

The background of the entire page is a collage of African art. It features several masks with intricate carvings and patterns. One mask on the right has a large, textured beard. Another mask on the left has a wide, open mouth. In the center, there is a small figure of a person. At the bottom, there is a large drum with a textured surface. The overall color scheme is warm, with shades of yellow, orange, and brown.

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

Conversations About Domestic Violence And  
Other Issues Affecting Their Community

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*Seattle, Washington, 2004*

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



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# Executive Summary

Oliver J. Williams, Ph.D.



Understanding the importance of deciphering the perceptions of African Americans towards domestic violence, the City of Seattle established the Community Insights Project and commissioned the Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community (IDVAAC) to develop this report detailing the opinions of diverse groups of African Americans towards domestic violence. The purpose of the Community Insights Project is to secure information on African Americans' perceptions about domestic violence and to identify solutions to address this problem within African American communities across the country. The project seeks to inform a wider audience of the intricacies of domestic violence in the lives of African Americans, particularly in relation to other compounding social problems.

In 1998 IDVAAC started a national effort to learn more about community perspectives associated with domestic violence. Since then, IDVAAC has convened focus groups with community members across nine cities: San Francisco and Oakland, California; Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota; Memphis, Tennessee; Birmingham, Alabama; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Detroit, Michigan; and Seattle, Washington. Representing diverse geographic territories, the project provides insight into the perceptions of the types, causes, contributing factors, consequences, solutions and barriers to ending domestic violence in the African-American community. This report focuses on the perceptions of community members in Seattle, Washington.

Prior to this effort, literature on this subject was limited to incidence and prevalence rates. The current collection of literature lacks substantive information concerning the causes and consequences of domestic violence, in the African-American community and specific solutions to the barriers that inhibit the reduction of violence in these communities (Hampton & Yung, 1996; Oliver, 1998; Richie, 1996; West, 1999; Williams, 1993; Williams, 1998; Wyatt, et al., 2000). The gap between African Americans and their understanding of domestic violence is enormous (Bent-Goodley, 2001; Bent-Goodley, 1998; West, 1998; White, 1994). Studies have reported that African Americans experience domestic violence at greater levels than White Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos (Rennison & Welchans, 2000; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Yet, due to methodological shortcomings of studies that have not included African Americans or simply have not demonstrated an understanding of the complexity of the African-American experience, the research on this population continues to warrant vast knowledge development and skill illumination (Lockhart, 1985; Williams & Becker, 1994). In addition, the limited understanding of the convergence of race with socioeconomic status and other critical variables impedes a full understanding of the prevalence of domestic violence in the African-American community. The result of having a limited understanding of African-American experiences with domestic violence is policy that does not respond to the needs of the population and, in some cases, can be harmful to the African-American community (Bent-Goodley, 2004).

From the literature, community interviews, and this current report, the authors have identified key issues that inhibit African-American community responses to domestic violence. The first issue is the double bind that African American women face when reporting and confronting domestic violence within their families and the community. The double bind has been defined as “the tendency of African American woman to withstand abuse, subordinate her feelings and concerns associated with safety, and make a conscious self-sacrifice for what she perceives as the greater good of the community but to her own physical, psychological, and spiritual detriment” (Asbury, 1993, Bent-Goodley, 2001, p. 323). Many African Americans forego reporting abuse in an attempt to protect their intimate partner from abuse by police or loss of income through imprisonment or incarceration. The result is that the woman and her child(ren) are at an increased risk for violence and often do not report violence until the lethality of the abuse cannot be withstood. These concerns may also influence her reluctance to seek assistance through other domestic violence resources in an effort “not to put her business in the street.”

Second is the need for culturally competent services, which has been well-documented in literature (Bent-Goodley, 2001; Gondolf & Williams, 2001; Hampton & Yung, 1996; Richie, 1996; West, 1999). Lack of culturally competent services in shelters has resulted in African-American women being less likely to seek shelter and other domestic violence services, even when they recognize the seriousness and lethality of the violence (Asbury, 1993; West, 1999). Workers have been found to treat abuse less seriously and even withhold services due to negative stereotypes of African-American women or the belief that these women are better able to defend themselves by virtue of their race and gender (West, 1999). A national study of batterer’s intervention programs found that these programs are often

geographically inaccessible to African-American men and do not provide culturally relevant curricula that could encourage greater participation and awareness among this population of men (Williams & Becker, 1994). African-American men have been found to have lower completion and participation rates than other men due to the lack of culturally relevant services despite specific recommendations and practices that have been offered to provide culturally competent services for batterers (Gondolf & Williams, 2001).

The third key issue involves discriminatory treatment toward African Americans who experience abuse and seek assistance. Such treatment of African Americans who experience domestic violence can be found throughout the service delivery process, but is particularly visible in the criminal justice and child welfare arenas. African Americans, both men and women, are more likely to be arrested, prosecuted, and imprisoned due to domestic violence than other groups (Richie, 1996; Roberts, 1994). Despite mandatory reporting laws being universal for child abuse and neglect, African Americans are more likely to be arrested than Whites or any other ethnic group (Mills, 1998). African-American women experiencing domestic violence have been found, more likely than other groups of women, to have their children removed from the home even when the circumstances are similar (Bent-Goodley, 2004). Inequitable treatment has been a clear reason why African Americans attempt to remain out of the formal system of care despite the need and, often, desire to seek help.

*The gap between African Americans and their understanding of domestic violence is enormous.*





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to be aware of  
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based  
solutions to  
create change.*

The Community Insights Project attempts to provide a broader picture of African Americans' perceptions and experiences with domestic violence. The following six affinity groups were assembled to share their perspectives related to domestic violence in Seattle's African-American community: (1) Children and Youth Workers, (2) Community Activists, (3) the Faith Community, (4) the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) Community, (5) the Human Services Community, and (6) the Law Enforcement Community. This report, which includes their perspectives and insights relative to domestic violence, is not meant to speak for the entire community, as each individual's experiences are different. It does, however, provide critical insights into the African-American perception of domestic violence in Seattle, Washington.

For practitioners, this report documents community beliefs concerning the need for the following: (1) community cohesion and more self-help mechanisms, (2) culturally based prevention and

intervention services, (3) educational activities for diverse ages and developmental levels, (4) a strengths-based perspective in providing services, and (5) increased training for professionals on this issue. Policymakers will find this report useful in offering recommendations to reduce the problem through the following five areas: (1) increased funding for domestic violence that does not pit organizations against each other and finding ways of ensuring that the funding actually serves the intended population; (2) greater substance abuse and mental health preventive and treatment services; (3) policies that strengthen the individual's ability to be self-sufficient through enhanced job training, employment opportunities, and equity in economic income and wealth; (4) policies that ensure that there is no longer differential treatment in the removal of children and the enforcement of laws due to race, ethnicity, culture, gender, or sexual orientation; and, (5) increased funding for preventive services, to avoid having to use the formal structure to address this issue. Researchers will find this report useful in reinforcing the need for (1) greater research on the intricacy of racism, contemporary oppression and discrimination, and the historical context with domestic violence; (2) additional research on culturally competent models of domestic violence prevention and intervention that focuses on healing; (3) documentation of the differential treatment of African Americans in the law enforcement and child welfare systems as a result of domestic violence.

For citizens, this report emphasizes the need for each of them to be aware of what is happening in their communities and homes and to find comprehensive, strengths-based solutions to create change. The participants have provided the reader with food for thought and an inspiring message: African American communities must strive to eradicate domestic violence issue from our communities. Violence inhibits a community's capacity to care for itself (Williams, 1993).



# Summary of Findings

Findings from the focus group sessions indicate the following:

## **Domestic violence is a problem that is pervasive and connected to other forms of violence.**

The participants in the Seattle, Washington area reported strong connections between domestic violence and other forms of violence—particularly community violence, sexual abuse, child abuse, youth violence, and verbal abuse. The respondents emphasized the need for African Americans to develop their own definition(s) of domestic violence as opposed to using the language and definition of White communities.

## **Racism and persistent discrimination greatly impact domestic violence in the African-American community.**

The participants felt that the impact of racism was extremely important to understanding why domestic violence occurs in the African-American community. Inequities with job opportunities, lack of equal pay, and poor education are all consequences of racism and contemporary discrimination. Internalized oppression and feelings of powerlessness and worthlessness were described as primary causes of and contributing factors to domestic violence among African Americans.

## **The lack of community cohesion was described as a major problem for addressing domestic violence in Seattle, Washington's African American community.**

From feeling a lack of accountability among community members to address domestic violence, to a lack of community willingness to work together and build consensus, focus group participants stated that non-existent and fragile relationships among community members are a major reason for domestic violence.

## **Inadequate resources, particularly the lack of preventive services, were cited as a major barrier to addressing domestic violence.**

The participants indicated that there were limited resources to address domestic violence, as well as issues seen as compounding or causing domestic violence, such as substance abuse and mental illness. Participants also highlighted the need to invest greater resources in providing culturally competent services that truly meet the needs of the population and ensure that individuals providing these services both know the community and are invested in community change.

## **Lack of funding and the competition for scarce resources were also discussed as major issues in Seattle, Washington.**

The participants echoed that there are limited funding opportunities to address this issue in Seattle. The participants described incidences of discrimination related to the implementation of projects, whereby money acquired to serve the community is not always spent in the community. The participants also stated issues with the competitiveness of funding that causes organizations to vie for funding rather than work together.

## **Solutions to address domestic violence must be holistic, comprehensive, and culturally based.**

The groups strongly felt that the community could resolve these issues with the proper supports and attitudes. The participants saw a critical role for the church and other entities to better address domestic violence and asserted that, to be effective, responses to domestic violence must be multi-faceted and address other social ills that impact the problem, such as substance abuse and racism.



*The lack of community cohesion was described as a major problem for addressing domestic violence in Seattle, Washington's African American community.*





Tricia B. Bent-Goodley, Ph.D.

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



## Introduction

This report provides perspectives on domestic violence from community members in Seattle, Washington. While the participants all represent different professional backgrounds, points of view and experiences, their message was essentially the same—that domestic violence must stop, particularly in the African-American community. The participants were heroic in their willingness to share personal information and professional insights. The respondents were open and engaged throughout the focus groups and provided specific examples of what African Americans can do about domestic violence in their own communities. With such limited empirical information about African-American perceptions of domestic violence (Bent-Goodley, 1998), this report and the Community Insights Project will go a long way towards providing a more comprehensive understanding of how African Americans view domestic violence and identifying solutions most relevant to the unique needs of diverse communities.

Four clear messages emerge from this report: (1) one must understand the historical context and ravages of contemporary racism and discrimination

address this complex issue; (3) one cannot address domestic violence without understanding and addressing issues of racism, substance abuse, mental health, unemployment, and homelessness, as well as similarly competing social issues; and (4) solutions rest in culturally competent interventions that are delivered by skilled and personally invested individuals.

## Organization of Report

The core components of this report include: (a) a representation of findings across the six focus groups; (b) session summaries, using quotes to reinforce focus group findings; and (c) recommendations emanating from the findings. The first half of this report represents the respondents' collective responses to the focus group questions. In doing so, the report allows the reader to see the collective wisdom across each group categorized in response to types of domestic violence, causes, factors, consequences, solutions and barriers. The session summaries present the findings from each specific focus group: Children and Youth; Community Activist; Faith; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender; Human Services; and Law Enforcement. Quotes from the participants will appear in this section of the report to reinforce the significance of the respondents' voices in the process of formulating the report. Finally, policy recommendations are offered to respond to the issues illuminated from the across group and session summary findings.

## Community Demographics

Of Seattle's 563,374 residents, 47,541, or 8.4%, are African American (City of Seattle, 2003a). The median family income is \$45,736, with African Americans having a smaller median

that continue to proliferate in African-American relationships and communities today; (2) the community should be at the center of the effort to find solutions to



family income of \$32,042 (Washington State Office of Financial Management, 2002). Ninety-three percent of persons over the age of 25 possess a high school diploma and 36% have a Bachelor's Degree or higher (City of Seattle, 2003b). According to the 2000 Census, 64,068 persons, or 11.8% of the population, live below the poverty level, with 10,231 or 23% being African American (Washington State Office of Financial Management, 2002). African Americans have twice the unemployment rate of all other residents ages 16 and older in Seattle (Washington State Office of Financial Management, 2002).

## Methodology

Focus groups were utilized as the primary methodological tool to assess participants' perceptions of domestic violence. The focus groups provided participants with an opportunity to share their perspectives in a safe place with a competent facilitator skilled in the group process. The strength in using focus groups is that it systematically allows each member to share information that builds on the discussion, and it allows for 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.

IDVAAC Steering Committee members facilitated the focus group sessions, 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.

Data analysis of the focus group sessions took place in several steps. First, the

audiotapes for each focus group were transcribed. Second, an independent researcher analyzed the data, including a comprehensive review of the transcripts and the audiotapes. Third, themes were identified, coded, and plotted on a large flipchart. Fourth, once the themes were identified, they were collapsed into the six categories described in the previous paragraph. Data was analyzed within each focus group and later, across focus groups.

## Participants

There were a total of 51 participants among the six focus groups. The average age of the respondents was 43.5, with ages ranging from 25 to 66 years old. Sixty-six percent of the sample was composed of women and the remaining 33% of the participants were men. Over one-third of the participants possessed a Bachelors Degree (37%) and another third had earned a Masters or Juris Doctor degree (31%), one-fifth of the participants had some college experience (21%), five percent of the participants possessed a high school diploma, and six percent of the participants did not respond to this question. Thirty five percent of the participants were married, 33% were single, 23% were divorced, 6% were separated, and 3% did not respond to the question. On average, the participants had been residents of the community for 19.5 years, ranging from 1 year to 51 years as a resident. The participants had served in their current role in the community for an average of 13 years, ranging from 5 days to 50 years in their current capacity. There was great diversity with regard to the roles the participants played in the community: community organizer, advocate, program/shelter director, administrative supervisor, legislative assistant, social worker, attorney, judge, case manager, entrepreneur, outreach worker, therapist, government worker, nurse practitioner, probation officer, police officer, social work educator, teacher, researcher, minister, and metro operator.



# Across Group Findings

## Types of Violence

The following types of violence were identified: (1) community violence, which included rape, homicide, youth and gang violence, prostitution, and sex trading; (2) family violence, which included domestic violence or partner abuse, child abuse, childhood sexual abuse, elder abuse, animal abuse, sibling abuse, and dating violence; and (3) social violence, which included hate crimes, police brutality and police violence, and violence stemming from drugs and mental illness. Family violence, as distinguished by the participants, included sexual assault, verbal abuse, emotional abuse and spiritual abuse. Police brutality and police violence were highlighted as types of violence experienced in the community.

The participants emphasized that all forms of abuse were debilitating; however, the respondents stated that verbal and emotional abuse can have a long-term negative impact that often goes unrecognized or unaddressed by others. The respondents also stated that the issue of secrecy around child sexual abuse and domestic violence was problematic. The respondents emphasized that many African Americans suffer child sexual abuse and domestic violence in silence and keep the secret of abuse as opposed to reaching out for help and exposing the violence. Consequently, respondents stressed that these types of violence might be more difficult to identify.

**Table 1: Types of Violence**

Community violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Rape</li><li>• Homicide</li><li>• Youth violence</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gang violence</li><li>• Prostitution</li><li>• Sex trading</li></ul>
Family violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Domestic violence</li><li>• Partner abuse</li><li>• Child abuse</li><li>• Childhood sexual abuse</li><li>• Elder abuse</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Animal abuse</li><li>• Sibling abuse</li><li>• Dating violence</li><li>• Sexual assault</li><li>• Verbal abuse</li><li>• Emotional abuse</li><li>• Spiritual abuse</li></ul>
Social violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Hate crimes</li><li>• Police brutality and police violence</li><li>• Violence stemming from drugs and mental illness</li></ul>	

## Defining Domestic Violence

The participants stated that the definition of domestic violence is adopted from White culture and that there is power in the ability to define an issue. Consequently, the respondents emphasized the need for African

Americans to develop their own definition(s) of domestic violence in an effort to capture the unique issues and circumstances reflective of racism and oppression experienced by this population.

*Currently, very little is known about the voices within the African American community and the perspectives they hold about the issue of domestic violence in all its forms.*



## Connection between Domestic Violence and Other Issues

The participants saw a connection between domestic violence and other social issues. Describing what they termed as a “continuum of violence,” the respondents stated that the issues linking the different types of violence often go unrecognized or not addressed by those who want to stop domestic violence. First, the participants agreed that the link between substance abuse and domestic violence needed to be addressed as a necessary component of addressing domestic violence. Second, respondents stated that the stereotypes of African Americans needed to be better explored to address differential treatment of African Americans due to their race. Third, the respondents stated that issues of socioeconomic status and differences according to class needed to be addressed. Specifically, the respondents stated that due to class differences, some middle-class African Americans did not necessarily understand the culture of economically disenfranchised populations. The participants felt that many middle-class African Americans attempt to disassociate from African Americans with less financial means, which results in middle-class African Americans being detached from the realities of being poor, living with fewer resources, and potentially experiencing less desirable living conditions. Fourth, the respondents also identified the connection between domestic violence and child abuse in the African-American community as being inadequately explored, understood, or documented.

## Causes of Domestic Violence

For the purpose of this report, “cause” is defined as a condition, occurrence, or circumstance that was identified by focus group members as directly resulting in domestic violence. The groups identified a number of causes of domestic violence.

These causes include: (1) having limited support systems for both victims and perpetrators of violence, including the lack of culturally relevant services and preventive services; (2) feeling out of control or the inability to control life events, including feelings of worthlessness; (3) having to negotiate living in a racist society, including issues of internalized oppression, defining manhood through violence, and the emphasis on survival; (4) societal influences, such as negative media images of African Americans and the impact of rap and hip-hop culture on promoting negative stereotypes of African Americans, particularly women; (5) lack of information about domestic violence and the changing laws relative to domestic violence; (6) limited economic opportunities; (7) substance abuse; and (8) a disconnection from the spiritual realm.

### Limited Support Systems

The participants emphasized the poor support system for survivors of domestic violence, particularly for those abusers who want to get help in Seattle. The respondents stated that there are no preventive services available in Seattle to help stop abuse before it starts or to educate the community about this issue before it develops into a problem. The participants also stated that services are either non-existent, or they are not culturally competent and therefore are not considered as an option for community members. In addition, the participants indicated that services are delivered by people who do not look like them nor have a real interest in seeing the conditions of the individual and/or the community change. Consequently, issues with service provision extend beyond the limited number of services and include much broader issues of not having indigenous service providers and administrators, to not having programs specifically designed to meet the unique needs, circumstances, and history of African Americans.

*One cause of domestic violence is feeling out of control or the inability to control life events, including feelings of worthlessness*



**Table 2: Causes of Domestic Violence**

Limited support systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of culturally competent programs</li> <li>• Lack of preventive services</li> </ul>
Feeling out of control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inability to control life events</li> <li>• Feelings of worthlessness</li> </ul>
Living in a racist society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internalized oppression</li> <li>• Defining manhood through violence</li> <li>• Emphasis on survival</li> <li>• Negotiating racism</li> </ul>
Societal influences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negative media images</li> <li>• Impact of hip-hop culture and rap</li> </ul>
Lack of information about domestic violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changing laws</li> <li>• Resources available</li> <li>• Defining what constitutes domestic violence</li> </ul>
Limited economic opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of employment</li> <li>• Poor educational systems</li> <li>• Inequity in pay and wealth</li> <li>• Poor housing</li> </ul>
Substance abuse	
Disconnection from spiritual realm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not being connected to a higher power</li> </ul>



### **Feeling out of Control**

The inability to control one's fate was also described as an issue that links domestic violence with community violence. The participants stated that having to negotiate living with racism, as described below, led to internalizing oppression and consequently feeling as if one has to use violence to control her/his situation. They stressed that violence, in this context, is often a result of trying to survive or defining one's manhood through the use of violence and the power derived from controlling someone else.

### **Negotiating Living in a Racist World**

The causes for domestic violence centered on the challenges of having to negotiate living in a racist world that continues to

discriminate against African Americans. The participants saw a critical link between internalized oppression, domestic violence, and community violence. They stated that internalized oppression breeds low self-esteem, self-hate, frustration, and feelings of powerlessness.

### **Lack of Information about Domestic Violence**

The groups stated that there is limited information available about domestic violence in Seattle, including what domestic violence is, as well as what resources are available to help someone involved in a domestic violence situation. The participants stated that African Americans in Seattle are not informed about new laws related to domestic violence and simply do not understand



what constitutes domestic violence. Consequently, the respondents stated that many individuals simply do not know that they are experiencing or perpetrating domestic violence.

### **Limited Economic Opportunities**

Limited economic opportunities were stressed as a cause of domestic violence in nearly every focus group. The participants strongly asserted that the lack of employment, poor educational systems, inequity in pay and wealth, and poor financial situations caused violence in the home. Also, according to the participants, the tendency by some to identify the ability to provide for one's family as a critical element of manhood can be damaging for men who are unable to obtain needed goods and services. The tremendous impact of poverty and limited economic opportunities was seen as devastating to the African-American community.



### **Societal Influences**

The participants identified negative media influences, such as portrayals of African Americans as deviant, violent, and criminal. The respondents stated that these portrayals have an impact on the community and are linked to violent actions. There were mixed feelings about the impact of rap and hip-hop music as causes of domestic violence. Some participants stated that rap and hip-hop culture is more of a reflection of the reality of the experiences of individuals living in Seattle and other communities. Other participants stated that rap and, particularly music videos, shape opinions about African-American women that is demoralizing and harmful towards reinforcing negative stereotypes of Black women. There was agreement that some of the language used in rap music and some of the images of African-American women in music videos promote negative stereotypes of how Black women should behave and want to be treated, thus contributing to domestic violence.

### **Substance Abuse**

The participants identified substance abuse as a cause of domestic violence. In essence, the respondents asserted that if drug abuse and the drug culture were addressed, domestic violence and the severity of violence would decline.

### **Disconnection from the Spiritual Realm**

The groups stated that the community's disconnection with spirituality also caused domestic violence. The participants expressed that in addition to not participate in religious activities as often, many in the African American community are also disconnected from a Higher Power, and consequently, may not have a conscience to regulate violence.

*Many in the African American community are also disconnected from a Higher Power, and consequently, may not have a conscience to regulate violence.*

## Contributing Factors to Domestic Violence

For the purpose of this report, a factor is defined as any component that may contribute to or increase the likelihood of a domestic violence occurrence. There were a number of factors discussed as contributing to domestic violence in the African-American community: (1) structural issues, such as a poor educational system, lack of parental nurturing, poor housing, and a high incidence of mental illness; (2) the historical context, which identifies historical events perceived as impacting violence among African Americans; (3) the silence of abuse, and (4) the lack of community cohesion. These issues are summarized in the following table:

**Table 3: Factors Contributing to Domestic Violence**

Structural issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Poor educational system</li><li>• Poor housing</li><li>• Lack of parental nurturing</li><li>• High incidence of mental illness</li></ul>
Historical context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Slavery</li><li>• Jim Crowism</li><li>• Remnants of discrimination</li></ul>
Silence of abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Negative stereotypes</li><li>• The need to protect African American men</li><li>• Inequitable treatment from police and the child welfare system</li></ul>
Lack of community cohesion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Feeling like outsiders</li><li>• Lack of communal spirit</li></ul>

*Some stated that there is a decline in the number of available African-American men, resulting in heterosexual women feeling as if they need to stay with a partner, even if he is abusive, to avoid being alone.*

### Structural Issues

The persistent and insidious nature of racism was deemed evident in disparate treatment in the areas of economics, employment, and education. The respondents felt that in addition to not having healed from historical oppression, African Americans continued to face sometimes hidden forms of racism and discrimination. The participants emphasized that it was not just one structural issue that was a factor for domestic violence in the African-American community, but it was the cumulative impact and stress of having poor educational systems and inadequate housing that was a factor for domestic

violence. The respondents also stated that there was a lack of parental nurturing whereby parents are not monitoring and teaching their children as in previous generations. The participants asserted that many young people are being left to raise themselves, causing problems with self-esteem and contributing to children lacking a bond with the larger community. The participants also stated that the high incidence of mental illness was a factor to consider. Respondents emphasized that there seems to be a lack of willingness to recognize mental illness; thus, it goes untreated. The participants felt that this untreated population posed a threat for increased domestic violence.



## **The Historical Context**

The historical context was deemed as absolutely essential to understanding why domestic violence occurs in the African-American community. The history of the enslavement of African people was recounted in every focus group as being a centerpiece for the use of violence in the home and community. While some participants urged moving beyond the past, the majority of the group members were strong in their acknowledgment of the critical impact of slavery, Jim Crowism, and other forms of discrimination, the remnants of which continue to impact how African Americans relate to each other today. The participants stated that, without having an understanding of the historical context as a factor for domestic violence in the African-American community, one is limited in her/his ability to serve the population. For example, some participants stated that there is a decline in the number of available African-American men, resulting in heterosexual women feeling as if they need to stay with a partner, even if he is abusive, to avoid being alone. On the reverse, the same participants felt that the wide range of options of partners for heterosexual African-American men makes them feel as if they can treat a woman any way they choose, because they can always move on to the next willing woman.

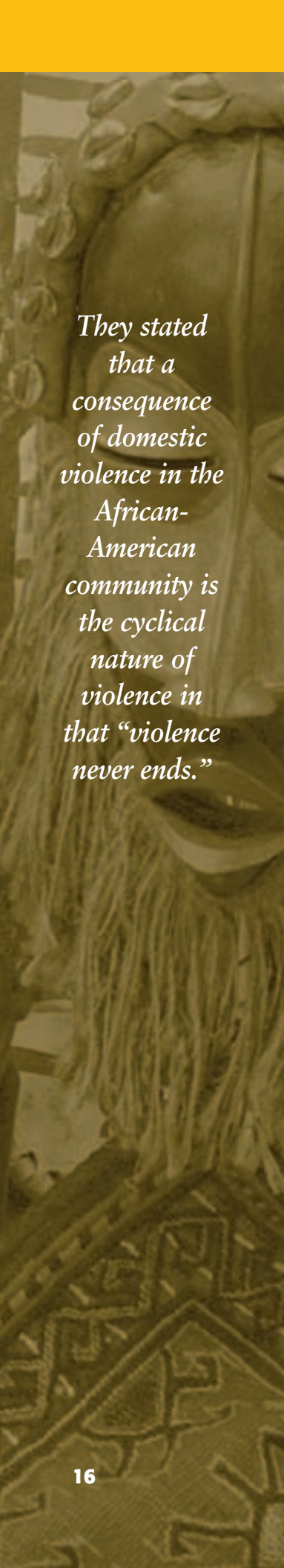
## **The Silence of Abuse**

The silence related to domestic violence was seen as a major contributing factor among African Americans. The participants discussed a number of concrete reasons for maintaining silence. First, the respondents stated that many families were silent about domestic violence because they did not want to perpetuate negative stereotypes of African-American men, women, relationships, or the larger community. Thus, domestic violence was seen as an embarrassment to everyone and another way that White people can demean and denigrate African Americans. A second explanation for the silence in the African-American community

was the need for African-American women to protect their African-American male partners. The participants described African-American women as feeling an historical pressure, passed down through the generations, to protect African-American men at all costs, including that of their own health and well being. Furthermore, the respondents stated that there was an expectation that African-American women would make this sacrifice willingly. The third reason given for keeping silent about domestic violence was to prevent having to interact with the criminal justice system, particularly law enforcement. While the need to try to keep African-American men out of the hands of police was described, there was also considerable attention given to the inequity experienced by African-American women at the hands of police. Consequently, the need to avoid law enforcement was seen as necessary for both genders. This notion was deemed true in same-sex relationships as well. The final reason given for maintaining secrecy had to do with the fear that children would be removed from their homes. The participants stated that children were more likely to be removed from African-American homes compared to White homes when domestic violence was discovered.

## **Lack of Community Cohesion**

The final major factor was described as the lack of community cohesion in Seattle. Participants talked about the difficulty of becoming a part of the Seattle community and feeling like outsiders despite being of the same race. The respondents also stated that diversity within the community was not recognized or respected, particularly for those in the LGBT community. The participants described a fear of talking to children in the community or on the street and the lack of community involvement by elders due to their fears of young people. Each group described this lack of communal spirit as feeding into a system that allows violence to take place in the community and the family without accountability.



*They stated that a consequence of domestic violence in the African-American community is the cyclical nature of violence in that “violence never ends.”*

## Consequences of Domestic Violence

The participants identified a number of consequences of domestic violence in the African-American community: (1) the cyclical nature of the violence, (2) the higher incarceration rate of African American men and women, (3) the increased risk of child removal, and (4) loss of income. These issues are summarized in the following table.

**Table 4: Consequences of Domestic Violence**

Cyclical nature of violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Perpetuation of negative stereotypes</li><li>• Perpetuation of silence</li><li>• Acceptance of violence</li></ul>
Higher incarceration rate of African-American men and women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Harsher treatment</li><li>• African-American women not perceived as victims</li><li>• Violence in same-sex relationships not perceived as being as serious as in heterosexual relationships where the woman is the victim</li><li>• Bias when partner is White</li></ul>
Increased risk of child removal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Child removal as the rule, not the exception</li></ul>
Loss of income	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Taking time off from work</li><li>• Increased potential for unemployment</li></ul>

### The Cyclical Nature of Domestic Violence

The participants stated that a consequence of domestic violence in the African-American community is the cyclical nature of violence in that “violence never ends.” The respondents asserted that the negative stereotypes of African Americans are perpetuated through domestic violence, as well as through the silence that surrounds this issue in African-American communities. The tendency of the African-American community to cloak domestic violence under a shroud of secrecy gives birth to a sense of shame. This persistent silence, coupled with shame, engenders a culture and attitude of acceptance toward domestic violence, which, in turn, feeds back into negative stereotypes and, consequently, recommences the cycle of violence. The consequence of the perpetuation of

negative stereotypes and silence, then, is a cycle of violence centered on shame and acceptance of abuse.

### The Higher Incarceration of African-American Men and Women

The participants emphasized that the primary response to domestic violence in Seattle appeared to be through the criminal justice system as opposed to being through the natural community networks or the church. The participants viewed this response as being particularly problematic due to disparities in treatment for both African-American men and women in the justice system and because of their mistrust of law enforcement officers. The participants stated that African-American men are perceived as violent and consequently receive harsher punishments than other populations. Group members



felt that African-American women are perceived as not being victims and are consequently ignored in the justice and social service systems leading to increased risk for homelessness. The participants appeared to feel this way due to persistent arrests of African American women and limited resources available for this population when attempting to obtain services. Overall, they stressed that social institutions treat African-American men and women more harshly than any other population.

Regarding gay and lesbian African Americans experiencing domestic violence, law enforcement officers were often described as believing that violence is “not that bad” among lesbian partners and consequently, do not treat the violence as seriously. The participants shared that those lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons who are African-American and who are battered by White partners are not treated in the same way since the battering partner is White. Conversely, an African-American same-sex partner might be arrested for violence if he/she is accused of battering a White partner.

The ultimate consequence of domestic violence was identified as the high incarceration rate of African-American men, in particular, and, increasingly, African-American women.

### **Increased Risk of Child Removal**

Another major consequence was the increased risk of child removal in African-American homes where domestic violence

is experienced. The participants emphasized that African-American children are removed from their homes to a larger degree than White children when domestic violence is involved. Some of the participants stressed that child removal is the rule, not the exception. The participants stated that this consequence leads to fewer African Americans, particularly women, being willing to seek help for domestic violence.

### **Loss of Income**

Loss of income was considered another major consequence. The idea that having to take off time from work to go to court or obtain group treatment was seen as a consequence for domestic violence in the African-American community. The participants stated that this is, again, a disincentive for many African Americans in Seattle to report domestic violence or seek assistance for such services. Losing financial sources and potentially employment was seen as a large consequence that actually deterred seeking help.



## **Solutions**

The participants identified a number of solutions to respond to domestic violence in the African-American community, particularly in Seattle. The respondents cited the need for: (1) culturally based social education; (2) increased community-based, developmentally appropriate domestic violence programs; (3) use of community networks; and (4) structural issues. These suggestions are summarized in the following table:

**Table 5: Solutions**

Culturally based social education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Life skills</li><li>• Conflict resolution skills</li><li>• Culturally rooted interventions</li><li>• Greater accountability</li></ul>
Appropriate domestic violence programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Community-based services</li><li>• Healing groups, conversational groups, self-esteem building groups</li><li>• Use of churches</li><li>• Services across the life span</li><li>• Developmentally and age appropriate services</li></ul>
Use of community networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Resources in the community</li><li>• Overemphasis on deficit perspective</li><li>• Need for a strengths-based perspective</li></ul>
Structural issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Discrimination and racism</li><li>• Limited economic and employment opportunities</li><li>• Poor educational system</li><li>• Differential treatment in criminal justice and child welfare systems</li></ul>

### **Culturally-Based Social Education**

First, the need for culturally based social education was described as a critical solution. In addition to life skills and conflict resolution skills development, the participants urged the Seattle community to develop more culturally-rooted interventions that would help to change the mindset of residents. Interventions suggested include: (1) the development of rites of passage programs as a means of restoring self-pride and educating the community about domestic violence, and (2) the creation of parent training initiatives to restore parental nurturing and responsibility. The respondents emphasized that these types of programs could speak to the need for greater accountability in communities and families to address domestic violence.

### **Increased Community-Based, Developmentally Appropriate Programs**

Second, the participants emphasized the need to have domestic violence education programs in the community across the life span that are developmentally and age appropriate. The respondents mentioned the need to conduct workshops on domestic violence prevention and define healthy relationships beginning as early as middle school and continuing through to the aging population.

The participants emphasized the need for increased community-based domestic violence services that would create safe places that individuals could come to begin the healing process. The group members emphasized the use of healing groups, conversational groups, and self-esteem building groups that would be led by skilled and culturally-competent counselors. The use of churches, as a





place where Christ could be at the center of the intervention process, was suggested as a venue for healing groups.

### Use of Community Networks

The next solution rested in the need to stop looking outside of the community. The participants talked about the tremendous resources in the community and said that, instead of looking at the community and the issue from a deficit perspective, leaders needed to take the community's strengths into account. For example, the idea of using the church as a place to address domestic violence was discussed. They felt that churches have been overlooked as a resource and safe haven.

### Addressing Structural Issues


Finally, the groups shared the idea that any solution to end domestic violence must address the underlying issues that support the violence. The participants emphasized that issues such as discrimination, racism, limited economic and employment opportunities, a poor educational system, and differential treatment of African Americans in the criminal justice and child welfare systems, need to be addressed to be responsive to domestic violence. The respondents shared that to merely target domestic violence in isolation is neither holistic nor comprehensive enough to fully address the problem.

## Barriers

While the focus groups identified a number of barriers to addressing domestic violence, each of the barriers fit into one of four themes: (1) the competition between domestic violence programs, (2) having a deficit view of the community's capacity, (3) the mistrust between community members and those outside the community, and (4) the lack of services that are culturally relevant. The barriers are represented in the table below.

**Table 6: Barriers**

Competition among community programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Fighting for funding</li><li>• Not working together</li></ul>
Deficit perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lack of recognition of community strengths, resources, and inherent networks</li><li>• Overemphasis on deficiencies and problems</li><li>• Looking outside of community for answers</li></ul>
Mistrust within the Seattle community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Mistrust within community</li><li>• Mistrust of outsiders</li><li>• Lack of community cohesion</li></ul>
Lack of culturally competent services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lack of services</li><li>• Lack of culturally competent services</li><li>• Staffing not reflective of target population</li><li>• Absence of preventive services</li></ul>



### **Competition among Community Programs**

The participants emphasized that competition among community programs and agencies in the Seattle area as being a barrier to addressing domestic violence. The participants shared that many of the programs fought amongst themselves for funding opportunities and thus, did not work together to address domestic violence and other pertinent issues. This concern was emphasized in each of the focus groups as being a primary reason for not having better addressed this and other issues in the community.

### **Deficit Perspective**

The second barrier noted was the failure of the community to recognize its strengths, resources, and inherent networks and, instead, overemphasize its deficiencies and problems. The participants asserted that far too often, leadership looked outside the community to address domestic violence and other

issues. The participants stated that the community was oftentimes perceived in a negative fashion and, consequently, its members were treated in a disparate or subservient manner. The group felt that having a deficit perspective of the community and buying into negative stereotypes of African Americans was a serious barrier to addressing domestic violence.

### **Mistrust within the Seattle Community**

The third barrier identified was the mistrust within the Seattle community. The participants emphasized that mistrust is directed both within the community and towards outsiders attempting to come into the community. Participants talked about the mistrust between youth and elders and the lack of community cohesion between the young and aging populations, new and more established members of the community, and service providers and community members. The respondents further stated that the mistrust extends towards those coming from outside the community, regardless of an “outsiders” desire to help respond to domestic violence.

### **Lack of Culturally Competent Services**

Another barrier discussed was the lack of services, particularly those that are culturally competent. While earlier stated as a cause of domestic violence in the African-American community, the participants heavily identified the lack of culturally competent services as a barrier to addressing domestic violence within the community. Due to the participants’ emphasis of this consideration, it appears as a barrier in this section. The participants emphasized that there are a limited number of services in the community to address domestic violence and that many of the services offered are neither culturally relevant nor staffed with individuals that look like the participants. These issues were perceived as barriers to seeking and fully utilizing treatment resources. The participants also emphasized that preventive domestic violence services do not appear to exist and that those facing abuse receive help only after coming to the attention of the criminal justice system, which Seattle’s African-American community saw as being overutilized.





# Session Summaries: Within Group

The following section provides summaries of the six community focus groups held in Seattle, Washington. It should be noted that there was some variability from group to group. Some group members emphasized a particular area during the discussion that may not have been emphasized in another group discussion. Consequently, the session summaries vary in length and focus. Quotations from group members are included to share the voices of the group members in the narrative. The six groups are: (1) Children and Youth, (2) Community Activist, (3) Faith, (4) Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender, (5) Human Services, and (6) Law Enforcement. Again, the findings are categorized into the group's perception of types of violence, causes and consequences of domestic violence, contributing factors to domestic violence, barriers, and solutions to ending domestic violence.

## Children and Youth Focus Group

### Types of Violence

The members of the Children and Youth focus group were quickly able to list a number of different types of violence that take place in the African-American community. The participants identified police brutality, domestic violence, parent-to-child violence, sibling violence, youth violence, gang violence, and rape. The respondents strongly stated that the definition of domestic violence needs to be developed by African Americans for the African-American community as opposed to using definitions derived from White organizations. The definition was seen as critical to fully understanding the dynamics and issues of domestic violence as it relates to African Americans.

*"It's hard for them [teenagers] to gauge what's violent behavior. 'Oh, he slapped me.' They don't see that as violent. But if he put her in the hospital, that was violence to her."*

Members of this group emphasized the rise of females fighting males outside of intimate relationships. The respondents felt that young women were asserting themselves more often to ensure that they would not be victims.

*"I'm seeing more and more domestic violence play out in youth relationships and the need to control. I'm seeing a lot of male-female violence but I'm seeing females as perpetrators as well, but I see more male perpetrators overall. I see the need for young women to fight back or [assert that] 'I'm not gonna take that.'"*

### Causes of Violence

The causes for domestic violence were identified as (1) lack of community cohesion, (2) the influence of hip-hop, (3) survival strategy, (4) the need to control, and (5) lack of a cohesive family system. The participants stated that part of the reason for youth violence is related to the lack of community cohesion. The participants stressed that the preceding generation "did not pass down the village concept" and so young people react to their environment out of low self-esteem, self-hate, frustration, and simply the need to survive.





*"...my generation and the generation past have really let these kids down because they don't have the village concept and we're afraid of our kids. We're afraid to go talk to them and when we see them on the street, we want to go across the street because 'what are they going to do?' You no longer hold them accountable or ourselves accountable."*

The respondents emphasized that many young people are "addicted to violence" and use it as a means to assert manhood or to demonstrate that they can control something or someone.

*"...you go back to what you're most comfortable with, and that is violence as kind of an equalizer. So using violence as an equalizer seems to be what I see as a common theme."*

The group emphasized that rap and hip-hop culture cause negative perceptions of women and encourage violence between individuals, whether they are in relationships or not. There was some discussion around the use of rap music as a means to tell the stories of young people, influence their decision-making, and shape their relationships.

*"I'm saying that when rappers say these things, these very disrespectful things about women of their own color, that's me...When you're talking about me like that, that dehumanizes me. That makes me feel like less of a person. And I don't really like that. When I see a video with a girl shaking her butt on a car, that's objectifying a beautiful, Black woman. I don't like that. And it's not just male rappers, it's female rappers [too]."*

The group ultimately felt that the need to survive was the primary cause of youth violence both in their intimate

relationships and within the larger community. The participants stated that youth are not taught proper values in the home and do not have a cohesive family system that nurtures and protects them. Consequently, many of the young people find ways to belong and get acceptance from outside of the home, among peers or gangs. The participants emphasized that these young people use violence, even within their intimate relationships, as a means of belonging, being accepted, and feeling a sense of control and competence over their life circumstances.

*"Part of it is used as a form of survival. As far as kids, when they come out of the home, if they're in a home that, you know, violence is all they see. If domestic violence is there and the children are being neglected, they get to an age where they go out in the street and they do whatever it takes to be taken care of. And violence is part of their way of getting that."*

## **Factors**

The major contributing factors for domestic violence that the Children and Youth group participants identified are: (1) historical context, (2) contemporary discrimination, and (3) lack of a community safety net. The respondents stated that violence in the African-American community is derivative of slavery and that, until the associated issues are addressed, the problems in the community will continue. The participants asserted that the impact of slavery includes poor parental nurturing in the home, poor educational systems, poor communication patterns, and the history of inadequate contemporary discriminatory treatment in social service delivery. Contemporary discrimination in the form of limited jobs and inequity in economics is a major factor that compounds feelings of frustration, stress, and the lack of control over one's life.

*"I think it's just living in a system that doesn't support us. We tend to internalize so much...there comes a moment when we have to let it go. And I think that what*

*As far as kids, when they come out of the home, if they're in a home that, you know, violence is all they see.*



*we're dealing with here is that the frustration becomes so much and that's how we react and how we respond. In that way, it's a result of oppression."*

The breakdown in the community, which was also seen as connected to enslavement, was mentioned as an important influence in the erosion of translating history, values, and community context to the children. The participants asserted that there is no village in Seattle that would keep children together even if their families were falling apart. The lack of a community safety net was seen as a major reason for children and youth coming into the child welfare system.

*"There is a great deal more self-hatred in Seattle, Washington, than there is in other parts of the country because there's such a small population of African Americans. And therefore, we don't have the base of the village that you speak of, or the respect."*

### **Consequences**

The major consequences of domestic violence identified were: (1) community division, (2) differential treatment, and (3) negative stereotypes. The participants felt that the community was divided as a result of domestic violence and other types of violence.

*"I think we're becoming more divided, more endangered. There's no trust in the community, even among the adults. And the kids see that. Because we are trying to get whatever this 'piece of the pie' or whatever the 'American dream' is."*

The participants emphasized that there were different consequences for African-American men and women, particularly in the legal system. The respondents stated that African-American men were expected to be violent; thus, the system responded to them from that perspective. However, participants felt that because women were supposed to be "dainty," African-American women were often faulted for not coming across as weak, afraid, fragile, or needing

protection. Despite possibly feeling this way, the stereotype of African-American women as being the opposite of those things results in harsher treatment for Black women. The participants also stated that African-American women were seen as "being more sexual," creating the perception that they encourage sexual assault or, at minimum, are not impacted as negatively as White women. Overall, the group felt that African Americans were treated more harshly in the criminal justice system, but ultimately there were differences according to gender.

### **Solutions**

The Children and Youth participants identified three solutions for ending domestic violence in Seattle: (1) social education, (2) accountability, and (3) culturally-based models of intervention. The respondents stated that social education is necessary and described two Seattle-based programs that provide a type of social education. The emphasis of social education programs is to hold children and youth accountable for their actions and to "find a unifying standard that will bring us all together." The group also emphasized the use of culturally based models, such as rites of passage programs, as being effective tools for children and youth.

### **Barriers**

The major barriers to ending domestic violence in the African-American Seattle community were: (1) poor community participation and the lack of a safe environment, (2) substance abuse, (3) fear of getting involved, and (4) competition among programs for funding. The participants emphasized that because the environment impacts a young person's behavior, the lack of a safe environment is a barrier to ending domestic violence among young people. Participants stated that community members are not active the community because they are focused on day-to-day functioning as opposed to the larger issues in the community. Substance abuse was seen as a key reason for the cycle of violence, needing to be

*There is a great deal more self-hatred in Seattle, Washington, than there is in other parts of the country because there's such a small population of African Americans.*

addressed or domestic violence initiatives would not be as effective. The participants stressed that systems serving youth, such as child welfare and juvenile justice systems, need to become more culturally competent and stop competing for funding. Participants stressed the need to work together to sustain projects in the community beyond funding. The following quotes underscore the perception that agencies are not working together and instead are competing for funds.

*"...they have communities and agencies fighting over dollars specified to help our kids. And so it becomes a dog-eat-dog situation, and the kids feel the pressure."*

*"I know that a lot of development managers, the ones that do the fundraising and things for our community, are Caucasian, and we do not have development managers here in the community—very few that are of African-American cultures. So, therefore, they don't target and really look for those dollars that are going to really support people in the African-American communities."*

## Community Activist Focus Group

### Types

The Community Activist focus group emphasized the impact of verbal abuse. They maintained that verbal abuse is often dismissed as not being as important as other types of violence, yet its damage extends beyond the physical consequences of abuse. These participants further emphasized the need for African Americans to develop their own definitions of domestic violence instead of using that of the "dominant culture."

community. The participants affirmed that one could not talk about the cause of violence in the African-American community without acknowledging the influence of violence in the larger society. They felt that living in a violent and racist world is a cause for violence both in the home and the community.

This group emphasized that domestic violence is a result of feeling out of control and that "the family becomes the victim of the powerlessness." The participants felt that African Americans are often "not in touch with our real feelings because we have had to suppress" them.

*"It just seems to me that we have a tendency to always use the words that the dominant culture creates and the dominant culture created that word and it's out there....It's always somebody else's power to define."*

### Causes

The participants identified several causes of domestic violence: (1) community and societal violence, (2) internalized oppression, (3) disconnection from the spiritual realm, (4) sex-role stereotypes, and (5) secrecy around the issue of domestic violence in the African American

*"I think in order to deal with violence in the Black community, you've got to go back and deal with the fact that there has never been [a] time in North America where we, as a race of people, have not had violence perpetrated on us, around us, among us, and in us....And so once you are programmed to believe that violence is accepted on all levels, then you have the silence that we are talking about. Because, who can you go to?"*

The participants stated that violence often erupts when a person can no longer handle the oppression.

*It's always  
somebody  
else's  
power to  
define.*



*"We are not in touch with our real feelings because we have had to suppress and take so much....Because there is so much that you have to take in and not respond to, and then finally when you do respond, you respond in an inappropriate manner."*

*"We have to be taught how to confront the internalized issues, because we are always on guard from the external. That is how we have seen our lives. That it's an external thing. It's something that's been happening to me and I'm not seeing that we're stuck with being the victim, but a lot of our issues are being framed that way. We victimize ourselves. And we don't see that we have the power to stop the cycle, so we need to learn new communication styles and stop the silence in our community."*

The participants also asserted that community members no longer look to the church or God for guidance resulting in a "disconnection from the spiritual realm." This, in turn, results in individuals engaging in abusive and hurtful behaviors towards others without a sense that anything is wrong.

*"Another reason why I think violence [occurs] is [because of] a disconnection from the sacred. Disconnection from a belief in the fact that there is a power greater than ourselves that can guide us in a way. And that disconnect is very prevalent in the society and the African-American community, more so than it was 40 to 50 years ago."*

The respondents also emphasized that sex-role stereotypes or gender appropriate behavior continues to be a cause for the violence in the home. As a result, the participants stated that men are seen as being men when they keep their women in line by beating them.

*"We are socialized into roles as women in the community, we are responsible for holding the family together. And then we go to church and we try to get help there, we are told that if you pray more, if you're more forgiving.....and so, we sort of ...sanctioned it, unspokenly."*

The participants stated that the prevalence of domestic violence is a result of the continued secrecy around the issue in the African-American community, often a result of trying to protect African-American men or feeling as if one is betraying the race by exposing the violence. The respondents declared that there needs to be more education in place to help women understand what abuse looks like. They stated that many African-American women do not know that they are experiencing domestic violence in their relationships because they lack knowledge about the issue. For example, a woman may not understand emotional and psychological abuse; hence, while she may perceive threats and controlling behavior as negative, she may not attribute either circumstance to domestic violence. The participants also stressed that the notion of "minding your business" is still prevalent in the community, contributing to the secrecy and shame around the issue. Understanding this notion, the participants felt that African Americans need to determine when violence becomes unacceptable and strive to balance "minding your business" with breaking the silence around the issue.

*"If you take [your business concerning domestic violence]... out on the street and people recognize that there's been a kind of inability for our community to reconcile "minding our business," but also minding within the realms of what is humanly acceptable."*

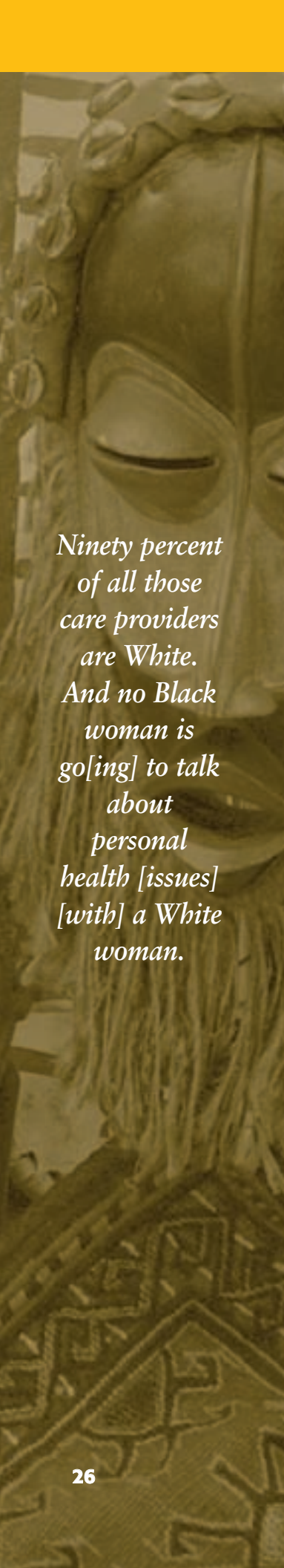
Ultimately the group felt that "domestic violence makes it unsafe for everyone" and that the issue went beyond the family to include the entire community.

### **Contributing Factors**

The factors listed as contributing to domestic violence include: (1) gaps in services, (2) incongruity between the



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woman.*

worker's race and the client's race, and (3) ethical implications of services. The participants in the Community Activist group identified a number of factors for domestic violence in the African-American community; however, the major emphasis was placed on having "no safe place to go." The participants emphasized that providers are often White and that African-American women do not feel comfortable sharing such personal issues with individuals who are White.

*"Ninety percent of all those care providers are White. And no Black woman is go[ing] to talk about personal health [issues] [with] a White woman...about things that happen in my home."*

Furthermore, the respondents described the competition between programs and funding sources as being problematic in obtaining the critical preventive services needed in the community and creating safe places to go before violence erupts. There were also questions as to the ethical implementation of services. Participants stated that when organizations receive funding to support services to African Americans, it often takes approximately six months before these organizations actually implement the services for which the funds were intended. In essence, the respondents stated that "there is no safe place for the marginalized people in our community."

### **Consequences**

This group stated that the perpetuation of negative stereotypes of the African American community is a major consequence of domestic violence, particularly those stereotypes that promote the idea of the African American community being deviant and violent. Participants also discussed destructive attitudes within the African American community itself concerning who really experiences domestic violence. They explained this by asserting that some African Americans believe that "bad

people," such as substance abusers, do not deserve empathy, regardless of how intensely they experience domestic violence. On the other hand "good people," generally described as those who are heterosexual and in monogamous relationships, were deemed as true victims of violence.

*"One of the consequences I see is the perpetuation of the lies and the myths...I am so glad you talked about internalized racism. I'm so glad you are talking about gay, bisexual, transgender community, women in the sex industry, drug users. When violence happens to them, it's all right. So, it's them. And so I think that's something...that that's not good for us as a people to make 'good' people and 'bad' people...It is divisive and it's anti-revolutionary. It doesn't make sense to work it like that."*

The group asserted that domestic violence, particularly when it goes unaddressed, leads to an increased need for mental health services, a higher risk of HIV infection, and increased drug use—issues that also often go unaddressed. The participants felt that there must be mental health issues resulting from experienced and witnessed violence. The onset of drug use was seen as a means to self-medicate from abuse and other pressures. The participants identified the increased risk of HIV infection as a consequence of women not being able to negotiate condom use or experiencing rape at the hands of an abuser. In addition, the group stated that Black children are more likely to be removed from the home than White children when domestic violence is discovered.

### **Solutions**

The respondents stated four major solutions: (1) address structural issues, (2) look at diversity in the African-American community, (3) create safe places, and (4) provide early education. The participants maintained that to truly impact domestic violence, the underlying issues have to be



addressed, particularly racism, oppression, and discrimination according to race and gender. The respondents stated that cultural differences within the African-American community need to be better addressed and even recognized as a significant factor.

*“We’re here to talk about domestic violence, but we see so many unexamined issues that we can’t really talk about some of these other things because there is so much stuff underlying it. If the undercurrent is there, it’s just gonna come out.”*

*“To try to develop solutions that are unique to domestic violence and to correct that one illness while not dealing with the wholeness and common source of those ills is doomed to failure. I guess I just encourage us to think about the connectiveness and the wholeness of our range of issues and the common source of those concerns.”*

The group emphasized the need to create safe places geographically located in the community to address domestic violence and that these programs should stress healing from contemporary and historical oppression. While other solutions were also presented, such as early education about domestic violence and addressing the way in which the media portrays African Americans, the primary solution was to create these safe spaces and to ensure the emphasis on healing and not necessarily treatment.

*“I’d like to be able to put a collective network together of African-American resources....Because the community really wants to interface with their own, there are many providers, but if they don’t know what the services are, they can’t go to them.”*

*“Part of the solution is offering healing...We have not offered a way for us to heal and to process our pain, and that has been denied us as a race of people—to process our pain.”*

The group members stressed that as



healing groups and other resources develop, consideration should be given to view these resources from a strengths perspective.

*“We need to start looking at our strengths and what we are doing right. Because when we get together as a people to talk about what we are not doing, and what we are doing--we are resilient and fantastic. People don’t see that it is a privilege to sit in the presence with one another and we minimize that.”*

### **Barrier**

The major barrier acknowledged by this group was the lack of consensus within the community around what is important and what is needed to address domestic violence. The respondents emphasized that “when you don’t know what you want, you are always in fear that you are not going to get it.”



# Faith Community Focus Group

## Types of Violence

The Faith Community participants focused on spiritual abuse, which was defined as “where people take their beliefs and use them as a means to control.” The participants stated that the primary issue with domestic violence, along with drug abuse, is not knowing how to help the person get through it. The respondents discussed that the church is often not seen as a resource because individuals want to maintain a facade of a good family life and that people almost want to hide who they really are while in church.

*“We come here to hide our real selves.”*

Yet the respondents acknowledged that “domestic violence is interspersed [with other social problems] and represents the fabric of every type of problem,” emphasizing that domestic violence is interwoven with other social problems.

*The participants also emphasized the long-term negative impact of emotional and psychological abuse.*

“One of the subtle forms is the emotional coercion and that emotional and psychological abuse where you don’t see a bruise on a person. There is nothing that is visible, but what is happening is the person is using put-downs, lying, tricking, manipulating, controlling and doing it on a subtle basis so the scars don’t show, but actually the scars are just as devastating. That is harder to touch on sometimes.”

## Causes

Although the group identified a number of causes of domestic violence in the African-American community, participants emphasized the limited services available as a consequence of inadequate funding and an overreliance on external sources to address the issue.

“How dare any of you go to law to solve a matter between you. You should judge this matter between yourselves. I mean, we can’t go to God by the law, so we definitely can’t live life by the law and be right, according to God. So we have to get back into doing what is right and what the spirit of the Lord...That’s the only way that we are going to stop domestic violence.”

The participants stated that churches are often not seen as a resource to address domestic violence. Church leadership often does not take an active role to assert influence in stopping domestic violence. The respondents emphasized that church leadership may not feel prepared, but that adequate tools to end violence are already within the church. They stressed that leaders may need to be persuaded to take on the issue and be educated on how best to address domestic violence.

*“I..think that in our community, that we actually have neglected the soul. There is true neglect. You can be spiritual, but actually we bring a person along on this spiritual path and they don’t seem to be growing spiritually, and you wonder what is the matter there. And what is actually happening there is people have so much that is weighing down the spirit of the soul—issues with the abuse, that they can’t grow.”*

*“We have to push the victimization because they [clergy] don’t have the wisdom and the knowledge about the dynamics of domestic violence. If we have to overcome their philosophies, their theologies around domestic violence issues ....then we have to teach them.....the first time I went and asked a faith-based community, a person who was well-known in the community, about starting a women’s support group, the first thing she said was ‘The African community is not ready for a women’s support group. Don’t do it.’ And I said, ‘Well God’s ready.’ And I went ahead and did it anyway.”*

*I think that we have a lot of things that are repressed, suppressed, and we are depressed.*



## Contributing Factors

The major factor identified as contributing to domestic violence in the African-American community was the historical context of slavery and its resulting oppression and discrimination. The respondents stated that the effects of slavery continued to “plague African-American communities today” and that having to negotiate contemporary discrimination created frustration, anxiety, and feelings of being persecuted.”

*“We have had a lot of trauma to us and we need a way of relief of that. We cannot deny that it has happened to us. We cannot let our kids live in a world that says we are not hurting here.... We have gone backwards, causing massive chaos and confusion in our community, and the children are suffering from that... They [White people] don’t understand the pressure of our society. We are saying” let’s start from here,” but they [youth] need to have a past.”*

The participants emphasized the need to be able to address the inward scars of violence more publicly and to promote healing. The following statement is an example of that dialogue.

*“I don’t think in the Afro-American community and in most communities, that what we present externally is what we are feeling internally. I think that we have a lot of things that are repressed, suppressed, and we are depressed. I think that even in a spiritual journey, one hopes to make the internal and the external kind of pair up one day so we can feel.”*

Consequently, the respondents shared that the ongoing ramifications of slavery, particularly the effects on the mental and spiritual health of the African-American community, often go unacknowledged. This, in turn results in overutilization of the criminal justice system in responding to domestic violence, as opposed to developing an understanding of and addressing mental health and spiritual implications of violence.

## Consequences

There were three major consequences of domestic violence that were discussed in the faith-based group. First, the participants maintained that using jail as a sanction for domestic violence has an economic impact for both the abusive partner and the survivor. The participants stated that the abusive partner is faced with losing his job or losing wages due to having to go to court or mandated treatment groups. The respondents identified this issue as problematic, particularly because it takes away from the person’s ability to financially contribute to the family. Additionally, it often serves as a deterrent for the woman to reach out for help. In terms of the woman, the respondents asserted that she is impacted by not having the additional financial support and that she, too, could lose her job or wages due to having to go to court.

*“If he gets in the domestic violence situation, he’s sent to jail and all of his troubles are taken care of and he is taken care of. But in most cases, the woman is left to try to face the problems of living life with the kids and going on. So I think it is much better for the man.”*

The group also discussed the inequity experienced by the survivor when batterers use the system against them.

*“If the woman is arrested, she loses more than if a man is arrested. A victim defendant will come out of jail with nothing, if she is arrested. And, in a sense, where the man can go to anger management and batterers treatment and probably go back home. He will get a no contact order and go back home. Because the woman needs the finances and needs help with the children and all of that....so they end up in a shelter or going back*



*I think that even in a spiritual journey, one hopes to make the internal and the external kind of pair up one day so we can feel.*



*We are too dependent on resources...Once they are gone, we are at a loss.*

to...someone who will take care of her. She can lose out on so much more than what the man can lose out on. A lot of the men now, they're manipulating the system and they are calling the police on the women now, and they're running, going down and getting protection orders...and get a dissolution or legal separation so they don't have to pay child support, so they can keep the houses or keep the apartment, and keep the woman out. So now the men are more manipulative and wiser about the system than some women are."

The second major consequence discussed was the differential experiences of African-American men and women related to violence. The participants stated that African-American men are better able to find "suitable partners" and can move on to the next person if they do not find happiness in a relationship. However, the respondents stated that African-American women often stay in unhappy and unhealthy relationships because they feel that they don't have any other options and feel trapped in the situation.

*"...he can go right around the street and find himself another woman because there are so many women. So men are reluctant to change...So when you think about it, it has a lot to do with why a man would be violent in one situation and not the other...If there were more competition available in men, then a woman would not have to put up with this from this man,*

*because she could go and choose another, because of the availability of men, then it wouldn't be that much."*

## **Solutions**

The primary solution identified in the faith-based group was to use the church to help stop domestic violence. The participants stated that through the spirituals principals, change is possible, but the focus must be on changing the mindset of the individual through proper religious teachings.

*"If there is a parishioner who is a victim in the church, who is accessing the court system, I'm saying that the church needs to be active in seeing that the court system is actually working for that victim-survivor and calling people to account for what is happening. And if the batterer is going through treatment, offering ongoing support for that batterer and saying 'Hey brother, did you attend your meeting last week?'"*

The participants also emphasized creating culturally-based programs that strengthen self-pride and build self-esteem.

## **Barrier**

The primary barrier to stopping domestic violence was identified as the failure to look for other options. Focus group participants stated that the community seemed to go to the same places to get support instead of looking to other innovative venues within the community, such as the church.

*"We are too dependent on resources...Once they are gone, we are at a loss."*

*"It's difficult to build relationships, even to build relationships together so we won't overlap each other's programs so we can work together."*



# Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Focus Group

Given their membership in what can legitimately be considered a distinct African-American subculture, participants in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) focus group engaged in more generalized discussion about domestic violence in the larger African-American community, while simultaneously discussing the unique ways domestic violence unfolds within and impacts their subgroup. Additionally, the fact that members of this group experience multiple and overlapping forms of oppression and discrimination (racism, sexism, heterosexism, to name a few) from both outside as well as inside the African-American community, set the stage for a multi-layered, textured, and rich dialogue.

## Types

The members of the LGBT focus group spent considerable time stressing that most people do not understand the concept of domestic violence and that there needs to be more diverse perspectives in defining domestic violence. What might be considered abusive behavior in one community or among one group may not be the same in another community or group. The respondents stated that to understand domestic violence, one must also get past “fear-based knowledge,” that is, the difficulty of telling the difference between what is true and what is false.

*“...one of the things that I experienced with women was that a lot of the knowledge that they didn’t have was based on fear and they could not decipher how much of that fear was true and how much of that fear wasn’t true.”*

The participants asserted that, to fully understand the prevalence of domestic violence, one must also understand the orientation and perception of the person regarding what is violent and what is abusive behavior.


*“...so I think the thing that’s really important to remember when we’re talking about this is it’s not necessarily even the behaviors that might be independently on their own, not desirable behaviors, but like looking at who’s actually forming a new systematic power over the other person.”*

## Causes

The two primary causes of domestic violence were identified as (1) learned behavior and (2) lack of control. Focus group participants emphasized that family violence experienced during childhood impacts adult relationships.

*“I just know that I believe I have the personality of all those women in my family from generations back and I believe that they used violence and screaming as a way of survival, being heard. And there was no intent on harming anyone.”*





*"You were beaten down in your family and you're beat down by society. You're beat down in school by your teachers. You know what I'm saying? I'm talking about this same cousin of mine, it's like her mother and father kicked her [expletive] all the time, you know. I mean, so it's like she's in this relationship now and I'm like, 'why are you taking this from this man?' You know, 'why don't you do this, why don't you do that?' There again, I mean, it's what ...feels most comfortable for me. It doesn't feel comfortable for her to stand up for herself, you know. When she does stand up for herself, it's almost like she's having an out-of-body experience, you know. She's like, 'wow, did I just say that?' And then she almost wants to take it back."*

*"I can hold it together. I can keep my family intact, at any cost...The cost of me, you know, bleeding, being bruised...But I can hold it together, you know?"*

*"I tell you what I experienced and you know this is a lot of years of looking at my family issues and my behavior and all the things I went through. And one of the things I realized as an adult woman, was that I could not tell the true from the false. It blew my mind when I figured that out, that I couldn't tell the truth from false...So, the true from the false was that when I got into relationships with abusive men that came off as my prince...They start off as my prince and then all of a sudden, he'd lock me in a closet and say, 'I'm sorry honey, I love you. I won't do it anymore. I just did it because I love you.' How was I able to tell the truth from the false?"*

Additionally, the perception of one's peers regarding what constituted acceptable and non-acceptable behavior became equally or more important later in life regarding whether one adopted abusive behavior. The participants contended that domestic violence is also caused by the fact that individuals use violence as a survival mechanism and to feel a sense of power and control over their lives.

## **Contributing Factors**

Two primary factors identified as contributing to domestic violence in the African-American community were: (1) the influence of heterosexual relationships and gender role expectations in LGBT relationships and (2) emotional instability. The respondents discussed how restrictive gender roles assigned to heterosexual women can impact LGBT relationships in that one person may feel compelled to perform the function of "a woman" even if both partners are women, thus creating an imbalance of power.

*"Part of the truth and the false to me was, I believe, in dealing with people that are sexual minorities 'cuz you live under this idea of this heterosexual motif which plays a part into our abusive situations because we allow ourselves to play these gender roles and now we're female even though we're in a same-sex relationship."*

Additional factors that received great emphasis were emotional instability and the feeling that one needs to be in control in order to feel as if one is protecting her/himself and maintaining a sense of order. This emotional instability contributes to not having a healthy sense of what constitutes a loving relationship.

*"And I'll tell you what it did. It made me angry. That woman, you know...at that time, got into it. It was like the fight was on and I got mad at her, she rejected me one more time. You know, couldn't tell the true from the false. I thought it was true and it ended up being false...which I grew up with, so it brought back all that stuff. And so I became very protective of myself. I went into survival mode. And so even today, call it homophobia or whatever you want to call it. Who cares? I am very protective of that because I protect my anger around being rejected. And so when I'm in a relationship with someone who rejects me, discounts me, any of that...and this is the emotional piece of it all, you know. For me, I think that in a lot of relationships sets up violence, not to mention competitiveness. Who is going to be in charge here? You're in charge? Okay, you can be that for an hour, but then it's my turn. But the other 23 is mine."*

*I can hold it  
together.*

*I can keep my  
family intact,  
at any cost.*



*And if you step into that space, it's hard. And the fight may not be physical, but there's this even might fight about whose really in charge there."*

*"And so I try to get folks to like, what it ultimately comes down to is they need to choose themselves. And the thing that's really, really hard, especially for me when I'm talking to my girlfriends or when I'm talking to a support group. How do you get folks to choose themselves over love?...or what they call love, what they've experienced as love, their experience of love and everything that means—the Cinderella complex, all the expectations, being protected, loved, cared for, all that stuff."*

### **Consequences**

The primary consequences discussed by the group were: (1) the compartmentalization of people's identities and experiences, and (2) the failure to address domestic violence from a holistic perspective. The group members discussed the notion that people are addressed, both among service providers and community members, as either Black or White, or as either being in a same-sex relationship or heterosexual relationship, as opposed to receiving comprehensive and holistic services that allow for multi-dimensional realities.

*"...when you're Black or White, you're over there. Then you're gay in a Black community, then you're over there. And then your own gay community, we'll put you over here."*

This consequence was perceived as detrimental to being able to get the help necessary to heal both individually and as a community.

*"What they do is, they're looking and trying to assess for who's the most redeemable in the eyes of society."*

### **Solutions**

The primary solution suggested to end domestic violence was to offer groups that focus on healing as opposed to just treatment. Group members stated that, in order to get to the issue of domestic violence, there needs to be healing on a

multitude of levels around race, sexual orientation, gender, class, contemporary discrimination, oppression, and the historical experiences of African Americans. The participants stressed that skilled counselors who are also willing to give of themselves in the group process should lead these healing groups.

*"...when I do community support groups...I always ask the group to focus on healing—whatever will build our self-esteem or whatever is going to heal us from the hurt and the pain to get us back on track, we get to talk about."*

The respondents emphasized that these groups should also identify what it means to be in a healthy relationship in addition to discussing what is unacceptable in a relationship.

*"..I think that one of the things that we can do is not only teach folks about domestic violence, but even more importantly, teach folks how to be in a relationship with somebody else. How do you resolve conflicts? How do you argue?"*

The participants also identified the need for community-based accountability as a solution to end domestic violence.

*"...you feel reluctant to turn in a Black man because of the harsher sentencing that they'll get. I think one of the things that we might need to consider is alternate forms of community-based accountability. I think we would be the best ones to figure out what that would [look] like. But I think that's something that we can definitely spend some time looking at what restorative justice could look like, in a way that is more sustaining and more loving than holding onto folks."*

*"I think it's true, for us to stand on the truth when we have conversations. I think one of the things that we do as a Black community is that we've forgotten how to have conversations....And I think it's very important that part of standing on the truth is calling things out for what they are. And that is to address the Black community and say, 'let's have a conversation about what is going on as far as domestic abuse and violence in our community.'"*

*What they do  
is, they're  
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society*

# Human Services Focus Group



## Types

The Human Services focus group identified two primary forms of violence: (1) family violence, encompassing child abuse and domestic violence, and (2) social violence, such as acts of robbery and drug dealing. The participants emphasized that social violence was equally as destructive and detrimental to the community as domestic violence and other forms of family violence.

*"It is like a fabric. It is interwoven in our community. It is so entwined that one area affects another area. They overlap in a sense...Whereas we are so focused on that—the peripheral vision has been taken away from it, because it is isolating and all we are doing is looking at that. The issues that affect our community are all stemming from that and it is causing us not to look at...the whole picture."*

## Causes

The participants in this group felt that a major cause of violence in the African-American community centered on a lack of values and community cohesion. The participants stressed that the lack of values could not be limited to youth, but included adults as well. Described as a sense of entitlement or selfishness, the participants stated that these kinds of attributes caused violence in the home and the larger community.

*"As far as the value system, it is so difficult to say now because you have Ministers who, and I'm not saying that, well maybe their values are kind of messed up, who will preach on Sunday and beat their wives on Sunday night...because you have people who are married, or at least they appear to be, but they are successful in everything in their life and they are liked by people and they feel very confident...and they are abusers."*

*"Values change all of the time. So no one is really looking at these internal things that you can't see and grab what is actually making us do everything we are doing. And until we look at this invisible aspect of our lives, which you know is just as real as anything else, I think all this stuff working on the physical part [will not be as effective]."*

In addition, the respondents asserted that there was "no sense of community or sense of leadership" in Seattle that could counter the lack of community cohesion and consensus building that needed to occur.

*"Why are we always looking to people to lead us somewhere? Because we are confused. Otherwise, why do we have leaders?"*

The participants also identified larger societal influences that caused domestic violence, such as patriarchy, male domination, and the fact that power continues to rest "with the majority population." Consequently, African Americans are constantly attempting to negotiate a "piece of the pie" and trying to secure a bit of power to impact the community.

*"...they change laws so readily that you feel as though you gotta be White people. Those who have power get to change the rules, and they change the rules on a continuum."*

*"...one of the big issues in the African-American community was a lot of women are hesitant to call the police or to do anything about that [domestic violence] because they don't want to hand this man over to the system when they know he is not going to get just treatment. And also I think with a lot of mothers, and I've seen this over and over, if you know your son is doing this, instead of holding him accountable, it's like we try to make all of these excuses....and I think that goes back to racism."*

*Why are we  
always  
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lead us  
somewhere?  
Because we  
are confused.  
Otherwise,  
why do we  
have leaders?*



## Contributing Factors

The major factors identified as contributing to domestic violence in the African-American community were (1) the historical context of racism and discrimination, and (2) the failure to recognize the unique cultures and diverse experiences of African Americans in Seattle. The participants emphasized that significant numbers of those identified as African American in Seattle come from different countries and geographic locations. Yet, these individuals do not often know about the resources and services available to them in the community and beyond. In addition, little is known about their culture and ethnicity. Instead, everyone is categorized as African American, without representing the richness of diversity within people of African ancestry.

## Consequences

The group emphasized two consequences of domestic violence in the African-American community. One consequence is that men and women receive different responses from the criminal justice system. Specifically, the participants stated that African-American “men get harsher punishment [and] go to prison” and African-American “women are ignored.” The second consequence discussed by group members was the response from the child welfare system. The participants emphasized that removing a child from the home due to domestic violence appears to be occurring more frequently among African Americans in Seattle. One participant stated that “the system will say you failed to protect the child” and then the child will be removed from the home and put into foster care. This was seen as a major deterrent for African-American women to seek assistance for domestic violence.

## Solutions

There were two major solutions suggested for ending domestic violence in the African-American community. The first suggestion was to increase support groups and other forms of support for survivors and abusive partners in the community and to ensure that skilled counselors lead these groups.

“...if you have some type of training in place or educational system in place that shows you that that’s not right and should not be accepted, at least you now know how to recognize it and hopefully you have other outlets or community organizations....that you can tap into...because you can recognize it. But if you don’t have the organization or you don’t know how to tap into them, it is lost. It doesn’t matter if you recognize it or not.”

*“We need to educate those individuals that are in the systems .... And we’re showing them that there are differences and cultural differences that you need to be aware of. And just getting all of the different groups that are out there together and to form an alliance that we all are working towards the same cause. Because you have a lot of different organizations doing a lot of different things. Some of those agencies are focusing on the same thing. Now if we could form an alliance that makes us a stronger group.”*

The second suggestion was to maximize use of media campaigns that are culturally relevant and able to reach a diverse audience of African-American community members. These media campaigns could be used to educate community members about domestic violence and share resources to obtain assistance.

## Barrier

The major barrier to addressing domestic violence in the African-American community, as identified by this group, was the mistrust of outside systems, such as law enforcement and child protective services. The participants stated that these systems are not trusted in the community and, therefore, are not perceived as places to get help, but instead, places to avoid.



*Now if we could form an alliance that makes us a stronger group.*

# Law Enforcement Focus Group

## Causes

The participants identified the following causes of domestic violence among African Americans: (1) mutual mistrust, (2) being afraid of the community, (3) use of negative stereotypes, and (4) not being educated about changes in domestic violence laws. The participants in this group clearly identified the issue of poor police-community relations as being a problem in addressing domestic violence in the African-American community. From Black officers feeling the need to prove themselves due to the community member's perception of the police to the abusive partner attempting to challenge the officer and his/her authority in the situation, there is a mutual mistrust acknowledged by the group that often gets played out in domestic violence calls.

*"One of us is going to have to project to whoever is around us that we are not going to let 'the man' take us down. So I think they come in, sort of [on] a high horse. And I think that in a situation where it is people of color, particularly African-American males, they are less likely to try and do what they are supposedly taught, which is separate and find out questions. I think there is an urgency and expediency to get the heck out of Dodge, grab the first person that looks like he may be a batterer. And I think at that point, and this once again is my statement, is that I think the race of the officer...it doesn't always have to be a majority officer. I think there are some African-American officers that have the same perception about their own community."*

## Types

The participants in the Law Enforcement focus group focused largely on intergenerational violence, particularly acknowledging elder abuse and emphasizing the use of violence stemming from mental illness. The participants asserted that the issue of domestic violence in the Seattle African-American community is not more prevalent, but instead, it is gaining more visibility in the community, thus, contributing to the perception that domestic violence occurs more often.

The group also acknowledged that there are officers that are afraid of the community, which negatively impacts their ability to work with the community. Participants also asserted that socioeconomic status plays into how calls are answered. For example, when officers receive a call from a poor neighborhood, they may come to the call with a particular perception of the individuals and situations prior to their arrival. These perceptions



could be fueled by stereotypes or based on myths about the population. It was acknowledged that this operationalization of perception happens less often in middle and upper middle class communities.

*"I do think that coming into areas where it is a lot poorer and so forth, they know from the address...They already have a preconceived idea before they get there. So in that respect, I think class does play in the response."*

The participants also acknowledged that limited employment opportunity is a major cause that becomes magnified if the abusive partner is forced to take time off from his job due to being in jail, appearing in court, or going into treatment.

*"If I have to show up for continued court appearances as a victim, and there are advocates calling me on the job and trying to chase me down, my check is going to get substantially deflated. So I often think it may be the idea of continuing employment more so than being unemployed."*

The participants shared that community members are often not aware of changes in domestic violence laws, resulting in increases of individuals being prosecuted due to domestic violence.

*"I think most people walking on the street do not understand that they can go to jail for 365 days; that they can pay a couple of thousand dollars for a treatment program—maybe two treatment programs—where they are working or not working; that they will be on probation for two years plus, unless they do something. I don't think the average person really knows that kind of impact, nor do they really think they don't have to hit a person to be in that situation...It's like a stop sign. You want to go through the street, but if there is a stop sign, you stop, because we know that there is a danger there. That awareness is not fully there."*

## Contributing Factors

The members of the law enforcement group acknowledged three major factors that contribute to domestic violence in the African-American community: (1) feelings of powerlessness, (2) gender-based stereotypes in contemporary music, and (3) individuals, families, and communities not being community centered. Among the group members' discussion was the issue of feelings of powerlessness resulting from an inability to control one's life, particularly as it relates to economic opportunity.

*"[the ability] to find housing because what they can't afford, you know, [can result in] homelessness. So I think maybe how they handle their stress"... "And the stress is precipitated by what?"... "The lack of control"... "The lack of economic resources."*

Another factor cited was the influence of rap and hip-hop culture, in particular, and contemporary music, in general. The participants stated that some of the music justifies "violence against women as being connected to one's manhood."

*"Music says it's OK to perpetrate this violence against women. In all that...asserting one's manhood. If you think about our whole cultural traditions about being a man, all the trappings around what that means, protect the women and children, and whether you can support them in a job. And all of that stuff is kind of intertwined."*

The participants also identified a disconnect from seeing oneself as part of a larger community. Participants alluded to a paradigm shift in the African-American community in that seeking what is beneficial for the individual now takes priority over seeking what is best for the community as a whole.



***Music says it's  
OK to  
perpetrate this  
violence against  
women.***

***In all that...  
asserting one's  
manhood.***



*I do think that as probation officers, we could be used in the community.*

*"I think the basic premise is that we moved away from being inclusive....[there] is a desire to not be emasculated, not to be any less than who I am.... We've moved away from who we are as a unit to what I am as a man."*

### **Consequences**

The major consequences of domestic violence in the African-American community, as identified by the group, are: (1) lack of community cohesion and (2) increased removal of children from the home. The participants stated that the community was afraid to talk to children and youth, connect with them, discipline them, and advise them. The participants strongly asserted that this fear has led to children being disconnected from the community.

*"We don't have any community cohesion...we've become afraid of our children. We've become afraid to discipline our children. We're afraid to tell the neighbor 'you know that ain't right.' You can't do anything."*

The participants also identified the connection between child abuse and domestic violence, noting that, increasingly, child protective services is notified when police respond to a domestic violence situation. This proves to be problematic, particularly for African Americans, who tend to have their children removed more often than other populations.

### **Solutions**

There were four suggestions offered to end domestic violence in the African-American community: (1) develop more preventive programs, (2) hire more criminal justice professionals of color, (3) utilize criminal justice professionals to educate the community, and (4) provide more cross training within criminal justice professions. The first suggestion was to create more preventive programs in the community to stop domestic violence before it begins.

*"Our families need to be strengthened and any programs that can help in that way are helpful....just some good preventive programs....not so much a don't do, but how to do it in a better way...how to do better parenting, communication skills and things like that, and self-image...somewhere it has to happen and it should happen before the person gets into the criminal justice system."*

The second suggestion was to hire more criminal justice professionals of color. There was discussion around the notion that African-American criminal justice professionals understood their culture and community better and could communicate with the population more effectively.

*"I think it is important that we have more people of color...because people are going to reach out more if they see more probation officers, more judges, more attorneys, more advocates [that look like them]. And I have seen that difference in a case, just the—interaction—the trust. And I think that to help overcome, from all of the things we've said, that will make a very big difference."*

The third suggestion was to utilize criminal justice professionals, particularly probation officers, to educate the community about domestic violence. This suggestion was mentioned in the context of educating the community about changes in domestic violence laws.

*"I do think that as probation officers, we could be used in the community. If we had pushed to go out into the community and to involve people in the community who aren't in the criminal justice system to understand what goes on there, [I] think we could be much more effective and help the community that way."*

The final recommendation was to offer more cross-training among criminal justice professionals on domestic violence. For example, judges may acquire more insight as they listen to the law enforcement officers' perspectives on and experiences with domestic violence and vice versa.



*“We get training in domestic violence. It is not mandated, however. And there’s a lot of turnover on the bench, so we haven’t had a court focus. But if we did, that would be great. We also work with the City Attorney’s Office and advocates and the police. Basically, they all interact with us around this issue, so it would be very nice to have some response or some kind of a focused education and training around this particularly issue for all criminal justice folks.”*

It was also stressed that current domestic violence training needed to be more holistic and given greater emphasis in law enforcement training curricula.

*“When the sergeants of the unit go out to teach the domestic violence, they don’t break it down from culture to culture to culture. This is domestic violence: You get the call, you look for the bruises, you figure out who is the aggressor, who is the victim, you take pictures, you do the arrest, and that’s it.”*

## **Barrier**

The major barrier discussed to addressing domestic violence was the differential treatment of African Americans in the criminal justice and child welfare systems. Group members asserted that women who are less socially desirable are more likely to be treated differently than those who are more socially acceptable in the eyes of society.

*“If there is a woman, for example, who is on what we call the edge of acceptance socially, I think that violence against her seems to be tolerated a little bit more. They don’t have people to advocate for them in the same way that some of the other people do.”*

In addition, the participants maintained that the limited training received on domestic violence is a barrier to better responding to the issue. The participants stressed that, when women fight back, they are perceived in a negative light, and that this is attributed to African-American women more often than to White women.

*One cause of domestic violence is feeling out of control or the inability to control life events, including feelings of worthlessness*

## **Recommendations**

This report points to the need to find creative solutions to domestic violence within the African-American community. More importantly, this report issues a call to address those policy issues that can make a difference in the lives of children, families, and communities struggling to deal with this issue. The members of this Seattle-based assessment were clear in asserting that effective intervention and prevention of domestic violence requires a multipronged approach. Developing and maintaining policies that protect groups, ensure safety nets, and create opportunities for economic growth and viability is central to any solution to eradicate domestic violence in the African-American community.

## **Rethinking Definitions of Domestic Violence**

Finding ways to define domestic violence that meet the needs of diverse communities is also critical to fully addressing this issue. Definitions establish the agenda for change, set parameters for legal and non-legal sanctions, and create perceptions as to what domestic violence is and what it is not. Many African Americans feel that their circumstances are outside the definition of domestic violence and, consequently, not relevant to them. By helping communities define this issue for themselves, policies can be developed that more accurately reflect the needs and corresponding solutions unique to that community.





## **Understanding the Impact of Slavery on Violence and the African American Community**

The historical context of slavery consistently surfaced in this report as being a critical component to understand if one wants to change the tide of violence in African-American homes. While conceptually discussed, there has been limited research conducted to illuminate the ways in which African-American intimate relationships have been impacted by societal influences. Additional research is needed to explore the intricate relationship between history, historical African-American responses, and current trends of domestic violence in the African-American community. As participants have discussed, the historical context is interwoven throughout these relationships, and thus, indicates a need for greater study.

## **Addressing Differential Treatment**

The differential treatment experienced by African Americans at the hands of law enforcement and child welfare workers, in particular, is staggering. Almost each group discussed experiencing or witnessing differential treatment and the mistrust it generates among community members. Fueling negative sex-role perceptions and racist stereotypes, this differential treatment somehow persists, despite laws that should limit its probability. In addition to tracking this inequity, protocols need to be established that protect African Americans from this type of abusive use of power.

## **Addressing Structural Inequity**

Service providers and policymakers often underestimate issues of racism, both in its historical context and in its contemporary manifestation of discrimination. The findings from this report suggest that having to negotiate living in a racist and discriminatory society creates feelings of powerlessness and internalized oppression that greatly impact relationships in homes and communities. The full extent of how issues of racism and contemporary discrimination impact African-American relationships is also not clearly known. While there is growing literature on the connection between poverty and domestic violence, there is less literature on the impact of poor education and inadequate housing on domestic violence. Also, the relationship between oppression, domestic violence, and the unique historical legacy of African Americans has not fully been uncovered. These intricate relationships warrant greater study as targeted interventions are developed. Without formidably addressing the issue of racism, service providers and policymakers may not be successful in their efforts to fully eradicate domestic violence in the African-American community.



## Focus on Building Positive Relationships

Because of historically negative relationships, there must be an effort by those in the criminal justice and child welfare systems to build positive relationships with the African-American community. African-American women often do not report violence because they do not want a child welfare worker to remove their children. A woman may also choose not to call law enforcement for fear of police brutality or being detained herself due to dual arrest laws. Consequently, in addition to addressing the systemic inequity that exists, there must be a clear effort to strengthen the relationship and trust between new leadership and communities of color. There also must be a demand that law enforcement officers be held accountable for their actions, and that systems demonstrate a commitment to creating and sustaining quality, culturally competent, and consistent services in African-American communities.

## Increase Community-Based Services

The limited services for domestic violence prevention and intervention were persistently discussed in each of the groups. Contributing to the long-standing tradition of self-help in the African-American community (Carlton-LaNey, 2001; Martin & Martin, 1995), greater resources and support need to be provided to the community to develop its own programs and initiatives around this and other issues connected to domestic violence. These initiatives should be community-based and community-led. In addition to being geographically rooted in the community, the services should be led by community members or those with a history of working in the community. Having this genuine concern and an established relationship is important towards helping communities feel that the providers have integrity and a history of being responsive and caring. Such community-based organizations should be

provided with equal opportunities for funding. Frequently, capable community-based organizations are penalized in the grant review process because they may have a shorter organizational history or formal experience than other organizations. If these organizations and individuals are able to demonstrate a successful and consistent history with the community, then they should be given opportunities to receive funding to support the development of their infrastructure. This new procedure would prevent less-established organizations from losing funding opportunities to more established organizations that do not necessarily have the community's interests at heart or the ability to engage the community.

## Ensure Domestic Violence Services are Culturally Competent

Ensuring that services are culturally competent is critical to the success of this endeavor. Culturally competent intervention methods are needed across levels of intervention: individual, family, community, and societal. In addition to providing such interventions, they should be documented to provide greater confidence in results and to offer opportunities for replication in other places. Funding opportunities should be attached to culturally competent service provision, in that those programs unable to demonstrate cultural competence should not continue to receive public funding. Additional funding should be earmarked for the creation and sustenance of community-based, culturally competent domestic violence programs.





## Conclusion

The community members that shared their insights in this process should be commended for their willingness to take risks and be honest about the glaring issues in their community. The participants provided clear recommendations that inform policy, practice, and research that can change the conditions of their communities and the problem of domestic violence. The respondents' clear message was that the structural issues and cultural manifestations of domestic violence in the African-American community must be taken into account and addressed in order to stop domestic violence. In recognizing the diverse manifestations of domestic violence, the participants were optimistic that it could be addressed through innovative, community-led decision-making and action. With their strength and collective wisdom as a guide, they believe they can reduce domestic violence in the African-American community.





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## Steering Committee



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



# Fact Sheet on Intimate Partner Violence in the African American Community

## STATISTICS

In a nationally representative survey, 29% of African American women and 12% of African American men report at least one instance of violence from an intimate partner.<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.<sup>6</sup>

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

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



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