# Community Insights on Domestic Violence among African Americans:

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

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# Executive Summary

To further the understanding of the impact of violence against African American women, the Office on Violence Against Women commissioned the Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community (Institute) to write a report on community perceptions of domestic violence in the lives of African Americans living in the San Francisco/Oakland, California area.

The Community Insights on Domestic Violence in African American Communities project is an ongoing, nationally focused endeavor. Included in this endeavor were community assessment interview sessions with representatives from nine cities with high concentrations of African American populations. The first assessment took place in the San Francisco/Oakland, California area in December 1998, and additional assessments have taken place with representatives from Minneapolis, Minnesota; St. Paul, Minnesota; Seattle, Washington; Memphis, Tennessee; Birmingham, Alabama; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Detroit, Michigan. Although assessments are scheduled through spring 2003, the findings reported here solely reflect perceptions of the types, causes, and consequences of, as well as barriers and solutions to domestic violence by African American community representatives in San Francisco/Oakland, California.

Representatives were chosen because of their expertise in and knowledge on domestic violence, and their commitment to eradicating domestic violence in the San Francisco/Oakland area. Since the community representatives assisting with the community assessments represent only a few of the many voices knowledgeable about domestic violence in the San Francisco/Oakland area, it is not assumed that they speak for all members of the various African American communities that exist in the San Francisco/Oakland area, nor is it assumed that they speak for all those who work to eradicate violence. The purpose of this report is to share the insights provided by these representatives. Their voices provide a starting point in an emerging conversation on how the African American community, as a whole, can be a catalyst for change.

The family violence literature contains very little information pertaining to how African Americans view domestic violence. Data focusing primarily on incidence and prevalence rates, treatment completion rates, recidivism, program utilization, and consumer needs tell the story of clinical outcomes, but do little to address the perceptions and cultural needs of African Americans experiencing domestic violence. More importantly, such data has traditionally focused on specific individual's or specific families' responses to domestic violence rather than communities perceptions of and behaviors toward domestic violence. Health and criminal justice data provide some relevant indications of patterns, but often have methodological shortcomings in regard to presenting a clear picture of prevalence, completion rates and program utilization (Bent-Goodley, 2001; Hampton, 1991, Joseph, 1997; Sullivan & Rumptz, 1994; West, 1998; Williams & Becker, 1994; Wilson, 1987). In all three bodies of literature, African Americans are often compared to other racial and ethnic groups of varying socioeconomic status without a full appreciation of the complexities in which violence flourishes in their communities. Even more, data does not exist on African Americans' perceptions of domestic violence in their communities and its affects on their lives.

Oliver J. Williams,Ph.D.

In an effort to address some of the gaps in the literature and to better understand the perceptions of African Americans in the San Francisco/Oakland area as it pertains to the impact of domestic in their communities, the following five groups of informed community representatives were invited to meet in their respective affinity groups as part of the community assessment process: 1) Community Activists, 2) members of the Faith Community, 3) the Human Service Community, 4) the Law Enforcement Community, and 5) advocates for the Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, and Transgender (LBGT) Community. Thirty-eight (38) community representatives participated in focus group interviews, which took place in December 1998 in Oakland. The information provided in this report represents findings across the groups and within the groups. Although the Institute conducted the assessments, this report represents a description and interpretation of community representatives' voices, rather than any stated or unstated agenda of the Institute.

It is important to note that at many levels in society, African Americans are viewed as a monolithic cultural group possessing a singular heritage and worldview. This report does not seek to perpetuate this misperception in its effort to publicize and amplify the voices of the representatives who have participated in the community assessment process. Therefore, when the issue of cultural sensitivity presents itself in this report, we want to alert the reader to the fact that the concept of "cultural sensitivity" at times serves as a proxy for many characteristics that distinguish African Americans from the broader U.S. society (i.e., race and ethnicity). However at other times, and more importantly, in the context of this report, the concept serves as a proxy for the multiple attributes that mark ever-shifting, but important distinctions within the "African American community." Hence, references to cultural sensitivity may be punctuating issues of race, ethnicity, social economic status,

sexual orientation, religious orientation or political affiliation. All of the aforementioned characteristics (except race) shape and give identity to the multiple sub-communities of African Americans that exist within any one geographical location. References to cultural sensitivity may also be more narrowly focused on the belief that the potential of African American-relevant institutions (such as the spiritual community, faith-based organizations, or community-based organizations) to provide services to the African Americans whom they serve should be maximized.
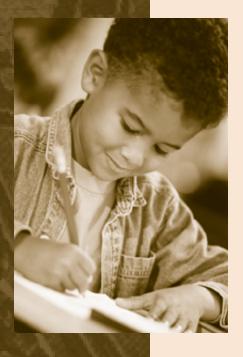
For **practitioners,** this report provides insights into three areas: 1) community planning and education activities, 2) perceived gaps in service availability in terms of gender, age, and cultural sensitivity - notably sexual orientation, and 3) developing anti-violence messages and identifying the groups to which those messages should be targeted. **Policymakers** will find this report helpful with respect to the broad strokes of domestic violence painted by the hands of the community assessment groups as a whole, and the narrower strokes sketched individually by each group. As a result, policy and funding mandates grounded in the perceptions of those living in and committed to the community move into greater focus. In this report, **researchers** will find the beginnings of questions warranting additional study, using either basic or applied research. For policymakers and researchers this report re-enforces the unquestionable need for their presence in the restorative process and the necessity for all stakeholders' input in the development of solutions with African American community members.

# Summary of Findings

*Domestic violence was part of a continuum of violence that links the community to the family.*

Findings from the community assessment sessions indicated that:

- **A high level of domestic violence was but one of many disturbing trends in violence that occur in the African American community.** African Americans in the San Francisco/Oakland area were concerned about the prevalence, rather than the type, of violence in their community. Domestic violence spilled into the community and community violence forced its way into residents' neighborhoods and families' homes.

- **Domestic violence was part of a continuum of violence that links the community to the family.** Domestic violence in the home did not occur in isolation, and its prevalence almost mirrored the various forms of community violence. To participants, this parallel evidenced the coexistence of violence inside and outside the home, highlighted linkages between stressors inside and outside the home, and connected violence witnessed to violence committed.

- **Many participants noted that the prevalence of domestic violence in the African American community flowed directly from the deficit of leadership, in general, and positive models for non-violence, specifically, in the African American community.** Too, the lack of leadership highlighted the absence of credible individuals, families, and African American sub-communities who practiced and exemplified the cultural principles valued by many African Americans, such as those celebrated during Kwanzaa.

- **Racism and social oppression were inextricably linked to violence and domestic violence in the African American community.** Whether in the form of restricting economic opportunities, marginalizing the unique cultural aspects of African Americans' lives, or perpetuating negative racial stereotypes, social oppression and racism fueled a hopelessness that contributed to violence in the community.

- **Community deterioration and negative intergenerational impacts were the inevitable outcomes of the ongoing, pervasive, and unaddressed violence and domestic violence in the African American community.** Violence has eaten away at community life by decimating the ranks of leadership and creating a communal sense of helplessness. Domestic violence has added to this disintegration by isolating those who are directly involved in the violence from those who witness it, ignore it or feel impotent to stop it. The intergenerational impacts of violence and domestic violence alienated the young from the elderly, and African American children from their family members.

- **Competitiveness between those entrusted with the task of addressing domestic violence was a major barrier to mounting an effective community response.** Overwhelmingly, participants cited the African American community's inability to mount a collective response to the issues of domestic violence as a major barrier to addressing the issue. In part, competitiveness was based on lack of a common vision and limited funding streams.

• **Inadequate resources were also a barrier to mounting an effective community response to domestic violence.** Succinctly put, inadequate resources produced inconsistent and haphazard services. An important area where the lack of resources significantly impacted the African American community was in the area of culturally-specific services, for both victims and batterers.

• **Solutions to domestic violence in the African American community must be systemic and holistic.** Collective community response begins with a community commitment to action. Systemic solutions bring together the major stakeholders important to the issue of addressing domestic violence, offer multiple strategies, as well as integrate a life course perspective.

Holistic solutions respect and strengthen the African American identity.



# Introduction

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. ("African American community" is referred to as a single entity throughout this document for ease of reading, but the reader should note that African Americans are not a monolithic group. As noted in the Executive Summary, any one group of African Americans may be categorized into subgroups based on ethnicity, social economic status, sexual orientation, religious orientation, or political affiliation.) Battered women, domestic violence victim advocates, and other practitioners in the field have shaped much of what the field offers in services to all ethnic groups. Although such efforts have saved the lives of many survivors and held perpetrators accountable for their behavior, many prevailing models for service delivery in reference to domestic violence have been unsuccessful with African Americans. Programs and services, whose constituents are primarily African American, are frequently developed without adequate input or broad representation from African American men and women. The intersection of culture, social context, community, sometimes poverty, and other competing challenges, shapes how men and women from African American communities view the problem of domestic violence, as well as solutions to it. As a result, the *Community Insights on Domestic Violence Among African Americans* project met with key representatives from the African American communities in nine cities in the United States to explore their perceptions on the impact domestic violence has on the lives of their community members. The project examined what they perceived as the causes and consequences, as well as community responses and solutions to domestic violence. In this report, the reader will learn the perspectives of African Americans residing in the San Francisco/Oakland, California area.

*Collective community response begins with a community commitment to action.*

As readers move through this report, they will begin to see and hear the problem of domestic violence through different lenses and different voices. There are common themes that emerge from the interviews, but there are also variations on themes across different groups. After reading the report, two things will be clear: 1) the community context of African Americans underscores the complexity involved in identifying the problems of and solutions to domestic violence, and 2) competing issues shaped by poverty challenge those community members who live in low-income, high-stressed neighborhoods to respond to issues of domestic violence. These and other community insights highlighted in this report provide alternate or expanded viewpoints on addressing domestic violence within the African American community and supporting the need to establish non-traditional services and interventions for African Americans.

# Community Engagement Methods

## Capacity Building and the Assessment Process

The first two of the nine cities chosen for this project were San Francisco and Oakland. The decision to begin the assessments in California was partly due to its location in the Northwestern U.S., in part because of the presence of an identifiable African American community in the area, and because of the active interest expressed by representatives in San Francisco and Oakland in mobilizing the African American community to address the issue of domestic violence.

Although the two cities are geographically close in proximity, they are demographically dissimilar. Thirty five percent of Oakland's 399,484 residents are African American, while seven percent of San Francisco's 776,733 residents are African American (U. S. Census Bureau, 2000). In 2000, 16 percent of Oakland's families lived below the poverty threshold and 25 percent of its adults had not attained a high school education. Oakland's median family income was $44, 384, while San Francisco's median family income was $63, 545. In reference to families' demographics, 18 percent of San Francisco's adults were without a high school education and 8 percent of its families lived in poverty. These statistics provide broad strokes framing the lives and realities of African American in the Oakland and San Francisco area.

Prior to conducting the community assessment, the Institute was involved in a process of capacity building. Although many definitions of capacity building exist, the one articulated by the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) is helpful in understanding the goal of the Institute in entering the San Francisco/Oakland area as part of the community assessment process. The ECDPM (1998) defines capacity building as promoting "the ability of individuals, organisations [sic], and societies to perform functions, solve problems, and set and achieve their own objectives." The Institute took a participatory approach toward capacity building that is people-centered, non-hierarchical, and empowering by relying on local experts, grass roots efforts and community strengths (Lusthaus, 1999).

*8% of San Francisco's residents live below the poverty line, whereas 16% of Oakland's residents live in poverty.*

Capacity building took two forms. First, planning sessions were held with a local advisory committee for almost one year. Members of the advisory group were selected through referrals from colleagues, state coalitions, domestic violence prevention advocacy groups and shelter programs. The advisory committee partnered with the Institute in consciousness-raising, community education, and community organization activities, in addition to advising the Institute on plans for an Institute-hosted community forum on domestic violence. The advisory group also assisted the Institute in identifying and contacting the potential pool of participants for the community assessment discussions. In addition, the advisory group identified local African American leaders, who displayed a commitment to and awareness of anti-violence messages, for recognition and award presentation during the community forum. Second, a town hall meeting was convened to provide a venue for community members to publicly voice their opinions and concerns about domestic violence to a panel of community leaders. Both events were publicized in local newspapers, by radio stations, and on television.

## Community Assessment Methodology
### *Participant Selection*

Thirty-eight (38) African American men and women, of various ages, occupations, educational levels, and relationship, gender and sexual identities participated in the community assessment discussions (See Tables 1-3). They were initially part of a pool of nominated participants who were divided into the following affinity groups: 1) Community Activists, 2) members of the Faith Community, 3) the Human Service Community, 4) the Law Enforcement Community, and 5) advocates for members of the LGBT Community. Nominated participants within each category were identified by the advisory group and then invited to participate. Though these groups were not exhaustive of those community groups knowledgeable about domestic violence, the Institute decided that valuable insights from individuals in these groups would yield the type of balanced information helpful to understanding issues of domestic violence in the San Francisco/Oakland area.

### Table 1: Assessment Group by Gender (N = 38)

| Assesment Group | Gender | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | Females (n=25) | Males (n=12) | Transexual (n=1) |
| Community Activists | 5 | 1 | – |
| Faith Community | 6 | 2 | – |
| Human Service Community | 4 | 6 | – |
| Law Enforcement | 7 | 1 | – |
| Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender Community Advocates | 3 | 2 | 1 |

## *Community Assessment Discussions*

The community assessment discussions used a focus group format in order to obtain participants' perceptions about domestic violence in the African American community. The focus group format provided an opportunity to learn what aspects of domestic violence were important to participants as they responded to open-ended questions and interacted in a group discussion (Patton, 1990; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). The discussions were audiotaped to collect information about the group interaction as participants responded to open ended questions and to allow for future analysis of the conversations.

A member of the Institute's Steering Committee facilitated each group and

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