refusing to make housing safer;
- non-offending parents and children losing housing;
- landlords or other tenants engaging in sexual violence or harassment;
- being labeled a nuisance tenant for making too many requests;
- calling law enforcement one too many times;
- being kicked out after disclosing sexual violence (this is particularly true for youth);
- losing subsidies or assistance; or
- landlord/housing manager finding out the tenant is a survivor and making it difficult for the survivor to stay.

While housing programs, shelters, and safe spaces have been created for survivors of domestic violence, dedicated housing options and assistance responsive to the unique needs of sexual assault survivors have not been as extensively developed. Separate and concerted attention is needed to adequately address the housing issues faced by survivors.

# Improving Housing Access

## PRIORITIZE HOUSING AS A PRIMARY NEED

Housing must be prioritized as a primary need of sexual assault survivors throughout the lifespan. Services for sexual assault survivors are largely based on immediate crisis intervention, with a focus on crisis counseling, hotline operation, and medical, court and law enforcement accompaniment. Focusing on responding to immediate crises leads not only to the narrowing of service provision and the exclusion of services that are deemed long term, but also disregards the fact that individuals process trauma differently.

## FRAME HOUSING NEEDS THROUGHOUT THE LIFESPAN

Housing stability sometimes feels unachievable for survivors of sexual assault due to heightened barriers. One of these barriers is the fictional idea that survivors only have housing needs immediately following their experience. For many survivors of sexual assault, their healing journey is not linear. The same can be said about housing needs. Our systemic response to housing centers providing services immediately following an assault due to elevated potential of physical harm. Linking services to an arbitrary timeframe excludes many survivors. Some survivors have immediate housing needs, but others may have housing needs crop up a year or decades later.

The impact of trauma can create housing instability and chronic homelessness throughout the lifespan. For example, what if a survivor was assaulted five years ago, remains safely in their home for those five years, and then sees someone related to the person who caused harm moving into the neighborhood? Housing needs are complex, change over time, and can be unforeseen. To better serve survivors of sexual assault and meet their needs, we must view housing needs of sexual assault survivors throughout the lifespan.

## BEYOND SHELTER

Shelters are a necessary part of the housing ecosystem but are just one component of something so much broader. For far too long, shelters have been relied upon as the main entry point for those seeking housing to access housing resources. Shelters are a solution for some but for many survivors of sexual assault, shelters are not the answer. Although domestic violence shelters are technically accessible to survivors of sexual assault, many have shared stories of being screened out because their experience did not fit within the parameters of domestic violence or too much time had passed. Homeless shelters, alternatively, can pose increased risk of repeat violence to survivors not to mention lack of staff training specific to sexual assault. Other survivors would prefer to sleep outside than be in congregate housing sharing living areas with strangers compounded with limited personal autonomy. Yet access to housing resources largely depends on entering a shelter. We must look beyond shelter access and establish an alternative bridge to housing resources to ensure more equitable access.

## FUNDING

Funding is one of the most significant barriers to aiding victims of sexual assault. Without funding to do this critical work, and the inability to have a dedicated staff person, staff are left with two choices: take on additional work or refer to a local housing program (if one exists). This leads to staff taking on additional duties or referring the survivor to a local housing program creating additional barriers. Funding barriers are even more elevated for culturally specific programs serving communities of color. All programs must be infused with strategies that are responsive to Communities of Color and other marginalized communities. Although survivors of sexual assault have clear housing needs, limited staff capacity due to inadequate and inequitable funding leads to gaps in services including meeting housing needs.

## SYSTEMS INEQUITY

Homelessness, sexual assault, and housing instability are symptoms of systemic failures yet are framed as individual failures; drastically shifting how each is addressed. The housing system fails survivors of sexual assault by not considering the complexity of housing needs while implementing processes that create heightened and unnecessary barriers. The one size fits most criteria used by current housing models centers imminent physical harm as a precursor to housing need. This approach ignores the variety of experiences survivors have over their lifespan. Unnecessary barriers created by systems prevent survivors from accessing much needed assistance. Communities of color face heightened barriers when attempting to access assistance linked to systems.

Tenant screenings and/or eviction records can unfairly impact a survivor's access to housing, yet each may have been caused in part or full by the survivors' experience with sexual assault. For example, a survivor has a criminal record directly linked to their victimization. A year later, the survivor applies for a housing unit and is automatically screened out due to their criminal background. Without the opportunity to explain their circumstances including the role their victimization played; survivors often become disillusioned with the process. Similarly, a survivors' eviction record may be directly linked to their experience. A survivor may have called law enforcement too many times, was labeled a nuisance tenant for requesting increased security such as more locks, asked for other accommodations, or fell behind on rent due to missing work to talk with a counselor or paying a medical bill related to their assault. All directly linked to their experience as a survivor and could lead to an eviction record.

## What to Say to Legislators

Advocates should tell members of Congress why eviction prevention, flexible funding, direct cash assistance, emergency shelter, transitional housing, housing set asides for culturally specific providers, and permanent housing are essential for survivors of sexual assault. Housing providers should talk about the survivors that programs serve and the struggles that programs face in meeting survivors' unique needs for safety across their lifespan. Advocates should share the latest information about the pervasive scarcity of emergency and transitional housing, and of safe, affordable long-term housing in their communities.

## For More Information

*National Alliance to End Sexual Violence* - <https://endsexualviolence.org>.

*National Organizations of Sisters of Color Ending Sexual Assault* <https://sisterslead.org>.

*National Sexual Violence Resource Center* - <https://www.nsvrc.org> or <https://www.nsvrc.org/sexual-violence-housing-resource-collection>.

*National Sexual Assault Coalition Resource Sharing Project* - <https://resourcesharingproject.org>.