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Black Women Seek Protection Closer to Home

By Marie Tessier, WeNews Correspondent



Oliver Williams

Credit: University of Minnesota.

(WOMENSENEWS) – Activists in the growing movement to support battered African American women say they agree on what’s needed to stem domestic violence: more services that are culturally informed and integrated into victims’ communities to help them overcome barriers to seeking help.

“Color-blindness is not what you need if you’re trying to serve diverse communities,” says Oliver Williams, executive director of the Institute on Domestic Violence in the African-American Community at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. “The trend is toward an increase in community-based, faith-based and grassroots services.”

While the battered women’s movement has long strived to serve all women, few projects can identify specific programs designed to reach out to diverse communities, Williams and others say. That can be a barrier to safety for black women, who tend to reach out for help through informal networks in their communities, such as a church, rather than consulting a shelter or hotline, Williams and other scholars and activists say.

African American women face a higher risk for experiencing domestic violence than other women, according to the most recent data from the Justice Department. In fact, they are more than twice as likely to die at the hands of a spouse or a boyfriend. They are also at greater risk of more severe violence, according to the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta and the Bureau of Justice Statistics in Washington, D.C.

“When you’re talking about African American women, you’re talking about everything bad about family violence, and then some,” says Tonya Lovelace, executive director of the Women of Color Network, a project of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence based in Harrisburg, Pa. “The way that communities of color experience violence is affected by our history, and by other issues.” [See below for Editor’s Note.]

Research Sparse

Research on domestic violence and African Americans is sparse, scholars and activists say. While some trends are generally accepted, it remains an open question how much race factors into higher rates of violence, scholars say. Much of the difference may simply reflect African Americans' disproportionate representation in lower-income groups.

Some behaviors can be grouped by race, but differences can be deceiving, Williams says. "Black women are more likely to leave than other women, but they are also more likely to return," he says. "A lot of the reasons may speak more to poverty and a lack of resources, because a woman may just not have a different place to go."



Tonya Lovelace

Credit: Pennsylvania Coalition
Against Domestic Violence.

That's why many domestic violence agencies are increasing efforts to work with a wider variety of service providers in communities of color, advocates say.

Organizations such as Atlanta's Black Church and Domestic Violence Institute, Williams' institute at the University of Minnesota and the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence's Women of Color Network in Harrisburg, Pa., are all engaged in training domestic violence groups and community service agencies in each others' work.

Much of the funding comes through the federal Violence Against Women Act, and much of the activity is coordinated and supported by the Violence Against Women Office at the U.S. Department of Justice in Washington, D.C. National groups such as the National Network to End Domestic Violence in Washington, D.C., and the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence coordinate and facilitate the work.

Income No Immunity

While scholars and activists agree that higher rates of poverty among African Americans probably shape some statistics about violence, they are uniformly quick to point out that higher incomes do not immunize against domestic violence.

An October 2006 article in *Essence* magazine, for example, details how Prince George's County, Md., the wealthiest predominantly black county in the nation, has a high rate of intimate partner homicide. According to the Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence, 48 people, mostly women, died there between 2001 and 2006 as a result of domestic violence, second only to Baltimore County, which had 72 deaths.

One of the starkest realities for African American women is their vulnerability to homicide. And the risk of violence is higher for women in bigger cities, according to the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Homicide is the second leading cause of death for black women between the ages of 15 and 24, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Only young black men have a higher homicide rate, and only black men have a higher rate of intimate partner homicide than black women, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Barriers to Seeking Help

Barriers to seeking help are believed to contribute to the higher rate of homicide for both women and men because violence has escalated to a greater degree before a woman can reach safety, scholars and activists generally agree. The homicide rate for black men has dropped more than for black women in recent decades, according to federal statistics.

All the factors that contribute to greater violence probably explain the higher intimate partner homicide rate of black men, Lovelace says. “Black women get arrested more, we get convicted more, and we have had fewer places to go. The statistics don’t account for self-defense.”

One of the biggest roadblocks to safety, says Tricia Bent-Goodley, a professor at Howard University in Washington, D.C., is the troubled, violent histories many black communities have with the police and social service agencies. That provides one more cultural barrier to seeking police intervention, even though African American women report intimate partner violence to the police more often--in 66.4 percent of incidents – than other women.

In addition, black women face a greater likelihood of being arrested along with a perpetrator, and their children are more likely to end up in foster care when authorities are involved, Bent-Goodley said in a training Webcast last year.

“If I’m being battered, the decision to pick up the phone to call for help is different for me,” says Lovelace. “There are more black men incarcerated than there are in college, so that makes it a bigger burden, and I have to question whether he will be brutalized.”

Journalist Marie Tessier writes frequently about violence against women.

Editor’s note: Tonya Lovelace, Project Manager for the Women of Color Network, contacted Women’s eNews after the posting of this article, expressing with deep concern that, absent the expanded context she provided in the interview, these quotations do not reflect accurately her beliefs about domestic violence and women of color. Lovelace was invited, and she agreed, to write a commentary further exploring this issue for February. Please watch for it.

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Mary Kay Ash Charitable Foundation, Domestic Violence Resources:
<http://www.mkacf.org/Violence/ResourcesForEndingViolence.aspx>

For more information on this specific topic, go to:

Institute for Domestic Violence in the African-American Community
<http://www.dvinstitute.org>

The Women of Color Network <http://womenofcolornetwork.org/>

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