

The definition of at-risk



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At-risk. I use that phrase a lot, and it is used just as much by my colleagues who work in the nonprofit space of service to the marginalized in our community. I was asked recently what that phrase meant.

I started to offer what I am sure was a fairly pat definition: "At-risk takes in a variety of indicators, but to many, at-risk means homeless. ..." Hearing the words, I stopped and recalled a recent event. Sally Love, the United Way director for Beaufort County, addressed the topic of homelessness at a local meeting. The stigma associated with the label "homeless," she noted, is the stigma that follows the label. She was right, the use of homeless powerfully shapes how people think about and respond to those who are homeless. In turn, the homeless, given that label by others, end up thinking negatively about themselves.



When we think of homeless people, do we see men, and some women down on their luck, muttering to themselves, living in a tent city on the outskirts of town, clothes dirty, toes poking out of shoes and often carrying a brown paper bag with a bottle, and on and on? That's a lot to infer from a single word that simply means "without a home." It is a condition, a happenstance. But the label is packed to the brim with all sorts of connotations we consciously or unconsciously load on it, and some may indeed apply. But the term also creates a frame or bias or, as Sally said, a stigma that clouds how we see those living "without a home." It narrows our understanding of who is, or could be, homeless.

Women veterans are the fastest growing veteran homeless population in the United States. Compared to their male counterparts, women face many challenges when they take off that uniform for the last time. They are leaving the stability, consistency and, for many, the social support found in military service, and striking out on their own. Many are single parents when they leave and earn less on average than they did in the service and less than their male counterparts. There is a frighteningly high rate of domestic violence for both women in the service and as veterans: almost 40 percent of women veterans experience domestic abuse. Depression is common among women veterans, even more so when they have PTSD. Most PTSD is linked to sexual assault, and substance abuse is found in almost one-fourth of those with PTSD. The VA could help them, but those with sexual assault or related trauma find the male-dominated culture at the VA just an extension of what they experienced in the service.

And here is the kicker. Women veterans many times don't fit the VA or other social service agency's definition of homeless, or even the stereotype of living on the street. They aren't on the street looking for a handout. One researcher observed, "... women veterans, like women in general, are usually living in vehicles, staying on a friend's couch or remaining in a violent relationship in order to not become 'homeless.' Women are used to being the caretakers and often have a very hard time asking for help."

The plight of a homeless female veteran is only marginally about "living without a home." It is all about living "at-risk."

This Friday, Feb. 15, the first Beaufort County at-risk Veteran Stand Down will take place.

Male and female veterans "living without home" may be there. But for all involved in the stand down, from sponsors, host and service vendors to the Veterans themselves, all have checked their bias a long time ago and will be there to ease the risk. For more information, contact Robert Greene Sands, robert@pamlicorose.org.

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