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Domestic Violence Victims in  
Transition from Welfare to Work:  
*Barriers to Self-Sufficiency and the W-2 Response*

*Summary Version*

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## Rationale and Methodology

Historically, many victims of domestic violence have utilized the welfare system as an economic support mechanism when leaving violent relationships. Recent national and state legislation has established welfare-replacement programs with strict time limits, work requirements and rules mandating that women cooperate with state efforts to collect child support from fathers. Domestic violence advocates in Wisconsin have expressed concern about the potential inability of abused women to comply with the work requirements of Wisconsin Works (W-2), and about the capacity of W-2 to effectively identify, support and protect victims so they can successfully move from welfare to work.

The Institute for Wisconsin’s Future (IWF), in conjunction with statewide advocacy groups, has completed a survey of domestic violence victims to determine:

- 1) The extent to which domestic abuse impacts women’s capacity to maintain employment and complete needed education and training programs.
- 2) How Wisconsin Works (W-2) responds to the highly vulnerable population of battered women making a transition from welfare to work.

During the fall of 1998, 274 surveys were completed by victims of domestic violence around the state. Respondents were primarily single mothers. Three-quarters had a high school diploma or less. More than 90% had received AFDC at some time, and 61% had been or were currently enrolled in W-2.

## Major Findings

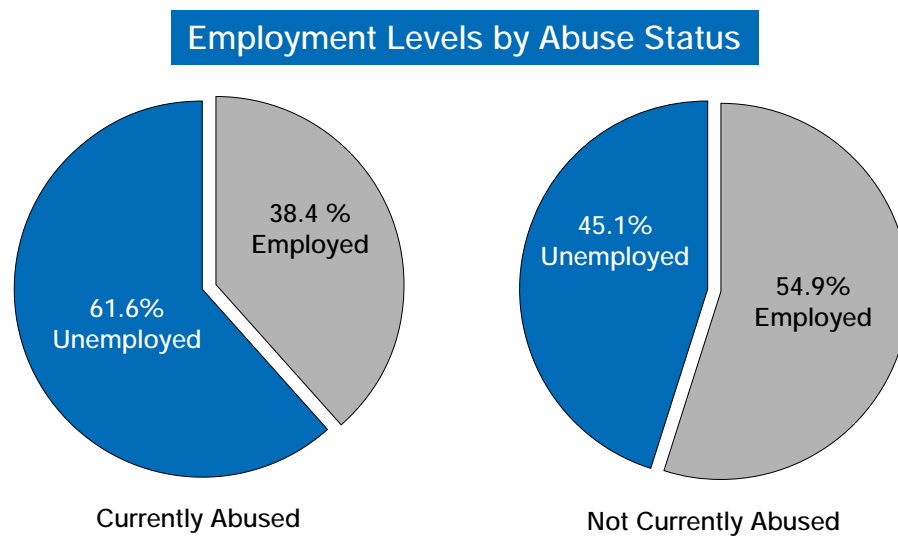
### I. Domestic violence has a severe negative impact on low-income women’s ability to maintain jobs and to succeed at education and training efforts.

Approximately 30% of respondents report they were fired or lost a job because of domestic abuse, and 35% report that the abuse hurt their education and training efforts. More than half (57.8%) of women surveyed indicate that they were threatened to the point where they were afraid to go to school or work. Respondents also detailed specific behaviors on the part of abusers that have clear and dramatic effects on the women’s ability to find and maintain employment or achieve self-sufficiency.

TYPE OF ABUSE	NUMBER	PERCENT
Abuser kept respondent from sleeping	207	84.5%
Respondent was threatened to the point that she was afraid to go to work or school	137	57.8%
Abuser refused child care at last minute	112	47.1%
Abuser called respondent at work repeatedly	102	41.5%
Abuser refused transportation to work at last minute	82	34.0%
Respondent was beaten so she could not work	82	33.9%
Respondent is afraid former partner will return and harass her if the state attempts to collect child support from him	61	26.8%
Abuser forces respondent to do illegal things	49	20.9%

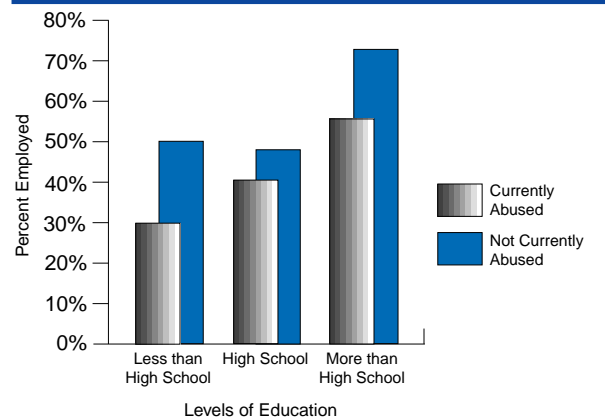
## II. Women who are currently being abused are less likely to be employed than are women who were abused in the past, regardless of education level or age.

Employment rates of women who had been abused in the past were considerably higher (54.9%) than those of women who were currently being abused (38.4%). All victims of domestic violence suffer physically and emotionally in ways that could affect their ability to work, even after they have left an abusive relationship. However, women currently in abusive situations face daily disruptions that prevent stable participation in the work force or education programs.

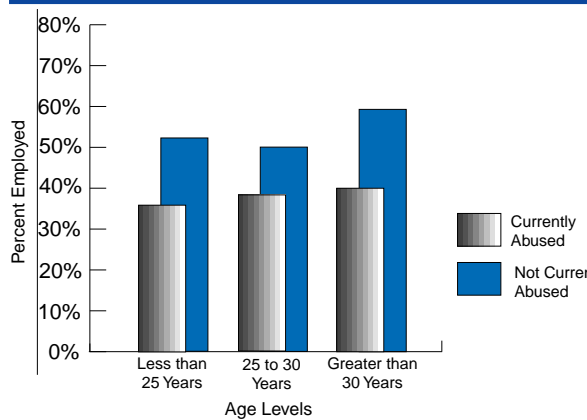


This difference in employment rates is consistent regardless of education level or age.

**Chart 1: Employment Rates of Current and Past Abuse Victims, by Education**



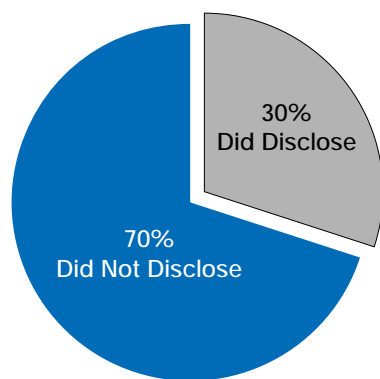
**Chart 2: Employment Rates of Current and Past Abuse Victims, by Age**



### III. Victims of domestic violence are being overlooked under W-2.

Findings show that voluntary disclosure, currently the only W-2 mechanism for identifying victims of abuse, is ineffective since the vast majority (nearly 70%) of W-2 participants surveyed did not disclose that they were or had been victims of domestic violence to W-2 agencies. Because W-2 lacks a systematic method to screen for abuse among W-2 applicants and participants, agency caseworkers (FEPs) are generally unable to identify this population and therefore are prevented from developing accurate assessments of participants' job readiness and need for other available support services.

Percent of Women Who Disclose Abuse



### IV. When W-2 participants do disclose domestic violence, W-2 caseworkers frequently fail to advise the women of available support services, program options or exemptions from certain regulations.

W-2 has several provisions to address the needs of domestic violence victims, yet approximately 75% of the respondents who disclosed abuse were not informed of available counseling, housing funds, or information on the use of W-2 work hours to seek help. Only 4.9% of those who disclosed that they had been victims of domestic abuse were told that they might have good cause for non-cooperation with child support enforcement rules if it would put themselves or their children at risk of violence. The failure of W-2 staff to inform women of this option is particularly disturbing, since more than one-fourth of respondents reported being afraid that a former partner would return and harass them if the state attempted to collect child support.

Table 2: W-2 Agency Response to Domestic Abuse Disclosure

Agency Response to Domestic Abuse Disclosure	Percent
Referred participant to counseling	26.8%
Asked participant for proof of abuse	19.5%
Told participant funds were available if she was homeless because of abuse	14.6%
Informed participant that part of weekly W-2 activity hours could be used to get help for abuse	7.3%
Told participant that child support enforcement rules might be waived	4.9%

## Recommendations

In order to address the issues raised in this report and to ensure that domestic abuse victims are positioned to achieve self-sufficiency, IWF, the Task Force on Domestic Violence, the Milwaukee Commission on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault, and the Access Committee of the Governor's Council on Domestic Abuse recommend the following improvements to W-2:

- ❖ **Caseworker training:** Caseworkers must be trained on the safety and confidentiality issues associated with domestic violence.
- ❖ **Assessment tools:** A standardized assessment mechanism for applicants should be developed to consistently identify abuse.
- ❖ **Universal notification of program options:** All applicants must be provided with information detailing the possible benefits of self-disclosure as well as the support services and program options available to abuse victims.
- ❖ **Clarification of "good cause" exemptions:** Domestic violence victims must be informed of the option to not comply with child support enforcement rules if doing so would put the woman or her children at risk of continued violence.
- ❖ **Partnerships:** Domestic violence advocacy and service groups must be partners in developing and reviewing W-2 procedures that specifically impact their client group.

## Conclusion

This report documents the destructive role domestic violence plays in preventing low-income women from maintaining employment or securing skills through education and training programs. The data indicates that the W-2 system, as currently designed and implemented, can not adequately identify the vast majority of abuse victims. Moreover, once victims of domestic violence are identified, the W-2 program is not consistently providing these women with available support services or safety provisions needed by such a vulnerable population.

Women coping with situations of physical abuse struggle daily to create and maintain safe lives for themselves and their children. The additional task of securing the skills and education necessary for steady employment and long-term self-sufficiency is daunting. For W-2 to succeed in helping this vulnerable population make such a challenging transition, several systemic changes are required. The changes (see "Recommendations") are neither major, nor do they have significant financial implications, but they could spell the difference between prolonged poverty and a stable life for thousands of Wisconsin women and children.

## Acknowledgements

This study was funded by the Joyce Foundation of Chicago. The survey instrument was designed by IWF in collaboration with the Task Force on Domestic Violence, the Milwaukee Commission on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault, and the Access Committee of the Governor's Council on Domestic Abuse. These advocacy groups assisted in developing the report's policy recommendations. We wish also to express our thanks to Pa Vang, IWF intern, for her work in building these collaborations and assistance in designing the survey instrument.

The Institute for Wisconsin's Future is a statewide policy research and community education center. IWF was established in 1994 by a coalition of concerned academics, community and religious leaders, labor organizations and business professionals to produce and disseminate analysis of key public policy issues to assist citizens in making informed public policy decisions.



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