

# Discussion Guide



**Seven women share their experiences of  
homelessness...**

**A riveting new documentary film**

Director  
Laura Vazquez

Producer  
Diane Nilan

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## Introduction

Ask any individual or audience about the image in their mind when you say “homeless person.” Chances are quite good that they will describe the stereotypical disheveled, disorientated older man standing on a street corner in Big City, USA.

Truth is, while homeless men comprise the most visible and, sadly, easily dismissible segment of this nation’s homeless population, by no means are they the largest percentage of this hard-to-count populace. Nor is homelessness strictly an urban issue.

Consider this approximation of the overall categories of the millions (no credible estimate of this country’s homeless populations exists) of un-housed persons in the United States:

- Single men 45%
- Single women 20%
- Single and two-parent families with children 25%
- Unaccompanied youth (13 - 24 years old) 10%

Single men likely comprise close to half of the overall homeless population. Certainly their needs are as important as the needs of women, children and teens. But historically, **women, children and youth have not been proportionally calculated when homelessness was considered.** Homelessness and myriad causes of it, especially poverty, continue to escalate unabated, forcing millions to experience life as “poverty nomads” migrating across urban and non-urban America. The latest economic assault on poor and vulnerable people in the financial fall-out of the Great Recession/Depression of 2008 has only added—significantly—to this nation’s homeless census.

**REALITY:** **Policymakers** have not adequately addressed the needs specific to families and youth. The **public** exhibits little recognition of their existence. **Schools** strain to identify and serve homeless students. **Communities** grapple with homelessness in general, under-prioritizing families and youth. **Shelters** and other emergency solutions are often restricted or overcapacity, leaving families and youth unserved. **Advocacy organizations** present fractured pictures of who and how many experience homelessness. And **Congress** remains woefully in the dark about the millions of invisible homeless children, youth and families on our nation’s streets.

When Laura Vazquez and Diane Nilan, **on the edge** director and producer, set out to make this documentary in 2006, they very specifically focused on women who end up **invisibly** homeless. Sadly, women whose lives have fallen apart in a significant way, whose families, including their children, are no longer part of their lives, may eventually become known as “bag ladies,” lumped in with the grizzled guys on the street. But before they cross that tragic threshold into visible homelessness, it is likely that many lived lives much like the seven women of **on the edge**.

Perhaps when the scope of homelessness is better understood—how it affects babies, small children, teens, young adults, women as well as men, millions of them—perhaps then sufficient outrage about this solvable issue will resonate in communities and in Congress.

The courageous women whose lives are revealed in this film deserve immense credit for opening minds and hearts of viewers of **on the edge**. To make their sacrifice worthwhile, the **paradigm** of how this nation views and addresses homelessness **needs to change. This film is that call to action.**

## **on the edge** *Think you know homelessness? Think again...*

**on the edge**, DVD, documentary. 68 minutes running time. Laura Vazquez, Director. Diane Nilan, Producer. nomad productions. 2010.

### **Includes:**

- 2 trailers, 4 minutes and 8 minutes, and
- Q/A session (20 minutes) with Professor Markus Redding, Columbia University School of Social Work and his MSW students. (Available summer 2011)

**Recommended Viewers:** People of every knowledge level, ages (mature) 13+. **on the edge** provides an extensive, personal account of issues common to many women, children and teens who find themselves without a home.

### **Overview**

**on the edge** discloses a world seen by few—the nomadic existence of women and children far from gritty ghettos and urban poverty.

In **on the edge**, seven women reveal intimate stories of their fall from housing and independence, taking viewers beyond stereotypes, exposing brutal realities of poverty and homelessness by those who endured it. This hour-long documentary chronicles the struggles of seven women trying to escape homelessness in small towns and resort communities across America.

**Audiences** that will benefit include: individuals, advocacy organizations, shelter staff, human services personnel, government workers, college/university students (social work, health fields, education, sociology, psychology), law enforcement personnel, social justice groups, elected officials, educators on all levels, and corrections officials.

### **Production Notes**

**on the edge** was filmed over the period from 2006 – 2008. This film explores a cross-section of a largely invisible and little-understood part of the larger population. The focus on women was the filmmakers' decision.

Subjects did not receive compensation for their participation. Although the project received considerable support, monetarily and in-kind, the bulk of this project was a labor of love on the part of Laura and Diane who share a commitment to the eradication of homelessness for families and youth, and the incredible support of two institutions: Northern Illinois University's Department of Communication and the nonprofit organization HEAR US Inc.



## Discussion Guide

This Discussion Guide is **organized around the women in the film.** Use questions to selectively address the particular issues that interest your group or to address those that apply to your curriculum. Some topics are so intense that one question could carry an entire discussion about welfare, domestic violence or even child sexual abuse. At the end of the guide, you will find a list of general discussion questions and resources that may also be helpful for a broader discussion about homelessness and poverty.

### **INTRODUCTION**

**The opening scene** depicts a different scenario for homelessness: women in non-urban settings sharing their stories of homelessness.

- How does this concept differ from the stereotypical portrayal of homelessness?
- Why focus on this segment of the population?
- Does the suggestion of homelessness in rural settings shift your perception of the issue?

**Angela** uses the phrase **“welfare mom”** describing her pre-homeless situation.



- What are the elements of welfare and other government-provided supports that would cause a family to be vulnerable to homelessness?
- How does being on welfare impede a family’s return to independence?
- What forms of government support might be useful in preventing family homelessness?

Leading a staff meeting, Angela can be heard saying “we can’t save everybody...” and then pointing out “...these women want a better life.”

- How do you think those 2 statements reflect the conundrum and reality for homeless families? For shelter directors?
- What current Federal or State policies and practices are you aware of that affect family homelessness?
- Do you know what services are available in your community for homeless families/youth?
- Do you know what are the restrictions and requirements that govern these services and access to them?

Angela’s OB doctor told her to expect twins. She was determined to make things work, moving out of the shelter 2 months after having the babies.

- How realistic do you think it was to move out of the shelter so soon?
- What resources does a family need to survive?
- How does a mother’s dependence on a spouse/partner make her vulnerable to loss of housing?
- Do you think the welfare system adequately provides for families?
- How does the stereotype of “welfare moms” play into the perception of women having babies for money? Is it a legitimate perception?
- Should a mother be given sufficient resources to provide for her family’s basic needs?

Angela makes a strong statement that she'll never be homeless again.

- What economic realities have changed to potentially jeopardize her determination?
- How do her experiences affect the way she views her material possessions?
- How do you think her sexual abuse might explain some of her choices?



**Antoinette**

**Antoinette** portrays her dependence on the shelter rather than family or friends. She describes conditions that led to her homelessness.

- What level of income does a working single parent need to attain/maintain stability?
- How does the issue of a “living wage” fit with a person’s vulnerability to homelessness?
- What other support networks are needed when young women like Antoinette encounter financial difficulties? Do these supports exist?

Antoinette describes her relationship with the 2 men who fathered her children. She calls one “a wonderful father.” The other lied to her.

- How might her definition of “wonderful father” be affected by her own father and step-father, one who abandoned her and one who abused her?
- What are the vulnerabilities of young women (and men) in **foster care** when forming relationships?
- Do you think she seemed gullible or naïve?
- How do you think Antoinette’s sexual abuse by her stepfather may have contributed to her later problems with men or her homelessness?
- Did the child welfare system adequately protect her?



**Beatrice**

**Beatrice** points to the high mobility of her family, aligning her feelings to a lack of possessions.

- How would the lack of possessions affect a school-age child or teen?
- What possessions are essential for quality of life?

Beatrice describes hardships of high school as a homeless student. She makes astute observations about self-esteem. Her understanding about her mother’s “sickness” points to underlying causes of homelessness.

- What are possible difficulties and resources for a child or teen in coping with homelessness while attending school?
- What significance is self-esteem for a child/teen as they experience homelessness?
- How does a parent’s mental illness affect their ability to provide for their family?
- What realities does her mother’s “sickness” bring to the family’s situation?
- What resources might a family need when the caregiving parent is mentally and/or physically disabled? Are those resources adequately available?

Beatrice pleads on behalf of children and youth being helped by poverty programs.

- How did her experiences strengthen her understanding of these programs’ value?
- What are options for children and youth who lack the support of assistance programs?
- Do you think she correct in her assessment of the importance of these programs?

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**Julianna**

**Julianna** describes her fear caused by her family's ongoing experience of **domestic violence**.

- What affect does fear have on a custodial parent's decision-making process before, during and after leaving the abusive spouse?
- How did her family's military connection complicate her dilemma?

Julianna needed to make decisions about keeping her family together.

- How might this separation impact the emotional health of her children once they left their father?
- What effects might the dilemma of her family needing to further split up have on her and her children?
- What reasons do shelters have to restrict the age of older (male) children?

Unlike Antoinette, Julianna had a supportive community of friends.

- Was that all she needed to adjust to the changes in her life?
- What resources might be needed to help her cope?

Julianna looks back at the early relationship with her husband. She describes the conundrum of experiencing domestic violence in the military.

- How did Julianna give her spouse power?
- What role do fear and the imbalance of power have in domestic violence?

Julianna tried to address getting pregnant each time her husband returned from tours of duty.

- What are common barriers to family planning Julianna and other women experience?
- What do you think kept her tied to her marriage?
- What role did guilt and lack of self-esteem have in prolonging her situation?
- What economic realities loomed as she and her children left him?

Julianna faces the future with hope, feeling a sense of courage.

- What contributed to her arriving at this point?
- What residue might she and her children experience in their post-homelessness life?
- What barriers might she encounter as she pursues her next goals?



**Melissa**

**Melissa** describes reasons for her family's early experiences of homelessness and how they coped with the loss of housing.

- What are the financial realities a **single mother** might face?
- How do those challenges threaten the stability of a family?
- What are basic expenses for attaining and maintaining a family's own place to live?
- Besides money, what prevents a family trying to rent a place to live?
- What might be reasons for the rise of the extended-stay motels and the corresponding loss of subsidized housing?

Despite her industrious nature Melissa can't make ends meet.

- How do multiple evictions affect a family?

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- What other resources might Melissa have needed to overcome problems she encountered?
- What was the significance of Melissa's perception about being "too busy, just trying to survive" for her children?

Melissa describes her creative efforts to cope with the challenges of trying to raise her family as a single parent. She explains how their stability was undercut by Hurricane Ivan.

- What typical childhood realities could affect a single parent's job stability?
- What systemic supports do families need to cope with the aftermath of the hurricane (or other natural disasters)?
- How did government assistance help or impede their survival?
- Should the government intervene to restore stability to impoverished families experiencing natural disasters?

Melissa met Ayden's father and became pregnant. She refused his offer of getting an abortion.

- Would she have been better off to abort the baby?
- What consequences does a woman face when making that decision?
- How does poverty affect the decision to terminate a pregnancy?

Melissa comments on the ongoing resentment from her daughters about their plight.

- How can parents cope with their children's anger and frustration with their personal situations?
- What potential long-term effects may linger in children during extended/repeated stints of homelessness?

Determined to make life better for her and her children, Melissa attended and graduated college.

- Did that decision help or hurt their situation?
- Is a college degree a help or hindrance in the quest for stability?
- What other essential components protect a parent from homelessness?



**Nancy** presents her foray into homelessness as fueled by a desire for adventure. She points to being caught up in situations as a **child** later became too much for her to handle.

- How responsible are children when they make misguided decisions that lead to instability as adults?
- What resources are needed to return to a stable, productive life?
- What significance did her small town life have on her decisions to "have fun"?

Nancy looks at relationships in her family, especially with her strict, religious father, as having an effect on her development.

- How did drugs fit in with her psychological needs?
- Why does Nancy (or any woman) fear homelessness?



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Nancy's "why not?" attitude seemed impervious, but then she talks about self-esteem and her relationship with her siblings. She looks back at how she got in over her head as a child.

- How does self-esteem affect a person's ability to make decisions?
- How did Nancy's lack of self-esteem act as a barrier to her returning home where she could get help?
- What other issues could be a deterrent to getting help?
- How does her family's involvement (getting her into multiple treatment programs) differ from other families?

Nancy looks back at her journey and reflects that she's "just lucky." Is she?

- How have her own experiences colored the way she looks at others in the same situation?
- Without overcoming substance abuse, what would have been likely outcomes for her?
- What are possible pitfalls for someone like Nancy to return to work with individuals who wrestle with addictions? Assets?
- What potential barriers does a person face when returning to the workplace after going through a treatment program?



**Tonya** introduces her story by dispelling myths, describing her work and salary as opposed to being unemployed and on welfare.

- How does this image contrast with stereotypes of black women, single mothers, and homeless women?
- What impact might her tumble from self-sufficiency to a one-room spot in a shelter have on her self-esteem?

Tonya describes herself as a "workaholic," a much-decorated employee.

- What traits of a workaholic might lead to substance abuse?
- How did Tonya view her fall into homelessness?
- Had she had additional support or resources, how might she have acted differently in terms of her unborn child?

Tonya, aware of her family's history of **substance abuse**, took steps to learn about it.

- Why wasn't this enough to prevent her from plummeting into addiction?
- What role does family history have in addictions?

Tonya expresses fear of leaving the shelter structure.

- What might Tonya's fear represent in her recovery process?
- What supports might help her cope with the fear?
- What dangers lurk to sabotage her recovery and her progress?



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**Darlene** describes the mobility factor for children.

- How does high mobility affect children in terms of friends and school?
- What other challenges face highly-mobile children and families?

Darlene points to the occurrence of **emotional trauma** in over 90% of the families they see.

- What are ways emotional trauma (ET) occurs?
- What are the potential effects of ET on families?
- What services would be needed to address these traumas?

Is Darlene correct in her assessment of the need for government involvement in fostering solutions to family homelessness?



**Ralph** states that family homelessness is not on the street, that it's the "best kept secret in America."

- What circumstances contribute to the secretive nature of family homelessness?
- Would higher visibility help or impede solutions to family homelessness?

Ralph points out that we've created "Poverty Nomads," and that the **federal government** has a distorted view of traditional family structures.

- What are causes of nomadic life for people in poverty? Effects?
- Does the government's perception of family structures hinder its ability to help families in non-traditional arrangements?

Ralph states (when interviewed in 2008) that low income housing is no longer being built.

- How does a government's investment/lack of investment in affordable housing affect families' homelessness?
- Does providing a safety net for single mothers and offering affordable housing simply contribute to their becoming "welfare queens"?

### Epilogue

- What was your reaction to the ending updates of each woman's situation?
- What do you see as their vulnerabilities? Strengths?

**GENERAL QUESTIONS**

- What purpose could be accomplished by the filmmakers' decision to focus on women and children?
- What happens to a woman's children when she is judged by the state as not being able to provide adequate shelter for them?
- How did the film's portrayal of foster care align with your perception of the problems or benefits of the foster care system?
- How did the women portrayed differ from common stereotypes of homeless women?
- How does non-urban homelessness differ from urban homelessness?
- Each woman talked extensively about their mother. Discuss the significance of their observations and the impact of maternal relationships.
- Given the realities of today's economy and job market, how can families survive on the low end of the wage scale, lacking subsidized housing?
  - What is the housing affordability price in your community?
  - What wage would the earner need to afford HUD's Fair Market Value for rental housing?
  - What supports, besides housing subsidies, would bolster families' chances of remaining independent?
- What effects does homelessness have on a child's development?
  - What related societal liabilities are incurred when children are homeless?
  - What policies might alleviate or eliminate the negative effects on children?
- What policy solutions might reduce the overall vulnerability to homelessness of families and strengthen their stability?
- While shelters provide an emergency solution to family/youth homelessness, they lack many qualities that would be helpful for those staying there. What are the drawbacks? What are the pluses?
- How might the experience of homelessness affect children in families housed in shelters? In motels? Doubled-up?
- Each woman presented somewhat unique situations—typically more than one crisis—that led to homelessness and mentioned challenges to escaping it. What solutions to homelessness might be helpful?
- What are the possible pitfalls that might cause the women/their families to return to homelessness?

## OTHER INFORMATION RESOURCES:

### Web-based

- HEAR US Inc. [www.hearus.us](http://www.hearus.us)
- **on the edge** <http://www.ontheedge.niu.edu>
- **on the edge** is on [Facebook](#)
- See the HEAR US “Other Resources” Page for a listing of other organizations working on homelessness (<http://hearus.us/understanding-homelessness/resources.html>)

### Books (HEAR US Inc. [www.hearus.us](http://www.hearus.us))

- “Crossing the Line: Taking Steps to End Homelessness” by Diane Nilan
- Children’s book trilogy—“Where Can I Build My Volcano?,” “A Family of Five or Six,” and “A Place of Our Own” by Pat Van Doren

### Films (HEAR US Inc. [www.hearus.us](http://www.hearus.us))

- “My Own Four Walls,” an award-winning collection of 6 documentaries featuring children and youth experiencing homelessness.
- Short videos on HEAR US YouTube page (<http://www.youtube.com/hearus1>)

### Organizations Represented by homelessness professionals in the film

- Ralph de Costa Nunez, New York City, NY
  - Homes for the Homeless and Institute on Children, Homelessness and Poverty
  - [www.homesforhomeless.org](http://www.homesforhomeless.org) and [www.ichp.org](http://www.ichp.org)
- Darlene Newsom, Phoenix, AZ
  - UMOM, United Methodist Outreach Ministries
  - <http://www.umom.org>

## SUGGESTED ACTIONS:

### Get involved locally

- Support local programs (if they exist) by donations of time, money or supplies.
- Research the extent of the local safety net. Report your findings to local policymakers.
- Tutor or mentor children, youth or parents, providing a vital human connection.
- Assist in starting programs, emergency shelters, essential services, advocacy efforts.

### Become an activist

- Host screenings of **on the edge**. Invite community leaders and decision makers.
- Encourage local colleges and universities to screen **on the edge** and use **on the edge** in curriculum.

## **on the edge** *Think you know homelessness? Think again...*

- Invite your legislator to watch **on the edge** and visit local programs helping families and youth.
- Join campaigns to address the issue of family/youth homelessness.

### Questions to assess homelessness in your community:

- Where do families go when they lose housing?
- Does your community have adequate/any domestic violence shelter and services?
- How extensive is help for families experiencing natural disasters (fires, floods, etc.)?
- Do local shelters turn away families and youth due to overcapacity or are there other reasons?
- Do unaccompanied minors have safe places to turn when they lose housing?
- Do young adults and teens over 18 have access to housing and resources?
- When teens age-out of foster care are safeguards in place to help them avoid homelessness?
- What restrictions are placed on the amount and frequency of assistance families/youth can receive?
- What is the gap between resources available and local needs?
- What efforts are made to coordinate local services among education, housing, mental and physical health, judicial, child welfare, foster care, and other entities?
- Do local government officials understand the true scope of homelessness, especially as it pertains to families and youth?

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## About the Filmmakers:



**Laura Vazquez**, an accomplished documentary filmmaker, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, IL. She has taught at NIU since completing her Ph.D. at Northwestern University in Radio/TV/Film in 2000. Vazquez has worked on several projects in conjunction with HEAR US and other organizations focusing on homelessness including:

- [My Own Four Walls](#) (2007), winner of the '07 NAECHY Outstanding Media Award
- [FAFSA FIX](#) (2007) featuring homeless youths' efforts to gain access to college
- [On Their Own](#) (2010), a training film explaining education rights for homeless youth

Vazquez received two grants from NIU to work on the documentary **on the edge** during her sabbatical in the Spring/Summer 2008. Since then she collaborated with Andrew McCormick and Diane Nilan to complete editing the documentary.

**on the edge** won the Best of Festival Award in the Faculty Documentary Division of the Broadcast Education Association (2011). It was an Official Selection of the Geneva Film Festival and the [Naperville Independent Film Festival](#) and [Sycamore Film Festival](#) in September 2011.



**Diane Nilan**, founder and president of [HEAR US](#) Inc. has over 25 years' experience working with impoverished and homeless families including directing the shelter at Hesus House in Aurora, IL for 13 years. In 2005, Nilan formed a national non-profit organization, HEAR US Inc., to call attention to the hidden issue of homeless families and youth. Her initial documentary project **My Own Four Walls** united her with Vazquez's documentary expertise. In addition to

producing **on the edge**, Nilan's work includes:

- "[Crossing the Line: Taking Steps to End Homelessness.](#)" (Booklocker, 2005) her reader-friendly book about homelessness.
- "[REACH](#)" (Information film and materials, 2008) to empower incarcerated parents helping them secure their children's education
- "[Learning Curve Express](#)" (You Tube, 2009) interviews with homeless mothers in doubled up and motel situations; and
- Homeless and poverty blogs "invisible homeless kids," Change.org's "[Poverty in America](#)" and "[Wanderings.](#)"

Nilan, in her RV/office known as "Tillie" continues her cross country journeys to non-urban communities to chronicle poverty and homelessness, particularly for invisible families and teens, conducting trainings, developing grass-roots advocacy support and filming for future projects.

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**Collaborators and Production Partners**

Northern Illinois University, Department of Communication

Gene and Catherine Bellini, graphics

And most specially, the women, men, children and youth who agreed to participate in this endeavor.

For more information about **OTE**, the filmmakers, or to arrange screenings:

- Laura Vazquez, Professor, Northern Illinois University, Department of Communication, [lvazquez@niu.edu](mailto:lvazquez@niu.edu), 815/753-7132
- Diane Nilan, President, HEAR US Inc., [diane@hearus.us](mailto:diane@hearus.us), 630/225-5012

**Nomad Productions** is a collaboration between Laura Vazquez and Diane Nilan. Other film projects are being planned.

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Photo of Darlene Newsom, courtesy of UMOM Inc.

Questions and corrections concerning this discussion guide, contact Diane Nilan.