



"FAUX ST. REVISITED" BY CHRISTINE HANLON

## A very gendered experience

*The first survey of its kind reveals startling statistics about the health and experiences of homeless women*

BY AMANDA WALDROUPE  
STAFF WRITER

**K**aren Creed's walk is a limp. As she moves down the concrete path near southeast Portland's St. Francis' church, she heavily favors her right leg. Her left one sticks out to her side. She explains that her knee is fused, and she cannot bend it.

Creed, 49, has arthritis and osteoporosis. Her ankles are clearly swollen, and her fingers are becoming gnarled. "I'm a mess, physically," she says.

Sleeping outside, most often times on concrete, exacerbates her physical health. Creed feels bruised and sore each morning she wakes up, and has problems standing up because she can't bend some of her joints. "I have to get up like a crab, go sideways," she says.

Her voice is deeply raspy, which Creed says is caused by breathing in the fumes and dust of cars driving by each night. She often wakes up multiple times a night, and has headaches in the morning because of it.

Creed says she has been homeless off and on since she was a child. Her most recent episode of homelessness began four years ago when her son died. And she says her health has dramatically deteriorated because of her homelessness.

Creed's condition, like that of homeless women across the country, is what concerned a group of University of Nebraska-Lincoln sociologists who have embarked on a long-term study of the issue. They recently completed a survey of 40 homeless women in Portland to help further highlight the health problems faced by homeless women.

The survey's results are disturbing, and demonstrate — even from a small sample of 40 women — that homeless women are extremely vulnerable to sexual trauma, domestic violence, lack of physical and mental health care, and suffer significantly from mental illnesses and substance abuse.

Of the more than 18,000 people who accessed homeless or housing services in Multnomah County last year, 45 percent were female.

**R**esearchers interviewed the women between August 2010 and May 2011. The women answered a questionnaire on their own, and they were also interviewed by a researcher.

Portland is one of three cities in the survey, along with Pittsburgh, Penn., and Omaha, Neb., that included 200 women. It

is the initial step in a two-year project funded by a \$400,000 grant from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, a division of the National Institutes of Health.

Homeless women were questioned on a wide range of topics, including how they became homeless, their mental and physical health, their risk of HIV infection, and histories with trauma and domestic and sexual violence.

The survey, says Les Whitbeck, a sociology professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and principal investigator in the survey, is the first of its kind done in the nation, focusing specifically on women's health and comparing the results between cities.

Whitbeck says he and his colleagues got the idea to survey homeless women after doing a similar survey on homeless youths. In that survey, the youths reported similar experiences and concerns while homeless, until they grew older. By the time the youth were 18, 19, and into their early 20s, homeless females began reporting higher rates of sexual trauma and domestic violence.

Whitbeck said the main goal of surveying homeless women was to get a more detailed understanding of the prevalence of specific physical and mental health problems, as well as HIV risk, among homeless women. The sample is preliminary, and the researchers are committed to interviewing women multiple times over a longer period of time to get stronger data. But themes and trends have already emerged, they say.

"Homeless people have very gendered experiences," says Devan Crawford, University of Nebraska-Lincoln sociology professor and researcher.

**T**he survey revealed that high numbers of homeless women have physical health problems, mental health disorders, suffer from substance abuse, or a combination of all three. While that is something homeless service providers already know, researchers emphasize that the data creates a clearer picture of homeless women being extremely vulnerable with major barriers to ending their homelessness.

"There are a lot of very damaged women," Whitbeck said.

More than half of the 40 women surveyed showed symptoms of borderline personality disorder or anti-social disorder. Twenty-five reported going to an emergency room in the past 12 months to receive basic medical

care.

Seventeen women who wanted medical treatment did not receive it. More than half said they had not seen a dentist in the past two years. That was noted as a particular concern to women. One anonymous woman who took the survey described being able to access dental care as "a huge thing" for homeless women. As one 36-year-old woman told researchers, "Losing teeth really affects self-esteem and (a woman's) ability to go out and interview for jobs."

Twenty women reported seeking some sort of help for mental illness, whether calling a hotline, being admitted to a hospital, or being part of a support group. Twenty-five women, or 62.5 percent of the sample, reported having a major depressive episode in their lives.

Numerous women also reported using illegal drugs.

Asthma was the physical health problem women reported the most, and 13 reported that they had inflammatory lung disorder. Other physical health problems reported include high blood pressure, lung disease, diabetes, thyroid disease and neurological problems such as Parkinson's disease.

Women also reported feeling that they were in physical danger. "We are constantly at risk while sleeping, men wanting to rape or molest us," said a 51-year old woman.

"Staying alive" was another woman's main concern.

One notable difference with the Portlanders surveyed, as compared to those in Omaha and Pittsburg, was that only five women reported being homeless for a year or less, Crawford said. Portland's homeless women, she said, were homeless for "much longer" than the other women.

Another statistic that stands out is the number of women, 12, who are not working or not looking for work. Some reasons women gave to surveyors included not having a place to shower, dress, get ready for work, as well as being unhealthy or disabled.

"It is hard to get clean underwear and bras. (We) need more places to get a haircut," reported a 23-year-old woman in the survey.

Creed says it is hard to access services that may seem secondarily important to housing and case management, like places to get glasses, for example. Transportation is a huge obstacle for her, because of her arthritis. It would be nice, she says, if there were more places like St. Francis where she can put a "cup of coffee between my very

Statistics from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's survey of 40 Portland homeless women:

■ 21 women had spent time in jail or prison since the age of 18

■ 11 women stopped attending school by the 11th grade

■ 18 women became homeless because they could not pay their rent.

■ 13 became homeless because of domestic violence; 7 listed domestic violence as their main reason for becoming homeless

■ 21 women slept in a shelter for the past 12 months; 19 slept outside.

■ 10 women said they are not currently seeking employment because of "poor health."