



## Introduction to Special Issue: Domestic Violence in Black Communities

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## Introduction to Special Issue: Domestic Violence in Black Communities

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### ABSTRACT

Violence against women and domestic violence within families is a well-documented, internationally recognized social and public health problem that disproportionately impacts Black communities. The purpose of this special issue is to “widen the lens” by expanding the research on domestic violence in Black communities. This double issue is divided into six themes: (1) Overview of the research: past, present, and future; (2) Exploring ethnicities: Violence across the Diaspora; (3) Mental and physical health consequences; (4) Family Violence; (5) Institutional and Structural Violence; and (6) Culturally sensitive treatment. The authors in this special issue have proposed innovative models and frameworks and have endeavored to broaden our understanding of domestic violence by utilizing a variety of methodologies, including semi-structured in-depth interviews, case histories, and systematic research reviews. Regarding suggestions for future research, the authors in this Special Issue emphasize the importance of data-driven discourse on gender-based violence in Black communities.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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African american; Black American; intimate partner violence

“The absence of research on African Americans’ perceptions of violence in their communities and its effects on their lives represents an important gap in our knowledge that has implications on multiple levels” (Hampton & Oliver, 2006, p. 5).

### Part I: Overview of the research and intersectionality

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the Black population is diverse and growing. In 2019, there were 46.8 million people in the United States who identified as Black, which reflects a 29% increase over almost two decades (Tamir, 2021). Although the Black population is remarkably diverse, they are overrepresented among victims and perpetrators of intimate partner violence (IPV). In the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS),

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The term “Black” will be used to refer collectively to individuals of African and Caribbean ancestry and “African American” will be used to refer specifically to those of African ancestry who were born in the United States.

45.1% of U.S. Black women and 40.1% of Black men had been victims of sexual violence, physical aggression, and/or stalking that was committed by an intimate partner during their lifetime. Based on these prevalence rates, it is estimated that more than 6 million Black women and nearly 5 million Black men are survivors of some form of IPV (Smith et al., 2017).

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### ***Overview of the research: Past, present, and future***

The Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community (IDVACC), shortly after its inception in the 1990s, sought to address the absence of research on the Black community’s perspectives of domestic violence. As part of the Community Insights Project, researchers conducted 37 focus groups with 335 Black individuals who had knowledge, professional or otherwise, of domestic violence. As part of the current Special Issue, Jenkins (2021) reflected on this research, which was conducted between 1998 and 2004, in her article *Community insights on domestic violence among African Americans*. Participants identified structural inequalities, racial oppression, economic disenfranchisement of Black men, and the ongoing impact of slavery as unique contributors to IPV in the Black community.

Next, Gillum (2021) presents a brief overview of the current state of the literature, with a focus on the importance of investigating the IPV among sub-populations of Black women, such as African immigrants and refugees, African Caribbean immigrants, and sexual minorities (Black lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women). West (2021) further expands the research by situating IPV, especially non-fatal strangulation, reproductive coercion, and domestic homicide, in the context of family violence, community violence, historical trauma, structural violence, institutional violence, and cultural violence. In addition, West (2021) calls for more research on protective factors, the help-seeking process, and resilience among Black survivors.

### ***Exploring ethnicities: Violence across the diaspora***

The foreign-born Black population has nearly doubled in the last decade from 2.4 million in 2000 to 4.6 million in 2019. Most immigrants were born in Caribbean nations (46%) or African countries (42%; Tamir, 2021). In addition, using data from Africa, the Americas, Australia, and Europe, Kalunta-Crumpton (2019) documented gender-based violence against women of African descent in 16 countries. To better reflect this diversity among Black communities, the authors in this Special Issue explored IPV across ethnicities and across the world.

Using a variety of theoretical frameworks (e.g., an intersectional lens, social learning theory, and gender inequality theory), Lacey et al. (2021) highlight historical perspectives, theories, prevalence rates, risk factors, and consequences of violence among Caribbean descendants. Using the 2014 Kenya Demographic and Health Survey, Sano and associates (Sano et al., 2021) explore the association between married women's physical IPV justification and female genital mutilation (FGM). Using in-depth interviews conducted with 84 women who immigrated from Africa, Asia, and Latin American countries, Njie-Carr and associates (Njie-Carr et al., 2021) developed the Engendering Resilience to Survive (ERS) model to illustrate the unique vulnerabilities experienced by these survivors while also focusing on their resilience and strengths.

### ***Mental and physical health consequences***

Relationship violence has been shown to have a profound impact on the physical health and emotional well-being of Black women (Rice et al., *in press*). Sharps et al. (2021) used a syndemic framework to disentangle the intersecting and synergistic effects of IPV, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection. In addition, they review effective evidence-based interventions and strategies to address the unique needs of battered Black women who are living with HIV. Also, substance abuse, violence, and Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS)/HIV (i.e., SAVA) frequently co-occur and this cluster of adversities have been associated with increased mental health problems, such as posttraumatic stress symptoms (PTSS). Yet, few studies have examined protective factors, such as social support. Howell and associates (Howell et al., 2021) address this void in the literature by using a syndemic framework to assess the interaction among these adversities as well as the moderating effect of social support in their largely Black sample of battered women.

## **Part II: The web of violence and culturally sensitive treatment**

### ***Family violence***

Intimate partner violence can have a radiating effect, which goes beyond the survivor, and negatively impacts other family members, including children.

Aymer (2021) sought to understand abused mothers' perceptions of how their adolescent sons (ages 13–17) have been affected by IPV in their home. Using in-depth interviews with 10 mothers (7 identified as African Americans, Black, or Caribbean) who resided in battered women shelters, participants demonstrated a keen awareness of how their abuse impinged on their son's lives, particularly as their sons used violence to protect their mothers. As a result, the mothers were motivated to seek shelter services, which was a precursor to leaving their abusers.

Among Black women, childhood victimization in the form of observing violence between parents/caregivers or experiencing childhood physical abuse was associated with being the victim or perpetrator of adult IPV. However, researchers should widen the lens by investigating a range of family violence in the form of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs; West, 2021). In this Special Issue, Lee et al. (2021) found that adult family incarceration, substance use, and mental illness were associated with adolescent bullying perpetration among 637 urban African American adolescents from the Southside of Chicago.

### ***Institutional and structural violence***

When survivors seek services from formal agencies, they may encounter institutional violence, such as discriminatory police treatment in the form of having their IPV and sexual assault minimized or by encountering police officers who have victim blaming attitudes (West, 2021). Richie and Eife (2021) make the link between gender-based violence against Black women and the forces that led to their overcriminalization. More specifically, they used a case history and the Violence Matrix to illustrate how rape, battering, and stalking in their intimate relationships, communities, and larger society contribute to Black battered women's overrepresentation in the legal system.

Structural violence also can take the form of racial discrimination, which has been measured by being unfairly stopped and frisked by police, followed by store clerks, called insulting names, or physically attacked because of skin color/race. Higher rates of relationship abuse have been associated with being a victim of racial discrimination (Lavner et al., 2018). Thus, there is an urgent need for information on race-based stress among Black Americans. Carter and Kirkinis (2021) compared the differences in emotional and race-based stress symptom reactions to negative racial encounters among 175 Black and White participants recruited from psychology courses and community health centers. White participants primarily exhibited symptoms of intrusion, whereas Black participants experienced a variety of symptoms including depression, intrusion, anger, hypervigilance and physical symptoms.

### ***Culturally sensitive treatment***

There is a notable absence of research on help seeking and effective culturally sensitive treatment for Black victims and perpetrators of partner violence (West, 2021). Evaluations of male batterer intervention programs (BIPs) have produced mixed results with many finding little or no positive effects. In addition, this research has been plagued by methodological shortcomings. In this Special Issue, Emezue et al. (2021) conducted a systematic review of the research on culturally differentiated (BIPs) for immigrant male batterers (IMB). Although long-term impacts of these programs remain inclusive, allowing for group negotiations of cultural expressions of masculinity created promising short-term results in changing IPV-tolerant attitudes.

Cox and Rivolta (2021) attempted to overcome the methodological shortcomings in previous studies by employing a quasi-experimental research design with a propensity-matched comparison group to test the effectiveness of Connecticut's batterers' program for serious male family violence offenders. While controlling for demographics, family violence risk, and criminal history, they used court records to calculate the one-year recidivism effect sizes for program participants. Although the program participation group had significantly lower one-year arrest rates than the comparison group, these differences applied to any type of new arrest but not specifically to family violence offenses. Cox and Rivolta (2021) concluded that court-mandated batterer programs can be effective in reducing general recidivism; however, is inconclusive with battering violence.

There is a critical need for more research on service providers who frequently encounter Black survivors of IPV. For example, Black women often identify faith communities as a source of solace and social support when addressing partner violence. Davis and Johnson (2021) explored the perceived negative impact of IPV related to religious and spiritual abuse through the lens of Black clergy members who had observed, been approached for counsel, and/or had personally endured this form of victimization. These faith leaders expressed a need and a desire for clergy-specific training.

Finally, there is a growing African immigrant population in the United States (Tamir, 2021). It is imperative that scholars investigate IPV in this population, such as the help-seeking process utilized by African immigrant and refugee victims (West, 2016). In this Special Issue, Sears (2021) expands the knowledge base by investigating the cultural beliefs related to partner abuse help seeking among African immigrant and first-generation college women.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, violence against women and domestic violence within families is a well documented, internationally recognized problem that disproportionately impacts Blacks in the United States and across the globe. The authors

of this Special Issue emphasize the importance of data-driven discourse on gender-based violence in Black communities. It is our sincere hope that this collection of articles will serve as an inspiration for continued work on all forms of interpersonal violence in this population.

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## Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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