

The background of the entire page is a collage of African art, including various masks, carvings, and textiles. A large, semi-transparent yellow circle is positioned in the upper right corner, partially overlapping the title text.

Community Insights on Domestic Violence among African Americans:

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

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**CITY OF MEMPHIS & INSTITUTE ON
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN THE
AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY**

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Executive Summary



Oliver J. Williams, Ph.D.

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.

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

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). Regarding batterers intervention,

there is an inadequacy of responses of the traditional domestic violence service delivery network to address domestic violence among African Americans. It has also been noted that most batterers programs do not make any significant effort to provide culturally relevant service delivery practices and outreach that would encourage greater participation among African American men who batter (Williams & Becker, 1994). Consequently, it is not surprising that African American men have lower completion and participation rates than other men due to the lack of culturally relevant services, despite the development of culturally competent curriculum designed to provide services to this population (Gondolf & Williams, 2001).

The intent of this report

The Community Assessment Project attempts to provide a fuller picture of how African Americans perceive and experience domestic violence. The following four groups of participants were assembled to share their perspectives related to domestic violence in Memphis, Tennessee's African American community: (1) Children and Youth workers, (2) the Faith-Based community, (3) the Human Services community, and (4) the Law Enforcement community. This report includes their perspectives and insights about domestic violence, but this report does not speak for the entire community, as each individual's



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

experiences are different. However, the report does provide critical insights from four groups of African Americans into the African American perception of domestic violence in Memphis, Tennessee.

For practitioners, this report supports the need for the following: (1) community cohesion and more self-help mechanisms, (2) culturally-based and conveniently located prevention and intervention services, (3) educational experiences for the very young and all developmental levels, (4) more faith-based programs to provide services, and (5) increased training for diverse professionals about domestic violence. Policymakers will find this report useful in the following five areas: (1) increased funding for domestic violence, particularly that which does not force poorly funded minority organizations to compete with each other; (2) more substance abuse and mental health preventive and treatment services; (3) policies that ensure funding actually serves the population it is meant to serve, i.e., Black communities; (4) policies which strengthen individual self-sufficiency through

improved employment opportunities and equity in economic income and wealth; and (5) policies that reduce the cyclical and generational nature of domestic violence. Researchers will find this report useful in reinforcing the need for (1) additional research on culturally competent models of domestic violence prevention and best practice interventions that focuses on healing; (2) documentation of differential treatment of African Americans by law enforcement, the judicial system, and the child welfare system when domestic violence is involved; and (3) more research on the intersection of racism, contemporary oppression and discrimination, substance abuse, domestic violence. As community citizens, this report emphasizes the need for each of us to be more involved and more aware of what is happening in our communities and homes and to find comprehensive culturally sensitive solutions to promote change. The participants have provided us with ideas and an inspiring message that we must strive to eradicate this problem and this deadly issue from our communities.

Summary of Findings

Findings from the community assessment sessions indicated the following:

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

Violence is pervasive in all communities. In African American communities, domestic violence firmly connects its families with these many forms of violence. Participants in the Memphis, Tennessee area reported strong connections between domestic violence and other forms of violence, particularly community violence, sexual abuse, child abuse, health abuse, youth violence, and verbal abuse. Health abuse was defined as destructive practices that relate to the human body and included such activities as abuse of alcohol and other drugs, overeating, and refusal or unwillingness to secure needed medical attention. Respondents noted the connections between stressors inside and outside the home; they connected violence committed with violence observed by perpetrators in their childhood.

Violence among African American youth reflects the need for social and economic respect. Several focus groups discussed how violence specifically perpetrated by African American youth can be an extreme expression of rebellion against parental and community realities –both social and economic. Inequities with job opportunities, lack of equal pay, and poor education are all consequences of contemporary discrimination. Internalized oppression and feelings of powerlessness and worthlessness were described as primary causes and factors of domestic violence among young African Americans. Youth gang violence was described as a method Black youth use to secure the attention and respect they need to feel good about themselves from their peers.

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

Raising community awareness and breaking the “code of silence” are imperative if the community is to solve problems associated with domestic violence. An increase in public awareness initiatives and adequate counseling resources that can address problems of both victims and abusers were mentioned as critical if the African American community is to attack domestic violence and eradicate it as a social problem.

Lack of funding and competition for that funding were cited as the major barriers to addressing domestic violence, particularly the lack of funding for preventive services in Memphis, Tennessee. Respondents noted the limited resources available to address domestic violence and the issues that cause and exacerbate it, such as substance abuse and mental illness. One example mentioned was the single domestic violence shelter in the city, which averaged 50 new admissions monthly. More funding would encourage the community to more accurately address its need.

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



Introduction

This report provides perspectives on domestic violence from community members in Memphis, Tennessee. While all represented different professional backgrounds, strengths, and experiences, their message was essentially the same -- that the African American community must end domestic violence because it destroys the family, which is the fiber of the community. Respondents willingly shared personal information and professional insights; doing so displayed great courage and community concern. They were open and engaged throughout each focus group and provided specific examples of what can be done about domestic violence in our minority communities. Traditionally, research has provided some indicators or patterns about domestic violence, but most display methodological shortcomings that limit a clear picture of prevalence, completion rates, and program utilization (Bent-Goodley, 2001, Hampton, 1991, West, 1998). Limited empirical information about African American perceptions of domestic violence make this report and the Community Assessments Project important because they provide a more comprehensive understanding of how African Americans view domestic violence and what solutions they identify as most relevant to the unique needs of diverse communities. Recognizing the complexity of the issue, this report links domestic violence with other social issues and nests its recommendations in the desires and understandings of a diverse group of thinkers in Memphis.

This report can cite four emergent messages: (1) To address domestic violence, one must understand and address issues of racism, homelessness, poverty, substance abuse, mental health, unemployment, and other competing social issues; (2) To address domestic violence, one must also understand the history of contemporary racism and discrimination that have continued to affect African American relationships; (3) One cannot address

domestic violence in the African American community unless the community is at the center of proposed solutions; and (4) solutions must be culturally sensitive, that are implemented by skilled African American practitioners.

Community Assessment Methodology

Memphis, Tennessee was selected as the fourth of nine cities chosen for this project by the Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community (IDVAAC) Steering Committee for several reasons: its southern location, its southern heritage, and its diverse population demographics. Memphis is a prime example of a city of the "New South"; a city that has attracted major industry and is experiencing rapid growth. Memphis is a city that has taken strides in addressing domestic violence through both political and judicial means.

Memphis, a city of 296.35 square miles, is the county seat for Shelby County in the southwest corner of Tennessee. Of Memphis' 650,100 residents, 399,208 or 61.4% are African American (City of Memphis, 2003). The median family income is \$32,285; however, the poverty rate of African Americans is 25.59 percent. Of the poverty population in Shelby County, 77.11 percent are African American (University of Georgia Initiative on Poverty and the Economy, 2004-2005). Seventy-six percent of persons in Memphis over the age of 25 possess a high school diploma and 21 percent have a Bachelor's Degree or higher (City of Memphis, 2003). Still, the Census reports that in 1997, 20.8 percent of businesses in Shelby County were minority owned (US Census Bureau).

Thirty African American men and women formed a pool of respondents who were nominated by the Memphis Community Advisory Group. This group was formed to learn more about the



Linner Ward Griffin

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



minority community, organize logistical resources, and facilitate introductions in preparation for the community assessments process approximately one year prior to IDVAAC's arrival in Memphis. The advisory group identified persons who were invited to participate in five domestic violence focus groups in the Memphis, Tennessee area. Four affinity groups to which they were invited included: (1) members of the Human Services Community, (2) the Faith Community, (3) the Law Enforcement Community, and members of the (4) Children and Youth community. Approximately six participants were invited to form a fifth community assessment group—one that represented Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender (LGBT) Community advocates. None of the persons invited for the LGBT focus group attended. While a number of reasons for their non-attendance were speculated, no specific, documented reason for their non-participation was ever given. Twenty-two African Americans participated in the four focus groups mentioned above. A description of all participants in the four assessment groups is presented in the tables that follow.

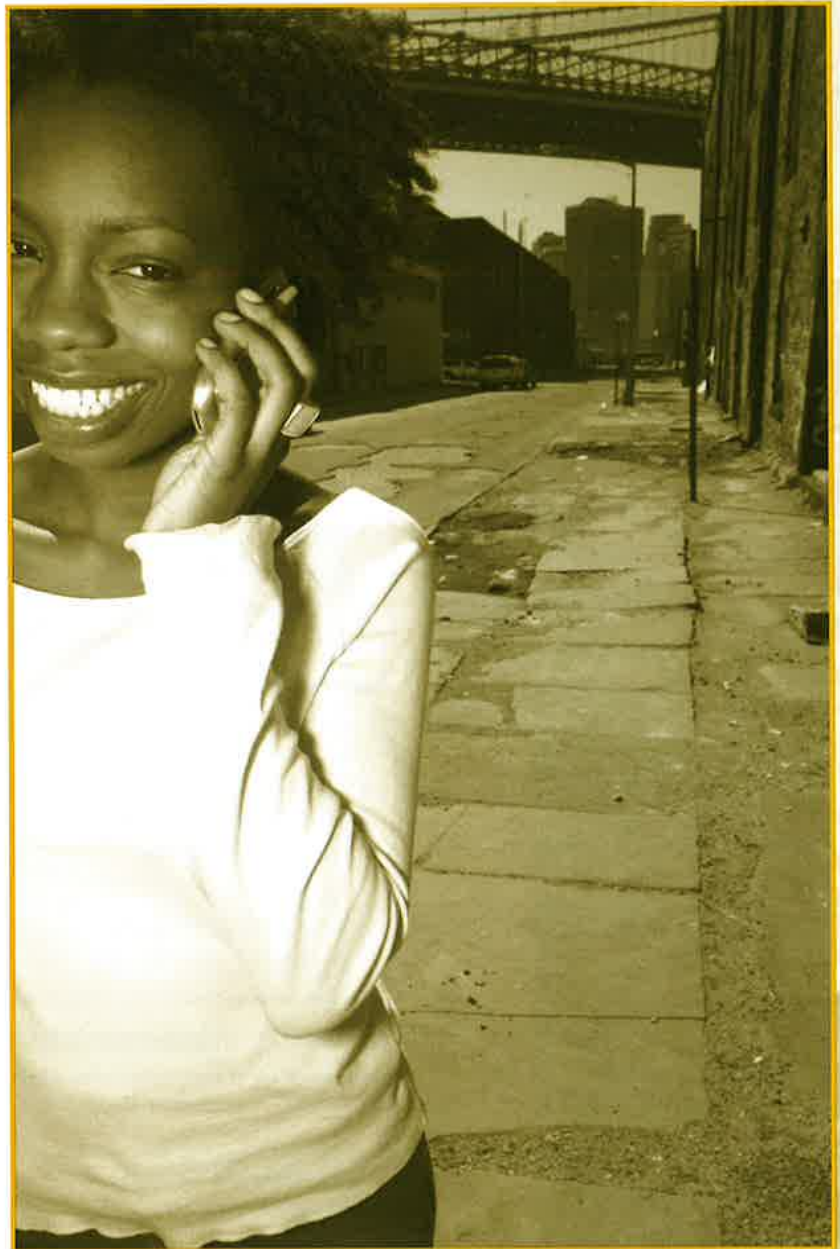




Table 1: Assessment Group by Gender (N=22)

	Gender	
	Females	Males
Assessment Group	(n=21)	(n=1)
Human Services	9	0
Faith	3	1
Law Enforcement	4	0
Children and Youth	5	0

Table 2: Assessment Group by Length of Time in Memphis (N=22)

	Years in Memphis		
	0-10 yrs.	11-20 yrs.	21+ yrs.
Assessment Group	(n=3)	(n=6)	(n=13)
Human Services	1	1	7
Faith	1	1	2
Law Enforcement	--	1	3
Children and Youth	1	3	1

Table 3: Assessment Group by Age (N=22)

	Age			
	20-29 yrs.	30-39 yrs.	40-49 yrs.	50-59 yrs.
Assessment Group	(n=1)	(n=5)	(n=7)	(n=9)
Human Services	1	1	2	5
Faith	--	1	3	--
Law Enforcement	--	1	--	3
Children and Youth	--	2	2	1

Table 4: Assessment Group by Education (N=22)

	Level of Education			
	H Sch.+	BA/BS	MA/MS	Ph.D./M.D.
Assessment Group	(n=5)	(n=4)	(n=9)	(n=4)
Human Services	2	1	4	2
Faith	1	1	1	1
Law Enforcement	2	1	1	--
Children and Youth	--	1	3	1

Table 5: Assessment Group by Marital Status (N=22)

	Marital Status			
	Single	Married	Divorced	Widowed
Assessment Group	(n=7)	(n=11)	(n=3)	(n=1)
Human Services	3	4	1	1
Faith	1	3	--	--
Law Enforcement	1	2	1	--
Children and Youth	2	2	1	--

Community Assessment

Community assessment discussions were held in focus groups, which were the primary methodological tool used to obtain participants' perceptions of domestic violence. The focus groups provided participants with a safe place to share their perspectives and with a competent facilitator skilled in the group process. The strength in using focus groups is that they systematically allow each member to share information that builds on the discussion, and they allow a diverse group of people to share their insight on an issue (Krueger, 1994). Each focus group session was audiotaped to ensure the accuracy of the information obtained and systematic data analysis.

A member of the IDAAVC Steering Committee facilitated each focus group session, using the same semi-structured questionnaire to solicit comments and guide the discussion. Each focus group lasted from 1 1/2 to 2 hours in length. Based on the project's objectives, the questionnaire included open-ended questions categorized as follows: (1) types of domestic violence and the relationship between domestic violence and other social issues, (2) causes of domestic violence, (3) factors contributing to domestic violence, (4) consequences of domestic violence, (5) solutions to addressing domestic violence, and (6) barriers to addressing domestic violence solutions.

Data analysis of the focus group sessions involved several steps. First, the audiotapes were transcribed with transcriptions produced for each focus group. Second, the transcriptions were compared with the groups' discussions, which had been captured on paper in the seven areas described above by scribes or group reporters. Third, an independent researcher analyzed the data. Fourth, themes were identified, coded, and plotted on a large flipchart. Fifth, once the themes were identified, they were collapsed into the six categories described above. Data were analyzed within each group and later, across each focus group. Sixth, reports were produced for each group, which were reviewed by each group's facilitator and scribe.



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Children and Youth—

Domestic violence is an issue that affects both the family and the community. This particular subject is often described as one that is cyclical in nature and can influence future generations. For this reason, the perspectives of practitioners who work in different settings with children and youth were seen as an important element in the discussion surrounding domestic violence in the African American community.

Five female participants constituted the Children and Youth focus group and responded to the interview questions. They represented a range of professions within the field, including two school social workers, a school psychologist, a school guidance counselor, and a regional administrator for the Department of Children's Services.

Participants in the Memphis area Children and Youth focus group were asked what they associate with the subject of violence in the African American community. Group members noted several types of violence, including rape, gun violence, violence towards animals, violence towards homosexuals, and physical abuse. Sexual and physical violence towards and amongst youth were their main concerns.

The respondents believed domestic violence to be a significant problem that often goes underreported or undocumented in the community. They cited feelings of shame, guilt, or even acceptance on the part of the victim as factors that distort the real frequency of violent incidents. According to the group, many victims are prone to believe that abuse is deserved because of failure or inadequacy on their part. Another factor the group discussed as masking the extent of violence was misdiagnosis of childhood behavioral problems. These respondents spoke from their experience in dealing with children who act out and who may be treated for individual behavioral issues or attention deficit disorder. Instead, the group stated, the behavior may be symptomatic of a different problem. Angry or aggressive behavior from a child can be an indicator that violence is the norm at home.

Violence was viewed as one of the top three problems in the African American community, along with poverty and substance abuse. The group believed all three issues to be interrelated. The breakdown of the family, the ability to successfully work with other people, and the ability of the individual to cope in difficult circumstances were also tied to the problem of violence.