

CENTER FOR SURVIVOR AGENCY & JUSTICE

POVERTY, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, SOCIAL INEQUALITY:

What the New Poverty Data Tell Us About Addressing Domestic & Sexual Violence

by Sara Wee, CSAJ Director of Research & Programs

New poverty data was released this month from the U.S. Census Bureau. While poverty is decreasing and income is increasing, communities of color continue to live in poverty at disproportionate rates and material hardship (food and housing insecurity) had a real impact on many. Why does this matter for domestic and sexual violence survivors? And what does it mean for our advocacy?

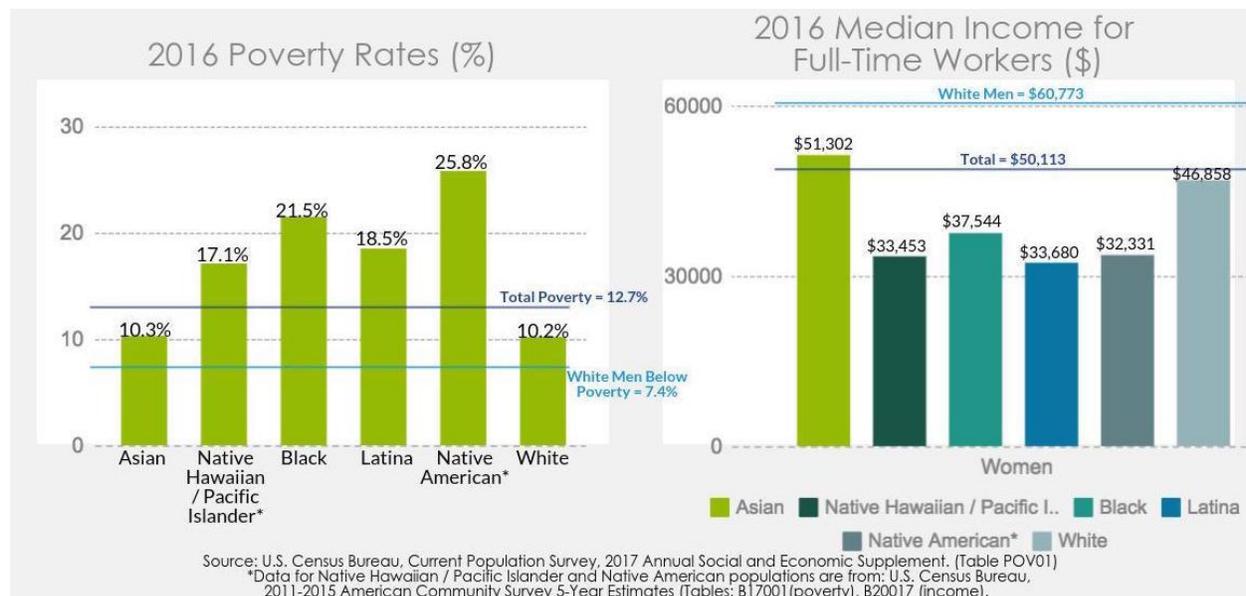
The poverty data mirrors what we know about the economic realities of survivors:

- The stats line up. There's a link between poverty, domestic violence, and social inequality.
- It's not just about income. Traditional measures of poverty don't always account for the ways in which survivors experience economic hardship.
- Advocacy must address both the physical and economic safety needs of survivors.

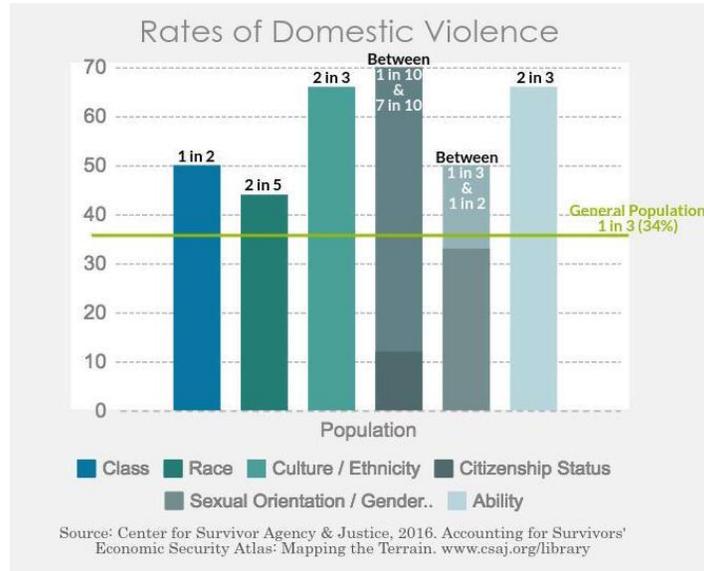
In the wake of policy decisions that will change our economic landscape – with a particular impact on survivors and marginalized communities – a look at what this data says (and doesn't say) can be a helpful tool in mapping our own community context and steering our advocacy efforts toward enhancing survivors' economic security and equity.

Poverty data: Focusing on inequity

For the second year in a row, poverty is decreasing and incomes are rising. In 2016, 40.6 million people (12.7%) were living in poverty - \$12,234 for an individual, \$24,563 for a family of four. And the gender wage gap narrowed for the first time since 2007. Despite these gains, women still only make \$.80 to the male-dollar and this inequity is even more striking for communities of color:



A similar picture emerges when we examine rates of domestic violence across identity groups: While 1 in 3 of all women report domestic violence, rates of violence are dramatically higher for those on the social margins:

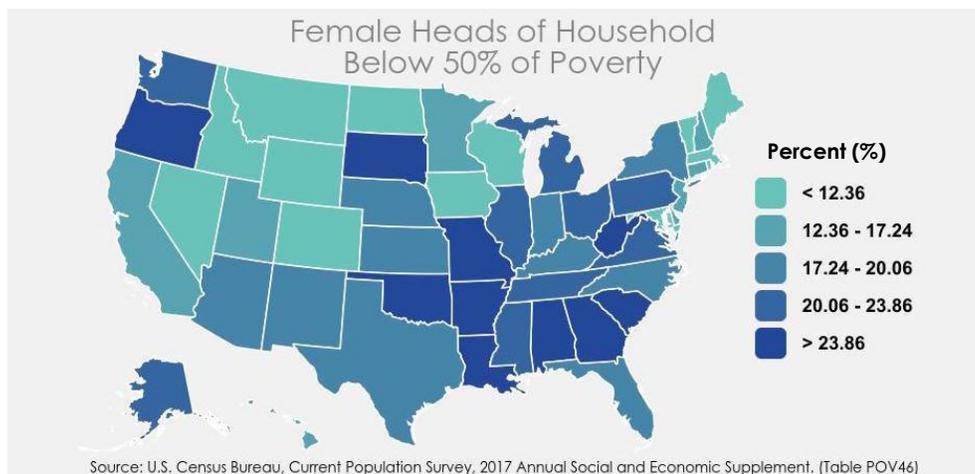


The fact that disparities in poverty, income, and violence persist despite a brightening economic landscape should be the center of our focus. CSAJ recently released an [Accounting for Economic Security Atlas](#), which delves into these intersections and disparities for survivors in greater depth.

Take a closer look at the charts above as you explore the [poverty data](#) further:
How does this compare to what you're seeing and hearing from survivors? What populations do you serve that aren't represented here? What other questions do you have?

Geographic context matters: Painting a fuller picture

State and local-level differences say even more about our economic landscape, presenting an important opportunity for advocacy organizations to add much-needed context. For example, in West Virginia and South Dakota one-in-three female householders (no spouse present) do not make enough to meet half the poverty line. Whereas in Colorado and Maryland, less than one-in-ten live below 50% of the poverty line:



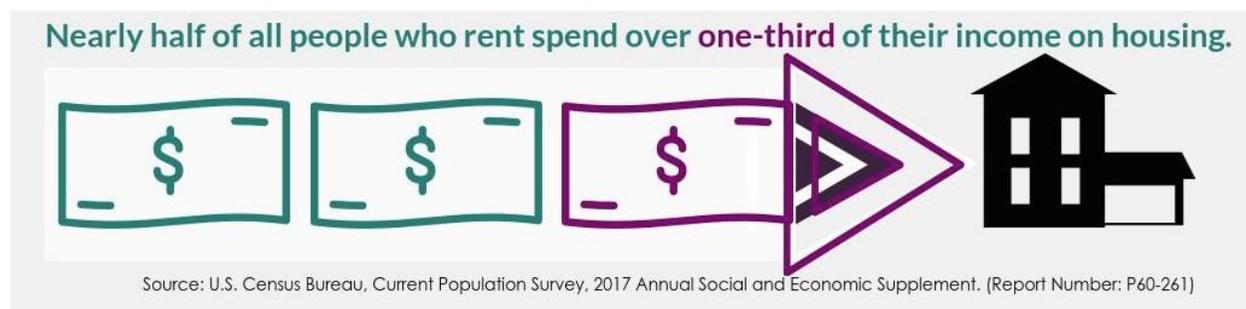
Making comparisons across states and local jurisdictions provides visual nuance, helpful when thinking about how we continue to advocate for funding, programs, and service to reduce poverty, advance equity, and end violence.

Check out this mapping tool from [Talk Poverty](#). In addition to the Mapping Tool, the [American Community Survey](#) is easy to navigate and create tables or maps that detail social issues across race and gender and allow us to compare our state (and even county) to others. Think about: *What are your state and local income averages and poverty rates? Where do survivors you work with sit in the economic landscape? And what do survivors say most contributes to economic insecurity? What does your program data, local economic picture, and insights about funding, services, and resources reveal when placed next to this national picture?*

And think about intersections: *How would the map above look if we centered [Native American](#) women by state? Or women of color? Or if we compared immigrant populations? What would these comparisons tell us or lead us to examine?*

Income isn't everything

The data also underscores that income isn't everything. [Supplemental data](#) released this month shows material hardship matters a whole lot for one's economic security:



Other [recent data](#) shows similar trends in housing insecurity for survivors: 1 in 3 families entering shelters cite domestic violence as the cause, and yet 8 in 10 survivors will leave emergency shelters without a safe or affordable place to go.



In a [longitudinal study](#) of low-income women, 1 in 5 women who reported domestic violence were food insecure, compared to 1 in 10 of those who never experienced violence.

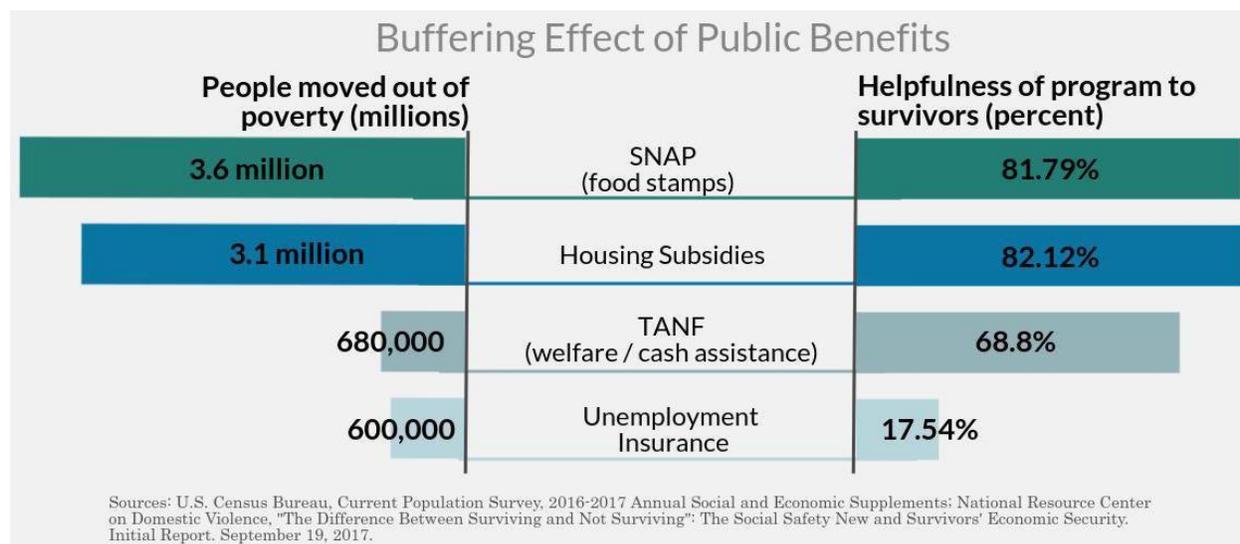
And despite Medicaid expansion and the declining rates of uninsured via the Affordable Care Act (down from 9.1 to 8.8% from 2015 to 2016), medical costs put 10.5 million in poverty.

Domestic violence is no doubt a major contributor to this cost, it generates upwards of [\\$4 billion](#) each year in medical and mental healthcare costs.

For decades, survivors have described the economic harm created by a partner who interferes with their income or restricts their access to resources. They also have underscored the importance of access to things like childcare, housing, and transportation when seeking safety. It's not just about income.

Buffering effects: Keeping an eye on anti-poverty programs

Key public benefits have been cited as [responsible for stabilizing poverty](#) rates during the 2008 recession and for moving millions of people out of poverty. Importantly, the same programs that lift people out of poverty are also among the most helpful public benefits to survivors.ⁱ



These data underscore the importance of protecting, expanding, and enhancing critical programs seeking to address poverty, particularly for survivors of violence. For example, while advocates report that SNAP (food stamps) and TANF (welfare) are among the most helpful public benefits for survivors, SNAP has a much stronger impact on reducing poverty (3 million people).

What gives? While advocates state that TANF (welfare) is extremely beneficial to survivors, preliminary findings from the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence survey also reveals that "less than half of advocates report that most domestic violence survivors are able to access TANF when they need it." We know historically that the 1990s welfare reform attaching work requirements to cash assistance left survivors with the same financial needs but more likely to be unemployed because the policy change ignored the safety risks and financial tradeoffs that employment can bring.ⁱⁱ In addition, the funding mechanism (state block grants) made TANF unresponsive to economic adversity in a state, thus only 1 in every 4 families that would be eligible for TANF actually receive benefits.ⁱⁱⁱ On the other hand, funding for SNAP is much more responsive to state needs as is eligibility for benefits more straight-forward.

On the other hand, TANF and Unemployment Insurance move a similar number of people out of poverty, yet advocates consider Unemployment Insurance much less helpful.

Is this due to survivors needing unemployment benefits less? Or is there less awareness of it as an option? Or are there more barriers to accessing job protections for survivors? How would you interpret this chart and where would needs of survivors rank from where you sit? How would you rate the helpfulness of public programs?

So, what can you do?

Advocate for the economic and physical safety needs of survivors, simultaneously. Start here:

- o [Building Partnerships to Enhance Consumer Rights for Domestic Violence Survivors: An Assessment and Resource Tool for Attorneys and Advocates](#)
- o Survivor Centered Economic Advocacy: [Webinar](#) and [Advocacy Brief](#)
- o [Introduction](#): Guidebook on Consumer & Economic Civil Legal Needs of Survivors
- o [Screening for Consumer Issues](#): A Tool for Domestic Violence Advocates & Attorneys

Adopt an intersectional advocacy approach. There are numerous innovative examples of the ways we can advance economic equity by centering survivors who are marginalized by virtue of race, ethnicity, citizenship status, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, and other identity factors.

- o [Accounting for Survivors Economic Security: An Atlas](#)
- o Women of Color Network, Inc: [Economic Policy Field Reports](#)
- o Asian Pacific Institute on Gender Based Violence: [A to Z Advocacy Model: Asian and Pacific Islanders Build and Inventory of Evidence-Informed Practices](#)
- o Casa de Esperanza: [Building Evidence Toolkit](#)
- o Southwest Center on Law and Policy: [SAFESTAR](#) and [Legal Resources for Native Survivors](#)
- o National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs: [Reports on Hate Violence and Intimate Partner Violence for LGBTQ individuals](#)

Do a data dive using the poverty data, your own program data, and insights into survivors' experiences to build a nuanced understanding of economic equity for survivors. Then Share your story to protect vital programs, amplify the work, and illuminate emerging or persistent needs.

What does poverty and economic hardship look like for survivors in your community? How does your on-the-ground economic reality give further context to national and state level data? What policy or systems changes have made important positive and negative impacts? What can we celebrate about survivors' resiliency and communities' ability to transform? What's not being told through this data? What programs, services, advocacy are critical and need protecting? Here are some places to dig into the poverty data:

- o *US Census Data*: [Current Population Survey](#) (national-level data) and [American Community Survey](#) (state, county, local-level data)
- o *Center for American Progress*: [State Map Tool](#)
- o [Contact CSAJ](#) to discuss your data interests and needs

Find out more about the state and impact of economic inequity in the U.S.

- o National Women's Law Center: [You Should Be Ticked Off By the Wage Gap for Some Women of Color](#)
- o ColorLines: [Study Finds White People Wildly Overestimate Racial Economic Equality](#)
- o Coalition on Human Needs: [Fact of the Week: 15.6 Million American Households were Food Insecure in 2016](#)
- o Economic Policy Institute: [Native Americans & Jobs: The Challenge and the Promise](#)
- o Scholarly Research: [Rural Disparity in Domestic Violence Prevalence and Access to Resources](#)

ⁱ Preliminary findings from the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence

ⁱⁱ Lindhorst, T., Oxford, M., & Gillmore, M. R. (2007). Longitudinal effects of domestic violence on employment and welfare outcomes. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 22(7), 812–828.

<http://doi.org/10.1177/0886260507301477>

ⁱⁱⁱ Purtell, K.M., Gershoff, E.T. & Aber, J.L. (2012). Low income families' utilization of the federal "safety net": Individual and state-level predictors of tanf and food stamp receipt. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34(4), 713-724. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3375851/>