

## UNL research aims to understand homelessness among women

December 23 2009

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Women make up nearly one-third of the homeless population in the United States. Yet little is known about how they become homeless or how they live. University of Nebraska-Lincoln sociologist Les Whitbeck hopes his new research project surveying the lives of homeless women will lead to better understanding and to programs that help combat the problem. His research also will create employment and job skills for those most in need.

Whitbeck recently received a \$400,715 two-year grant from the National Institutes of Health's National Institute of Child Health and Human Development funded by the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act to begin the pilot project.

[Homeless](#) women need special attention because their situations differ greatly from men's, Whitbeck said. Women often have children, adding stress and limiting their options; they're more vulnerable to sexual exploitation; may suffer from different mental disorders; and become homeless for different reasons.

His goal is to understand the various pathways to homelessness and the long-lasting effect it may have on mental health and risk factors for [HIV infection](#) among homeless women.

"The ultimate goal is to turn research into action by creating prevention programs to help women get off the street and to minimize the impact on children," Whitbeck said.

His study will test innovative new techniques for documenting pivotal life events and for diagnosing mental and substance abuse disorders, as well as methods to obtain a truly [representative sample](#). Because homeless women's situations vary tremendously, capturing that diversity is challenging.

Over the next two years, Whitbeck will test his survey and sampling methods in Omaha, Pittsburgh, Pa., and Portland, Ore., before beginning a larger national survey. Validating his sampling and survey methods will help other researchers studying vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations.

The project also will have an immediate, perhaps even life-altering, impact for some people. In addition to retaining a full-time employee and hiring a graduate student, Whitbeck plans to hire 12 interviewers, four in each survey location. Because women feel more comfortable and cooperate more readily when interviewed by women of similar backgrounds, Whitbeck will hire [women](#) from homeless and other outreach programs who may be unemployed or working in unstable employment.

The benefits go beyond a temporary job. In a previous study on adolescent homelessness, Whitbeck found that through training and stable employment, interviewers obtain job skills, university connections and, often, the confidence to pursue new lives. One young, previously homeless woman he had hired is now studying for her doctoral degree.

"We've allowed homelessness to become part of the urban landscape," Whitbeck said. "For years, we've just ignored it and actually criminalized it. This is an effort to increase our national consciousness."

The federal ARRA legislation is designed to invest in science, technology and engineering research and infrastructure to stimulate the

nation's economy and bolster research capacity. ARRA funding is received through competitive grants from federal agencies representing a variety of disciplines.

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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