Community Insights on Domestic Violence among African Americans:

Conversations About Domestic Violence And Other Issues Affecting Their Community

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This report is based primarily on interviews completed with African Americans from Birmingham, Alabama and examines their perspectives on the causes and consequences of domestic violence in the African American community. In addition, the report discusses their views on solutions toward the prevention and reduction of domestic violence in the African American Community. This was a project of the Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community (IDVAAC). The IDVAAC would like to acknowledge the work of its Steering Committee members for developing, guiding and implementing the national community assessment concept: Linner Ward Griffin, Robert L. Hampton, Shelia Hankins, Esther J. Jenkins, Kelly Mitchell-Clark, William Oliver, Beth E. Richie, Joyce N. Thomas, Antonia A. Vann, and Oliver J. Williams, the Executive Director.

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Executive Summary

In an effort to increase understanding of the perceptions of African Americans toward domestic violence, the Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community (IDVAAC) established the Community Insights Project. The purpose of the IDVAAC Community Insights Project is to secure information from African Americans who maintain an insider-specific understanding of the causes and consequences of domestic violence and to identify what they consider to be useful solutions that may be effective in preventing domestic violence in African American communities across the United States. As such, the projects seeks to inform a wider audience comprised of domestic violence service providers, criminal justice practitioners and public officials about the unique manifestation of domestic violence in the African American community.

In 1998, IDVAAC initiated a national effort to learn more about community perspectives on domestic violence. Since then, IDVAAC has convened focus groups with community members in nine cities, including: San Francisco and Oakland, California; Seattle, Washington; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Detroit, Michigan; Birmingham, Alabama, Memphis, Tennessee; and Greenville, North Carolina. The Community Insights Project has sought to enhance understanding of domestic violence in the African American community by gathering data on a range of issues, including: types of violence, causes of violence, consequences, solutions and barriers to ending domestic violence in the African American community. This report focuses on the perceptions of community members and domestic violence stakeholders in Birmingham, Alabama.

The evolving literature on domestic violence among African Americans has identified several factors that distinguish the occurrence of domestic violence among African Americans from the occurrence of domestic violence among members of the majority population. The first of these factors is the observation that structural inequalities emanating from the adverse impacts of historical and contemporary patterns of racial discrimination have contributed to domestic violence in the African American community. More specifically, those exposures to racial oppression have served as a catalyst for conflict and violence within intimate relationships (Bent-Goodley, 1998; Hampton, 1982; Hampton, Oliver & Majarian, 2003).

Second, a dominant theme in the literature on domestic violence among African Americans is the "double bind" that many African American women who are battered face. The double bind has been described as the "tendency of African American women to endure abuse, subordinate their concerns with safety, and make a conscious self sacrifice for what many of these women perceive as the greater good of the community to her own physical, psychological, and spiritual detriment" (Asbury, 1993). The existence of a community ethic that socializes African American women to internalize the view that to report an abusive man to the authorities is a form of community betrayal has functioned to hinder many African American women from proactively seeking help in an attempt to protect their intimate partner from involvement in the criminal justice system, to avoid loss of income and/or as means of avoiding social ostracism (Asbury, 1993; Bent-Goodley, 2001; Richie, 1996). The result is that the battered black woman and her children are at an increased risk for intimate partner violence and re-victimization when such women forego seeking help from law enforcement and domestic violence service providers.

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Third, the literature on domestic violence consistently reports that it is not uncommon for African Americans who experience abuse and seek assistance to experience racial discrimination. Discrimination toward African American victims of domestic violence has been identified throughout the domestic violence service delivery network and the criminal justice system. For example, there is evidence that reports that African Americans, both victims and batterers, are more likely to be arrested, prosecuted, and imprisoned due to domestic violence than other groups (Buzawa & Buzawa, 2003; Richie, 1996; Roberts, 1994). Furthermore, it has been reported that African American women experiencing domestic violence have been found to have their children removed from their custody, even when the household circumstances are similar to those of non-black women (Bent-Goodley, 2004). Indeed, inequitable treatment, based on race, remains a major reason why African American women are persistent in their efforts to remain outside of the formal systems that exist to address domestic violence victimization.

Fourth, African American researchers and practitioners have consistently called attention to the need for culturally competent services (Bent-Goodley, 2001; Gondolf & Williams, 2001; West, 1999; Williams, 1998). The lack of culturally competent services in shelters and non-residential domestic violence programs has been identified as a major factor explaining why African American women who are battered are less likely to seek emergency shelter and or services provided by domestic violence programs, even when they have experienced severe acts of intimate partner violence (Asbury, 1993; West, 1999). Research in this area has reported that it is not uncommon for workers in domestic violence programs and law enforcement to treat abuse less seriously and even withhold proactive intervention and services, as a result of acting on negative stereotypes of black

women, including the belief that African American women, unlike white women, are better able to defend themselves (West, 1999). The inadequacy of the response of the traditional domestic violence service delivery network to address domestic violence among African Americans is also evident in the location of batterers programs in areas that are geographically inaccessible to low-income African American men. It has also been noted that most batterers programs do not make any significant effort to provide culturally relevant service delivery practices and outreach that would encourage greater participation among African American men who batter (Williams & Becker, 1994). Consequently, it is not surprising that African American men have lower completion and participation rates than other men due to the lack of culturally relevant services, despite the development of culturally competent curriculum designed to provide services to this population (Gondolf & Williams, 2001.

The Community Insights Project attempts to provide a broader understanding of African Americans' perspectives on domestic violence. Community stakeholders representing the following groups were assembled to share insider-specific perspectives on issues related to occurrence of domestic violence in Birmingham's African American community. The group participants represented included: (1) Children and Youth Workers, (2) Human Services Workers, (3) Community Activists, (4) Law Enforcement, (5) GLBT, and (6) the Faith Community.

African Americans, both victims and batterers, are more likely to be arrested, prosecuted, and imprisoned due to domestic violence than other groups

Summary of Findings

1. Collaborations between various public and community-based agencies are important in the effort to prevent and reduce the occurrence of domestic violence in the African American community.

2. A recurring theme during the discussion of types of violence was that violence is omnipresent in the daily lives of African Americans.

3. Adverse structural conditions (e.g., racial discrimination, blocked access to employment opportunity, poverty) serve as a catalyst for domestic violence, as well as other types of violence in the African American community.

4. Abuse of women is tolerated in the African American community.

5. Domestic violence is associated with various social problems (e.g. poverty, unemployment) and the high rates of community violence.

6. The most significant barrier hindering effective responses designed to prevent and reduce the occurrence of domestic violence in the African American community is community tolerance of violence that occurs within the context of intimate relationships.

7. The reluctance of traditional providers of domestic violence programs and services to recognize the value of developing and funding culture-specific programs was identified as a major barrier hindering the prevention and reduction of domestic violence in the African American community.

8. The African American community must be mobilized to address domestic violence through increased public awareness.
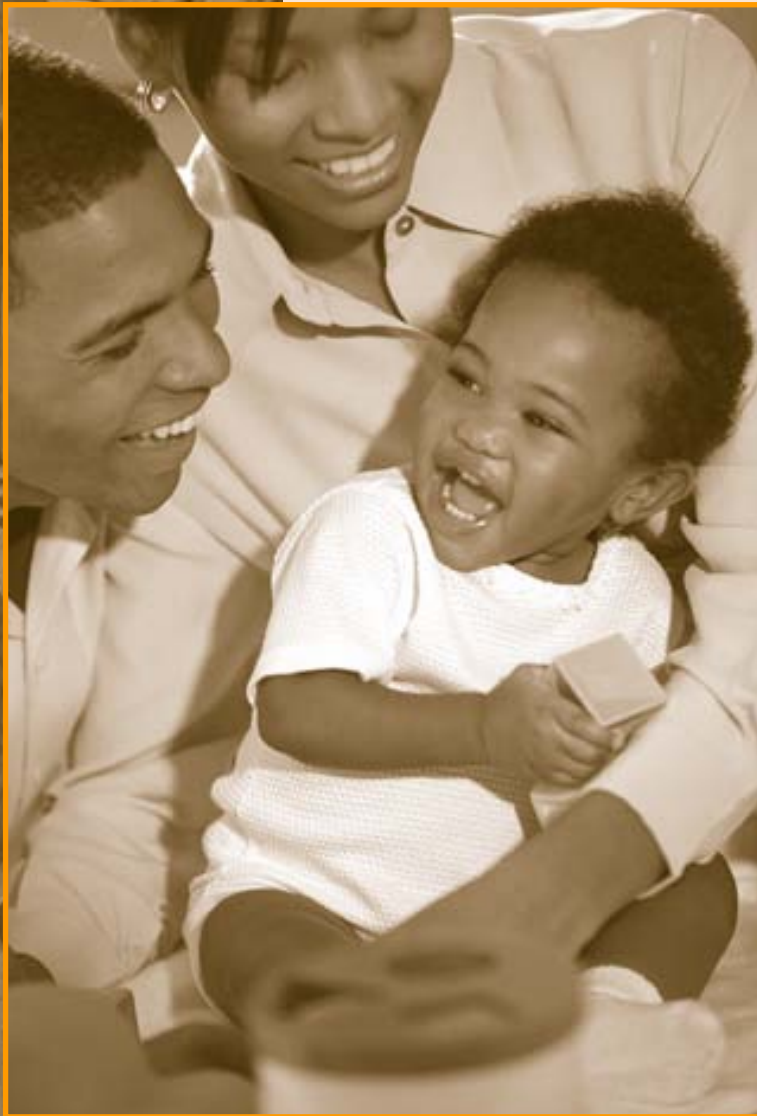
Introduction

This report provides perspectives on domestic violence from community stakeholders in Birmingham, Alabama. While the participants represented a broad range of professional backgrounds and interest groups, they expressed consensus regarding the need for a more enhanced response to reduce and prevent domestic violence among African Americans. The participants who were invited to participate in the focus groups were invited because of their professional involvement in occupations that allowed them to maintain an insider-perspective on the causes and consequences of domestic violence among African Americans in Birmingham. There is very limited research on African Americans perceptions of domestic violence (Bent-Goodley, 1998), consequently this report and the larger Community Insights Project has the potential to advance understanding of what is needed to establish a much more informed response to domestic violence that is informed by solutions identified by African Americans who are both professionally and personally committed to addressing this issue.

Organization of the Report

The primary sections of this report include: (1) a representation of findings across the six focus groups; (2) individual session summaries, using participant quotes to amplify focus group thematic findings; and (3) recommendations that emanate from the findings. The first half of this report represents the participants' collective or across groups responses to the questions that were posed during the focus groups. The session summaries present the findings from each specific focus group. Finally, policy recommendations are offered to respond to the findings that emerged from these discussions.

Community Demographics

Birmingham is the largest city in the state of Alabama. Though pronounced differently, it is named after Birmingham, England. Birmingham was at the center of the American Civil Rights Movement throughout the 1960s. In recent years Birmingham has been named by various groups as one of the best U.S. cities in which to live. Birmingham was founded as an industrial enterprise after the close of the Civil War. Over the course of the 20th century, while industry declined nationwide, the city's economy diversified. Though manufacturing is still a strong sector, Birmingham also is a major medical research center and a regional banking and publishing power.

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, there are 242,820 people, 98,782 households, and 59,269 families residing in the city. The racial makeup of the city is 24% White, 73% Black. The median age is 34 years. For every 100 females there are 85.7 males. For every 100 females age 18 and over, there are 80.4 males. The median income for a household in Birmingham is $26,735, and the median income for a family is $31,851. Males have a median income of $28,184 versus $23,641 for females. The city's per capita income is $15,663. Regarding poverty rates, 24.7% of the population and 20.9% of families are below the poverty line. Among whites, the per capita income is $24,989, whereas among blacks it is $12,734, 51% less. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000)

Methodology

Focus groups were the primary method used to assess the participants' perceptions and views about domestic violence. The focus groups provided participants with an opportunity to share their perspectives within the context of a facilitated group

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process. Focus groups are a valuable methodological tool because they allow group participants to share their understandings of a particular issue (Kreguer, 1994).

IDVAAC Steering Committee members and/or associates of IDVAAC facilitated the focus groups, using the same semi-structured questionnaire to solicit responses and guide the discussion. Based on the projects objectives, the questionnaires included open-ended questions categorized to tap the following issues: (1) types of violence that occur in the African American community, (2) the causes of domestic violence among African Americans, (3) consequences of community and domestic violence in the African American community, (4) solutions to prevent domestic violence in the African American community, and (5) barriers that may hinder the prevention of domestic violence in the African American community.

Each focus group lasted from 1 1/2 to 2 hours in length. Each focus group was audio-taped. Following the focus groups the audio tapes were transcribed and subjected to thematic content analysis. An independent researcher analyzed the transcript data, including the transcripts and the audio tapes. Consequently, themes were identified and coded. Finally, once the themes were identified, the thematic findings were analyzed within each focus group and later, across the focus groups.

Participants

There were a total of 54 participants among the 6 Birmingham focus groups. The average age of the focus group participants was 38.3, with ages ranging from 21 to 60. . The participants in the faith focus group had the highest average age (46.6 years) and the participants in the children and youth group were the youngest with an average age of 32.2. The children and youth group was also the largest (14 group members) and the faith group was the smallest with only 5 group members. Women represented 63% of the participants; men represented 27% of the group members. All (100%) of the participants were African Americans. The majority(70%) of the participants reported that they had completed at least 4 years of college. The remaining 30% had attended college, but had not graduated. Fifty percent of the participants were married, 31% were single, and 15% were divorced. On average the participants had been residents of the community for 18.7 years, ranging from 7 months to 52 years as a resident. The participants had served in their current role in the community for an average of 10.2 years, ranging from 3 months to 33 years. There was a broad range of occupational diversity among the focus group participants, including domestic violence advocate, program directors, social workers, youth workers, community activists, police officers and police executives, district attorney and legal aid society lawyers, city councilpersons, outreach worker, educators, college professors, physicians and ministers.

The strength in using focus groups is that it systematically allows each member to share information that builds on the discussion

Across Group Findings

This section of the report is provides a summary of the thematic findings derived from the six focus groups that were convened as part of the Birmingham community assessment..

Types of Violence

In response to a question that asked focus group participants to list the types of violence that generally occur in the African American community, the following types were identified: (1) community violence, which included rape, homicide, youth violence, drug violence, gang violence, robbery and assault; and (2) domestic violence, which included intimate partner violence, dating violence, child abuse, sexual abuse, verbal abuse, and emotional abuse. The participants suggested that overall, most types of interpersonal violence that occur in other racial and ethnic communities also occur within the African American community. However, participants did note that it was their view that certain types of community violence (e.g., homicide, serious assault, robbery, gang-related and drug-related violence) tend to disproportionately occur in low-income neighborhoods compared to other communities. In addition, the participants acknowledged that while a disproportionate number of African Americans, particularly African American males, are seriously assaulted each year and many loose their lives, verbal and emotional abuse often have long-term negative effects that go unrecognized and unaddressed.

Table 1: Types of Violence

Community violence	• Rape • Homicide • Youth violence • Drug violence	• Gang violence • Robbery • Assault
Domestic violence	• Intimate partner violence • Dating violence • Child abuse	• Sexual abuse • Verbal abuse • Emotional abuse

Connection between Community Violence and Domestic Violence

There was a significant level of consensus within each focus group and across the focus groups that there is a connection between domestic violence and community violence in the African American community. Many of the participants suggested that exposure to violence within the home and in the homes of neighbors and friends functions as a catalyst leading to the internalization of the belief that violence is normal and that it is acceptable to resort to its use as a means of resolving disputes involving family members, intimate partners, acquaintances, and strangers. Additionally, some participants reported that the high rates

of community violence in the African American community are linked to the prevalence of intimate partner violence as a consequence of men importing street oriented values and norms regarding dispute settlement into their intimate relationships. Hence, acts of disrespect and non-compliance in the home should be responded to in the same manner that they would be responded to in the streets.

Causes of Domestic Violence

A "cause" is generally defined in this work as a condition, occurrence, or circumstance that was identified by focus group participants as directly or indirectly contributing to domestic violence. The primary causes that were identified and discussed by the focus group members include: (1) community tolerance of domestic violence, which included references to inadequate gender socialization, absence of functional male role models and mentors, domestic violence as a learned behavior, lack of information about healthy relationships, routine exposure to violence in the community, negative media images of black men, inadequate criminal justice responses; and (2) economic pressures, which included frustration, lack of male authority in the household, and relationship conflict.

Table 2: Causes of Domestic Violence

Community Tolerance of Domestic Violence	• Gender socialization • Absence of male mentors • Domestic violence is learned • Religion and gender socialization • Lack of information about healthy relationships • Routine exposure to violence in the community • Inadequate criminal justice response to domestic violence • Negative media images • Lack of conflict resolution skills
Economic Pressure	• Frustration • Relationship Conflict • Lack of Male Authority

Community Tolerance of Domestic Violence

One of the most important thematic findings uncovered in this analysis is the finding that there was unanimous agreement among the focus group participants that domestic violence occurs in the African American community because it is tolerated and accepted. More specifically, participants observed that there are a number of cultural beliefs and practices that function to promote male dominance and female subordination as the ideal type of intimate relationship arrangement.

Moreover, participants attributed a significant meaning to the role of traditional patterns of gender socialization, as inculcated in the home and church as a community-level factor that provides men with motives and justifications to support resorting to violence against their wives and girlfriends. According to participants, community socialization of males allows men to resort to violence against their intimate partners as a means of securing compliance and/or maintaining male dominance, without the burden of incurring a significant negative community response. Participants asserted that the teachings of the black church, particularly teachings that emphasize male dominance and female subordination, are substantially linked to both the victimization and re-victimization of battered African American women. According to the participants, many black men and women have been taught in their religious instruction that God ordains men to be head of the household and that women should submit to the authority of their husbands. Consequently, it is the view of our participants that many abusive black men rely on such teaching to justify resorting to violence. In addition, conservative interpretations of the Holy Scriptures were implicated in the manner in which black clergy offer pastoral counseling to abused women. That is, it was the opinion of many of the participants that black clergy often contribute to the re-victimization of black battered women when they counsel women to "pray and endure" rather than

to assist women with the development of a safety plan or providing a referral to human services agencies with expertise in addressing domestic violence.

Community tolerance of domestic violence was also discussed in terms of the promotion of negative images of black males in the popular media, particularly in rap music. Many of the participants asserted the view that contemporary black popular culture has a tendency to glorify men (gang members, gangstas, and players) who value resorting to violence as a means of resolving disputes or men who construct their identity as men on the basis of emotional and sexual exploitation of women. Consequently, the popularity of negative media images of black men is associated with relationship conflict and intimate partner violence as young black males attempt to adapt video images of masculinity into their real life relationships.

Finally, the participants made reference to how the lack of an adequate criminal justice response to domestic violence involving African Americans contributes to the re-victimization of African American women.

Economic Pressure

The participants also identified economic pressure as a major cause of domestic violence among African Americans. Group participants used the term economic pressure and related terms (e.g., economic challenges, economic deprivation, poverty, etc.) to characterize living lives characterized by high rates of poverty, underemployment, unemployment, and blocked access to employment opportunities that allow individuals to achieve a decent standard of living. The focus group participants provided a rather sophisticated description of how various

structural conditions (racial discrimination, blocked access to educational and employment opportunities) hinder the capacity of many black men in meeting their responsibilities as husbands and fathers, culminating in frustration and anger. According to the participants, this anger and frustration is compounded by black women's increased access to education and vocational opportunities and their growing economic independence from black men. Participants further added that relationship conflicts related to household authority are aggravated by the economic independence of black women, particularly in those situations where they are critical of a man's failure to meet her expectations of him as a husband and a father.

Consequences of Domestic Violence

The participants identified two primary consequences of domestic violence in the African American community: (1) socializing young people to accept domestic violence as being normal and (2) economic distress.

Table 3: Consequences of Domestic Violence

Domestic Violence is Normal	• Domestic violence is learned at home • Community tolerance contributes to the re-victimization of battered women
Economic Distress	• Loss of income • Loss of employment • Unwillingness to terminate relationship to avoid economic distress

Domestic Violence is Normal

The focus group participants were unyielding in the articulation of the view that exposure to domestic violence in the home has significant consequences for young children and adolescents. In addition to promoting emotional trauma and increasing their risks of being physically abused by their parents, exposure to domestic violence was said to increase the likelihood that young people who are raised in such households will learn that it is acceptable to resort to violence as a means of resolving disputes. Participants pointed to a number of cases in which clients of theirs who were being provided intervention services as a result of being delinquent, incarcerated, convicted batterers, or victims of domestic violence, had been exposed to a wide range of acts of family violence in their home of origin.

Economic Distress

The participants devoted a significant amount of time discussing how exposure to domestic violence is linked to economic distress. This term was used to describe how experiencing domestic

violence often resulted in economic setbacks for the victims. For example, participants described a number of scenarios in which domestic violence is likely to result in economic distress, including situations in which loss of household income results due to the victims' absence from work because of physical injury or emotional exhaustion; loss of income as a result of being fired for excessive absenteeism or the occurrence of acts of domestic violence in the workplace; the removal of the batterer from the household stemming from his arrest or voluntary departure and his subsequent loss of employment; and unwillingness of the batterer to provide financial support as a form of retaliation. Furthermore, economic distress was described as a social condition that often hinders help seeking and therefore results in battered women remaining in the relationship and available for repeated acts of victimization.

Solutions

While the individual focus groups did not offer identical solutions and approaches to prevent domestic violence, the solutions that they identified were quite consistent. The participants identified four major solutions that they believed would contribute to the prevention and reduction of domestic violence in the African American community, including: (1) comprehensive coordinated response, (2) violence prevention education, (3) cultural competency training, and (4) healthy relationship counseling.

Table 4: Solutions

Comprehensive Coordinated Response	• Information sharing and collaboration among domestic violence service providers • Collaboration between domestic violence programs and community-based organizations • Community-based efforts to raise awareness and mobilize the African American community • Urban contemporary radio
Violence Prevention Education	• School-based violence prevention programs • Church-based violence prevention programs • Conflict resolution skills training
Healthy Relationship Counseling	• Targeting at-risk adolescents, young adult females and battered women • Interventions to enhance self-esteem
Cultural Competency Training	• Establishment of culturally specific programs and services for African Americans victims and batterers • Implement cultural competency training for domestic violence service providers and local funders

Comprehensive Coordinated Response

It was the consensus of the different focus groups that there are numerous factors that contribute to domestic violence among African Americans and consequently prevention will require much more than a single approach. In their criticisms of the existing response to domestic violence among African Americans in Birmingham, participants expressed the view that information sharing and collaboration between domestic violence service providers, as well as other agencies and organizations that do some of this work, is inadequate. One thing that was striking in the analysis of the focus group transcripts were the numerous occasions when a group participant informed the group about a particular intervention (e.g., dating violence program, an effort to develop a culture-specific curriculum targeting African American victims and batterers) and group members expressing a complete lack of familiarity with the program or initiative. Hence, what the focus group participants identified as being essential to any effort to prevent and reduce domestic violence in the African American community was a comprehensive coordinated response. Accordingly, the participants spoke of the need for greater collaboration between the existing domestic violence service providers and community-based institutions that operate within the African American community. The community institution that was mentioned most often was the black church.

An important component of the groups' emphasis on the implementation of a comprehensive coordinated response was the need to engage in efforts designed to raise the African American community's awareness of the domestic violence problem, to increases awareness of existing support services available for victims and perpetrators of domestic violence and to mobilize African American institutions and leaders to begin to recognize the importance of prioritizing domestic violence as a significant social problem that must be addressed. One of the strategies that were mentioned as a means of increasing public awareness was to collaborate with urban contemporary radio stations in Birmingham to support and implement a public awareness campaign.

Healthy Relationship Counseling

Several of the focus group participants described encounters that they had with troubled young females and battered women in which it was evident that many of these women did not understand the distinction between a healthy relationship and an unhealthy relationship. As a result of these observations, it was recommended that programs that serve women who are at increased risk for experiencing intimate partner violence develop interventions that are designed to enhance the self-esteem of adolescent females and adult women and to assist them in recognizing the signs of an unhealthy relationship.

Cultural Competency Training

One of the more disturbing findings reported by some of the focus group participants was their perception that there were some domestic violence programs in Birmingham that were reluctant to allow staff to develop culturally-specific interventions in which the curriculum would be designed to address the unique manifestations of domestic violence among African Americans. Opposition to the establishment of culturally specific programs and support groups was said to be related to a concern that racially homogeneous groups or groups that incorporated race-specific content would represent a form of "reverse racism." However, it is important to note that there were some participants who reported that they were currently engaged in developing culturally specific curricula for use with African American victims and batterers. Hence, cultural competency training was identified by many of the focus group participants as a solution that should be incorporated in efforts to address domestic violence in the African American community. More specifically, participants discussed the importance of exposing domestic violence service providers, particularly white program administrators and United Way administrators, to cultural competency training that would be designed to enhance their understanding of the justification for culturally competent interventions as an alternative approach in working with African American victims and batterers.

Barriers

While the focus group participants were very mindful of what they felt should be done to prevent and reduce the occurrence of domestic violence in the African American community, they were also very sensitive to the challenges and obstacles that have the potential to hinder the successful implementation of the various prevention strategies that they have recommended. The specific barriers they identified included: (1) violence is multi-generational problem, (2) southern culture, and (3) lack of adequate services for black men who batter.

Table 5: Barriers

Violence is a Multi-Generational Problem	• Domestic violence being deeply rooted in socialization practices • High rates of unemployment, poverty, and other social problems
Southern Culture	• Cultural emphasis on male dominance • Emphasis on privacy
Lack of Interventions for Men who Batter	• Lack of priority given to treatment for batterers and men at-risk of engaging in intimate partner violence

Violence is a Multi-Generational Problem

The focus group participants suggested that intimate partner violence is so deeply rooted into the fabric of intimate relationships that none of the focus groups believed that it could be completely eradicated. Furthermore, the participants suggested that the factors that contribute to intimate partner violence, particularly social norms that condone male dominance and female submission to men and intergenerational exposure to family violence either in one's home of origin or in the homes of extended kin and neighbors, were unlikely to become less of an influence in the near future.

Southern Culture

Several of the focus groups identified the emphasis that southern cultural traditions place on male dominance in the home and keeping family matters private as major barriers that operate to impede domestic violence prevention in a southern city like Birmingham. Adherence to the privacy norm was said to function as an obstacle as a result of women being socialized by older generations of women to define domestic violence as a family matter. Consequently, defining abuse and violence that occurs within the context of family or other intimate relationships as a private matter has the effect of precluding battered women from seeking help from either formal or informal sources of support.

Lack of Adequate Services for Men who Batter

Participants observed that most of what is available to address domestic violence in Birmingham is directed toward women who are abused. Indeed, such is the case in most cities throughout the United States. However, given the predominance of services for battered women and a reluctance to offer culturally specific programs and support groups, many of the focus group participants agreed with the observation that in Birmingham African American men who batter and those at-risk of battering women do not have sufficient access to programs and services that would assist them in developing conflict resolution skills and anger management. The lack of such programs was described as a barrier and obstacle in achieving long-term reductions in the occurrence of domestic violence in the African American community.

Session Summaries:
Within Group Findings

The following section of this report provides independent summaries of the six community focus groups held in Birmingham, Alabama. The groups did not report consistent thematic responses to the questions posed during the focus groups. Some group members, based on the uniqueness of the group as community stakeholders emphasized a particular area during the discussion that may not have been addressed or minimally addressed in another group. Consequently, the session summaries vary in primary focus. Selected quotations from group members are included to share the subjective perspectives of the group members. The six groups are (1) Law Enforcement, (2) Children and Youth, (3) Human Services, (4) Community Activists, (5) Faith-Based Community Organization (6) Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender (GBLT). Similar to the across group findings, the findings are categorized into the groups perceptions of types of violence, causes and consequences of domestic violence, solutions, and obstacles and challenges.

Law Enforcement Focus Group

The participants in the law enforcement group represented a range of criminal justice practitioners (e.g. deputy police chief, police officer, legal aid society attorney, judge, prosecuting attorney) and domestic violence service providers (e.g. court advocates).

Types of Violence

When asked to list the various types of violence that occur in the African American community, the participants identified and listed assault, threats of assault, homicide, verbal abuse, domestic violence, and property damage/vandalism. Members of this group emphasized the importance of recognizing that the various types of violence that occur in the African American community do not occur in isolation from each other, but are very much related.

> *I agree with the escalation. On verbal assaults, it starts different and different ways. But a lot of it probably starts… Verbal, psychological, emotional and threats of violence and control are all related. All of those interrelated… Someone might have some type of psychological control or want to be of that nature, to abuse someone and try to abuse emotionally and verbally first and then threatens. threats and then you have… Probably they are related, the first group outsiders.*

Additionally, there was consensus among group members that it is common for involvement in minor acts of violence to escalate into more serious acts of violence over the course of one's life span and increased familiarity with the practice of violence in one's interpersonal relations.

Causes of Community and Domestic Violence

The focus group participants were asked to discuss the causes of community violence (i.e., violence that tends to involve perpetrators who are not related by bonds of intimacy) and the causes of domestic violence in the African American community. The primary causes of community violence were identified by the law enforcement focus as (1) economic stress, (2) community tolerance of violence, and (3) drug involvement. The participants expressed the view that exposure to historical and contemporary patterns of racial discrimination has led to a challenging economic situation that produces stress that precipitates high levels of aggression.

> *It seems like sometimes when we have the money problems, it sort of escalates your inner abilities of stress and then adding to the stress… I mean, adding the stress, then you begin to act out.*

According to the law enforcement focus group participants, domestic violence primarily resulted from (1) community tolerance of violence, (2) low self-esteem among batterers and victims, and (3) control.

Community Tolerance

Among the members of this group, the most important factor contributing to the high rates of community and domestic violence in the African American community was what they identified as a deeply entrenched community tolerance for violence as a means of resolving disputes or imposing one's will on others.

> *Usually, if the community tolerates some kinds of behaviors, then people think it's all right… and then a lot of people are doing it.*

In terms of the link between domestic violence and community tolerance, the participants suggested that community tolerance for domestic violence occurs through two means. First, community tolerance for domestic violence is learned by observing how significant others resolve conflicts and resort to violence in addressing issues with their intimate partners.

> *Because it's a learned behavior and it's an expected behavior. We're just getting around to educating our people. People who commit the domestic violence go to church on Sunday morning. They make their […]. They hold offices in the church. They hold offices in the neighborhood, in the community. These are the people that we look up to.*

These participants also implicated the black church, particularly the clergy in contributing to the re-victimization of black women by offering pastoral counseling influenced by conservative interpretations of the Holy Scripture and the need for women to submit themselves to their husbands.

> *The black church has been our focus, our place. And that has been the institution that has preached that it's okay; that if she doesn't act right, just whip her up and she will be quiet.*

Similarly, another focus group participant stated:

> *People who commit the domestic violence go to church on Sunday morning. They make their […]. They hold offices in the church. They hold offices in the neighborhood, in the community. These are the people that we look up to.*

Second, this group emphasized the importance of gender socialization as a means of communicating the message that domestic violence may be justified as a means of resolving conflicts in intimate relationships.

Socialization is the main thing. We're taught that a man's home is his castle and what goes on there, that's not my business. A lot of times, it's [domestic violence] not seen as important. And if we could really deal with that, we could actually change the whole face of our communities to make them better. But it's seen as 'your problem' because it's not happening to me. And people really don't see how it does affect, either directly or indirectly.

These participants also implicated the black church, particularly the clergy in contributing to the re-victimization of black women by offering pastoral counseling influenced by conservative interpretations of the Holy Scripture and the need for women to submit themselves to their husbands.

And the black church has been our focus, our place. And that has been the institution that has preached that it's okay, that if she doesn't act right, just whip her up and that she should be quiet.

Some of the participants expressed the opinion that the traditional response of the criminal justice system has symbolically communicated a tolerance for domestic violence in the African American community.

Society has also helped to put that woman in that situation. Because for so long, even when the police were called, nothing was done. So the woman felt like she had no source of help.

The lack of an adequate criminal justice response resulting in community tolerance was exemplified in the candid comments of one of the focus group participants, a judge. Her comments suggest that there is an important need to educate criminal justice practitioners about the causes and consequences of domestic violence for victims as a means of combating subjective views that may privilege batterers or at minimum lead to discretionary decisions that contribute to the re-victimization of battered women.

> *And even when you sit and you talk about, there are so many factors, it's still hard to grasp. You can go down to each factor as to why a person may remain in a situation, but it's still hard to integrate that within your system. You know, even though I'm on the bench and I try to be objective, sometimes I find myself saying, 'That lady is crazy' for remaining in this relationship.*

Consequences

When asked to identify the consequences of the high rates of interpersonal violence in the African American community, the participants discussed two factors that they thought were significant: (1) the exodus of advantaged blacks to the suburbs, and (2) fear of other blacks.

Exodus of Middle-Class Blacks

It was the view of these participants that social order and control in inner city neighborhoods was declining as a result of the exodus of advantaged middle-class blacks who had formerly provided leadership and served as role models for those who were less fortunate.

You'll have as strong a community as you will want to have. I want to live in an all African American community and I always have lived in an all African American community. But I've had to move out of certain communities because they've gotten too dangerous. It doesn't bother me, but I'm trying to look out for my children and things of that nature. I want a strong community.

Fear of Blacks by Blacks

Fear of blacks by blacks was also identified as a significant consequence of the high rates of violence in the African American community.

Like we have neighborhood meetings set up through the Birmingham Police Department. A lot of people don't come because they say well, "So and so's son is the one selling drugs. I don't want them to know what I'm saying because it does come back to me.

Barriers

The participants in the law enforcement focus group identified the following barriers that they believed have the potential to hinder the prevention and reduction of domestic violence in the African American community: (1) lack of employment opportunities, (2) a lenient criminal justice response, and (3) lack of sufficient funding.

Lack of Employment Opportunities

Throughout the conversation, these participants made numerous references to the association between unemployment and involvement in acts of domestic and community violence. Based on their occupational understandings of the lives of violent crime offenders, the participants were confident in offering the view that efforts to address violence in the African American community that fail to address the high rates of unemployment among African American males are likely to fail.

I work in the DA's office and most of the people who do the stealing, the killing and the robbing, the majority of them don't work. I don't know if we got them jobs, if that'd help. The majority of them see things that other people have and they want them. And so they go take it. If there were some apparatus to maybe… I know some people want to work. Some people don't want to work. Still, that's their jobs. But I think that might ease some of the pressure off if you had some apparatus that would give them jobs. I think if you could get some type of viable employment so they can go to work every day and have some respect for themselves, I think that might ease the situation some.

Lenient Criminal Justice Response

The court advocates who participated in the law enforcement group were very critical of situations in which criminal justice officials use their discretion in ways that fail to hold batterers accountable. It was the view of these particular group members that lenient criminal justice responses to men who batter have the effect of privileging batterers and contributing to the re-victimization of battered women.

What I've found, being a court advocate, as an obstacle, occasionally, is that judges, and attorneys need to be better educated about domestic violence and how their actions impact battered women.... Because they're minimizing what actually has occurred or what is occurring. You know, it's the reality of this person is actually suffering and it's just made as a joke.

It is interesting to note the criticism of the criminal justice response was not challenged by the criminal justice officials who were also members of the group. Indeed, as noted above, a participant who was a judge admitted that subjective biases about battered women have the potential to influence the exercise of judicial discretion and decision making.

Lack of Adequate Funding

The group members identified the lack of adequate funding to address domestic violence as a barrier.

> *I know one thing with our organization and I'm sure […] a lot of others, is lack of money. With a lack of money, you have a lack of staff you can get IN the jobs. So a lot of times, you have staff that's overworked and underpaid. Department of Human Resources is a good example of that also. But I think really money and time are two big things that make it difficult to deal with this problem.*

Children and Youth Focus Group

Types of Violence

The participants in the children and youth focus group identified a broad range of types of violence that occur in the African American community, including (1) emotional abuse/violence, (2) child abuse, (3) sexual violence, (4) gang violence, (5) youth violence, (6) drug-related violence, (7) dating violence, and (8) domestic violence.

Priority

The members of this group were asked to comment on their perception of how much of a priority violence was in Birmingham's African American community. It was the opinion of the participants that violence was having a devastating impact on the African American community, particularly on families. However, according to several participants, the violence problem was not receiving very much attention from neither black controlled institutions (e.g., urban radio and the black church) nor agencies and institutions within the larger society.

> *If you gauge it in terms of public attention paid to it, not very much. If you gauge it in terms of the impact on families, it's significant. The fact that it doesn't get reported… There are several parts of that issue that need to be looked at. But I think that it's relegated to the back pages of the newspaper. It's relegated in terms of when there's a death connected to domestic violence, it gets a lot of air play. But then the causes and the significance and the rate of it…that sort of stuff is only dealt with when something tragic occurs. In terms of attention paid to it within the African American community, I don't think that WE even talk about it enough. We don't give it enough play in ourselves. The radio stations, talk shows, ones that we have don't deal with that issue. It's the political arena that seems to be the most important issue. So we don't pay attention to it; churches don't preach about it; Sunday schools don't teach about it; it's not attended to.*

Causes of Community Violence

The participants identified seven factors that contribute to the high rates of interpersonal violence in the African American community, including: (1) lack of positive role models, (2) access to weapons, violent media, and lack of conflict skills, and (3) lack of school-based violence prevention programs.

The Lack of Positive Role Models

The participants were very concerned with the lack of positive black men to serve as mentors and role models for young African American males and females. The shortage of stable black men who might serve as role models was characterized by the participants as a community-wide problem that affects all of the black community institutions that are responsible for facilitating the socialization of African American youth.

> *Black men are missing not only in the home, but in the community, in the churches, in all of our social institutions; men are just kind of absent—physically and emotionally.*

As a result of the shortage of positive males, many young men are being negatively influenced by their exposure to irresponsible mothers involved in a series of failed relationships and their exposure to various media, particularly, gangsta rap, which is implicated in promoting the use of violence as a means of resolving disputes with other males and with females.

> *One of the reasons is that because of lack of black males in the household—stable black males. You have a lot of households where youth are living… predominantly here in Birmingham; you have single parent households, that 90% of them are headed by women. And we have a revolving door of different men coming in and there are issues. And these kids see that.*

Additionally, the participants perceived the lack of positive male role models as problematic because it leaves many of these young males to negotiate life challenges without the assistance of stable adult males. Furthermore, participants felt that young men growing up in socially challenged neighborhoods were likely to be more vulnerable to being negatively influenced by their peers and media products that glorify violence and abuse of females.

> *Then they go to school and there are no positive males there. And… you have one brother telling another brother how to treat a young lady. And now you have young ladies having to react. And now they're saying… Like you said, some of them are saying it's accepted to be slapped or whatever. But some are saying "No, I'll jump you." So, I think the lack of stable males in the household is a major factor associated with violence, as far as teaching our young people how to act.*

Access to Weapons, Violent Media, and Lack of Conflict Resolution Skills

The participants expressed a great deal of concern about the large number of young people, particularly young males who have access to deadly weapons, and who appear to be willing to use them to resolve interpersonal conflicts. The lack of conflict skills and acceptance of pro-violence norms and images derived from various media with violent content was said to play a role in the escalation of trivial conflicts into serious and sometimes fatal violent confrontations.

If you look at the TV or video or anything or listen to the music, everything has pretty much got a lot of violent undertones to it.

I think there's more an acceptance of violence as a solution… Whatever disagreement that you have, whether it's something small, like somebody accidentally bumped into you, to whatever, the response is violence.

Causes of Domestic Violence

The participants also identified three specific factors that increase the likelihood of domestic violence in the African Americans, including: (1) economic frustration, (2) community tolerance, and (3) lack of information about healthy relationships.

Economic Pressure and Frustration

Economic pressure and the struggle to meet basic survival needs were identified as major sources of frustration for African American men. Additionally, there appeared to be consensus among the participants that it is not uncommon for frustration precipitated by economic pressure and challenges to be displaced toward a man's wife or girlfriend.

Financial crises at home usually bring about arguments and things of that nature. But a continuation of arguments and they escalate to a point where they become violent

Community Tolerance

The participants emphasized that one of the most significant factors contributing to domestic violence in the African American community is community tolerance of violence, particularly violent acts committed by men against women with whom they maintain an intimate relationship. According to these participants, tolerance of violence against women is associated with a numerous social processes. For example some of the participants made reference to the way in which boys are socialized to be tough, and particularly the emphasis on not allowing anyone to dominate them as having implications for how they resolve conflicts with their female partners as adults.

We said a lot about the male part of violence and males teaching other males the violent way of life. Women also teach their sons, "You've got to be tough. And you can't take anything off anybody." And men growing up in that environment, you don't know where to draw the line. If you've got to be tough with your friends, you've got to be tough with everybody and you don't take anything off anybody. So if it's a female and she gets in your way or does something you don't want her to do, you back hand her. And that's one of the things that they grow up with, even coming from a female, not just coming from a male.

Others made reference to socialization messages that females receive which say that if a man hits them or abuses them, but he is a good provider, they should not leave him or terminate the relationship. Also, significant was the assertion that not only do poor black women receive messages that encourage them to remain in abusive relationships, but so do middle-class educated black women.

On the flip side, if he hits you, he loves you, he's providing this home for you. It's not just poverty-level women but every socioeconomic level. He's got a nice home, a nice community. You don't want to leave that stuff, some of them think.

Indeed, there were several references to socializing black women to fight back and retaliate against men who abuse them physically.

Lack of Information about Healthy Relationships

Participants were assertive in expressing the opinion that for both males and females, adult and young people, that too many young people were growing up without a firm understanding of what constitutes a healthy relationship. Consequently, the lack of such information contributes to resorting to acts of domestic violence as a means of resolving disputes. It also was identified as a factor that causes young women to accept being beaten by their boyfriends and husbands

> *I think some of the females are beginning to think that it's normal to be treated a certain way. It's normal to be yelled at, back hand and pet slap. I work with at-risk and homeless youth and I have a young lady who went through a situation where she was abused and beaten. Then she met a young man who opened the door, called her sweetie, was nice to her, who she said was a "punk." She didn't want that. She wouldn't dish to that. I think another part of the problem or cause is a failure to teach how to have healthy relationships. Eventually, some-body's going to have to teach them how to do and be a good spouse, as opposed to a bad one! And when you're taught how to be in an unhealthy relationship, you don't know how to be nurturing and caring and loving*

Community Violence and Domestic Violence

Both community violence and domestic violence are major features of life in many inner city neighborhoods, particularly those neighborhoods that are populated by people who are poor and African American. The youth group participants stated that community violence and domestic violence were related. More specifically, what they argued was that the high rates of community violence provide a social context that facilitates the commission of acts of domestic violence.

> *And the family violence impact is, I think, quadrupled, because violence is com-munity-wide... there's violence in the street; there's violence in the house next door, on either side, front and back. There's just no way to escape it. And so we now have to figure out how we're going to deal with it. And a lot of them have really given up. They don't think there's a way out. They don't view death as a bad thing. We're just all going to die.*

Consequences

The participants identified three major consequences of violence in the African American community, including (1) increased economic distress, and (2) negative effects on children.

Increases Economic Distress

According to the participants, one of the most significant consequences of domestic violence is the economic distress that it creates for victims and their children. Actually, participants reported that domestic violence renders the homes of battered black women poorer as a resulting from a number of factors, including: the batterer being arrested and subsequent loss of employment or temporary loss of income; the loss of household income resulting from the victim's inability to work or loss of job; or separation.

But if the principal figure in the household who's earning--whether it's male or female--is removed or affected by violence… If you got your nose broken, you can't go to work for a day or two; maybe you lose your job. Or certainly your earnings will be decreased. And that has the effect of making our households poorer, which is another source of anger and frustration that we see resulting from domestic violence.

Negative Effects on Children

The participants were unanimous in asserting that children who witness violence suffer emotionally as a result. In addition, it was noted that children who grow up in homes where they are exposed to domestic violence are at increased risk of internalizing the view that violence in intimate relationships is acceptable.

There are negative consequences for children, like lots of emotional consequences. Children come up with different diagnoses like depression. I had a kid in our program a couple of months ago who had witnessed her mom kill her dad. And so that child is just dealing with all types of emotional problems and has even begun to have some mental problems, as a result of the violence in the home

Solutions

The participants identified and discussed seven solutions that have the potential to prevent and reduce domestic and community violence, including (1) early interventions and parenting classes, (2) healthy relationship counseling, (3) comprehensive community response, (4) anti-violence public awareness campaign, and (5) control exposure to media that promotes violence.

Early Interventions, Parenting Classes and Mentoring

The participants emphasized the importance of establishing classes and other interventions to assist young people; particularly young women recognize the distinction between a healthy relationship and an unhealthy relationship. Implicit in this recommendation is the belief that abused women have not been exposed to relationships characterized by mutual respect and support and/or lack the skills to foresee the challenges associated with maintaining an intimate relationship with men who manifest certain attitudes and behaviors.

Comprehensive Community Response

It was clear that the participants believed that the violence problem in the African American community is beyond the capacity of a single organization to solve. Consequently, one of the solutions that they discussed was the need for involvement of all of the major organizations and systems that are directly involved in addressing basic human needs;

It's also going to take everybody. It's going to take the church. It's going to take the educators. It's going to take parent involvement. It's going to take the schools. It's going to take the city of Birmingham deciding to make a stand.

The participants also discussed the importance of implementing a public awareness campaign that attempts to address both domestic and community violence in the African American community. One of the challenges that they identified is that victims of violence often do not know where to get assistance.

Barriers

The participants in this group identified three barriers that prevented effective responses to addressing violence in the African American community: (1) elitism and lack of community investment; (2) the lack of incentives for men; (3)multi-generational impact of violence.

Lack of Interventions for Men who Batter

Participants reported that the existing network of services that have been established to address domestic violence are disproportionately oriented toward providing services and interventions for battered women. Consequently, the system of support seeks to assist in women overcoming their victimization, but does very little to assist batterers in changing how they respond to their intimate partners.

> *I think that another one of the differences in the consequences is that a lot of times society will reach out to the female for help. But the black male, they're just going to say, "Lock him up." Nobody's going to reach out to him and say, "What causes this?" or what's available to help him? Yeah, I think…give him to the law and give her to the church or some group or somebody. I still think there's a big difference in the consequences. Black males have it so hard, I don't even see how they exist, period. Because we don't even say positive things to him. WE say, "Call the police and lock him up." Where at least the female gets a little support; not a lot, but she gets some. He doesn't get any from anywhere. Everybody's saying, "Lock him up."*

Violence is a Multi-Generational Problem

Some of the participants were not very optimistic about the long-term reduction of domestic and community violence in the African American community. Among those who expressed this view, they believed that there are multiple factors that contribute to the high rates of violence in the African American community and that those conditions are deeply rooted into the social fabric of black community social life.

> *I think one of the reasons that it is going to be difficult to combat this problem is that it's a multi-generation-type problem. Because family has not been able to specify roles—roles for the young lady, the roles for the young man. For that reason, they don't know how to really interact on a healthy level. Because the family has not TAUGHT the child how to behave; how to sit down and work through a conflict. And they give them a lot of unhealthy-type suggestion. When you do not have information to pass on, […] depend, what's going to happen is that you're going to misguide or mislead someone into behaving or making a decision that's going to be healthy. And I think that's what I see when I work with kids in middle school and high school. They just do not have the proper information. And it's because parents do not even realize the role of the mom or the role of the dad in the household. […] cause a lot of conflict. Even when it comes to dating, they don't even know what the purpose for dating. What courtship is all about. And they don't know how to date. They don't even know how.*

Human Services Focus Group

Types of Violence

The participants identified several types of violence that occur in the African American community, including (1) drug-related violence, (2) child abuse, (3) gang violence, (4) street violence, and (5) domestic violence.

Causes of Violence

The participants identified two primary causes of domestic violence, including: (1) economic deprivation, and (2) domestic violence as learned behavior.

Economic Deprivation

The participants identified economic deprivation as a cause of domestic and community violence. The term economic deprivation is used here to refer to

> *I think there's a huge economic factor in there as well. Because if folks are economically empowered, then that leads to bigger problems that lead to more violence in terms of trying to get things they want, not knowing how to go about obtaining resources. And I just think there's a huge economic factor to it.*

Domestic Violence is Learned

Participants emphasized that domestic violence is learned in the home of origin and/or within the context of peer groups. More specifically, the participants observed that individuals learn the justifications and rewards of resorting to violence against intimate partners as a result of their association and identification with significant others whom they have witnessed engaging in such acts.

> *Part of it is it's learned behavior. It is a matter of looking at your environment and deciding what model of behavior you want to emulate. So a lot of it is caused by that. There is a lot of violence that is seen in the family context, also. So that one of the things I confront my guys with is that fact that when they were children, if they saw their fathers beat their mothers.*

Relationship between Domestic Violence and Community Violence

The participants reported that there was a strong relationship between exposure to domestic violence in the home of origin and the likelihood of participating in acts of community violence.

> *Because I think that the violence that is occurring in our homes impacts everything else that happens in community.*

> *I totally agree that there is a correlation between violence in the home and the dating relationships, whether there's violence or not and not just domestic violence, but any violence. Especially the guys that I work with in detention center. There's about 100 guys I see each month and the majority of them there have witnessed violence in the home or have been a victim of violence in their home.*

Consequences

The participants did not devote a significant degree of discussion to addressing the consequences of domestic violence in the African American community. The primary emphasis on this portion of the discussion was working through some understanding of differences in the impact of domestic violence on women and men. The participants identified these factors as consequential, including: (1) economic distress, (2) the lack of adequate criminal justice response, and (3) a perception that the system is more punitive toward men who batter than to women who batter and that black women who batter receive more punitive treatment than white women who batter.

Economic Distress

The participants identified economic distress resulting from experiencing domestic violence victimization as a significant consequence. That is, that exposure to domestic violence precipitates absences from work, loss of employment and loss of economic support from the batterer.

> Because I think that the violence that is occurring in our homes impacts everything else that happens in community. I think it's impacting everything from healthcare to insurance to our schools to our employment. Because battered women end up missing days off work, they're under productive, and they end up losing their jobs. The stalker comes on the job and harasses them and they end up losing their jobs. So it affects every facet of our being, if we look at it. If we look at larger crimes in this city, as well as in the nation, it all is going to fall back to domestic violence. If we look at rapes and murders and even hate crimes, I think it all has its rooting in domestic violence because violence is a learned behavior. Our first learning ground is at home and we learn how to behave. Everything we do in this life is a behavior toward a goal. We behave to attain our goals in life. We behave to create a balance in our life. And that behavior is learned in our homes.

## Inadequate Criminal Justice Response

Participants felt that one of the consequences was that as a result of a lack of uniformity in the criminal justice response to domestic violence in Birmingham, some women, particularly African American women, were much more at risk if their case were heard in a court in which the judge or prosecutors were reluctant to hold batterers accountable. Consequently, the lack of an adequate criminal justice response was discussed as a factor that contributes to the re-victimization of battered women.

> But I do know that there are certain courts that have a pretty high rate of dismissing cases of domestic violence and are not holding people accountable.

The participants also noted that the criminal justice response was more punitive toward men who batter and that the system was more punitive toward black women who battered compared to white women who batter.

> I don't know if legally the consequences are different, but there's a perception among males and females that it would be worse for a male if he were to slap a female than if a female were to attack a male. But there's this perception among the males that I work with that their penalty would be greater than it would be for a female.

> And I think black females are punished far more frequently than white females would be punished.
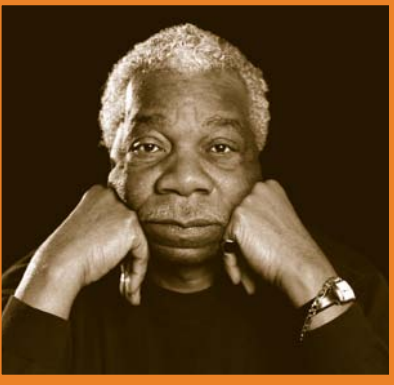
Solutions

The participants in the human services focus group identified the following strategies and solutions as having the potential to prevent and reduce the occurrence of domestic and community violence in the African American community: (1) healthy relationship counseling, (2) early violence prevention education, (3) urban radio involvement, and (4) coordinated community response.

Healthy Relationship Counseling

Battered women or women at risk for experiencing domestic violence must be targeted for information that helps them to make a distinction between healthy and un-healthy relationships.

> *First, it has to be the awareness that I NEED help. There has to be the awareness that this is not acceptable. It speaks to tolerance levels and exposure. I think in some factions it's almost just a way of communication. Well, what's one of the problems in a relationship? The first thing they say, well, lack of communication. Well, I submit that in domestic violence, there's not a lack of communication at all. They're communicating more than you can imagine. It's inappropriate and dangerous and violent communication that's occurring. Battered women must become aware that violence is not an acceptable method of communication and dealing with handling your business. We must help them to understand that this is not an appropriate way to handle your business.*

Early Violence Prevention Education

The provision of violence prevention in elementary and middle schools was identified as an approach that is needed to address both community and dating violence in the African American community. It was the view of the participants that children need to have their awareness raised early on about the adverse consequences associated with perpetrating violence and becoming a victim of violence in the home and in the larger community.

> *I think just the idea of starting as early as possible and teaching problem solving skills, conflict resolution skills as soon as we can is important. We need to empower our children and let them know that violence isn't the way to solve problems; that there are other solutions; that they have other skills that they can use, other than just their physical prowess, to solve problems. So as soon as we possibly can we need to start teaching problem solving and conflict resolution….*

Several participants supported this recommendation by referencing their involvement in a teen dating violence intervention operated by the local YWCA.

Need for Greater Involvement of Urban Radio in Addressing Social Problems

The participants made reference to urban radio as a major source of information in the community. However, several of the participants were very critical of the role that urban radio assumes in promoting media that glorifies violence and sexism. In addition, these participants were concerned that urban black radio is overly pre-occupied with emphasizing partying and pranks, rather than addressing the myriad of serious issues confronting the African American community.
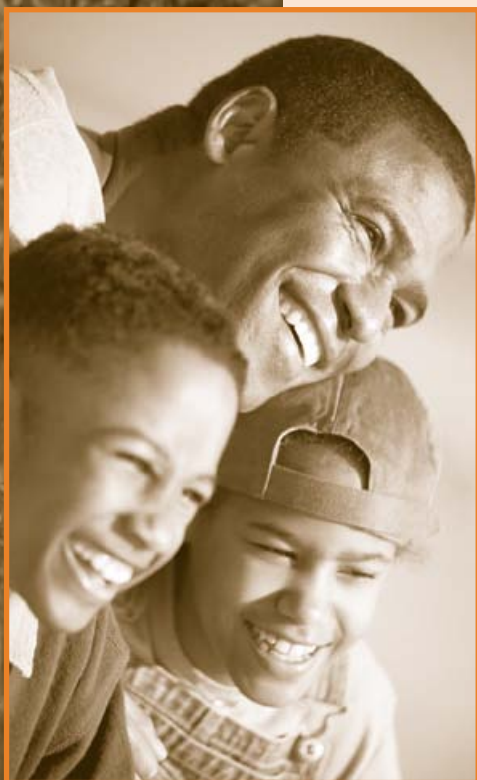
Personalities need to take a more active role in teaching the kids POSITIVE things for a change, instead of… There's a thing in the morning where they call people and play tricks on them and stuff. That's good to do things like that. But when I've approached certain personalities with what I'm trying to do in the community, they've just brushed me off and not called me back. So I think that some of the people that CAN be heard over the radio and on TV need to take a more major role in reaching the youth in a positive way.

Coordinated Community Response

The participants emphasized that the prevention of domestic and community violence in the African American community will not be reduced by a single approach or organization. Rather, they suggested that what is necessary to address violence is a coordinated community response in which a variety of agencies and organizations collaborate in doing this work. Among the specific agencies and organizations that were mentioned during the discussion included domestic violence programs, the black church, the school system, urban radio, and youth-based organizations.

There is no quick fix-it when you're talking about domestic violence. There is not one program that you can implement and say okay, we'll fix that. There is no one approach. It has to be a coordinated community effort. And many, many players have to be on board.

Barriers

The participants in the human services focus group identified and discussed five barriers that they thought had the potential to hinder efforts to address domestic violence in the African American community, including (1) southern culture, (2) acceptance of domestic violence by the victim, (3) fear of contributing to racial stereotypes, (4) absence of faith-based institutions, and (5) lack of support for culture-specific groups.

Southern Culture

The participants identified the privacy aspect of southern culture as a barrier to addressing domestic violence in Birmingham. More specifically, they emphasized that in the south, black and white people adhere to a social ethic in which the home and family are regarded as a privacyzone that should not be interfered with by outsiders. Consequently, domestic violence has historically been considered a private matter that should be resolved by the couple involved, as long as the abuse is not life threatening.

Because I think there is a long heritage of southern hospitality that's in both the white and the black community, in terms of what happens in your house stays in your house and you don't let the neighbors know it; you don't let the social worker know it; you don't let ANYBODY know it. Because you have to take care of your own; you have to take care of your own family. And that's family business and nobody needs to know. So in spite of some of the programs that we have and some even increased outreach projects, it's still a secret in a lot of situations.

Acceptance of Domestic Violence by the Victim

The participants discussed a number of ways in which a victim's acceptance of domestic violence precluded the victim from engaging in pro-active help-seeking behavior. Additionally, they emphasized the fact that failure to seek help increased the risk of re-victimization.

> *A lot of the protection of the perpetrator is because the victims feels, 'I don't want that person to leave me. They love me. I don't think that I should tell you what he or she has done to me because that's the love that I'm getting from that person. You don't know what they do for me. So I'm neglecting to report it as something that he has done to harm me or she has harmed me because this is what I perceive as love.'*

> *Well, to add to that, embarrassment, guilt, shame. 'I am responsible for his actions and behaviors. I caused it. And how are my family and society going to look at me? Am I really going to get the help that I'm going to get or am I going to see the relief of services I'm going to get?' I get that a lot*

Another dimension of the acceptance of domestic violence that was noted by the participants was the recognition on the part of African American women that the criminal justice system in Birmingham has traditionally perpetuated injustice against African American males. Hence, many black women who are battered are uncomfortable with reporting their husbands and boyfriends to the authorities out of fear of how they will be treated by the criminal justice system.

> *And then, when we think about our criminal justice system, the black female is not as willing to turn her male over to this unjust system.*

The acceptance of domestic violence by some black women is influenced by a number of interrelated factors, including economic dependency, emotional attachment, unwillingness to report batterers to the criminal justice system, and fear of community betrayal. In addition, the participants added another issue that appears to bring all of these considerations together: many battered women are merely trying to survive. They are attempting to survive physically and they are attempting to care for their children. Consequently, the acceptance of violence is a survival strategy that has emotional and economic implications for battered black women.

> *It's survival. And battered women think on that level. When you look at it, there are a lot of similarities. When I try to explain why battered women do some of the things that they do, it's because they're thinking on a base level of survival. How do I survive past the day, past this hour? And it looks crazy to the folk outside but it makes absolute sense to her. And the same thing has happened and is happening in the African American community. We make choices that to mainstream America look so self-destructive. But from the perspective that we're looking at, it's survival.*
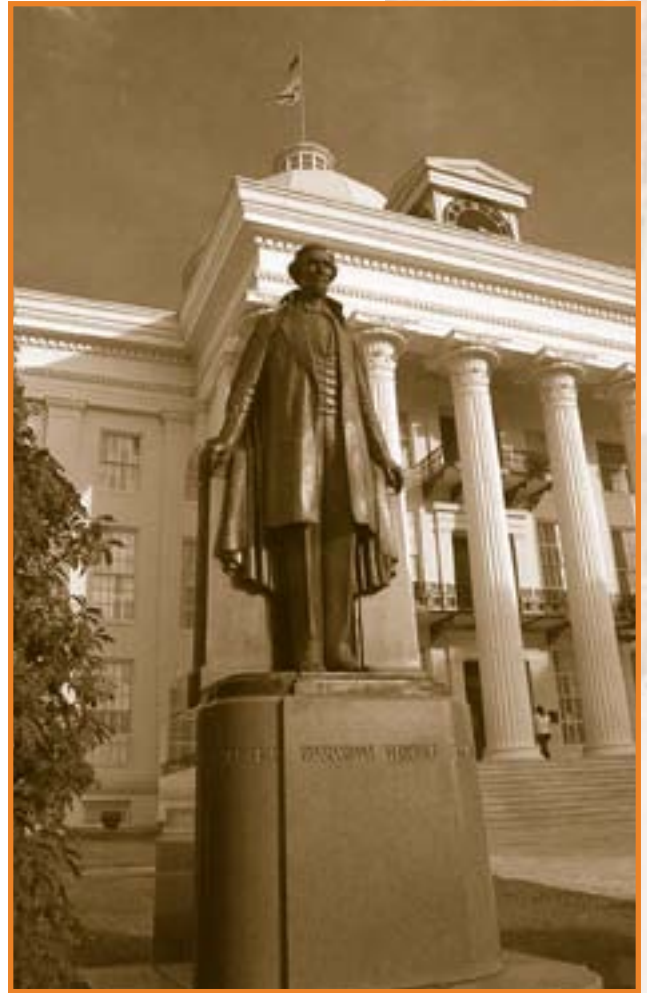
Absence of Faith-Based Institutions

Participants were very respectful of the historical and institutional significance of the black church as a major source of support for African Americans. However, the participants were in general agreement that the black church has not addressed and is not sufficiently addressing domestic violence and other those issues that increase the likelihood of black women being battered by their intimate partners.

> *The faith base has community been a strong aspect in our households, but when you get to the church and from the pulpit, they are absent in addressing domestic violence... They want to give you what's going to bring in the tithes and offering. They don't address life issues from the standpoint of that this is what is happening in our communities. What's happening in our homes? What's affecting you as an individual? What's affecting us as a nation?*

Lack of Support for Culture Specific Groups

The participants noted on several occasions that one of the more problematic barriers that function as an obstacle for addressing domestic violence in the African American community is the lack of support for culture-specific programs among those public and private agencies in Birmingham who typically fund or operate domestic violence programs. Participants appeared to be frustrated by the reluctance to fund culturally specific domestic programs that deliberately structure their programming to serve African American victims and batterers. This frustration was enhanced by the added reluctance of the black church, one of the few independent institutions in the African American community, to assume a leadership role in addressing domestic violence by raising awareness of it and making its various resources available to address the problem, including the implementation of culture-specific domestic violence programs.

> *But because we're not able to do all-black groups, because that's seen as reverse racism and discrimination in Birmingham, a lot of the emphasis in terms of dealing with that issue becomes diluted because white guys in the group, they don't want to hear nothing about church.*

The lack of support for culture specific programming was said to emerge from a larger context of racial discrimination and a desire to maintain control of domestic violence programs and their funding. As such, participants perceived the leadership in traditional domestic violence agencies as very reluctant to support the increasing number of black employees. Participants expressed the view that African Americans were being deliberately denied opportunities to achieve leadership roles in the domestic violence service delivery network and funding.

> *I was just going to say, I think one obstacle that I see is, Alabama is still very much a good ole' boy network. It's all about who you know, how long you've known them, whether or not you went to Alabama or Auburn. I have written grants that have been beautiful grants and they have not been funded. However, a member of my agency has gone to a certain governmental office and said, "We really would like some funding for this project." And he'll pull it out and say, "Okay, which one do you want funded?" Not based on the writing of the grant but based on this relationship that they had with my agency. And I just look at that kind of thing and know that when it comes to dollars and cents and who's*

really funding the projects, Alabama is still very much a good ol' boy network. And I think that's a huge obstacle because you really aren't empowered to get the dollars to do the work, often times, unless you're given the okay by somebody who is in that network.

Lack of Collaboration between the Research Community and Black Service Providers

The participants identified the lack of collaboration between the Birmingham research community and agencies that serve a disproportionate number of black clients as being problematic with regard to evaluating the effectiveness of service delivery directed toward African Americans. From the perspective of the participants there seems to be some disconnect between services and research, whereas if there were a stronger connection and the research was actually fed back into the community, it would enhance understanding about what is and is not effective in addressing domestic violence in the African American community.

> *One of the obstacles is that service providers aren't doing research and researchers aren't providing services to agencies that serve black clients. I think that there needs to be a coming together of those two things. My agency won't allow research. So when I want to do research with groups on what is a man, in advance of developing curriculum materials to do that, I can't do that.*

Community Activists Focus Groups

Types of Violence

The members of the community activists focus groups identified the following types of violence as types of violence that occur in the African American community: (1) child abuse, (2) emotional abuse, (3) youth violence, and (4) domestic violence.

Causes—Lack of Male Authority

The primary cause of domestic violence discussed by the participants was low self-esteem among black men that was precipitated by frustrations related to their economic deprivation and, in many cases, the lack of economic success compared to that of black women. It was the view of these participants that the economic situation of many black men leads to lack of household authority, which often gets translated into resorting to violence as a means of the male imposing his will on his female partner.

> *In many cases in Alabama, the wife, in too many cases, she's much more employable than a black male today. There's homes where she makes more money than he does. He feels threatened instead of saying, "Thank God, somebody's making the money, period." Then it becomes, who's the boss.*
>
> *I think the economic reality in our communities, with such high unemployment, there's surely the issue of esteem, both for the man and for the woman. Certainly, if the woman is the major breadwinner in the home and on a daily basis, she's coming home to a situation where the father of the children—either the baby's daddy or the husband in the household—is unemployed or underemployed or however this man has been beaten down.*

Consequences—Effects on Children

The participants identified one primary consequence of domestic violence in the community as being the effects it has on children. It was the consensus of the group that children are adversely affected by residing in households in which they are exposed to domestic violence.

> *When mom and dad or boyfriend-girlfriend or mother; they fought all night. Then the child brings this to school. And then we have a problem at school.*

Participants believe that boys and girls have different reactions to being exposed to domestic violence.

> *The way a boy reacts to physical violence against his mama is different than the girls' reaction, I think. It's been my experience. I've never really had the experience of actually living in the household where that was happening. Also, I do know that those things are different. I have friends that were experiencing these things and we would talk about it. And there WAS a different effect on girls versus boys. Boys wanted to run in and protect their mama and often got into confrontations, sometimes at the end, with the abusive person. Sometimes, as soon as they got big enough, they were able to confront him and that's what it would be; it would be a physical confrontation. With the girls, it was always something that was internalized and then later on in life, you'd see them going…tolerating too much of the same thing because they'd think that's how you're supposed to act. And a lot of it, too, is based on the breakdown in our extended families.*

Solutions

The participants identified four solutions that they believed would be effective in addressing domestic violence in the African American community, including (1) community-based programs, (2) programs for men who batter, (3) educating black clergy about domestic violence, and (4) the need for community collaboration.

Community-Based Programs

Several participants were very critical of the clergy and other community leaders for not having assumed a major leadership role in addressing domestic violence in the African American community. Clearly, participants believe that black community leadership must be involved in raising community awareness and mobilizing community-based and community-led initiatives to prevent and reduce the occurrence of domestic violence.

> *When we have murders at a high level in this town, every night on the TV you have, "Another murder in Birmingham." And the media, every night and it kept in front of us all the time, that we're killing each other! The same thing should be done with regard to domestic violence because it is the chief cause of murder in this town. Then every time there are domestic murder on the news, we should have a flash like we had when we were the murder capitol--that x amount of domestic violence and it led to x amount of death. But we're not asking for these kinds of services. Our leadership is not actually on the front end or front burner, trying to find solutions to some of this thing. Every church in this city should have those statistics said every Sunday at 11:00. Every preacher in this city should be aware of domestic violence in this congregation… I know that in my congregation there have been several women, over the past couple of years that have been killed by their husbands. And there's still no problem— nothing in the men's ministry or the women's ministry, dealing with domestic violence. Now at some point, we're going to have to be responsible for finding solutions for these things in our own way.*

Programs for Men who Batter

Participants observed that most of what is available to address domestic violence in Birmingham is directed toward women who are abused. However, participants noted that there is a dire need for not only domestic violence programs, but a broad range of services that address the various problems that adversely impact African American males and increase their risk of engaging in acts of intimate partner violence. The lack of such programs was regarded as a barrier and obstacle in achieving long-term reductions in the occurrence of domestic violence in the African American community.

> *Most of my programs have prints that, unfortunately, are geared toward women. It's what we've been taught to do… We address women's health issues. We have the women's ministries. But it doesn't make any sense for me to be a better person if somebody's going to hit me. It doesn't make any sense for me to be healthy if my husband is not healthy, because we're functioning as a group of people together. So we're doing more for women than we are for the men. I'm very excited about this program for men, so that we can start doing this thing together so we can come together as a nucleus of people together.*

> *We have not started to break the ice on getting to the young men in the community. We need to be able to get to the young men in the community to break the cycle.*

Educating the Black Clergy about Domestic Violence

There was consensus among the group participants that the black church, particularly black clergy must be involved in any comprehensive effort to raise community awareness and to prevent domestic violence in the African American community.

> *And educating our black males, first of all, but foremost educating the ministers and that directly affects the African American community. And […] we're going to sponsor a minister's conference to get all of them we can so we can educate them because they have the greatest ability to get to the African American community.*

Mentoring Programs

Several of the participants indicated that black males need mentoring and assistance in negotiating life challenges, particularly their passage from adolescence to adulthood. It was the view of these participants that both community and domestic violence could be reduced if more young black males were mentored and taught how to function as respectful, non-violent men.

> *We have not started to break the ice on getting to the young men in the community. We need to be able to get to the young men in the community to break the cycle.*

> *What I would like to see implemented at my school is for black men to come in one day a week, probably one or two people, and teach 6th, 7th and 8th grade black males how to be men. Let them wear a tie with their white shirt that day, sit down and talk and dialogue with each other, and tell me things that I don't hear at home because there is no father there to help me. Teach me how to be a man. Put those morals and values into me. So I would like to see the black males in the positions where they can come back to the school and really teach 'this is how to be a man.'*

Community Collaboration

Group members also discussed the importance of establishing a comprehensive coordinated response to address domestic violence. It was clear that the participants believed that it was crucial that African Americans begin to claim ownership of the problem and a leadership role in addressing domestic violence in the African American community.

> *One of the key things that is a solution to the problem of addressing the issues of domestic violence, we need more coordination and collaboration throughout the city.*

Barriers

The participants identified one primary barrier and that is the lack of information about what other agencies and service providers are doing in the way of addressing domestic violence in the Birmingham community. The lack of information about what other organizations were doing was also related to the failure of existing service providers to coordinate the delivery of domestic violence services that target batterers and victims in the African American community.

Lack of Information about Existing Services

The lack of information about what other organizations were doing was also related to the failure of existing service providers to coordinate the delivery of domestic violence services that target batterers and victims in the African American community.

> *There are so many agencies, so many programs that have got city funding, state funding, private funding. The fact of the matter is, the barrier is not knowing what's out there; the lack of information to inform the people, of what's out there.*

The Faith-Based Focus Groups

Types of Violence

The participants identified four distinct types of violence that occur in the African American community, including (1) child abuse, (2) domestic violence, (3) murder, and (4) rape.

Causes

Unlike the other Birmingham focus groups, the faith-basd focus group devoted most of its discussion of domestic violence in the African American community to addressing the causes of domestic violence. Their discussion of the other thematic areas addressed by the other focus groups was not as detailed. The participants identified four primary causes of domestic violence in the African Americans, including: (1) domestic violence as learned behavior, (2) slavery, racial inequality, and frustration, (3) empowered women and the lack of male authority, and (4) the lack of a common purpose.

Domestic Violence is Learned

The participants in this group devoted a significant amount of time to discussing how men learn to use violence as a means of controlling their wives and girlfriends. Many of the group members emphasized how young males and females learn at an early age that violence is a normal response to conflict in some households. This message is learned as a result of observing how their parents manage conflicts and stressful situations.

Men are taught at a young age that you have to rule your house and if ruling your house means beating your wife, you have to wear the pants some way. And a lot of men take that literally. ' I wear the pants in this house. This is my house and I'm going to rule this house in any way I feel fit, even if it goes on getting a belt or whatever and beating my wife and beating my family'—to that point. ' I'm the boss'. Because those roles were laid out for them from the time they were little. So, all that stuff becomes a part of our nature

Slavery, Racial Inequality, and Frustration

The participants emphasized the importance of the slavery legacy and racial inequality resulting from institutionalized racial discrimination, particularly blocked access to employment opportunities. The lack of sufficient income that would allow a man to assume his responsibilities as a father, husband, and provider was considered to be a major source of stress and frustration for many black men. It was the opinion of these participants that frustration over the inability to meet one's responsibilities as a husband and a father is often associated with situations in which black men resort to violence against their wives and girlfriends.

> *Because of slavery and because of the impact it had on the individuals, and the social effects of it, those things cause people to live a certain way and act out a certain way. And they develop coping mechanisms. And those coping mechanisms were handed down from generation to generation. There were certain things you didn't do or didn't say, and kept your anger bottled up inside of you. You stuffed it, so to speak. And as a result of stuffing the anger, it would come out and most of the time it would come out right in the home, right around the loved ones. But it was something that was a direct result of how that individual was treated because of the slavery or because of whatever they had to deal with, in that period of time. And that's just been perpetuating itself from generation to generation, up to this present time. In a lot of instances, people just don't know.*

For some participants the black church is implicated in domestic violence as a result of failing to recognize the importance of teaching black men how to manage their frustrations and emotions, particularly as it relates to helping them to recognize that black women are not their enemy.

> *There's always going to be a situation that causes emotions, but if teaching on handling those emotions, the teachings on how you express yourself, other than through an anger or temperament, should have been taught somewhere. And it goes back to our black churches and what were we teaching our men?*

Empowered Women and the Lack of Male Authority

Participants noted that the extension of educational and employment opportunities to black women and their subsequent economic mobility in the larger society has contributed to conflict between some black men and women. A common theme in the discussion was that black women are surpassing black men in education and mobility in the job market. Consequently, an increasing number of black men, particularly those who are married or living with economically independent women feel less valued today and that their authority as a man of the house has diminished. Thus, acts of intimate partner violence were perceived by these group members as an act of anger and frustration.

> *'How do I accept this woman, now, to be just like me—the same job as me— because it's just not taught There's going to be some respect lost somewhere. And a lot of times, it did happen. Not because women wanted it to, but because there was women who would step out, work—pretty much take over. Because when the black man started slipping, she had to make up for the difference. And he didn't understand That 'the woman's just trying to help me'. And then some other vile teaching got in there somewhere and she became the enemy. So what used to be the common enemy now, she's the enemy. She's going to get a job now.*

Lack of a Common Purpose

A significant portion of the discussion examined the role that racism has contributed to a decline in social cohesion in the African American community. More specifically, it was argued that there has been an increasing erosion of black community solidarity as a result of the dismantling of the overt manifestations of institutional racism. However, the dismantling of overt racism has rendered the African American community much more vulnerable to the emergence of social problems (e.g., removal of black middle class, increased social isolation of disadvantaged African Americans, increases in female-headed families and poverty) that facilitate the perpetuation of domestic violence and many other social problems.

> *Back then, you had a "common enemy," and every- body knew who the enemy was and your enemy was real. Today, we still have an enemy, but it's not as real as it was then. It's more subtle. It's more behind-the- scene. It's in the systems of governing and things like that. And it's very subtle. So you take away the enemy and you don't have a common enemy no more, so you don't have that thing to gather around, to sup- port one another against. It's sort of like we lost that common enemy, so to speak, as far as our perception. It's still there. I'm not talking about a particular peo- ple or a particular race; I'm just talking about the forces that are arrayed against the black community and keeping it from being that community like it should be.*

Consequences—Effects on Children

The most significant consequence of domestic violence, as discussed by the faith-based group members, was the observation that children who grow up in homes where violence occurs often are likely to become adults who batter or adults who are battered. In addition, the perception that the criminal justice system was much more punitive toward men who batter compared to women who batter was identified as a significant difference in the consequences of domestic violence for black men and women.

Solutions—The Black Church

The primary prevention strategy identified by the faith-based group participants was the need for the black church to establish programs that address the emotional scars and pain associated with African Americans exposure to slavery.

> *I think we still are suffering a little bit, 400 years later, from the effects of being oppressed as a people. And from a spiritual context, I think there's some healing that needs to occur in our community*

It was the opinion of the participants that the black church has an important role to play in preventing domestic violence. Their primary emphasis was on the need for the church to develop programs that assist African American men manage their emotions.

Barriers—The Black Church

While the black church has historically served as one of the most important community institutions, some participants expressed the view that the church is simply not accessible as it ought to be to meet the needs of its members or others in the community who require assistance in coping with domestic violence or with other pressing social problems.

> *And most churches are open on Wednesday night, for Bible study. They may be open on Thursday for choir rehearsal or something. And then they open up on Sunday for service. But then, during the week, when people really need help—Monday morning at 10:00, they need to talk to a pastor or somebody at their church, or even just go to the chapel and sit down and pray, those doors are locked, in many churches in this community. It's not an open place where you can gather and go and gather your soul. I think the churches are museums, a lot of them in our community. What do you do? You go, you pay your money, you see something, and then you leave. And when you want to come back again, you do the same thing, over and over again. And a lot of our churches have just become museums.*

Gay, Lesbian, Bi-Sexual, and Transgender (GLBT) Focus Group

Types of Violence

The participants in the GLBT focus group identified three distinct types of violence that they believed were predominant in the African American community: (1) physical violence, (2) emotional abuse, and (3) verbal abuse.

Priority

The group expressed the opinion that domestic violence, when compared to other social problems impacting the African American community, is not regarded as a major priority.

> The problem is it doesn't relate very high, because in so many instances it's economics. It's the economy, stupid! When you're struggling to put food on the table, guess what becomes the number one issue? Economics!

Causes

In an effort to explain the causes of domestic violence in the African American community, group members identified two primary causes: (1) domestic violence is learned and (2) domestic violence occurs as a result of power compensation..

Domestic Violence is Learned

The participants indicated that domestic violence is learned primarily in the home as a result of observing how family members, particularly parents and other intimate partners, use violence to gain compliance and/or as a means of resolving relationship disputes.

> *Well, you know, somewhere along the line, a lot of us—and I say "us;" hopefully, not just the gay and lesbian community, but the African American community--have learned that yelling gets results. So as we interact with each other, often times the level of our voices, you can hear it rising.*

In addition, the participants noted that religious teachings are another source of teachings that condone or provide a justification for engaging in intimate partner violence for heterosexual couples, as well as couples who are members of the GLBT community. More specifically, the participants stated that the emphasis that black male clergy place on male dominance in the household encourages men or GLBT partners who assume dominant roles to believe they have justification to resort to violence as a means of exerting power as it is biblically sanctioned.

> *I think that one of the ways all these things are related, is because of so much stuff that's coming from the pulpits, that said that men are the head of women and all this kind of stuff. And so when we go into same-sex relationships, somebody's got to be the man.*

A group member offered an opinion in opposition to the general consensus of most of the group with regard to the role of the black church in facilitating intimate partner violence. The contrasting argument that was introduced suggests that increasing disconnection and disregard of religious teachings has rendered black people more vulnerable to engaging in acts of domestic and community violence.

We have moved away from religious organizations altogether. There's a lack of community. We're moving away from churches, moving away from our pastors. We're doing our thing, not involved as we were back in the 60's. We don't want to lose our jobs and we don't want to lose our positions and so we're shying away from our churches. That's where we got our teachers. The black community got our teachers from the churches over years and over generations and I think that's why violence in the homes is a problem, because we're not going to church. We just don't Young blacks don't go to church.

Power Compensation

Participants also observed that living life as an open or visible member of the GLBT community is to live a marginalized existence. Consequently, the social stigma associated with the GLBT lifestyle quite often denies group members a sense of empowerment. As a result, the intimate relationship context is one of the rare settings where members of the GLBT community may exercise a sense of empowerment. However, what is problematic is when the exercise of power is translated or manifested as abuse of one's partner.

Power issues! Some folks have never had any instance of power in their life, and in a relationship, all the sudden, they get to work through these power issues. If they've been the victim everywhere else… they come to believe that now it's my turn to try

Various Types of Violence are Related

When asked about how various types of violence are related, the participants talked about the fact that they believed that low self-esteem was related to both victimization, re-victimization, and the perpetration of intimate partner violence.

Then you won't even respond to violence around you. That if I have low self esteem, I will accept him beating on me and won't have the power to say, "Stop," because I don't feel like I have the POWER to intervene. So I think they're all connected. They're connected with what we allow in our environment. They're also connected as a perpetrator. Because I would bet that a person that is physically abusive, would also do emotional abuse on someone and perpetrate those subtle abuse activities on another person. And they would do it, depending on the level of power that they have over that individual. So if I think that I have just a little bit of power over you, I will do that little subtle thing from across the room. If I have a whole lot of power over you, I may beat you down. And if I don't feel like I have any power, I will then move into victim role and allow you to even do the subtle emotional or physical thing against me. So depending on your level of perceived power in the role with the individual people, will determine where you fit along the spectrum of no violence to complete physical violence. And I think we all fall in there and are capable of each one of them. And I think that is a scary part—that most people would not want to assume the role of perpetrator. But I would say, put in the right circumstance, we would all commit physical abuse, emotional abuse, subtle abuse, all the way down to being physically abused—depending on the circumstances of your life; depending on how you are at that moment—a whole dynamic of things. There's no way that we can move off that.

Consequences—Re-victimization

The primary consequence of domestic violence within the GLBT community that was identified by the group members was that failure to identify violence in same-sex relationships as domestic violence, along with reluctance to report it or seek help contributes to re-victimization.

Solutions—Education

Participants in this group discussed the importance of academic education in changing attitudes and behavior of those at-risk for engaging in interpersonal violence.

> *Education, for the most part, will be the key to releasing us from some of the oppression, some of the abuse, some of the things that are going on within our communities. I just think that the more you know, it is quite difficult to tell you that you're wrong if you're well-educated.*

A contrasting view was offered that countered the claim that education would reduce the occurrence of domestic and community violence in the African American community. The group member quoted below argues that it is essential to the prevention of domestic violence within the GLBT community to name domestic violence as a form of oppression.

> *I worry that education has nothing to do with domestic violence. I don't believe by becoming more educated that it will stop anything. I don't believe that education… I don't believe the amount of money… I don't believe whatever…the amount of times you go to church each week; the amount of times you sit in a support group… Until you realize that there is the oppression and until you're able to call it for what it is, then it will continue. Because I've seen the richest of the rich…it's you down in the street. It's the poorest of the poor. You can conjugate a verb or you may not know what a bird is. Unless you can call it for what it is and are able to realize what is actually going on, then it's not going to stop.*

Barriers

The major barriers toward the prevention and reduction of domestic violence were: (1) reluctance to address domestic violence because of more pressing issues, and (2) the importance of maintaining household privacy. The participants indicted that the barriers that they discussed were relevant to both heterosexual and GLBT communities within the African American community.

Reluctance to Address Domestic Violence because of More Pressing Issues

Participants suggested that as a result of the various social challenges that African American males experience it is doubtful if they perceive abuse toward their wives and girlfriends as constituting a form of oppression, similar to racism. Participants also suggested that a similar interpretive of confusion or denial is occurring among gay men and lesbian women who batter. That is, as a result of the multiple oppressions experienced by members of the GLBT community batterers are often blinded by the harm they inflict on their partners when they abuse them.

I don't think that it is clear that black men are oppressing black WOMEN. So it just depends on the environment that you're in.

And that's so true, because you have to face your sexuality. In the black community, the word lesbian is not even said OR dyker. I don't know where that term came from; I'm still trying to find that somewhere, as the origins of it. These are very negative things. We are even more so in the closet because of our upbringing. And what we have here is that our whole social structure has been replaced by white conservative structure, so that we tend to act the same way.

The reluctance to address or even recognize relationship violence as a problem also contributes to the re-victimization of members of the GLBT community who are experiencing domestic violence.

The Household Privacy Issue

Participants identified the custom of socializing children to adhere to the norm that "what ever happens in this house, stays in the house," contributes to the perpetuation of domestic violence within both heterosexual and GLBT relationships.

I think the problem is that we were all trained, what happens in the house, stays in the house. We don't talk about our stuff in the street. And that's why abuse can go on for so long and the neighbors not knowing what's going on. If the house is sound-proof, the neighbors don't know what's going on because we're not going to go out and talk about what happened. And as adults, we won't talk about what happened.

In contrast, one of the participants, a public school employee, noted that it is interesting, however, that children are less reluctant to maintain the integrity of the household privacy rule.

That is something that happens daily, I will tell you, dealing with 300 children. Somebody comes to school talking about what mama's boyfriend did to her, what daddy did to mama, what daddy did to me. Somebody's talking about abuse in the house. This is daily. The children are talking because not everybody's gotten the training that you don't talk about these things. There are adults in their life and they bring the abuses, too. But we would not just go out and say, "Look, let me tell you what happened in the house last night."

Recommendations
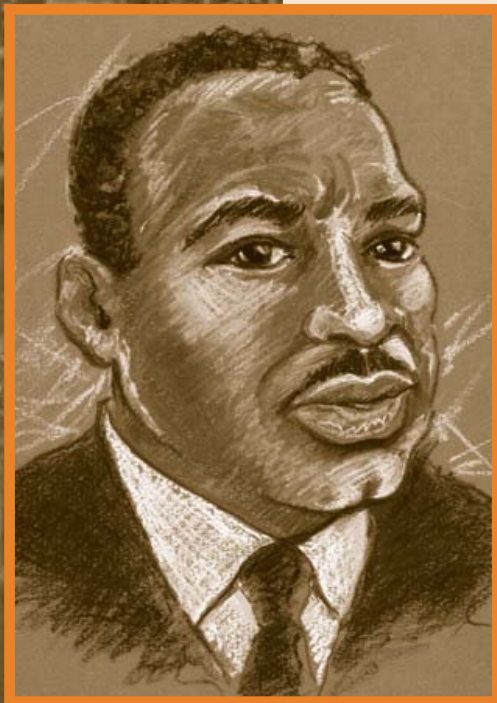
This report points to the need to find innovative solutions to prevent domestic violence in the African American community. The members of this Minneapolis-based assessment were in agreement in articulating the view that effective intervention and prevention of domestic violence requires a multi-pronged approach. Developing a coordinated community response and implementing policies that protect African American women and children, hold batterers accountable and that include African Americans agencies and practitioners as service providers is central to any comprehensive plan to eradicate domestic violence in the African American community.

Establish an Annual Birmingham Forum on Domestic Violence in the African American Community

The findings reported above suggest that there is a significant lack of awareness about the breath and type of domestic violence programs that are available in Birmingham. Many of the participants expressed the view that it was nearly impossible to establish culture-specific programs in Birmingham that have curriculum that address the unique characteristics of domestic violence as manifested in the African American community. In contrast, there were several references to ongoing efforts to develop programs and curricula that were culturally relevant to the experiences of African American victims and batterers. An annual forum that focuses on domestic violence in the African American community would provide a venue that would enhance awareness among domestic violence service providers as to the types of programs that exist.

In addition, an annual forum would be helpful in educating those who are opposed to culture-specific programming as to the rationale for such programming and exposure to information about model programs that have been developed to specifically address domestic violence in the African American community. The notion that culture-specific groups or programming is a form of "reverse racism" must be dispelled through forums and trainings that enhance cultural sensitivity and understanding of the intersection of cultural experiences and domestic violence.

Develop Research Collaborations between the Local Research Community and Service Providers in Birmingham that Serve a Predominantly African American Client Population.

Efforts must be undertaken to develop cooperative relationships between domestic violence programs that serve a disproportionate number of black clients and the University of Alabama-Birmingham (UAB) research community. A number of participants noted that UAB has substantial resources in the areas of medicine, mental health, social work, and public health that could be helpful in evaluating the effectiveness of interventions that provide interventions and services to African Americans who are victims or perpetrators of domestic violence.

Understanding the Impact of Slavery and Racism on Domestic Violence in the African American Community

A consistent theme in this report is illustrated by the numerous references to the critical role that the slavery experience and the subsequent legacy and contemporary patterns of racial discrimination in America has had on the attitudes and behavior of contemporary African Americans. The historical context of slavery was repeatedly identified by the focus group participants as being a critical factor to consider in any comprehensive effort to prevent and reduce domestic violence among African Americans. There is a body of literature that has examined the negative impact of slavery on the family life of African Americans (Blassingame, 1972; Frazier, 1965). Furthermore, a number of researchers have reported that historical and contemporary patterns of racial discrimination have functioned as a major source of conflict in the intimate relationships of African Americans (Hampton, 1982; Staples, 1982). However, there is a need for more focused research that examines the relationship between slavery, racial inequality, cultural stereotypes of black men and women, African American adaptations to racial inequality and current trends in domestic violence in the African American community. That is some explaination of how these unique experiences of how African Americans relate to the potential and increased risk of violence among African American men and women. But also how to decrease such risk. Interventions designed to address domestic violence among African Americans would be enhanced by greater understanding of the various ways in which slavery and historical patterns of racial inequality provide a context for the occurrence of domestic violence among African Americans. Finally, the inclusion of African American human services agencies and practitioners are essential to any comprehensive plan to eradicate domestic violence in the African American community.

Focus on Building Positive Relationships

The abuse of discretionary authority among criminal justice officials (police, prosecutors, and judges) in situations in which the victim of domestic violence or the batterer is African American has been well documented in the published literature on race and domestic violence (Buzawa & Buzawa, 2003; Crenshaw, 2000; Websdale, 2000). Consequently, African American women have been found to be reluctant to report their victimization to law enforcement for fear of being disrespected by the officers, detained for dual arrest, or fear of the police engaging in acts of violence against her partner (Asbury, 1993; Bent-Goodley, 1998; Wedsdale, 2000). Hence, poor relationships with law enforcement and less than satisfying experiences with domestic violence service workers who lack cultural competence have contributed to the re-victimization of African American women who are battered by their partners. Consequently, efforts must be undertaken to monitor and address the historic inequity that exist in the criminal justice response to perpetrators and victims of domestic violence in the African American community. The inclusion of African American domestic violence service providers in the domestic training of law enforcement could help mitigate the abuse of discretionary authority and enhance the police response to domestic violence incidents involving African Americans.

Public Awareness and Community Mobilization

Throughout the United States and in Birmingham, the stability of African American communities is significantly challenged by a host of social problems. Consequently, domestic violence is generally not a high priority social issue because it is generally hidden from view and often occurs within a cultural context in which there exists a certain level of community tolerance for intimate partner violence. To increase awareness of domestic violence and to mobilize an organized community response, efforts must be undertaken to initiate a comprehensive public awareness campaign targeting the African American community. There are a number of stakeholders who should be invited to contribute to raising public awareness about domestic violence and mobilizing the community to established an enhanced community response, including the faith community, domestic violence service providers, health care providers, representatives from the human services community, political officials, representatives from urban radio and media that target African American consumers, and African American small business owners. As a means of institutionalizing a community-based and community-led mobilization of the African American community to address domestic violence, an African American Task Force on Domestic Violence should be established to coordinate the community's response to domestic violence in the black community and to serve as a liaison to the traditional domestic violence service delivery network and the criminal justice system.

Culturally Competent Domestic Violence Services

The establishment and provision of culturally competent domestic violence services is a critical component to addressing domestic violence among African Americans (Bent-Goodley, 2001; Williams, 1998, 1994). Culturally competent service providers and interventions are needed across all levels of intervention: individual, family, community, and societal. The focus group participant were very vocal in pointing out how their numerical under-representation in the greater Birmingham contributes to their social isolation from other African Americans and increases the likelihood that first responders and domestic violence providers will be non-black. To facilitate the broader availability of culturally competent domestic violence services, efforts must be undertaken to conduct periodic cross trainings with domestic violence service providers and their staffs as a means of enhancing their capacity to provide effective interventions for African American domestic violence victims, batterers, and their families. In addition to enhancing the competency of domestic violence service providers and extending the availability of such interventions, there should be a more deliberate commitment to evaluate and document the effectiveness of domestic violence services that target African Americans. Furthermore, funding of domestic violence programs should be linked to the provision of culturally competent services and the cultural competency training of staff. Finally, local and state funding should be earmarked for the creation and maintenance of community-based, culturally competent domestic violence programs.

Conclusions

Domestic violence among African Americans is precipitated by a host of structural, community, and situational factors (Hampton, Oliver, & Majarian, 2003). Consequently, there are no easy solutions toward the prevention and reduction of domestic violence. We commend the community members that shared their insights. It is our hope that their perspectives on "the causes" of domestic violence in the African American community, as well as the various solutions that they have identified will be considered in future efforts to implement policy and intervention practices that are specifically oriented toward addressing domestic violence among African Americans. The most salient message uncovered by our analysis of these conversations is that these community stakeholders are convinced that the structural challenges that uniquely influence the lives of African Americans must be taken into account and addressed through innovative, community-led decision making and action. In addition, these findings suggest that there is much work that needs to be done toward the goal of developing a cadre of African American domestic violence program managers and practitioners in Birmingham and increasing awareness among current domestic violence program administrators and treatment staff as to the significance and potential utility of culturally competent approaches to address domestic violence among traditionally underserved populations. Increasing the number of African American domestic violence program managers and treatment staff is essential to the goal of enhancing service delivery to African American women who are battered and the men who abuse them..
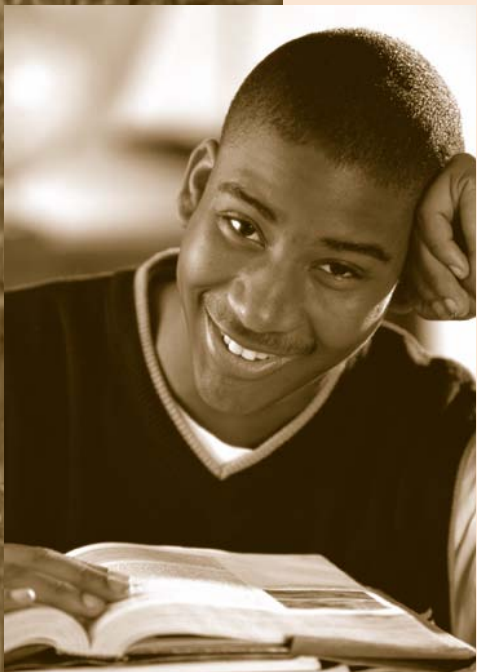
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Steering Committee

IDVAAC Steering Committee. Back row, left to right: Oliver J. Williams, Ph.D.; Kelly Mitchell-Clark; William Oliver, Ph.D.; Linner Ward Griffin, Ed.D., MSW; Robert Hampton, Ph.D. Front row, left to right; Joyce N. Thomas, MPH, RN; Shelia Hankins; Esther J. Jenkins, Ph.D.; Antonia Vann, CDVC; Beth E. Richie, Ph.D.

Fact Sheet on Intimate Partner Violence in the African American Community

STATISTICS

In a nationally representative survey, 29% of African American women and 12% of African American men report at least one instance of violence from an intimate partner.[1]

African Americans account for 1/3 of the intimate partner homicides in this country[2] and have an intimate partner homicide rate four times that of whites.[3]

Black women comprise 8% of the U.S. population but account for 20% of the intimate partner homicide victims.[2]

RISK FACTORS

The poorer African American women are and less educated the more severe the abuse they suffer

Alcohol problems (drinking, binge drinking, dependency) are more frequently related to intimate partner violence for African Americans than for whites or Hispanics.[5]

Among African American women killed by their partner, the lethal violence was more likely to occur if there had been incidents in which the partner had used or threatened to use a weapon on her and/or the partner has tried to choke or strangle her.[4]

Among African American women killed by their partner, almost half were killed while in the process of leaving the relationship, highlighting the need to take extra precautions at this time.[4]

Among African American women who killed their partner, almost 80% had a history of abuse.[4]

As with other women, domestic violence is more likely to end in the serious injury or death of black women when there is a history of her partner having used or threatened to use a gun or knife or the partner has tried to choke or strangle her.[4]

IMPACT OF ABUSE

Battered women are at greater risk for attempting suicide6 particularly if they were physically abused as a child, for being depressed[7] and to suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).[8]

DYNAMICS OF ABUSE

Women do better in abusive relationships when they have the support of friends and family. Battered black women who reported that they could rely on others for emotional and practical support were less likely to be re-abused,[9] showed less psychological distress,[10] and were less likely to attempt suicide.[6]

TEEN DATING VIOLENCE

Black youth are over represented as victims and perpetrators of teen dating violence.[11]

African American girls are as likely as boys to slap or hit their partner,[12] but studies of racially diverse groups find that girls are more likely than boys to be violent with their partner in self defense[13] and to be injured as a result of dating violence[14]

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Birmingham, Alabama
Domestic Violence Resource List

YMCA
Contact: Jim Lombard x303
2101 4th Avenue North
Birmingham, AL 35203
Phone: 205- 801-9622
Fax: 205- 324-7185
E-mail: jlombard@ymcabham.org
Web Site: http://www.ymcabham.org

YWCA of Central Alabama
309 North 23rd Street
Birmingham, AL 35203
Email: centralalabma@ywconnect.org
Phone: 205-322-9922
Fax: 205-521-9652
Website:
http://www.ywcabham.org/DVRes/index.asp

Crisis Center
Contact: Mike Falligant
3600 8th Avenue South, Ste. 501
Birmingham, AL 35222
Phone: 205-323-7785
Fax: 205-328-6225
E-mail: mfalligant@crisiscenterbham.com
emailed
Web Site: http://www.crisiscenterbham.com

Oasis Counseling Center
Contact: Eve Laxer
1900 14th Avenue South
Birmingham, AL 35205
Phone: 205-933-0338
Fax: 205-933-0343
E-mail: elaxer@oasiscounseling.org emailed
Web Site: http://www.oasiscounseling.org

Project SAFE
Contact: Sergeant James Jackson
1101 Carraway Blvd
Birmingham, AL 35234
Phone: 205-254-6542

Court Advocates
Phone: 205-521-9650
Mail to: YWCA Frannie Horn
309 North 23rd Street
Birmingham, AL 35203

Gateway
1401 20th Street South
Birmingham, AL 35205
Tel: 205-510-2600
Fax: 205-510-2621
Website: www.gway.org

Oakmont Center for Human Services
Contact: Jerome Porterfield
2008 21st Street Ensley
P.O. Box 8328
Birmingham, Alabama 35218
Tel: 205-787-7100

Birmingham Office
1820 Seventh Avenue, North
Birmingham, AL 35203
(205) 328-3540
Re: offers free lawyers and legal advice for
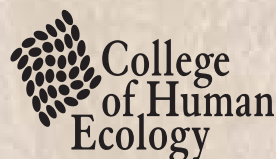victims of domestic violence who cannot
afford it.

Community Insights on Domestic Violence among African Americans:

Conversations About Domestic Violence And Other Issues Affecting Their Community

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