



# *Community Insights on Domestic Violence among African Americans:*

Conversations About Domestic Violence And  
Other Issues Affecting Their Community

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**A Pair of Purple  
Shoes —poignant  
reminder of a North  
Carolina domestic  
violence fatality.**

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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 project 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.



**Oliver J. Williams, Ph.D.**

In 1998, IDVAAC initiated a national effort to learn more about community perspectives on domestic violence in the African American community. Since then, IDVAAC has convened discussion 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, and consequences of violence, as well as 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 from eastern North Carolina, who assembled in Greenville, North Carolina.

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, this exposure to racial oppression has served as a catalyst for conflict and violence within intimate relationships (Bent-Goodley, 1998; Hampton, 1982; Hampton, Oliver & Magarian, 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 prevent many African American women from proactively seeking help as a means of protecting their intimate partner from involvement in the criminal justice system, to avoid loss of income and/or as a means of avoiding social ostracism (Asbury, 1993; Bent-Goodley, 2001; Richie, 1996). Consequently, many battered black women and their 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.

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 may struggle with whether they should utilize formal systems that exist to address domestic violence.

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). Regarding batterers intervention, there is an inadequacy of responses of the traditional domestic violence service delivery network to address domestic violence among African Americans. 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).





# Domestic Violence in North Carolina



Linner Ward Griffin, Ed.D

*North Carolina law enforcement data reveal that the number of deaths directly related to domestic violence has decreased over the last two years.*

Domestic violence is a social, legal, and public health issue that affects many North Carolinians regardless of age, ethnicity or social status. Adult victims and their children suffer untold emotional damage and physical harm, including death. State marriage license fees have provided support for domestic violence service provider programs in this state since 1991; and, currently all 100 of North Carolina's counties are served by programs that provide emergency shelter, confidential hotline services, court advocacy, counseling and advocacy, and community education.

North Carolina law enforcement data reveal that the number of deaths directly related to domestic violence has decreased over the last two years. In 2002, 78 women died as a direct result of domestic violence; in 2003, the number of deaths totaled 72. Eighty-two persons succumbed to domestic violence homicides in 2004 and 65 North Carolinians were victims in 2005. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI, 2004) Supplemental Homicide Report, the number of domestic homicides of women per million population in North Carolina in 2000 was 5.59. The distinction of exceeding the rate of 5.01 in domestic homicides of women was shared with 9 other states (Arkansas, Arizona, Delaware, Hawaii, Mississippi, Nevada, New Mexico, South Carolina, and Tennessee), most of which are located in the southern United States. This was a vast improvement over 1998 statistics, when North Carolina had a 7.29 domestic homicide rate and was one of 10 southern states that exceeded the 5.01 rate from a total of 16 nationally.

The North Carolina Council for Women collects data from state domestic violence programs bi-annually. Statistical data reveal that 44,895 unduplicated domestic violence victims were served from July 1, 2002 through June 30, 2003, by state programs. Most of these primary victims were adults. Although domestic violence affects people of all ages and all races, there were some interesting racial characteristics of victims serviced by programs during that year, which are presented below:

<u>Year</u>	<u># Served</u>	<u>Race</u>	<u>Women/female Children Served</u>
7/00-6//01	41,214	10,738 Black	39,075
7/01-6/02	47,983	12,374 Black	44,045
7/02-6/03	52,352	14,262 Black	45,843

The overwhelming majority of victims are female and between the ages of 18 and 44 years of age. Another alarming statistic reveals that pregnant women and new mothers are particularly vulnerable for physical abuse. Each year more than 3% of new mothers in North Carolina, or more than 3,000 women, are physically abused, mostly by their husbands or boyfriends, according to a University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Public Health study (Martin, Mackie, Kupper, Moracco, & Buescher, 2001).

Sexual abuse is a life altering experience for many women. The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services reports that in North Carolina 1 in 5 women have been sexually assaulted at some point in their lives. According to the NC Council for Women (2002), over 10,000 North Carolinians were affected by sexual violence last year. North Carolina rape crisis centers reported that 70% of these victims knew their assailants. Only 46% of victims reported their case to North Carolina law enforcement in 2002. Rape, childhood sexual abuse, and domestic violence are among the most common causes of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in women. The chances that a woman will develop PTSD after being raped are between 50% and 95%. Sexual assault also is closely associated with depression and anxiety disorder in women.

# The Community Assessment Project

The Community Assessment Project seeks to provide a fuller picture of how African Americans perceive and experience domestic violence. The following six groups of participants were assembled to share their perspectives related to domestic violence in eastern North Carolina's African American community: (1) Children and Youth workers, (2) members of the Faith community, (3) community activists, (4) the Human Services community, (5) representatives of the GLBTQ community, and (6) the Law Enforcement community. This report presents their perspectives, insights, and interwoven comments about domestic violence; but, this report does not speak for the entire community, as every individual's experiences are different. Still, the report does provide critical insights from six groups of African Americans into the African American perception of domestic violence in rural eastern North Carolina\*.

For **practitioners**, this report supports the need for the following: (1) more self-help mechanisms and stronger community cohesion, (2) more culturally-based prevention and intervention services available to members sparsely populated, rural communities, (3) educational experiences about family violence for the very young and all developmental levels, (4) more faith-based programs to provide education and services, and (5) increased opportunities for interdisciplinary training in domestic violence. **Policymakers** will find that this report illuminates needs in the following five areas: (1) increased funding for domestic violence education and services, particularly that which can provide support for residents in isolated, rural communities; (2) more substance abuse and mental health preventive and treatment services; (3) policies that ensure funding actually serves the population it is intended to serve, i.e., Black communities; (4) policies which strengthen individual self-sufficiency through improved employment opportunities and equity in economic income and wealth; and (5) policies that reduce the cyclical and generational nature of domestic violence. **Researchers** will find this report useful in reinforcing the need for (1) additional research on culturally competent models of domestic violence prevention and best practice interventions that focuses on rural communities; (2) documentation of differential treatment of African Americans by law enforcement, the judicial system, and the child welfare system when domestic violence is involved; and (3) more research on the intersection of racism, contemporary oppression and discrimination, domestic violence, and substance abuse.

As community citizens, this report emphasizes the need for each of us to be more informed and more aware of what is happening in our communities and homes and to find comprehensive, culturally sensitive solutions to create change. The participants have provided us with ideas and an inspiring message that we must strive to eradicate this black mark of domestic violence from our communities.



# Summary of Findings

Findings from the community assessment sessions indicated the following:

Rural settings, such as eastern North Carolina, provide a particularly difficult challenge for human service programs and for treatment services that address domestic violence issues. Small towns with small populations describe this rural region. The existing communities are not large enough to sustain many human service agencies. Domestic violence shelters and treatment facilities are sporadically situated across many miles and across several counties. One example mentioned was a single domestic violence program that serviced women and children in a four county geographic area. Having to drive more than an hour, and in some cases two hours to receive emergency and treatment services, was considered unacceptable.

Lack of funding was cited as a major barrier to addressing domestic violence, particularly the lack of funding for treatment services and preventive services in rural eastern North Carolina communities. Respondents noted the limited resources available to address domestic violence and the dearth of programmatic services and organizations available in rural communities. Small populations and small tax bases were seen as contributors to the lack of funding resources. More funding can provide more services and programs that could be much more easily accessed by persons in danger.

Violence is pervasive in all communities. In African American communities, families are firmly connected to many forms of violence –including domestic violence. Participants in eastern North Carolina area reported strong connections between domestic violence and other forms of violence, particularly community violence, sexual abuse, child abuse, health abuse, youth violence, and verbal abuse. Health abuse was defined as destructive practices that affect human health; examples of health abuse included medical neglect, abuse of drugs and alcohol, and unhealthy lifestyle practices. Respondents noted the connections between stressors inside and outside the home; they connected observed violence with acts of violence committed by perpetrators.

Youth violence among African Americans reflects the desire for social and economic respect. Several focus groups discussed how violence specifically perpetrated by African American youth can be an extreme expression of rebellion against parental and community realities –both social and economic. Lack of job opportunities, lack of equal pay, and poor education all are consequences of institutionalized discrimination. Internalized oppression and feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness were described as primary causes and factors of domestic violence among young African Americans. Youth gang violence was described as increasing in rural eastern North Carolina as youth seek to secure the attention and respect they need to feel good about themselves from their peers.

The lack of community cohesion among African Americans was traced to the beginning of desegregation. Desegregation was described as a prime cause of the breakup of the traditional black community and the breakdown of the family. Community redevelopment projects and racial integration of public schools were described as having a direct relationship with the loss of supportive community environments that historically monitored the behaviors of their own children and adults.

*The lack of community cohesion among African Americans was traced to the beginning of desegregation.*



African Americans' definitions of domestic violence can differ from what the majority community calls domestic violence and methods proposed to end the violence must also differ. Respondents repeatedly remarked that, "one size does not fit all"; African Americans must develop their own definitions of and responses to domestic violence and not depend upon the terms and solutions used by White America.

Raising community awareness and breaking the "code of silence" are imperative if the community is to solve problems associated with domestic violence. The need to "galvanize and publicize" was identified as a priority if the black community is every to eradicate domestic violence as a social problem. We must increase public awareness initiatives and secure adequate counseling resources that can address problems of both victims and abusers in the African American community.

Solutions to domestic violence among African Americans in eastern North Carolina must be comprehensive and culturally based. Participants thought that the community must resolve domestic violence issues with the proper support and attitudes. Because it has traditionally been the social and spiritual leader in rural communities, the church occupies a critical role in addressing domestic violence and the very direct symptoms of racism and other problems that permeate the community. A stronger role for church ministries was proposed as a solution to domestic violence in eastern North Carolina. Education for ministers about domestic violence was seen as an essential strategy for affecting changes in the behavior of both men and women in the African American community.



*Respondents  
willingly shared  
personal infor-  
mation and  
professional  
insights...*

## Introduction

This report summarizes comments and ideas about domestic violence from community members in eastern North Carolina.\* While all contributors represented different professional backgrounds, strengths, and experiences, their message was essentially the same --that the African American community itself must end domestic violence because it destroys black families, which are the core of black communities. Respondents willingly shared personal information and professional insights; they did so at great personal risk to themselves because of concern for their communities. They were open and engaged throughout each focus group and provided specific examples to support their statements and suggested remedies for domestic violence in our minority communities. Traditionally, research has provided some indicators or patterns about domestic violence, but most display methodological shortcomings which limit a clear picture of prevalence, completion rates, and program utilization in minority communities (Bent-Goodley, 2001, Hampton, 1991, West, 1998). Limited empirical information about African American perceptions of domestic violence make this report and the Community Assessments Project important because both provide a more comprehensive understanding of how African Americans view domestic violence and what solutions they identify as most responsive to the unique needs of diverse communities. Recognizing the complexity of the issue, this report links domestic violence with other social issues and rests its recommendations in the desires and understandings of a diverse group of thinkers in eastern North Carolina.

This report can cite four emergent messages: (1) One cannot address domestic violence in the African American community unless the community is at the center of proposed solutions; (2) To address domestic violence in the rural south, one must also understand the history of contemporary racism and discrimination that have continued to affect African American relationships; (3) To address domestic violence, one must understand and address issues of racism, geographic isolation, poverty, substance abuse, mental health, unemployment, and other competing social issues; and (4) solutions must be culturally sensitive and, ideally, they will be implemented by skilled African American practitioners.

*\* Note: The eastern counties are considered the 40 counties comprising the Northeast Economic Development Region, North Carolina's Eastern Region, and the Southeast Economic Development Region. They also conform generally to multi-county planning regions M (excluding Harnett) N, O, P, Q and R.*

*...they did so at  
great personal  
risk to  
themselves  
because of  
concern for  
their  
communities.*