

The background of the entire page is a sepia-toned photograph of African art. It features a central vertical sculpture of a woman with a tall, slender headpiece and a long, thin body. To the right of the woman is a large, rectangular panel with intricate carvings of architectural structures, possibly a temple facade. To the left of the woman is another panel with a large, stylized face. The overall texture is that of weathered wood or stone.

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

Conversations About Domestic Violence And  
Other Issues Affecting Their Community

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*Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2005*

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ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN THE  
AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY*

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# Executive Summary

In an effort to increase understanding of the perceptions of African Americans towards 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.



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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 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, 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 in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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 & 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 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 are steadfast 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 Minneapolis' African American community. The groups represented were: (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. A recurring theme during the discussion of types of violence was that interpersonal violence is a common feature of the daily lives of African Americans who reside in Minneapolis.
2. Adverse structural conditions (e.g., racial discrimination, blocked access to employment opportunity, poverty, and a resulting frustration) function a major factor contributing to domestic violence as well as other types of interpersonal violence in the African American community.
3. Abuse of women is tolerated in the African American community.
4. Domestic violence is linked to various social problems (e.g. drug use, prostitution, unemployment) and acts of community violence.
5. As a result of their minority status in the population and dispersion throughout Minneapolis, African Americans are physically and socially isolated from African American family networks and from other blacks. Subsequently, the realities of life in Minneapolis erode the capacity of African American families to address social stressors that may lead to violence within the family. In addition, social isolation hinders access to informal and formal support to African American women who experience intimate partner violence in Minneapolis.
6. The most significant barriers obstructing effective responses designed to prevent and reduce the occurrence of domestic violence in the African American community are community breakdown and increased alienation of lower and working classes from the black middle class.
7. The African American community must be mobilized to address domestic violence through a public awareness campaign.
8. 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.
9. African American men who batter must be held accountable for their actions.

*African American men who batter must be held accountable for their actions.*



# Introduction

This report provides perspectives on domestic violence from community stakeholders in Minneapolis, Minnesota. 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 Minneapolis. 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 effective 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 summary of the 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

Minneapolis is the largest city in Minnesota and the county seat of Hennepin County. It adjoins Saint Paul, the state's capital and second-largest city. Together these cities form the core of the Twin Cities metropolitan area, the 15th-largest agglomeration in the country (and roughly 65th-largest in the world), with over 3 million residents. In the 2000 census, Minneapolis itself had a total population of 382,618, making it the 47th-largest city in the United States. Among Minneapolis's 382,618 residents, 68,818 or 18%, are African Americans. The median per capita income is \$28,629 for whites. In contrast, the median per capita income for African Americans is \$12,274 or 43% of white income. Minneapolis is recognized by the Globalization and World Cities Study Group & Network as a world-class city (Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, 2005).

## 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 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 project's objectives, the questionnaire 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



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*The Minneapolis/St. Paul Twin Cities metropolitan area is the 15th-largest agglomeration in the country (and roughly 65th-largest in the world), with over 3 million residents.*







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. In addition, each focus group was audiotaped. Following the focus groups, the audiotapes were transcribed and subjected to thematic content analysis. An independent researcher analyzed the transcript data, including the transcripts and the audiotapes. 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

The Minneapolis focus group participants were all residents of the Minneapolis metropolitan area. In addition, all of the participants were African Americans who, as a result of their occupations (domestic violence service providers, criminal justice officials, youth workers, community activists, and/or members of the faith community), had a vested interest in facilitating the prevention of domestic violence in the African American community. The

groups represented included: (1) Children and Youth Workers, (2) Human Services Workers, (3) Community Activists, (4) Law Enforcement, (5) GLBT, and (6) the Faith Community.

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





# Across Group Findings

What follows is a detailed summary of the focus group findings based on an across group analysis.

## Types of Violence

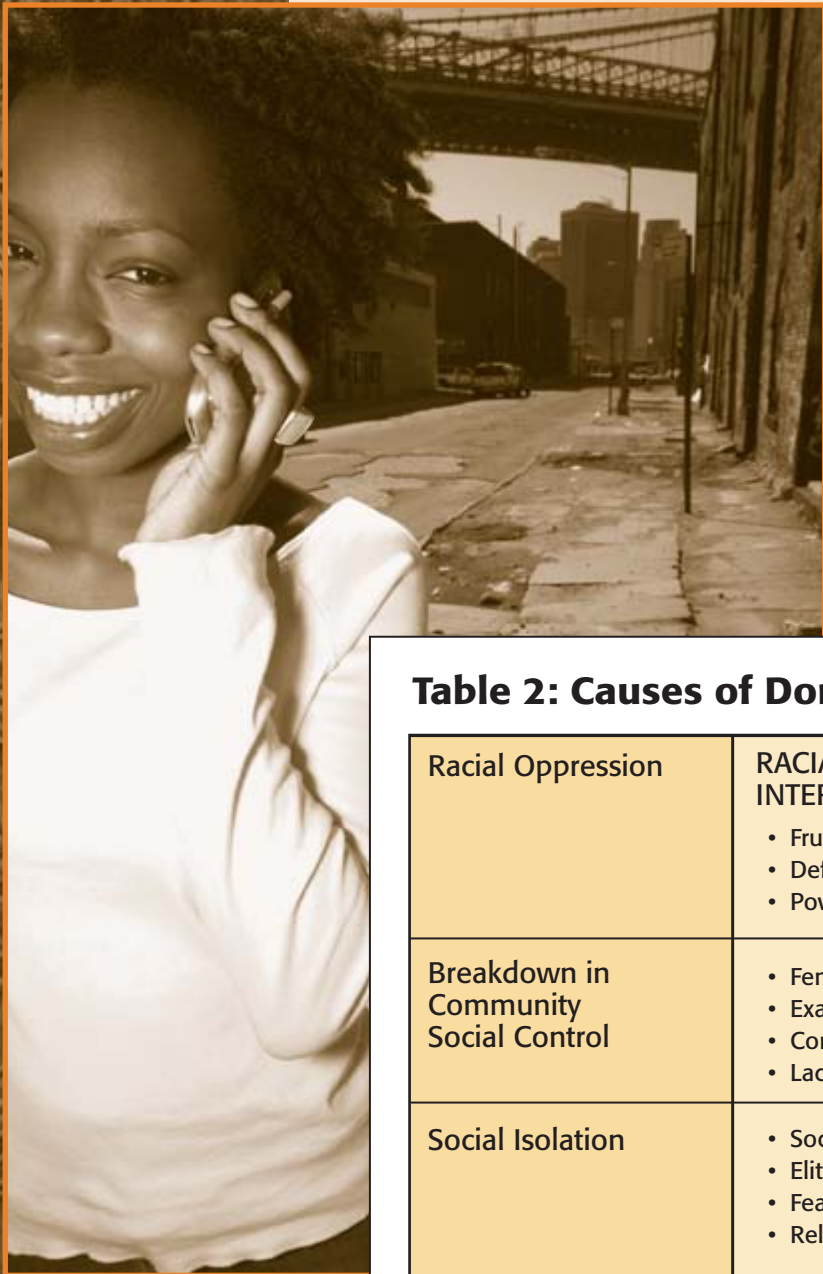
The focus group participants identified several specific types of violence, including (1) community violence, which encompassed youth violence, gang violence, drug-related violence, robbery, assault, murder, and rape; (2) domestic violence, which included psycho-emotional violence, assault, homicide, child abuse, and sexual abuse; and (3) structural violence, which included racism, poverty, police violence, hate crimes, prostitution, and pornography.

**Table 1: Types of Violence**

Community violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gang violence</li><li>• Drug-related violence</li><li>• Robbery</li></ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Assault</li><li>• Murder</li><li>• Rape</li></ul>
Domestic violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Psycho – emotional violence</li><li>• Assault</li><li>• Homicide</li><li>• Child abuse</li><li>• Sexual abuse</li></ul>
Structural violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Racism</li><li>• Poverty</li><li>• Police violence</li></ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Hate crime</li><li>• Prostitution</li><li>• Pornography</li></ul>

## Connection between Community Violence and Domestic Violence

When asked whether the various types of community violence (i.e., acts of interpersonal violence that tend to involve victims and offenders who are not related) were related to domestic violence, the participants generally agreed that the high rates of community violence, as well as the social conditions that produce community violence, were also related to the occurrence of violence involving intimate partners. Furthermore, the focus group participants consistently indicated that the high rates of violence in the African American community had become so common that values and norms that condone resorting to violence in “the streets” are often imported into the home and intimate relationships.



## Causes

The focus group interview schedule was designed to uncover participants' perspectives on those factors that they believe contribute to the occurrence of violence in the African American community. For the purposes of this report, the term "causes" is defined as a condition or circumstance that was identified by focus group members as directly resulting in domestic violence. The groups identified a range of causes of community and domestic violence, including: (1) historical and contemporary patterns of racial oppression, (2) breakdown in community social control, (3) differential patterns of gender socialization, and (4) social isolation.

**Table 2: Causes of Domestic Violence**

Racial Oppression	<b>RACIAL DISCRIMINATION INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Frustration and stress</li><li>• Defining manhood through violence</li><li>• Poverty &amp; unemployment</li></ul>
Breakdown in Community Social Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Female-headed families</li><li>• Exaggerated masculinity</li><li>• Community tolerance of violence</li><li>• Lack of spiritual foundation</li></ul>
Social Isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Social class alienation</li><li>• Elitism and lack of community involvement</li><li>• Fear of sexual preference disclosure</li><li>• Religious tolerance of domestic violence</li></ul>

## Historical and Contemporary Patterns of Racial Oppression

The participants strongly believe that historical and contemporary patterns of racial oppression, particularly the inability of many African American males to overcome limited access to educational and employment opportunities, are directly linked to both acts of community violence and domestic violence in the African American community. According to these participants, blocked access to opportunity is a major source of frustration and anger among African American men that hinders their desire to achieve economic stability, independence, and the material resources needed to meet their obligations as independent men, husbands, and fathers. Subsequently, anger and disappointment were said to sometimes erupt in the form of conflict and violence directed toward their intimate partners.



## Breakdown in Community Social Control

The participants observed that there are a number of factors contributing to the increased inability of community-based institutions (e.g., the black church, the black family, and black community leadership) to promote social order in the African American community. Among those factors that were consistently identified were the high rates of poverty and female-headed families. The rise of poverty and female-headed families, particularly families headed by females who had their first child as a teenager and who lacked adequate education and maturity, emerged as major themes in the focus group participants' characterization of the breakdown of community social control. There was also significant consensus across the various focus groups regarding a link between the large numbers of African American males who are not completing their educations and their increased risk for involvement in street-related activities that serve as a pathway to drug addiction, crime, incarceration, and/or physical injury, as well as committing acts of intimate partner violence. Finally, the lack of a spiritual foundation in the form of regular church attendance and participation and the inclusion of church attendance in the rearing of some African American youth was said to be a factor contributing to the breakdown of community social control.

## Social Isolation

The breakdown of community social control was also said to be aggravated by the social isolation of low income African Americans from not only mainstream opportunity structures, but also their growing alienation from advantaged African Americans – middle-class African Americans who have attained significant

education, vocational skills and the economic means to move up and out of the inner city. The participants were very assertive in describing their perspective on how social isolation of inner city African Americans is related to the exodus of advantaged African Americans from inner city neighborhoods. More specifically, it was suggested that advantaged African Americans and low-income African Americans are not only geographically isolated, but socially alienated from each other. Consequently, social isolation and social alienation serve to provide a social context for normalizing the glorification of alternative means of achieving success, which may include the use of violence as a means of resolving disputes, both in “the streets” and within intimate relationships.

## Consequences

The participants identified a number of consequences linked to the occurrence of domestic violence in the African American community, including: (1) loss of affect or desensitization to violence; (2) increased involvement of children as witnesses, perpetrators, and victims of violence; (3) loss of hope among youth, suicide, and depression, and (4) a general loss of influence from the African American community, family, and elders as consequences of violence; and (5) the re-victimization of women.



*The participants identified a number of consequences including a general loss of influence from the African American community, family, and elders as consequences of violence*

*The participants' identified children as witnesses, victims, and perpetrators of violence as significant consequences of exposure to domestic violence.*

**Table 3: Consequences of Domestic Violence**

Desensitization to Violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violence being viewed as normal</li> <li>• Intergenerational transmission of pro-violence norms</li> </ul>
Children as Witnesses, Perpetrators & Victims of Violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early exposure to violence</li> <li>• Learning to use violence as a means of resolving disputes</li> </ul>
Hopelessness among Youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased risk of being victimized</li> </ul>
Declining Influence of Community Elders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased influence of drug dealers and gang members in the lives of young people growing up in areas experiencing high rates of community violence</li> </ul>
Physical Injury	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assault</li> <li>• Disability</li> </ul>
Re-victimization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feelings of inadequacy</li> <li>• Embarrassment and lack of help-seeking behavior</li> <li>• Concerns about maintaining custody of children</li> <li>• Concerns about being evicted from apartment</li> </ul>



## **Desensitization to Violence**

The participants believed that the routine occurrence of community and domestic violence as a feature of everyday life was having the effect of desensitizing African Americans to the harm and the personal and social consequences that emanate from acts of interpersonal violence. The commonness of violence in the home and in the community were described as functioning as a catalyst for the intergenerational transmission of pro-violence values and norms in the African American community.



## Children as Witnesses, Victims, and Perpetrators of Violence

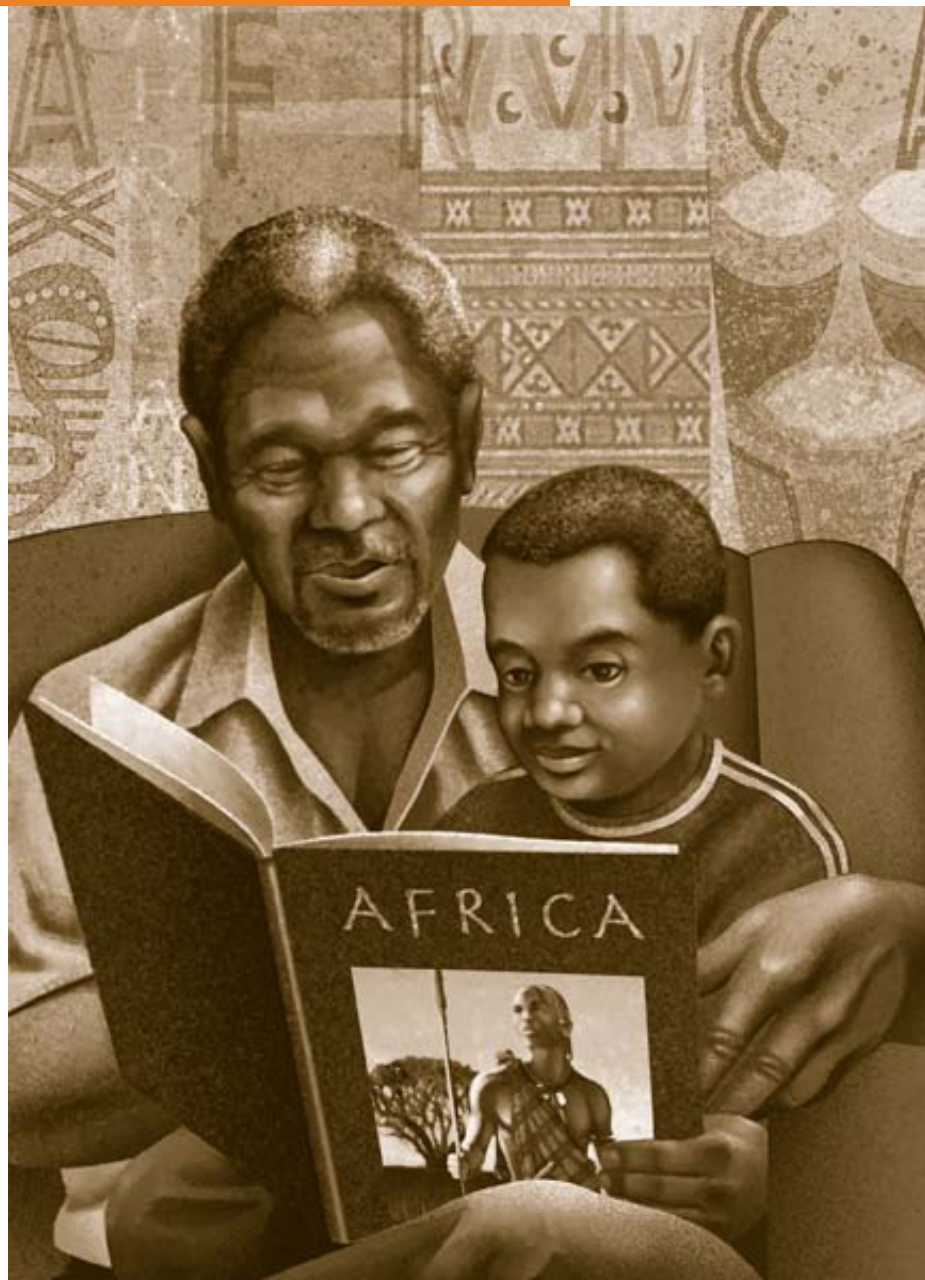
Also linked to the desensitization to the occurrence of violence were the frequency of violence and the adverse effects of violence. Consequently, the participants' identified children as witnesses, victims, and perpetrators of violence as significant consequences of exposure to domestic violence in the African American community. It was the view of many of the participants that children learn the value and utility of violence as a means of gaining compliance from others by observing how violence is used by adult family members. Some participants expressed the view that witnessing violence in the home may be related to a predisposition and willingness to engage in acts of community violence as children mature and gain more independence to participate in unsupervised activities with their peers.

## Hopelessness among Youth

Homelessness among youth was discussed in terms of battered women having to leave their homes with their children as a means of protecting themselves from an abusive partner. As such, homelessness was identified as a factor that increased vulnerability of youth, particularly young females, to becoming victims of sexual abuse. Hence, homelessness was described as a consequence of exposure to domestic violence and as a factor increasing the risk of various types of family violence.

## Declining Influence of Community Elders

The emergence and glorification of individuals who were making a living for themselves through illegal activities was reported to be a major factor contributing to the declining influence of community elders, particularly those employed in low-wage, low-status jobs. The focus group participants noted that the glorification of materialism and material acquisition in hip hop culture were major factors facilitating the declining influence of community elders as people to whom young people would look to emulate. The declining influence of community elders was believed to be associated with both high rates of domestic violence and community violence as a result of their decreasing influence on the values and norms of younger generations.



*The declining influence of community elders was believed to be associated with both high rates of domestic violence and community violence*



*Participants were very aware of the high rates of assault, serious injury, and death associated with community and domestic*

## **Physical Injury**

The participants were very aware of the high rates of assault, serious injury (e.g., paralysis), and death associated with various types of community and domestic violence.

## **Re-victimization of Women**

The participants believed that the inadequacy of the criminal justice system's response and that of the existing network of domestic violence service providers represent a form of re-victimization by the system established to provide protection to battered women. Participants talked a lot about how battered women with whom they were familiar had concerns about their parental rights being terminated as a result of their being victimized by their husbands or boyfriends. In addition, participants indicated that the victimization of battered women is compounded when as a result of the neighborhood disruption and/or property damage committed during violent incidents with their partners that they would be evicted from their homes by insensitive landlords. Furthermore, participants indicated that the inadequacy of the response of the criminal justice system and the domestic violence service delivery network

increased the likelihood that African American would not only be poorly served, but that they would be vulnerable to being re-victimized by their partner.

## **Solutions**

The focus group participants identified a range of strategies that they felt would be useful in preventing domestic violence in the African American community, including (1) interventions that address the pain of racism and racial discrimination, (2) mentoring and early violence prevention, and (3) holding violent men accountable for their actions, and (4) ) building stronger communities.



**Table 4: Solutions**

Interventions that address racial discrimination and oppression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Domestic violence programs must not ignore the role of racial inequality in domestic violence</li><li>• Policies and cross trainings specifically designed to eliminate racism in the responses of criminal justice agencies and traditional domestic violence programs</li></ul>
Mentoring and early violence prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Community-based mentoring programs</li><li>• Assistance for youth in negotiating life challenges</li><li>• Accountability and community focus</li></ul>
Holding violent men accountable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Advancing the understanding that racism is not an excuse for domestic violence</li><li>• Community-based public awareness campaign targeting black men's beliefs that condone domestic violence</li></ul>
Building Stronger Communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Economic opportunity and employment are essential in violence prevention</li><li>• Increased community mobilization to prevent domestic violence</li></ul>

*Participants emphasized the importance of promoting African American youth programs that focused on mentoring youth and helping them to negotiate the challenges of adolescence.*

## Interventions Must Address Racial Oppression

The focus group participants were very vocal and adamant in asserting that historical and contemporary patterns of racial discrimination are implicated in the high rates of community and domestic violence that occurs among African Americans. Additionally, the participants asserted the view that increased access to educational and vocational training and employment opportunities would substantially contribute to a reduction of violence in the African American community. Finally, the participants emphasized the importance of eliminating racism in the manner in which criminal justice agencies and traditional domestic violence service providers respond to African American victims and batterers.



## Mentoring and Early Violence Prevention

The participants emphasized the importance of promoting African American youth programs that focused on mentoring youth and helping them to negotiate the challenges of adolescence, as well as the various challenges associated with residing in communities plagued by poverty, unemployment, substance abuse, and high rates of community violence and domestic violence. The participants also discussed the importance of creating community-based violence prevention programs that would raise awareness about community violence; dating violence; and hate crime, particularly violence directed toward individuals because of their sexual preferences.

## Holding Violent Men Accountable

The focus group participants were very sensitive to and aware of the many challenges that African American males confront in their struggle to achieve “the American Dream.” Hence, the participants thought it was very important that domestic violence service providers be familiar with the intersection of racial inequality, frustration, and violence. Yet, they also emphasized that it was equally important that African American men who batter their partners be held accountable and recognize that there is “no excuse” for beating a woman. Subsequently, many of the participants discussed the importance of implementing a comprehensive violence prevention initiative that not only includes providing emergency services to women who have been battered and holding batterers accountable, but also structuring counseling interventions in a manner that enhances understanding the link between social oppression and committing individual acts of oppression.



## Building Stronger Communities

The participants emphasized that the ultimate solution toward the prevention and reduction of domestic and community violence in the African American community was inextricably linked to building stronger communities. They identified a number of elements that were necessary to strengthen the community, including increased availability of vocational training and employment opportunities, greater community mobilization around prioritizing the prevention and reduction of domestic violence, and eradication of the drug abuse and drug-related crime

## Barriers

The focus group participants identified a number of barriers that would make it challenging to prevent and reduce the occurrence of domestic violence in the African American community, including (1) community tolerance of domestic violence, (2) community breakdown, (3) elitism and lack of community investment, and (4) inadequate criminal justice response to domestic violence involving African Americans.



**Table 5: Barriers**

Community Tolerance of Domestic Violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Existence of norms and values that justify violence as a means of resolving disputes</li></ul>
Community Breakdown	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Entrenched social problems and community disorganization</li></ul>
Elitism and Lack of Community Investment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Exodus of the black middle-class</li><li>• Lack of community leadership</li></ul>
Inadequate Institutional Response to Domestic Violence in the African American Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Insufficient criminal justice response</li><li>• Lack of commitment to cultural competence among traditional domestic violence service providers</li></ul>

## Community Tolerance of Domestic Violence

The participants agreed that community tolerance of domestic violence constitutes a major barrier in the effort to prevent domestic violence in the African American community. Violence against women was said to occur within a larger community context in which a significant segment of the community appears to condone resorting to violence as a means of resolving disputes. According to the focus group participants, the entrenchment of a community ethic that tolerates violence against women does not only exist in the “street corner” social context that is frequented by African American men most at risk for engaging problematic behaviors. Rather, many of our focus group participants asserted the view that community tolerance of violence against women is accepted and indirectly promoted by members of the African American clergy and faith community. More specifically, it was argued that many black clergy contribute to victimization and re-victimization of African American women by promoting sexist interpretations of the Holy Scriptures and by encouraging abused women to “pray and endure” rather than addressing battered women’s safety. Consequently, it was the view of many of our participants that the black church, as an important community institution, has largely been invisible in efforts to prevent domestic violence in the African American community.

## Community Breakdown

Those who participated in the focus groups were unyielding in their view that there is a link between domestic and community violence and community social disorganization. The high rates of poverty, unemployment, crime, substance abuse, and acts of community violence were among the various factors that they referenced as indicators of community breakdown. Social disorganization and the life challenges associated with residing in low-income communities were said to be not only a factor in contributing to domestic violence, but barriers that have the potential to hinder successful implementation of viable solutions.



## **Elitism and Lack of Community Investment**

There was a great deal of discussion in the focus groups about the need for the black elite, that is, advantaged African Americans, to assume greater responsibility for addressing social problems in the community generally and domestic violence specifically. The lack of sufficient leadership to raise awareness and to serve as a liaison with mainstream institutions were perceived as a major barrier in the effort to prevent and reduce domestic violence in the African American community.

## **Inadequate Institutional Responses to Domestic Violence in the African American Community**

Throughout all of the focus groups, a great deal of criticism was directed toward the criminal justice system, as well as the traditional domestic violence service delivery network. It was the view of many of these participants that racial bias distorts the capacity of the criminal justice system to effectively address domestic violence in the African American community. The participants were not as critical of domestic violence service providers as they were of criminal justice agencies. That is, unlike their view of the criminal justice system, they did not believe that domestic violence service providers were intentionally racists. Rather, among those who were familiar with domestic violence programs, it was their view that such programs are inadequately prepared to address the cultural issues and concerns of African American victims and perpetrators of domestic violence.



# Session Summaries: Within Group Findings

The following section of the report provides summaries of the thematic findings derived from the content analysis of each of the community focus groups held in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Some groups emphasized a particular area of concern during the discussion. Consequently, the session summaries vary in length and focus. Quotes from group members are included below to share some of the specific meanings and perspectives of the focus group participants. The session group summaries that are reported below include: (1) Children and Youth; (2) Human Services; (3) Community Activists/Advocates; (4) Law Enforcement; (5) Gay, Lesbian, Bi-Sexual and Transgender; and (6) the Faith-Based Community. Again, the findings are categorized into each groups' perception of types of violence, causes and consequences of violence, and solutions and barriers to ending domestic violence in the African American community.

## Children and Youth Focus Group

### Types

Participants in the youth focus groups indicated that there are multiple levels of violence, such as personal and institutional. In addition, they reported that there is a relationship between the levels of violence, and that violence can occur in a blatant or an indirect manner. The distinct types of violence that they listed included (1) personal violence and (2) psycho-emotional violence.

Personal violence was described as various forms of verbal, nonverbal, and physical abuse. Several respondents relied on examples of personal violence through their experiences of dealing with pregnancy crises and men's ambivalence and verbal abuse toward their pregnant partners.

Examples of verbal violence are indicated in the following participant's account:

*Verbal is one type...Saying things like, 'I wonder if it is my baby. Why did you get pregnant? I don't want it' - questioning or putting that psychological guilt on women as to whether or not that is their child.*

*I want to add to that. The verbal abuse about how you look, about how you don't look; how you sound, how you don't sound. You get horrendous racial put downs from within our African American community. She became a slut and a whore and you black. Horrendous things that she had to hear and feel oppressed again because the person that she loved and conceived the child with, seemingly betrayed her, turned on her, and was very verbally abusive.*

Another participant expressed the view that personal violence is sometimes manifested through the internalization of violent language found in Black popular music.

*It is everywhere; it permeates so many aspects of our existence. Part of what is really troublesome for me – that my child, and I think many of our children, are*







*accepting language so lightly that really is deeply entrenched in violence. And I found myself standing in Target. I am trying so hard to get my point across. I said, 'baby, you know I am not going to let you get that. You cannot purchase that. I am going to stand on this one.' 'But Mom.' I said 'but baby, anything that you listen to that tells you that your people and you as a woman are bad or nasty, it is unacceptable.' But the discussion still remains and it really is a big issue, especially when you have a 15-year-old in your life. The language that so subtly gets into our lives and our children's lives that it becomes acceptable, but really it is rooted in very abusive stuff.*

The focus group participants listed psycho-emotional violence as a distinct type of violence that is found in the African American community. Emotional, psychological, and spiritual violence are a result of the internalization of stereotypical violent imagery from the media and exposure to racist institutions and practices. A recurring theme during the discussion of types of violence was that violence permeated daily life for African Americans.

*When you asked the question it was overwhelming because it is everywhere. This country was conceived in violence. Our experience has been one of violence as a people, and continues to be. Where do I start – the violence I've experienced, the violence my daddy experienced, the violence my grandfather experienced; the violence my White momma experienced because she married my Black daddy. Do I talk about my daughter who at 16, because of image issues and verbal attacks on her since she has been five, she wants to commit suicide? Do I talk about my 25-year-old son when he was 19, I asked him how many of your friends have been shot or wounded or paralyzed and he said 19? Do we talk about the violence and the racism that we experience when we operate in white institutions? Do we talk about the violence of the police?*

For some group members, a distinction was made between factors external to and those within the African American community that rendered violence common in the daily lives of African Americans.

*We've got the violence with the outside community – law enforcement or those sorts of things. Then on the other hand the music we hear, which is an internal thing. It is like if they don't get you overtly then they will get you in an indirect way through music.*

*Racism and oppression have been with us since we've landed here. And that's violence.*

## **Causes of Domestic Violence**

When asked to discuss the causes of violence, the youth focus group described several causes of violence in the African American community, including (1) systemic/institutional violence and (2) differential gender socialization.

### **Systemic/Institutional Violence**

The participants introduced the term systemic violence to refer to historical and contemporary patterns of racial oppression and institutional discrimination as forms of violence perpetrated by the white majority against the black minority. In prior research, these adverse structural pressures have sometimes been referred to as structural violence (Oliver, 2001). More specifically, the focus group participants talked about how the effects of systemic violence on African Americans leads to acts of intimate partner violence and various patterns of community violence.

*I think the greatest challenge we have in this community is the systemic violence because I firmly believe that it conditions a lot of what happens internally.*

*Your house can be a micro-system of what is going on out in the community.*

Reactions to the controlling influences of institutional racism were also described as a type of violence:

*I think the other thing is control. I think from the moment we were forced to come over here as people and definitely as black men. We have been closely monitored and controlled in this society and I think that a lot of the brothers that I have talked with, that is there one moment right or wrong, they chose to be out of control and deal with the consequences later. But I am not going to sit up straight, I am not wearing a tie, I am not going to lower my eyes. I am going to be out of control, and if that means yelling, hitting, screaming, doing whatever, than that is my little moment of glory of freedom in this oppressive society, even if it is in my household. Again, I am not excusing, condoning, validating any of that. What I am saying is, this is what I believe is a large portion of the anger that contributes to the anger that black men carry around in this country...based on my own informal talking with brothers.*

## Differential Gender Socialization

Domestic violence among African Americans was also explained as a direct outcome of differences in gender socialization and the socialized inability of African American men to feel free in expressing emotional pain. As such, inability to express emotional pain was described as the specific socialization mechanism that contributes to gender differences in the perpetration of acts of domestic and community violence.


*I really do think there are some differences in how women are gendered and how men are gendered around issues of violence. I am speaking about African American men right now. The pain that I believe as men, we feel in this country. A lot of brothers will talk about respect; they try to get respect. But, I think before the respect there is pain. A brother was talking about how he had a run in with the police and the police disrespected him and he carried that all the way home and he ended up doing something abusive to his woman. When I was listening to the brother talking he wasn't talking about respect, he was talking about pain. He said, 'I am a 33-year-old man, with a job, kids, and this dude is going to tell me that I better go home because it is too late for me to be out.' And he was couching it in terms of, he better recognize I am a grown man, I pay my bills. But this brother was hurt that someone would have the audacity to not treat him as a man, which he felt he had earned the right to.*

## Consequences

The youth focus group discussed (1) loss of affect or desensitization to violence, (2) children killing children, (3) loss of hope among youth, suicide and depression, and (4) a general loss of influence from the African American community, family and elders as consequences of violence. For instance, several respondents talked about a cycle of violence and the importance of dealing with inner healing before external problems.

*I really do understand the issue of homelessness is a priority and addressing the drug addiction becomes a priority and so on and so forth. But, then at the same time, if we haven't begun to work on our healing then all of those things are going to reoccur. So it is like when that baby is born. When that baby enters into*





*this world if the mother and the people around it, the father, have lost their ability to treat that baby with tenderness, then that is the beginning of the cycle of violence.*

## **Desensitization to Violence**

Some respondents expressed the view that the routine occurrence of acts of interpersonal violence in the African American community had contributed to desensitization to violence.

*The loss of the affect – I am pretty sure that is a major desensitizer when an 11-year-old child can kill an 8-year-old child and they are African American children. Can kill the child and say these words, 'I hate him! He dissed me!' And the consequence is, has this child no soul? Does this child understand that the rest of the life of the child is going to be spent in an institution? An 8-year-old killer has taken a life of a 7-year-old victim in our community. And somehow the affect is missing. Something that says this was a valuable person, or you're a valuable person. Now you are going to be in jail for the rest of your little life baby. You just can't come out and play. You have killed. Do you know what killed means? So we have these losses, tremendous losses of affect.*

## **Hopelessness**

Hopelessness and despair about the quality of life in the future was regarded as problematic among many of the respondents.

*One consequence is an increased sense of distrust in hope in the future, which increases despair but is experienced as daily fear. In the last five years I have never heard so many young people talk to me about their fears. And I am not talking about, afraid that I can't get a job, or afraid that I can't make it through this institution. I am afraid that when I walk out of here, what is going to happen to me. So that another consequence is this indirect experience of the desensitization. Because I ask all of my students, how many of y'all know a class mate that you grew up with (now we are talking about college aged students), who has either committed suicide or been killed by an act of violence. And do you know white and black and Indian, everybody raises their hand and say, I know somebody. Now what is the impact on them? Because that is the piece that has been troubling for me. Because as we talk about these issues, how do you have hope in the future? How do you have love for yourself? How do you have a sense that you belong to this larger family if all you are concerned about is the people around me are going to kill me. I might trust one or two people, but even then I got my eye cocked on them. So this whole sense of fear. Bottom line is distrust and fear is a real deep profound problem that we face. And I even hear it from older black people.*

Another participant noted the relationship between hopelessness, depression, and suicide:

*One thing that we forgot to mention was the suicide among our young people. Something that has been increasing is the depression, especially among young men, but both, high school aged.*

## **Solutions**

The participants in this focus group identified several solutions for preventing violence in the African American community. Among the solutions they discussed included, (1) addressing the pain of racism and racial discrimination, (2) exposure to African American history, (3) the establishment of mentoring programs, (4) mentoring and early violence prevention, and (5) accountability and community focus on violence prevention.



## Mentoring and Early Violence Prevention Initiatives

Since the late 1980s a number of violence researchers and policy analysts have discussed the importance of engaging in early prevention efforts to address the prevalence of violence among African American youth. Central to these efforts has been an emphasis on the establishment of community-based mentoring programs designed to assist youth in making successful passages from adolescence to adulthood.

*One thing we need to start with the young kids who are in these pre-school programs. We need to do some prevention programs as it relates to the young people who are dealing with depression in high school, or even before high school. And we need to be able to develop some trust within our own communities so that they are not afraid that the information that we get from them is not going back to harm them but we are there to help them.*

*When I was working at a juvenile correctional facility, I tried to work with those young people from the spiritual perspective, building self-esteem from a spiritual perspective, learning how to set goals for themselves, doing affirmations, that sort of thing. When I was able to work with them as it related to their education and what they wanted to do in life that was very helpful.*

## Accountability and Community Focus

According to the participants, an essential step in a community-based strategy to prevent and reduce the occurrence of domestic violence in the African American community is an organized effort to communicate prevention awareness messages. It was the view of the participants that the African American community must be mobilized to address domestic violence. In addition, participants discussed the need to create batterers interventions that hold African American men accountable for acts of intimate partner violence, regardless of the adverse structural conditions that hinder their capacity to succeed in American society.

*I guess for me it is accountability. I look at the programs that we have in our community that there are millions of dollars poured into and we assume as a group of people that the healing is really taking place in those programs, and it's not. And some real dialogue needs to take place like we are doing right now, to say what it is that we want to come out of these programs. What is the end result that we, not white folks, value? We need to be much more accountable and make other programs accountable.*

## Barriers

According to the youth group participants there are multiple barriers which make it difficult for the African American community to successfully manage the disproportionate rates of domestic violence. Among the barriers that they mentioned, included (1) community tolerance of verbal and physical abuse of women, (2) community breakdown, (3) inadequate criminal justice response to violence, and (4) lack of a common definition of violence.

## Community Tolerance of Domestic Violence

Several participants expressed the view that the frequency of interpersonal violence in the African American community has contributed to a generalized tolerance of verbal and physical abuse of women. Additionally, the participants talked about the existence of a value system within the African American community, which makes verbal abuse toward women acceptable and inaction among members of the community acceptable.



*We are really talking about characterization and how we accept violence, when we talk about verbal abuse to women...and how we value raising our sons and daughters to accept this...how we are raising our children to respond to the language we've moved into – from a silent language of not talking...to now being very aggressive.*

## Community Breakdown

Historically, African American families have been perceived as a major source of community strength and resilience. However, several members of this group suggested that the capacity of major community institutions (e.g., the nuclear and extended family, the church, and civic organizations) to control behavior and promote social order has declined among African Americans.

*We are watching our children perform sexual acts at 7, 8, 9, 10 years old outside. And instead of making that child accountable, we sit back and we watch, we say nothing. It is like we have these blinders on. Nobody wants to get involved; no one wants to be a part; no one wants to interact; no one wants to deal with any intervention. And that is having a terrible impact on the home front and on the family.*

*Well our families have gotten to the point now where...not even mothers or grandmothers of the children can discipline them without the parent saying this is my child and I am the one that does that, and I don't need you to discipline. Whereas before it was a community type thing and a family thing, and it is no longer that. And I think that has a lot to do with our whole individualistic type of, well through industrialization and urbanization, has become this 'me, me, me, this I, I, I.*

## Inadequate Criminal Justice Responses

The participants were critical of the criminal justice system's response to domestic violence in the African American community identifying it as a barrier that hinders the prevention of domestic violence. What they were particularly critical of was what they characterized as prejudice on the part of criminal justice officials. It was their view that racial prejudice on the part of criminal justice officials distorts the exercise of their discretion in ways that lead to inadequate responses to the victimization of African American women by their partners.

*Women are re-victimized I think more often because of the way the newest decisions to prosecute domestic assault. The system does not stay accountable to their own laws...because out of all the order of protections that are processed that I have written, that I had seen, nobody has done the 90 days in jail and nobody has been fined the \$700.*

## Lack of Common Definition of Violence

Some participants suggested that the lack of consensus on what constitutes violence is a barrier to effective community responses that have the potential to prevent violence. What they appear to suggest is that the lack of a common definition of violence precludes various agencies and stakeholders from being able to collaborate and partner as a result of variations in their definition and understandings of the nature of violence.

*Lack of common definition and consensus in the African American community about violence "I haven't seen the African American community come to an agreement on the definition of violence. And I think that is why we keep having*

*"I haven't seen the African American community come to an agreement on the definition of violence."*

*programs and coming to the table around violence because we don't have an agreement of what is violence. That is a very important point you have raised, about the sense of common definitions, common understandings. And without being able to define the problem it is hard to know how to rank it.*

## Human Services Focus Group

### Types of Violence

Participants in the human services focus group identified twenty-two distinct types of interpersonal violence that occur in the African American community. The specific types that they described have been collapsed into four distinct general categories, including (1) physical violence involving intimates, (2) emotional/verbal abuse of intimates (3), community violence involving non-intimates, and (4) structural violence.

Examples of physical violence included hitting with the hand or striking with an object, homosexual violence (sodomy, rape); neglect of children and adults; child spanking; women, teen-aged girls, and males being held against their will; violence related to drugs; child abuse; violence against elders; and sexual abuse and incest.

The types of community violence that the participants listed included: drug-related violence, robbery, gang violence, assault, robbery, and rape. Participants' efforts to identify types of violence occurring in the African American community reflected a collective recognition that community violence was extensive throughout African American neighborhoods in the Minneapolis area. Several participants commented about the commonness of community and domestic violence as a feature of everyday life.

*I've seen people in the community ignore violence. They don't say a word. They look at it. . . I had an incident where a lady stopped her car and asked a woman did she need help. She was screaming and hollering, she was holding an infant baby in her arms, and the neighbors are on the corner in an apartment complex, standing there watching it and told the lady to mind her own business and go on down the street. She had a cell phone and called and waited right at the corner where our building is on 12th and Humboldt and waited for the police to come and they never came. I wonder how many incidents of violence that there is from neighbors, community members that see and don't do anything."*

Participants' discussion of the commonness of violence was extended to include not only the violence perpetrated by African American males, but the increased involvement of African American females as perpetrators of violence.

*We have to face the fact that we now have females in our community, who are clearly just perpetrators. They're not defending themselves. They are perpetrators."*

*They watch it; they are afraid for two reasons: (1) because of retaliation for certain situations, and (2) I think people have a tendency to cover their heads, close their ears, listen to the apartment upstairs and just kind of hover and say I'm just not getting into it.*

The term structural violence is introduced here to characterize participants' numerous references to acts of violence and adverse social conditions that are imposed on African Americans by formal institutions and systems. The discriminatory actions of formal



*"I wonder how many incidents of violence that there is from neighbors, community members that see and don't do anything."*



institutions and/or their employees renders the community vulnerable to punitive acts of overt and symbolic aggression that characterize the lives of African Americans who reside in communities experiencing overt social disorganization and survival challenges. Examples of structural violence included: racism, hate crime, poverty, police violence, prostitution as a means of survival, and pornography.

## Relationship between Types of Violence

When asked, “Are these types of violence related? And if so, how are they related?” A number of respondents recognized connections or links between various social problems (drug use, prostitution, unemployment) and acts of interpersonal violence found in the homes and in the larger community. These focus group participants addressed the “links” between violence and other issues in the community, while also pointing to a lack of clarity in defining violence.

*Look at the tremendous growth in jails and prisons.*

*Another real important piece to violence is drugs, alcohol, and gangs. Most gang killings are really fights over drug territory. We know from a lot of the women that have been introduced to prostitution, that a lot of it is about drugs.*

*Teen pregnancy has a lot to do with violence in the home –incest, sexual molestation within the family. . . They end up in the foster care and justice systems.*

## Causes

The focus group participants were asked to discuss their views on those factors that contribute to violence in the African American community. The specific question used to facilitate this segment of the discussion was: “What are the causes of violence in the African American community?” Participants’ responses exhibited recognition of the cyclical nature of violence, changes supported by child abuse legislation, and the traditions of blacks in the United States. The responses included (1) historical and contemporary forms of racial discrimination, (2) community tolerance of violence, and (3) social class alienation.

## Historical and Contemporary Patterns of Racial Oppression

The participants in the focus groups were unyielding in expressing the view that the organization of American society is implicated in contributing to the proliferation of violence among African Americans. In addition, the group members appeared to suggest that racially inequality has imposed challenges on the capacity of African Americans to achieve the American Dream. Subsequently, frustrations and anger prompted by a challenging social environment serve as a catalyst for interpersonal conflicts that contribute to various patterns of community and intimate partner violence.

*As a people, we are victims of a post-slave culture that re-creates itself, we have experienced years of frustration. Blacks have been targeted with the ‘brand’ of a violent people. We fail to be valued as human beings.*

## Community Tolerance of Violence

A lack of concern about violence on the part of the community and concern about ever-present social conditions were identified by several group participants. It was the view of the group members that community tolerance provided a social context that facilitated the occurrence of domestic violence:



*Most gang killings are really fights over drug territory.*

*My point was that we as a community have been --are-- violent. We've been raised in it, almost celebrating violence. We celebrated Joe Lewis and Sugar Ray Robinson and all the people who lead violent lives and who were symbols of success for us. . . It's like the community . . . has really changed, There are a lot of Black young women who are having babies. . . I was one of them. I was very young when I had my first one. These young people who are having babies cannot really carry the adult responsibilities that go along with it.*

*We've got people in the community who live right next door to a crack house and ignore it and act like it's not happening; because they say they're not bothering me and I'm not going to say anything. . . . It happens almost on every block in the North side.*

*The music out there now talks about black women in a disrespectful way--women are nothing but a bunch of b\*\*ches and h\*\*s, it's almost like it's perpetuating this mentality to not respect women, and violence becomes an avenue of power. It works for both young men and women.*

## **Social Class Alienation**

Concerns about social class alienation and elitism surfaced during this part of the discussion, as participants cited symbols of success --children in "white" schools, automobiles, etc. However, the participants noted the reluctance of middle-class blacks to get involved with persons from different lower socioeconomic groups as a factor that contributes to the types of social disorganization that increase the likelihood of both domestic and community violence in the African American community.

*Some of us that are 'middle class, we're doing the same type of violence. We send our child to the white communities, into an all-white environment. Black kids isolated in white communities and at school. And these children cannot function. People who got money are doing this, and driving Mercedes Benz and everything. . . . They [our children] are being beaten down. Their spirit is being destroyed.*

*I think it's time for the community to say to gang members --'Yes, you are our Black brothers, but when you act like that you are not acting like our brothers. We are not covering up for you and yes, we don't like the police, but we're going to call the police on your as\*\*s.'*

## **Consequences**


The participants identified two factors as consequences associated with violence in the African American community: (1) gender differences and (2) hidden violence among the black middle class.

## **Gender Differences**

These participants identified different consequences for violence based on gender. For example, they noted that there were gender-based differences in expectations surrounding domestic violence among African Americans. As such, gender was regarded by this group as a factor that distinguishes how males and females justify and experience domestic violence. For example, the perception of male privilege and entitlement were identified by some of the participants as providing males with a motive and justification to resort to violence against their female partners.



*"I think it's time for the community to say to gang members --Yes, you are our Black brothers, but when you act like that you are not acting like our brothers."*



*Yes, I think there is more shame on the woman. . . If the children have problems it's the mother's fault. If a woman leaves her children there are serious consequences. Men can leave their children and have no problem.*

## Hidden Violence among Middle-Class Blacks

This group also identified hidden violence among the elite or middle class African Americans as a consequence of domestic violence. It was the view of this group that domestic violence often occurs in the black middle class because family members and others remain quiet about their experiences to avoid the social stigma that is unacceptable to persons at their socioeconomic level.

## Barriers

The participants in this group identified only one barrier that prevented effective responses to addressing violence in the African American community: (1) elitism and lack of community investment.

## Elitism and Lack of Community Investment

Human services focus group participants expressed concern about the existence of elitism among some segments of the African American population within Minneapolis. The elite blacks were described as people who only dealt with their individual needs and lacked concern about the masses of African Americans. Participants spoke of the special connection they had as children to their communities because they “were raised by the community.” As such commitment and investment in the black community’s development was thought to be missing for today’s youth and young adults. Accordingly, it was suggested that the erosion of community unity and stability provided an environmental context conducive to the proliferation of social problems and acts of interpersonal violence. These focus group participants also made reference to concern about children of the black middle class.

*We’re doing the same type of violence. We send our child to the white communities, into an all-white environment. Black kids isolated in white communities and at school. And these children cannot function. People who got money are doing this, and driving Mercedes Benz and everything. Their [our children’s] spirit is being destroyed.*

## Solutions

Three recommendations were listed in the participants’ discussion of solutions to address violence in the African American community, including (1) modeling behaviors, (2) collaboration, and (3) education.

## Modeling Behavior

The phrase modeling behavior is used here to refer to statements about the need for adult assuming a proactive responsibility for dealing with issues of violence in the family and in the larger community. Some practitioners have suggested that African Americans need to be visible and active in eliminating violence in the black community. The need for responsible action by black professionals was also discussed in terms of the many human resources available to the African American community as a result of advances in education and increased employment opportunities.

*We send our child to the white communities, into an all-white environment. Black kids isolated in white communities and at school. And these children cannot function.*



*We've got more Black judges here. We've got more Black prosecutors here. We've got more Black professionals here; actually, we've got a pretty significant group of professional Black folks here. We need to take responsibility for our population. . . . We've got doctoral level psychologists. You go to Hennepin County Government Center and see the prosecutors. Our public defender, Chief Public Defender is African American. Our Chief Juvenile Court judge is African American. We have a significant professional population here.*

It was furthered argued that efforts must be undertaken to help black youth become more effective role models.

*Positive role models are essential to teach children anger management, how to talk, how to resolve conflict.*

## **Collaboration**

The participants emphasized the importance of collaborations among various organizations to develop a structure to facilitate efforts to prevent domestic violence in the African American community.

In Minnesota there's not a problem [with money]. Money is not the issue."

*We should not be competing with each other. First of all there are more clients than any of us could serve. . .*

*If we would communicate with each other, we could say Phyllis Wheatley is going after a grant; I could write a letter of support so you could get the grant. I don't need to go after the same grant you're going after.*

## **Education and Model Human Service Providers**

The participants in this group also discussed the importance of expanded educational opportunities in the African American community as a solution to prevent the high rates of violence. It was the view of these participants that violence in the African American community is linked to inadequate preparation to deal with the challenges of daily life.

*The real issue is education or the lack of it. The other big issue is drugs.*

Finally, the focus group participants were very forthcoming and identified several well functioning human service programs in Minneapolis, e.g., Harriet Tubman Center, Phyllis Wheatley Center, Afro-American Family Service, Model Cities, etc. Participants also spoke about the need to function in a more "plan-full way." Examples of a more deliberate strategy to prevent violence among African Americans in Minneapolis included the need to develop more collaborative service delivery models. A more "plan-full way" of addressing violence was also discussed in terms of the need to be supportive of each other as programs seek external funding. According to the focus group participants "plan-full" collaboration would be facilitated and strengthened if the agencies were able to obtain the outcome statistics they sought and mentioned during the group meeting. Without exception, all of the focus group participants expressed the view that human services programs and agencies should initiate steps to reduce the incidence of violence in the African American community.

*The real issue is education or the lack of it. The other big issue is drugs.*

# Community Activists/ Advocates Focus Group

## Types of Violence

There was general agreement that the violence that occurs in the black community in Minneapolis-St. Paul was the same as that which occurred in other communities.

*What types of violence don't occur in our community?. I mean, its the same spectrum of violence that occurs across the country. It's a violent country. So we have not only familial, but non-familial violence and violence committed on us from other communities and violence that we do to each other. Sometimes it can be the application of force; sometimes it can be neglect [which] can be a form of violence...inflicting emotional hurt on people can be a form of violence.*

Several specific types of violence were also identified and discussed in detail, including (1) youth violence, (2) violence involving women as victims and perpetrators, and (3) racial or institutional violence.

## Youth Violence

Several participants who worked with children or families commented on the prevalence and changing nature of youth violence. It was noted that youth violence was increasing in severity and that youthful perpetrators, including those involved in dating violence, appeared to be getting younger. One respondent spoke of working with 10-year-old children who had fought each other with knives, stolen cars, and threatened a teacher. Although these children had committed these adult type offenses, it was noted that they were still very much children in that they did not understand the magnitude of their actions and [thus] showed no remorse.

The other day, we got a call because one of our kids , who I think is 10 or 11, with all this going on in the schools - shootings in schools - told his teacher he was going to shoot him. Of course he gets arrested and put in juvenile detention and that's where he sits right now. And doesn't understand what he did that was so bad.

## Domestic Violence

The discussion regarding domestic violence in the black community focused on segments of the African American community that were seen as particularly problematic in terms of identification and intervention. The groups that were specifically identified included immigrant and professional women as victims, and women as perpetrators. Abuse among the large number of African immigrant groups in the Minneapolis area was seen as a "subset" of domestic violence in the black community. The prevalence of domestic violence among professional or middle-class women in the black community was also noted. According to some participants many of whom were reluctant to seek help because they worked in social services or were "in the struggle" (i.e., were domestic violence advocates).

## Racial and Institutional Violence

Violence perpetrated against black people "by the system," particularly the police and courts, was a recurring theme throughout the discussion. The term violence was used rather broadly and included police intimidation to harsher sentencing and stigmatizing with a police record. Some participants referred to it as racial violence as it was directed at people of color. Others referred to it as institutionalized violence because of its "covert nature" that made it difficult to identify and, thus, to address.



*Sometimes it can be the application of force; sometimes it can be neglect [which] can be a form of violence...inflicting emotional hurt on people can be a form of violence.*

*The reporting system that is used when it comes to an African American, whether it be a child or an adult, is quite different from how it is reported if it's a white perpetrator. The white perpetrator usually goes through the system and is given the opportunity to basically not have a record at all. Where[as] the very first time an African American commits anything at all it's noted and a process of institutionalization begins that follows that African American [from] the very first time they enter until the time they either become an adult or die or whatever. ...There are very few African Americans, particularly males, who do not have a record. ...that to me becomes another violent act [because] it creates an economic barrier for us....and then we deal with the economics of just surviving. And so our men begin to commit violent acts in order to survive economically. And the system entraps them even more.*

*We have to pay attention to all types of violence.*

Black children were also seen as victims of this institutional racism. There was the concern that young black children were “being literally preyed upon by the police department” in that they were much more likely to be picked up, and placed in the child criminal justice system than white children committing similar offenses. As with adults, such labeling, or “starting the paperwork” with subsequent court investigations, had serious negative consequences for the children and their families.

## **Priority**

While considering violence, even domestic violence, to be a “huge” problem in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, the participants were reluctant to suggest any one type of violence as more common or problematic than another. A recurring theme in the discussion was that the various types of violence are related.

*I think that sometime we tend to go in that direction [of considering one type of violence more problematic], but I think that is a mistake because they are related. I think that when we tolerate certain kinds of violence we say that it is less important than other types. So, domestic violence or the way we treat our children or what we expose our children to is not as important as homicide. We miss the connection between those things and that they are related....We have to pay attention to all types of violence.*

The group did, however, believe that certain types of violence got more attention than others. “Violence like other social programs, have a tendency to have a fad level”, and domestic violence was seen currently as getting more attention at the policy/funding level compared to other types of violence impacting the African American community.

## **Causes**

The participants identified a number of factors that they believed contributed to violence and aggression, many of which were race related, including (1) frustration, stress, and anxiety; (2) social isolation; (3) community tolerance of violence against women; and (4) African immigrants and domestic violence.

## **Frustration, Stress & Anxiety**

Possibly reflecting the mental health background of most of the participants, there was an extended discussion of the role of frustration, stress and anxiety in violence, and factors that may cause them. It was noted that high levels of stress result from the demands of everyday living but that, as an oppressed people, African Americans are at increased risk of experiencing frustration from blocked goal attainment in the areas of education and







employment. Subsequently, the participants placed emphasis on how people handled stress, particularly their tolerance for stress and their ability to regulate anxiety and engage in effective conflict resolution. The participants agreed that blacks may have some difficulties coping with stress but also that the stress to which Blacks were subjected was often overwhelming. The following exchange captures this argument:

*Anxiety is the thing that exist in our lives, [and is] going to continue. For a lot of us we just don't have the ability, or haven't developed a capacity, to be able to tolerate [anxiety] and not necessary let it mean something about us, but about the situation.*

This comment reflects a contrasting view from a fellow participant:

*I think we have tolerated it [anxiety]...the fact is we don't know how to deal in a crisis or a catastrophic level of anxiety and stress.*

According to the participants, regulation of anxiety and the use of conflict resolution skills were related in that high anxiety was seen as decreasing the likelihood that one would use such skills in highly charged situations. Experiences with racism resulting from attempts to assimilate into predominantly white settings were seen as a major source of stress for African Americans in the St. Paul- Minnesota area. A male participant describes the process and the depth of its effect:

We as a people, as well as America in general, have become so mobile, as demonstrated here, we don't have those communities that are stable anymore. And for us to assimilate into American culture is impossible. We have the education, we have the ability to do the same jobs, but the moment we walk through the door assimilation is gone. Its not like an Italian or a Greek or, you know, you can't tell who they are until they say their last name and if they cut that short that's Americanized. But...when we walk through the door, its obvious. I'm not saying this as a racist statement, but the white society, their racism kicks in immediately when they see us. They begin to judge us based on our race and we feel that. We've become very sensitive to that. And

sometimes we feel it when its not there. We're always plagued by that. And that too is a stress level that is continuous; it never goes away.

## **Social Isolation**

Physical isolation and a lack of a feeling of community were seen as a major problem for African Americans living in the Minneapolis area and was related to violence in several ways. Under-representation and social dispersion throughout the Minneapolis area contributes to lack of community solidarity. Consequently, the participants noted that in Minneapolis that African Americans are less involved with church, community organizations, and even neighbors compared to African Americans who live in communities where the African American population is more concentrated. Hence, under-representation and social dispersion were seen as directly contributing to violence by removing the support system for people particularly when they were experiencing stress. Furthermore, physical isolation from other blacks was seen as particularly problematic in that it created an over-reliance on one's immediate family —wife and children—which, when taken to its extreme, resulted in patriarchy and a sense of ownership and situations in which “wives are not allowed outside of the house, don't have a key to their own door”. Being isolated from other blacks was believed to contribute to an increased tolerance for abuse because, “You have no way to check out should this really be happening to me.” In addition, social isolation contributes to denying the victim access to informal sources of support and assistance.

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Minimal social interaction among blacks was seen as resulting in a lack of bonding and caring, a reduced perception of commonality, and, subsequently, a lack of racial identification among African Americans. It also means less exposure to the diversity of behaviors among African-Americans which, just as with whites who have limited contact with blacks, gives rise to distorted images which become self-perpetuating when they lead to even less interaction and fewer opportunities to confront in-group stereotypes. Thus, the isolation and lack of bonding with other blacks becomes circular.

## **Tolerance of Abuse of Women**

According to the participants, the message sent to young girls regarding their acceptance of abuse from their male partners was also mentioned as a contributing factor. It was noted that young people are not being taught what is appropriate and inappropriate in a relationship and often simply do not recognize abuse for what it is. A male participant who worked with batterers offered an insightful explanation of the causes of violence against women, focusing on the need for control and how “getting a life” may help to alleviate the problem:

A cause of violence, in our community is a lack of really understanding what self is about. How you take care of the self. How do you take care of who you are in relationship to other people? And how you then regulate the balance between autonomy and being connected to somebody that’s trying to influence you? In our group system, we can’t get men to realize that he’s a separate life form in his heart. And how does he balance that internally for himself. Not trying to balance for her...but for himself. It’s more of an internal issue and not just for men, but for people in general and black people specifically. How do we begin to get black people to re-invest in themselves?

## **African Immigrants and Domestic Violence**

Participants also identified the significant African immigrant population, as another factor that contributes to the uniqueness of domestic violence in the African American community in Minneapolis. African immigrants from North and East Africa, were seen as a subset of the domestic violence problem in the African American community. However, participants identified slightly different forces contributing to domestic violence among the black immigrant population residing in Minneapolis. In addition, group members expressed the view that because of their differences from African Americans, intervention with African immigrants would require a different set of preventative strategies. Participants felt that abuse was a particular problem for this community, but noted that there were no reliable statistics documenting its exact extent.

Unlike the discussion of domestic violence in the African American community which focused on individual and systemic factors, the explanation of the causes of abuse in the immigrant communities focused on cultural issues. Specifically, cultural norms of patriarchy and male domination were seen as a primary source of violence against women--behavior, which in those cultures, is not considered ‘abuse’ and is accepted by both males and females. In a lively discussion of this issue (i.e., whether wife beating characterizes “true” traditional African societies or was a dysfunctional response to the brutality of colonization) it was noted that cultural assimilation poses a particular challenge for these groups. For example, in addition to having to deal with racial discrimination, African immigrants often do not speak the language, and are experiencing inter-generational conflict between traditional parents and more westernized children. Furthermore, African immigrants were described as struggling with western expectations around family roles. A participant’s explanation of unsuccessful work with two north African families describes the worker and the immigrant’s dilemma and suggests that at least some of the “problems” might very well be resolved with the passage of time:

*Part of it is our, my, lack of understanding of their culture. The second part is their lack of understanding of the culture they live in now. And so much of what we see as inappropriate is absolutely appropriate in their life style, and they cannot make the transition of why they cannot live their culture here—all of it. We would like to have them live pieces of their culture that's ok with our society. That's what our society demands of almost any culture that comes here—assimilation...[but they're so close to their culture. We're what, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth generation, maybe more than that. So, we're asking them—first generation Somalia in America, first generation Ethiopian in America—to adapt, overnight, to what we believe to be our society's norm.*

In addition to cultural norms that might contribute to family violence, the recent history of political violence and conflict in many of their countries of origin was noted. Many of these immigrants are political refugees, displaced from their homes and frequently victimized or witness to severe atrocities. These traumatic experiences have serious implications for mental health in general and for involvement in aggression and violence in particular. Furthermore, the inter-relatedness of violence was noted by the participants, particularly the relationship between the maltreatment of children, including sexual abuse and physical punishment, and subsequent aggression.

## **Consequences**

Participants noted that consequences of domestic violence are both “direct and indirect.” The types of consequences identified included (1), physical injury and (2) the re-victimization of women.

## **Physical Injury**

The most direct and obvious consequence of domestic violence is the physical injury.

*Bruises, cuts, lacerations, gun shot wounds. Go to Hennepin County [hospital] or North Memorial [hospital] any day and you will see the consequences.*

Emotional and economic consequences such as difficulty in personal relationships and an inability to work were seen as less obvious but harmful consequences of abuse. It was noted that many of the consequences, particularly the physical ones, are long-lasting (disability, disfigurement, chronic illness), impacting the victim's life considerably beyond the time of the abuse

## **Re-victimization of Women**

Domestic violence was seen as contributing to feelings of inadequacy and learned helplessness. Such feelings made victims both more reluctant to come for treatment and less likely to benefit from it as “they feel like they have lost their ability to affect change”. In addition, violence in the homes and community was seen as contributing to the cycle of violence as a result of providing inappropriate models for both male and female children as well generally increasing the level of anxiety in the community.

Though initially reluctant to make much of gender differences in the impact of domestic violence there was subsequent agreement that domestic violence has differential effects on women and men.

*Violence plays out differently for men and women in terms of the direct consequences, such as likelihood of injury, but also in less direct ways. One area that was talked about at great length was the way in which women are affected by “the system”. And while these laws and policies were specific to Minnesota, they illustrate how, in general, government policies, intended or otherwise, can serve to re-victimize victims.*



It was noted that one of the consequences for female victims of abuse was an increased likelihood that they would “lose” their children to child protection services. The participants believed that there was an assumption among child protection workers that an abused woman was unable to protect her children. It was argued that this fear of having one’s children taken by the state made women less likely to report abuse to authorities and more likely to remain in abusive relationships.

Out-of-home placement was seen as a critical issue, because, as one participant noted, in a state with an African American population of 3%, 50% of the children removed from their homes are African American. Domestic violence or the threat of domestic violence – any act that got the police called to the home – was seen as increasing the chances that a child might be removed. It was generally believed that children were removed without strong cause, were kept in temporary foster care for much too long awaiting ruling by the court, may be placed in culturally dissonant homes, and were not adequately schooled in some of the “locked” facilities. Rather than protecting the child from violence, these participants believed that the placements actually increased the child’s exposure to violence as both a witness to violence and a victim of physical and sexual abuse. New laws that accelerated hearings on children’s placement were seen as detrimental, rather than helpful, to the families as they often do not give parents, particularly those addressing substance abuse issues, enough time “to get themselves together” before their parental rights are terminated.

A second system-related issue that the group was very concerned about was the impact of a domestic violence case on an individual’s ability to have a place to live, which disproportionately affected women and increased the chances of their children being placed in foster care. The participants described a situation in which, in response to a range of nuisance behaviors and violations (e.g., delinquent rent, incidents of ‘unruly behavior’, too many police calls, over-occupancy), a landlord, in addition to evicting the occupant, can place an “unlawful detainer” on the persons records. This information is available to future landlords and can be used to deny a person a rental. With a very high occupancy rate in the area, such actions created extreme competition for available housing and excessive rents (“gouging”) particularly for those who were trying to get shelter in order to keep (or get) their children from child protective services.

*Once you get one on your record, you might as well just literally forget it. You have a [low] turnover right now in housing. So, just assume that we find, the landlord finds out that you’ve been acting up and he can get his UD (unlawful detainer) on your record. That landlord, within five minutes, can probably have someone else renting, even at a higher rate. And then we do not even want to start talking about the slumness of their renting. People are falling victims in the community ...there are housing scavengers that are going to shelters to ask people, ‘Well, do you need a house, well, if you do give me \$1000 and I’ll help you find a place’. Because people are so vulnerable in trying to create a home again for their children and families, they want to pay this money and be subject to, you know, a lot.*

## Solutions

Solutions to violence and domestic violence were offered early in the meeting when the group discussed causes of violence and again in response to the specific query regarding good responses – real and ideal – to the problem of violence in the black community. The specific solutions mentioned included (1) building stronger communities, (2) teaching children to be resilient, and (3) establishing model programs.







## Building Stronger Communities

Not surprisingly, given the concern about the isolation that occurred among African Americans in the Minneapolis area, participants saw building community as a necessary response to violence. It was noted that a sense of community could be nurtured and created and did not depend on physical proximity.

I have a sense of community here and in Minnetonka and there's nobody around my neighborhood that I would call my family, but [referring to another member of the group] is my family and I have other people in my extended family that I've learned to build. And I think that's a skill, and I think that a lot of our African American people need to learn the skill of building a community and not being isolated.

## Mentoring & Teaching Children to be Resilient

These participants believed that maladaptive responses to social conditions were a direct cause of violence. What appears to be lacking among African Americans is the capacity to tolerate anxiety and frustrations precipitated by adverse social conditions. As such, the development of conflict resolution and anger management skills was perceived as important solutions at the individual level. Consistent with the view that patterns of violence were seen as developing very early, it was emphasized that these skills should be passed on to children, along with encouraging them to avoid tolerating violence in their lives.

*We have to educate people, kids and adults...about family violence. What it looks like. What it means. What the affects are. I agree with you that at very young age we must talk about it. How to handle stress and anxiety; how to deal with those very normal human experiences and what language and what mechanisms to use, and what things don't work.*

Consistent with this view, several female participants spoke specifically about the need to teach adolescent girls and young women, explicitly and by example, that violence is unacceptable in relationships and to be able to identify abuse when it occurs. It was noted that mentors need not be a parent but should be important in the child's life.

## Model Programs

Much of the discussion of solutions, particularly when that question was posed directly, focused on programs and interventions. The "model" programs proposed by the group members had identifiable themes: early intervention, continuity of programming, a holistic approach to treatment, and culturally competent programming. Serving the needs of children -- "loading the gun on the front end"— in comprehensive after school programs was one example of an ideal program. Programs that address the needs of males and females separately and then jointly were seen as important interventions for domestic violence.

*One of the problems that I've seen is that is that the woman gets help and she gets services and things for herself or either the man gets help and they get back together. And then, there's all this turmoil going on, even if one of them is really trying to work on their stuff, there's nothing for them to come back to...*

Furthermore, with regard to the establishment of model programs emphasis was placed on continuity of care and addressing all of the needs of the clients. An ideal program was described as one in which vulnerable families have an advocate who assists them with needs in most areas of their lives, (i.e., working with the schools, child protection, social services, mental health needs. One participant described an existing program in another city that was a good model.

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*The thing that stuck in my head with (name of the program) was that they took care of the whole family and the whole person from the beginning to the end. And the end may never come. So that means that if the person ever had an ongoing need for treatment or therapy, or whatever, they could always--if they ever had a problem or need they could always go back to this same system. It's available to assist them. And I think continuity is very essential for our families when we're dealing with issues, whether its domestic violence or whatever.*

Focus group participants noted that in order for a domestic violence intervention to be effective with African Americans it must be culturally competent. That is, it must be designed to address the social realities and experiences of African Americans generally and those experiencing domestic violence specifically. The need for culturally competent programs was prominent throughout the discussion. However, it was noted that most practitioners have traditional Eurocentric training that often makes it difficult to fully implement culturally competent domestic violence interventions targeted toward African Americans. As one participant commented, when it comes to practice, black domestic violence service providers are “cognitively further along in providing treatment specific to the needs of African Americans.” An example of an Afrocentric approach to addressing domestic violence was described by one of the participants:

*One of the things that I have that is important in treating anybody of African American descent is that we have to interject some of our history into the treatment that we give our people. Because a lot of us have no reason to feel pride in who we are because we do not know who we are. And so, a lot of the treatment that we do at my agency is based on a person's identity, what your ancestors have given to the planet, not just America, what we have done on this planet as Africans. And that has to be injected into anything we do in order for a sense of belonging, a sense of pride and a sense of ability to save that person sitting next to me. He may have worn better clothes. He may look like me, but he has a job and I don't. What makes him like me? What makes me like you is my ancestry and the pride that I feel in myself, you can feel too.*

It was also noted that more research was needed, particularly on what worked with whom.

## **Barriers**

The participants noted a number of obstacles to addressing violence in the African American community that they had encountered as practitioners and advocates. The obstacles occurred across a number of levels, including (1) institutional or systemic obstacles, (2) inadequate service delivery and collaboration, (3) stigma and racial identity issues, and (4) the denial that domestic violence is a problem.

## **Institutional or Systemic Obstacles**

Institutional obstacles to addressing domestic violence were discussed in terms of insufficient funding and program priorities being determined by those outside of the African American community.

*If you need \$100.00 in order to do a program, they'll give you \$70. And they will ask you to do the \$100 worth of work". Service needs and goals were seen as "hodge-podge" and politically determined. In an analogy that resonated with the group, one participant referred to funding and funding priorities as a bag of groceries...it's kind of like they put everything in a grocery bag and tell us this is what they want us to deal with. You may have apples and oranges and bananas and some shrimp, stuff from all kinds of different ways. How can you give,*



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*serve, how can you accurately deliver service to all these people with all their needs, with dual diagnosis, with chemical dependency, with violence, how you going to give, you know, everything to everybody”*

Furthermore, it was noted that these mandated priorities might not necessarily be those of the community, or of the agency. For example, youth services, which the group repeatedly referred to as preventative for community and eventually domestic violence, was seen as being out of favor and under funded.

*This year there has been an almost all out war on resources for children, period.*

One participant noted that allowing funds and funders to dictate program goals may have the eventual outcome of undermining community-based programs and suggested that programs stay mindful of their original goals.

*We have to become selective about the bag of groceries we decide to accept. OK? Because once we begin to understand that the politics of money means that we use it to the best of the advantage that we have, because when we fall into that bag of hodge-podge because its there, we lose focus on doing good work in all other areas. And so we have to start becoming real clear about what it is we want to achieve in our communities. How we go about producing a program that's effective and how do we go about producing a program that will serve our community with the outcomes that we want to see. Rather than the approach normally taken now [where] we need to take this money because we've got to keep this non profit [agency] going.*

Using established “buzz” words such as culturally specific programming was seen as a useful way of capturing and communicating an issue to legislators who may have had very little direct experience with African Americans and had not done much thinking about issues of ethnicity. Otherwise monies would go to mainstream agencies, which, though they provided helpful services particularly in terms of meeting basic needs, were insufficient in number and did not address issues of identity nor those that may be specific to African Americans. This point, however, was further refined by noting that the issue is not culturally specific programming, which can be interpreted as services provided to the African American community even by mainstream organizations, but rather funding for culturally specific programs to do their own programming. An important way to increase funding was by lobbying state legislators, the lack of which was noted by one participant as an obstacle to eventually providing the types of services that are needed to address violence and other problems in the black community.

*How many of us even know who our state legislators are? I mean, how many of us have even picked up the phone to call them. I call so much that they think they personally know me. But that's ok. But a lot of us don't bother to do it. And believe it, they listen. If they start getting enough phone calls, they start to listen.*

## **Inadequate Service Delivery and Agency Collaborations**

*Inadequate service delivery and agency collaborations were also regarded as constituting a barrier that impeded efforts to reduce violence in the African American community. For example, a participant who worked with male batterers reported that 40% of the men who came to his program had previously received services from some other agency, which raised questions about the effectiveness of existing programs. It was argued that the problem may lie in agencies' approach to the delivery of services, particularly their inability to employ competent strategies to serve minority populations.*

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*It's not that the information is not valid, the information is not getting (through) to them. And so we have to change the delivery system.....as a professional we need to look at the client, determine the history of that client through his talking to us and deliver it, deliver the information based on what he or she is capable of understanding and accepting.*

In addition, it was suggested that one approach to reaching clients in treatment would be to allow them to set their own goals so that they can understand what they have to invest in, what they have to do to change the process. It was also noted that a lack of agency accountability for client outcomes was an obstacle to clients receiving adequate services and intervention. A lack of cooperation and coordination between agencies was not only seen as an obstacle to providing good services to individual clients (who could then “fall between the cracks”) but also to coalition building and resource sharing.

## **Denial that Violence is a Problem**

According to the participants, denial that domestic violence is a problem impacting the African American community was seen as a problem. Additionally, it was the view of these focus group participants that denial of the problem increases the likelihood that victims will not seek help, confront batterers, nor find solutions until the violence has resulted in serious injury. In describing the operation of a volunteer program to help at-risk families, it was noted that many of these families were reluctant recipients, wanting to protect their privacy. In some cases not having a history of being helped, they simply did not trust others' motives. Finally, it was noted that there was not necessarily support from all segments of the black community for addressing violence or other social ills which were seen by middle and upper income Blacks as problems affecting primarily lower class African Americans.

A number of themes emerged in the discussion. A great deal of concern was expressed about the welfare of all families, not just families experiencing domestic violence. As such, emphasis was placed on the treatment of children utilizing a holistic approach to treating family dysfunction. Most of the focus group members had worked closely with local and state agencies and had strong opinions about the adverse impact of various government practices on black families, as well as how to correct what they saw as some of the main problems.

The focus group's participants were very much aware that they constitute an extreme minority in the area, particularly in comparison to the racial distribution of African Americans in other major urban areas. This awareness figured prominently in their discussions of the intersection of social isolation from other blacks in the community and the occurrence of domestic violence, assimilation pressures and difficulties, and racial discrimination. Social isolation was also perceived as a challenge for African Americans regardless of class level.

# **Law Enforcement Focus Group**

## **Types of Violence**

The participants in the law enforcement focus group listed several types of violence that occur in the African American community, including (1) sexual violence, (2) racial violence, (3) elderly violence, (4) domestic violence, (5) community/street violence, (6) drug violence, (7) police violence, and (8) structural violence. These participants provided the lengthiest list of types of violence that plague the African American community.





## Causes

The participants in the law enforcement group listed four primary causes of violence in the African American community: (1) racial oppression and lack of economic opportunities and (2) the break down of community institutions, (3) negative images in hip hop, and (4) lack of spiritual foundation.

### Racial Oppression and Lack of Economic Opportunities

Internalized oppression in the form of self-hate, feelings of worthlessness, and feelings of hopelessness stemming from social conditions is also seen as a primary cause of violence in all forms. It is also perceived that violence is a learned behavior rooted in the reminiscence of slavery and learning how to deal with frustration and low self-esteem in a non-destructive manner is a solution to violence.

*I would say that... the education that we are handed is not inclusive of African American history... Our history has been erased, stolen or just lost some place. And we are mis-educated as to who we are. So therefore we are devaluated as human beings. So we invalidate one another's humanity.*

Another participant suggested that violence is a learned behavior rooted in the slave experience:

*I think that corporal punishment stems from our early experiences in the enslavement. And that is how we were taught and that is how we were. And I think that corporal punishment, as a community is one of those things that we hold most tenaciously to.*

Furthermore, internalized oppression was perceived to be a cause of frustration and low self-esteem that often precipitate acts of violence.

*I think that violence is a response to frustration, being treated unfairly. Feeling that you are being treated unfairly all of the time leads to frustration. And when a person is frustrated I think one of their tendencies is to lash out because they can't do anything about it. They generally lash out at those who are closest.*

The lack of economic opportunities resulting from racial oppression was also described as a factor contributing to violence in the African American community.

*I think that violence is directly tied to economics. You know when the brother goes downtown and applies for a job and he doesn't get it, he is qualified for it, or they have on the job training he doesn't get the job. He is the one who is supposed to be taking care of the family, who wants to take care of the family... And he comes home to maybe children and woman and he says I didn't get the job. 'What do you mean you didn't get the job?' And right then and there you have an argument started and he can't voice to her his frustrations.*

*Frustration. My gosh, this is so key. Because it encumbers so much of what goes on inside and outside of the home.*

Frustrated masculinity was also described as a product of exposure to institutional racism.

*But I think basically black men come home and it is the last place to fight where they can win.. And the fact that they have no contro at all on the outside the house. And they try to defeat the control inside the house and sometimes that creates the violence from the domestic issues.*

## **Breakdown of Families and Community Institutions**

The “breakdown” of community structures is perceived as the main cause of all forms of violence including domestic. One participant states,

*I think the black family generally had a breakdown. Families in America have had a breakdown. And as soon as that breakdown began it started with no holds barred type of attitude.*

Another participant suggested that the high rate of violence in the African American community is associated with the manner in which community leaders have abdicated their community responsibilities.

*Many of the village elders have for whatever reason negated their positions. There are people who speak for us, who really have no business speaking for us. You have three or four people in the black community whenever something happens who come out and come out against this abhorrence or that abhorrence. And they speak for everyone.*

The proliferation of drug abuse and social problems related to drug abuse and drug trafficking were also discussed in terms of eroding the capacity of the community to prevent violence.

*I just want to talk about the fact that at one point it was in the 70s before we got into this crack cocaine thing. The community had been jelling... It had been coming together economically. It had been coming together even religiously and becoming stronger based. And what I see happening now [is that] it has pulled us all apart from becoming a strong united base. And as long as we are separated and fragmented we will never be able to work as a united front.*

## **Negative Images in Hip Hop Music**

The negative lyrical content and sexist and pro-violence imagery promoted in “gangsta rap” music was described as an indicator of community breakdown and more specifically as a factor contributing to the erosion of positive values, norms, and behavior in the contemporary generation of African American youth.


*One of the causes is the fact that the media portrays and continues to perpetuate the idea that violence is a way to solve a problem. It is portrayed in the videos, it is portrayed in the records that come out...I think that form of rap music give credence to the fact that it is okay to call a woman a bi\*\*h. It is okay to get your woman in line by slapping her. It is okay to share my woman with you.*

## **Lack of Spiritual Foundation**

A number of participants noted that the black church has traditionally served as an anchor of stability in the African American community. However, it was the perception of the participants that an increasing number of youth and their families are disconnected from the teachings of the black church and are therefore much more vulnerable to engage in acts of violence as well as other forms of problematic behavior.







## Consequences

The participants in the law enforcement group listed four primary causes of violence in the African American community: (1) racial oppression and lack of economic opportunities and (2) the break down of community institutions, (3) negative images in hip hop, and (4) lack of spiritual foundation.

## Embarrassment

The high rate of violence among African Americans and the attention it receives in the media is leading some blacks, particularly middle-class blacks, to feel embarrassed about their membership in the black race. As a result, an increasing number of middle-class blacks feel compelled to distance themselves from those who reside in inner-city neighborhoods as a means of protecting their children from what they perceive as negative influences.

*I recall a couple of years ago I had the privilege of listening to one of our judges speak to a graduating class. And she said to the class that one of the things that she is really afraid of the most is that every time something happens on television she always wonders whether or not they are black. When she rides the bus and she sees a bunch of brothers and sisters standing on the corner laughing, doing whatever they are doing. How embarrassed she is.*

Another participant suggested that violence is a learned behavior rooted in the slave experience:

## Intergenerational Transmission of Pro-Violence Norms

A major concern of the participants in the law enforcement group was that norms that condone resorting to violence as a means of resolving conflict with others were being transmitted from one generation to the next as a result of the high rates of violence in the African American community.

## Continuation of Institutional Racism

According to the law enforcement participants, a primary consequence to domestic violence and other forms of interpersonal violence in the African American community is the continuation of institutional racial discrimination. They specifically referenced racism as a factor influencing the criminal justice system response to the occurrence of domestic violence among African Americans and its contribution to the re-victimization of abused African American women. A number of the group members expressed the view that an inadequate response to domestic violence involving African Americans serves to discourage help-seeking and reporting.

## Solutions

Several factors were identified as being important to include in efforts to reduce violence in the African American community, including (1) Enhanced family and community development (2) religious involvement, (3) mobilization of community leaders to address domestic violence, and (4) creation of alternatives to incarceration

## Enhanced Community and Family Development

Community and family economic development was seen as the primary solution to reduce the occurrence of violence in the African American community.

*She said to the class that one of the things that she is really afraid of the most is that every time something happens on television she always wonders whether or not they are black.*

*Everything begins with the home. The values are taught there including the spirituality piece and we need to strengthen that. Right now we are seeing people who have issues with corrections, issues in child protection, issues with chemical dependency. But what we do as professionals is we segment that family and only address parts of the family and not address the whole family. We have been talking about this thing about holistic services but we haven't done that. Right now we have programs in place that will provide housing for women and children. But he cannot be part of that. And the problem with that is she will always include him whether she is a married person or not. If she identifies him as her partner, then we need to include him in terms of services.*

*What it is we need to [do is] build up the home. Everything begins in the home. The values are taught there including the spirituality piece and we need to strengthen that.*

## Religious Involvement

Religious involvement and the black church were seen by the focus group participants as a protective factor for preventing crime and violence in the African American community.

*Church is very important in the community, and in anyone's life. If you don't have that foundation there it dulls that sense of right and wrong. You are going to be dealing with a lot of crazy things. And you find that the absence of these things in our children's lives and generations of people's lives. As they grow older they are going to result to violent type behavior.*

The discussion of religion included not only the emphasis on the power of faith and religious values but also references to the role that the black church should assume in addressing violence in the African American community.

*For me the foundation is biblical and not so much the physical church outside. It should start there in the home. And when we leave there and go to a church they are suppose to pick up on that feedback.*

Having a sound spiritual or faith base is seen as an important part of a family's, community's and individuals' moral foundation. Having a strong moral code for guidance, as well access to spiritual leaders from which to receive feedback, is seen as way to prevent or reduce violence.

## Community Leader Mobilization

The general consensus among the focus group participants was that in order to fully address domestic violence in the African American community, in addition to enlisting the support of the churches and clergy, it is important that all segments be involved in addressing the problem.

*To mobilize the pastors, the fraternities, the sororities, the elks, and the masons.*

However, it is important to note that one of the barriers to mobilizing community leaders from the various religious and civic organizations is that some of these men are batterers themselves.

It is a vital fact that many of them are the perpetrators.





## Alternatives to Incarceration/Decriminalization

At least one of the participants in this group felt that it is important to seek alternatives to incarceration for those arrested and convicted of domestic violence. His rationale was explained in terms of racial bias in arrest practices and the disproportionate number of African American males incarcerated in correctional facilities.

*I think it would help to decriminalize domestic violence...*

*Having worked in the system as long as I have I have seen people of color get the harshest treatment. And the enforcement of punishment paradigm is always used whenever we interact with that system. So if we could decriminalize domestic violence it is likely to generate more public dialogue about the issue...in our community.*

Learning how to deal with frustration and lack of self-esteem in a non-destructive manner was discussed as a solution to reducing violence among African Americans. One participant reported.

*In order to deal with some of the racism, and other things affecting our community, I think we need to look at the racism that we instill upon ourselves. Can we deal with the fact that 'Johnny light skinned' can get a job better than 'Peter Dark Skinned?' We do that and we fight among ourselves. I remember as a kid being chased home by my brothers because of the color of my skin. And when they got home they found out my mother and father was darker than them. And ooh that changed them, because they thought I was a mulatto kid of sorts, and I wasn't by any stretch of the imagination. I think that that promotes some of the violence in our community.*

## Barriers

The participants identified (1) legal and domestic violence service protocols, and (2) unwillingness to address institutional racism as barriers to overcoming domestic violence in the African American community.

## Legal and Domestic Violence Service Protocols

Some of the participants expressed resentment toward laws and domestic service provider protocols that emphasize separating families following acts of domestic violence. It was not the view of these respondents that battered women should not be protected but that too much emphasis is placed on separating men from their families as a standard intervention procedure.

*There are some government barriers built in to the whole system of treatment of perpetrators that emphasizes separating families. Those things are built into the law. But I think that community activism, active citizenship, the African American community can come together and start to force some of those things to change.*

## Unwillingness to Address Institutional Racism

This group strongly suggested that adverse structural and economic conditions have contributed to the erosion of the capacity of African American families and communities to prevent violence as well as other social problems. However, they were not very optimistic that there was sufficient interest within the majority population to commit to addressing racial inequality in access to education and employment opportunities.



Several interesting insights emerge from these findings generated from the law enforcement focus group. First, the focus group participants reported that community factors such as families, community leaders, and community conditions may serve as a catalyst for violence and as protective factors against violent behavior. This group strongly suggested that adverse structural and economic conditions have contributed to the erosion of the capacity of African American families and communities to prevent violence as well as other social problems. Furthermore, this erosion has led to a shift away from caring for each other within the context of nuclear and extended family. This shift is seen as a primary cause for street violence and domestic abuse. This raises an important question as to why domestic violence occurs. According to the focus group participants the occurrence of domestic violence in the African American community is largely an individual response to institutional racism and the frustration associated with such exposure. Consequently, developing coping strategies to counteract the effects of internalizing stigmatizing stereotypes is seen as a solution to both street violence and domestic violence.

## Gay, Lesbian, Bi-Sexual, and Transgender Focus Groups

### Causes

Several key themes emerged from the discussion involving the participants in the Gay, Lesbian, Bi-Sexual and Transgender focus group. The primary thematic findings included: (1) fear of disclosure; (2) institutional oppression; (3) human nature, language, strength; and (4) education.

### Fear of Disclosure

According to the focus group participants fear of being “outed” as being gay, lesbian, bi-sexual or transgender was seen the most important social problem faced by the African-American GLBT community. It was the consensus of these focus group participants that the primary cause of domestic violence in the African American community was institutional oppression.

There was a consensus among the focus group participants that being outed was associated with this population being at increased risk of experiencing violence. Accordingly, it was their belief that violence against members of the GLBT community will result from the discovery of one’s sexual orientation.

*I think that a lot of the GLBT African American people are cautious about being in environments where there are straight men because there is a fear always of discovery and then of violence.*

Violence stemming from one’s sexual and racial identity appears to have higher concern for this group than does domestic violence.

*It seems to me that domestic violence in the GLBT community would be less important than something like homophobic harassment for the same reason that domestic violence is less important in the black community than racial harassment.*

*I feel also that along with the violence that we have in our community that is similar to the African American community overall, we also have racial issues to*



*think of. And with us being GLBT we have sexual violence issues to deal with also that are issues that we deal with on different level than maybe other communities.*

Fear of violence resulting from being exposed as being a member of the GLBT community appears to be a primary concern for the African-American GLBT. In contrast, domestic violence was regarded as a secondary concern in terms of their specific risks of experiencing violent victimization:

*I know that there probably isn't anybody in this room who doesn't know where there had been couples that have had some domestic violence issues... most of us do. So I would say domestic violence would have to be ranked probably right under fear of discovery.*

*I think that domestic violence in GLBT relationships are a lot more hush hush than other situations. For one, when you are dealing with two men, neither one really wants to come public with the domestic violence because you still have that manhood issue. I can't say that I am a man and just as well as he is a man that he is beating me down, because that makes me less of a man.*

One reason offered as to why domestic violence was not as significant a concern as violence emerging from homophobia is the that the dynamics of abuse are difficult to disclose or admit in a public or community forum without experiencing overt social stigma. Among gay men, for example, the issue of "manhood" emerged in this group's discussion suggesting when men are abused; the identity of "man" can be damaged or compromised as a result of experiencing domestic violence.

#### Institutional Oppression and Economic Deprivation

According to the GLBT focus group participants, the primary cause of domestic violence in the African American community is frustration emanating from exposure to institutional oppression. Institutional oppression was characterized by this group as encompassing homophobia, racism, and sexism.

The root of domestic violence is based on power and control. And you see that same sort of power and control played out, and heterosexism, and patriarchy. And all these different forms of institutional oppression. So when you look at economic injustice and all the different institutions in our government, federal and local government, that continue to keep economic injustice in place, I think that belief system has a lot to do with feeding into the way that we interact with each other on an individual basis.

Another participant argued that economic injustice may influence how intimate partners interact at home.

If you have a situation where a woman, let's just say Jane, goes to work, she gets exploited by her boss, she is working twelve hours a day, she gets paid five dollars an hour, she comes home, she is pissed off in a bad mood, whatever, goes off on her partner, emotionally abuses her, calls her names... So, I mean there is a whole context.

Human nature was discussed as a secondary cause for violence. Language and the use of certain words and terms were seen as both a cause and consequence of violence; however, the primary consequence of violence highlighted by the group was strength. Education was seen as a primary solution to dealing with violence in general, as well as a secondary cause of many forms of violence.

## Religious Tolerance of Interpersonal Violence and Anti Homosexuality

There was consensus among the group participants that the black church, through its teachings, promoted both domestic violence and anti-homosexual sentiments.

*I grew up in a very religious family. I had to walk and turn away from it for me to have some sanity for myself. Because it just wasn't working for me to hear these messages of violence, which I continued to hear from members within my extended families, some of who are evangelists. Who are really saying and sanctioning violent things to happen to very good individuals within their families and they call themselves Christians. It doesn't work for me.*

*The community of faith...is so against it [homosexuality] that is why it is pushing so hard against the grain. Because it is almost like you are turning your back on what's been established tradition.*

The conflict between looking to the black church for guidance and comfort when one experiences domestic violence and yet facing rejection and judgment appears to be a difficult challenge for members of the GLBT community to manage and overcome.

## Solutions

The members of the GLBT focus group identified the following solutions as strategies that should be adopted to address domestic violence, hate crime and community violence in the African American community: (1) education and (2) addressing homophobia.

## Education

It is clear from the GLBT focus group discussion that members of this group believe that the prevention of domestic violence and violence in general is possible through education. One approach that was referred to often was the cognitive-behavioral approach. That is, youth should be taught how to process information and given the tools to cope with situations in a non-violent manner. Another strategy that was mentioned was using peers as role models to influence young people's perceptions to reject violence as a means of resolving disputes. Accordingly, these participants expressed the view that peer-educators may be critical in getting the anti-violence message across to other young people.

## Domestic Violence and Hate Crime

When asked specifically about the role that domestic violence plays in the Minneapolis African American GLBT community the members of the GLBT focus group expressed the view that domestic violence is not as important an issue as are other problems impacting this community. Rather, the independent and combined effects of homophobia, racism, and sexism faced by the GLBT community were described as being more of a threat than intimate partner violence. Yet it is important to note that these participants noted that there is an interconnection between all forms of interpersonal violence. For example, the violence that is rooted in the institutional arrangements of mainstream society may also surface as precipitating factors in same-sex relationships in the form of self-hatred, frustration, power, and control.

It is also important to note that though there are negative consequences associated with violence in general, the participants felt more of an affinity with the strengths that came from adversity. Not only was a stronger sense of self identified as a byproduct of the struggle to realize one's sexual identity, but also having the agency to achieve.





It is clear from the focus group discussion that prevention through education is the solution to both domestic violence and violence in general. Educating young people was thought to be the key to success. One approach that was referred to often was cognitive-behavioral in nature. That is if people, youth in particular, are taught how to think differently, process information and are given the tools to cope with situations in a non-violent manner; then behavior will be non-violent. Another strategy that emerged was using peer models to influence young people's perceptions. It is purported that sometimes the messenger makes a difference in how information is received and internalized. Using peer-educators may be critical in getting the message across, particularly when connecting with young people.

Finally an area that may warrant further exploration is to continue examining whether violence is part of our nature as humans, if it is our culture that teaches violent responses or if there is some combination of both that perpetuates violence in our lives. Understanding where violence comes from and the complexity of its beginnings is important in both generating and testing theories about how end domestic violence.

## Barriers

According to these participants, racism and homophobia were not only viewed as causes of domestic violence, they were also seen as barriers to help-seeking among GBLT victims of domestic violence.

*One way of looking at it is recognizing that domestic violence survivors who are in same sex partner relationships experience a lot of different barriers to receiving services to help them get out of that abusive relationship. So they are going to experience homophobia from police, hospitals, the criminal justice system, their family, their friends, it is going to be very difficult. Also there's that whole projection, where you don't want to tell your straight family, after you have finally got them to not disown you, now you have to tell them that your partner is abusing you. So you don't want to have to go in that whole "well you shouldn't have been involved with her in the first place," and that whole situation. The same can be said for African American survivors and the racism that exists in all the different institutions that survivors have to access in order to get out.*

## The Faith Group

### Types of Violence

In response to a question in which the participants were asked to list the various types of violence that occur in the African American community, they listed the following: (1) physical, (2) emotional, (3) sexual, (4) verbal, (5) structural (i.e., poverty), spiritual abuse. In the list that the participants provided their reference to spiritual abuse stood out as a type of violence that was not mentioned by members of other focus groups as a specific type of violence. The term spiritual violence was used to refer to the way in which the clergy and churches as institutions fail to adequately respond to domestic violence when they are made aware of its occurrence among its parishioners.

*There is spiritual abuse also... Often times when a person is experiencing abuse at home they go to the clergy and is further abused in their lack of understanding and sending them back into that home thinking that the resolution is either within themselves or God.*



Some participants also made reference to how pastors perpetuate acts of spiritual abuse

*And to just take that further, I think how we as clergy and representatives of "God" abuse either our own position or abuse our position in the community is violence. You know, if you look at scripture it was never meant to be competition and yet we find ourselves, often time, competing with one another instead of working together for the building of the Kingdom. We forget that we all have a boss and we end up being the boss or wanting to be the boss; and that in itself is a form of violence, because we fail to sit and communicate.*

## Causes

The participants in the faith group listed and discussed one primary causes of violence in the African American community: (1) racism and institutional oppression. There was a general consensus among these participants that the legacy of historical and contemporary patterns of racial discrimination are a major factor contributing to the high rates of domestic violence and community violence among African Americans.

## Solutions

The faith group participants were very vocal in asserting the opinion that the black church and the black clergy, particularly have a duty and responsibility to assume a leadership role in addressing domestic violence in the African American community. The assertion of this view emerged within the context of a consensus that historically the black clergy have been implicated in contributing to the victimization of women as a result of relying on conservative interpretations of the Holy Scriptures in their efforts to counsel and console women who were seeking pastoral assistance in negotiating an abusive relationship. Hence, the primary solution that the faith participants discussed was the need for black clergy to assume responsibility for the prevention of domestic violence. Several of the participants noted that black clergy must confront the abuse that they have suffered or perpetuated before they or their churches can effectively respond to domestic violence in a proactive manner.

*And I think as the brother said and the sister said, we forget that we need to first attend to our own woundedness and all of us are in various stages of it all of us are damaged; particularly African American folk and we have lead from where you are. We have to be leading people through it, instead of preaching from it, in order to effect healing. As a leader of a congregation, how can I bring my congregation into fullness and wholeness if I myself am not whole? I need to attend to that. A lot of time we get involved with all the best intentions, involved with the nuts and bolts of ministry that we neglect the human being that we are and therefore continue to preach from our woundedness.*

*From what they hear from the pulpit, to what they hear from family members, what they hear from society is to live with it - to deal with it and what you are doing is you're not living with it, you're dying with it. And so, until we create an environment that allows people the safety, if I can use that word, to move through their woundedness.*





# 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.

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

A consistent theme in this report is illustrated through 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. 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.

## 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; Websdale, 2000). Hence, poor relationships with law enforcement and less than satisfying experiences with domestic violence service producers 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 Minneapolis, 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 levels of intervention: individual, family, community, and societal. The focus group participants were very vocal in pointing how their numerical under-representation in greater Minneapolis 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.

## Addressing Domestic Violence among African Immigrants

Given the significant number of African immigrants, particularly Somalians, who reside metropolitan Minneapolis, it is essential that efforts be undertaken to develop a plan to raise awareness about domestic violence and the availability of domestic violence services in the Somali community. African American domestic violence programs should proactively seek to hire staff who are from the Somali community. In addition, domestic violence service providers in the larger community and those that primarily provide services to



African Americans should begin to form partnerships and collaborations with the existing human service agencies that provide social services to Somalians for the purpose of engaging in cross training designed to enhance the capacity of these agencies and staff to provided culturally competent services to domestic violence victims and batterers from the Somalian and other African immigrant communities who may voluntarily seek assistance or be mandated by the courts to attend a domestic violence program.

## 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.

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# 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.<sup>1</sup>

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

Black women comprise 8% of the U.S. population but account for 20% of the intimate partner homicide victims.<sup>2</sup>

## 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

Among African American women who killed their partner, almost 80% had a history of abuse.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

## IMPACT OF ABUSE

Battered women are at greater risk for attempting suicide<sup>6</sup> particularly if they were physically abused as a child, for being depressed<sup>7</sup> and to suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).<sup>8</sup>

## 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,<sup>9</sup> showed less psychological distress,<sup>10</sup> and were less likely to attempt suicide.

## TEEN DATING VIOLENCE

Black youth are over represented as victims and perpetrators of teen dating violence.<sup>11</sup>

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

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# Minneapolis, Minnesota

## Domestic Violence Resource List

### **African American Family Services**

2616 Nicollet Avenue South  
Minneapolis, MN 55408  
612-871-7878

or  
1041 Selby Avenue  
Saint Paul, MN 55104  
651-642-0021

### **African American Men Project**

1313 Penn Avenue North  
Minneapolis, MN 55411  
Tel. (612)302-4694  
aamp@co.hennepin.mn.us Contact: Shane  
Price

### **Black, Indian, Hispanic & Asian Women in Action (BIHA)**

1830 James Avenue North Minneapolis,  
MN 55417  
Tel. 612-521-2986 fax Fax (612) 529-  
6745  
email: info@biha.org  
Website: www.biha.org

### **Breaking Free**

770 University Ave West  
ST. PAUL, MN 55104  
Tel.651-645-6557 Fax: 651-645-7073  
website: www.breakingfree.net  
Email: vcarter@breakingfree.net

### **Harriet Tubman Alliance**

3111 First Avenue South  
Minneapolis, MN 55408  
612-825-3333  
Fax: 612-825-6666  
info@tubmanfamilyalliance.org

### **African American Queens Project**

4200 46th Ave North  
Robbinsdale, MN 55422  
Email: aaqueensproject@yahoo.com  
Tel: 763-843-5051  
Fax 763-533-5075  
Contact: Penny Richardson

### **Oasis of Love**

2304 Emerson Ave. N.  
Minneapolis, MN 55411  
Dr. Diane Thibodeaux, Founder  
Contact: E.B. Brown, Director

### **Southside Community Health Services**

310 east 38th street  
Minneapolis, Mn 55409  
Tel. 612-821-2362  
Contact: Clearance Jones  
4243 - 4th Avenue South  
Minneapolis MN 55409  
<http://www.southsidechs.org/>

### **AMICUS**

100 N Sixth St Suite 529B  
Minneapolis, MN 55403-1503  
(612)348-8570 Fax:(612)348-6782  
staff@amicususa.org

### **Thad Wilderson & Associates**

Rule 29 Mental Health Clinic  
475 University Avenue  
St. Paul, MN 55103  
Tel. 651-225-8997  
Fax 651-225-1697  
Email: twwilder@ties.k12.mn.us

### **Deborah's Place**

P.O. Box 23022  
Richfield, MN 55423  
Tel. 612.821.4834  
Eleanor Dildy, Founder  
Deborahsplace2003@yahoo.com

### **African American Child Wellness Institute**

Brackins Consulting and Psychological  
Services Bravada, Garrett-Akinsanya,  
Ph.D. Licensed Psychologist  
1219 Marquette Avenue South Ste. 80  
Minneapolis, MN 55403  
Tel. 612-302-3140/612.839-1449



# Steering Committee



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

**Conversations About Domestic Violence And  
Other Issues Affecting Their Community**



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Institute on Domestic Violence in the African-American Community



*Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2005*

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