# DATING VIOLENCE AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN COUPLES

Dating violence, also referred to as courtship violence or premarital abuse, can occur across all racial/ethnic groups. However, African Americans are overrepresented in demographic categories that are at increased risk for dating violence. Although this racial group is socially and economically diverse, according to the 2000 U.S. Census, black Americans on average are younger, more likely to be impoverished, and less likely to be married than their non-Hispanic white counterparts. Consequently, much of the intimate partner violence experienced by black Americans will occur in nonmarital relationships. As reported by the National Crime Victimization Survey, between 1998 and 2002 more African Americans were victimized by boyfriends or girlfriends (17.2 percent) than by spouses (10.9 percent).

Despite the elevated risk of dating violence among African American couples, research on this topic has been limited and plagued with methodological problems, including definitional limitations and problems with how data have been collected, analyzed, and interpreted. Researchers, often using small samples of African Americans, have focused primarily on dating violence among high school and college students. As a result, less is known about violence among black couples who are older, cohabitating, or involved in same-sex partnerships. The definition of dating violence, which is often narrowly defined, has been inconsistent across studies. Forexample, several researchers focused only on victimization or used a single item to measure dating violence (e.g., "Has a boyfriend or date ever threatened to or actually hurt you physically?"). Consequently, it has been difficult to compare rates of violence across studies or to identify the types of physical, verbal, psychological, and sexual violence inflicted and sustained by black dating couples. Once the data have been collected, researchers have often neglected to consider gender differences in the injury level, nature, and circumstances of the violence. The failure to consider the association between socioeconomic status and dating violence has been particularly problematic.

What appear to be racial differences in rates of violence may, in fact, be social class differences.

### **Prevalence of Dating Violence**

Similar to their white American counterparts, dating violence among African American couples can occur across the lifespan, often beginning in middle school or high school. During the 1993 academic year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention administered the Youth Risk Behavior Survey to 3,805 high school students, which included 677 black males and 829 black females. Physical and sexual victimization and perpetration were measured by such items as, "During the last thirty days were you physically beaten up by the person you date or go out with?" and "Has anyone ever forced you to have sexual intercourse even when you did not want to?" Approximately 9 percent of black girls had inflicted or sustained physical dating violence. A small number (3 percent) of the black girls were sexual aggressors, while significantly more (16 percent) were victims of sexual assault. In contrast, 8 percent of black boys had beaten up a date and 6 percent had been physically assaulted themselves in the month prior to the survey. Equal numbers (9 percent) of black boys had been victims or perpetrators of sexual assault.

Dating violence may continue into the college years. Clark and associates surveyed 311 African American undergraduates (76 males and 235 females). Students were asked to indicate how frequently during the previous year they or their partner had used dating violence to resolve a conflict. Verbal aggression was defined as insulting or swearing at the other person; refusing to talk to the other person; and saying something to spite the other person. More than 90 percent of males and females were victims or perpetrators of verbal aggression. Physical aggression was assessed using the following items: pushed, grabbed, or shoved; slapped, hit with something; choked; used a gun or knife. Comparable rates of physical victimization were reported by males (33 percent) and females (41 percent). However, more females (47 percent) than males (35 percent) used at least one physically aggressive action against a dating partner. Pushing, slapping, or hitting were the most frequently used forms of physical aggression inflicted and sustained by both genders.

Dating violence also has been reported among couples who are engaged to be married. Boye-Beaman and colleagues surveyed 123 black couples immediately upon completion of their marriage license application. Mild aggression was defined as pushed, grabbed, or shoved, and moderate aggression as slapped or hit. Couples rated the frequency with which the husband engaged in each behavior over the course of their relationship. One-half of these black couples reported male aggression during their courtship. More specifically, 19 percent reported mild aggression and 30 percent experienced moderate aggression.

Despite what appears to be gender parity in reported rates of dating violence, it is premature to conclude that aggression in black male-female premarital relationships is mutual combat or a gender-neutral phenomenon. Using a sample of 171 low-income African American youths enrolled in a job training program, researchers Carolyn West and Suzanna Rose discovered significant gender differences in the types of violence inflicted and sustained. Significantly more men than women perpetrated severe forms of sexual aggression, such as attempted rape. In addition, men were more likely to make their partners feel inferior or to degrade them. In comparison, the women were more likely to have their feelings hurt by a partner and to be victims of severe physical and sexual aggression, including choking and attempted rape. Self defense may explain why these young women were significantly more likely to threaten, slap, hit, or throw objects at their partners. Taken together, the research suggests that dating violence is gendered. Alternatively stated, female-initiated violence should not be excused and male victimization should not be minimized. However, when one considers the severity of violence and extent of injuries, it appears that women are the primary victims.

# Risk Factors and Consequences of Dating Violence

African American couples consistently reported higher rates of dating violence across studies. For example, McLaughlin and colleagues surveyed 150 African American and 458 white couples upon completion of their application for a marriage license. The rates of mild aggression were comparable

across ethnic groups. Both black and white men (23 percent and 19 percent, respectively) had pushed, grabbed, or shoved their future wives. However, the rates of moderate aggression were quite different. One-quarter (25 percent) of black men had slapped their partner compared with 12 percent of white men.

Based on these findings, it should not be concluded that black Americans are biologically or culturally more prone to dating violence than other ethnic groups. Rather, these results suggest that African Americans are economically and socially disadvantaged, which places them at an increased risk for all forms of violence. Racial differences in rates of dating violence frequently disappear, or become less pronounced, when economic factors are taken into consideration.

In addition, exposure to violence in other contexts may partially account for elevated rates of dating violence among African Americans. Black men who were involved in community violenceas witnesses, participants, or victims-committed more dating violence. In some cases, exposure to violence in the family of origin predicted the initiation of dating violence by black youths but was not as strongly associated with dating violence initiation among white adolescents. However, the connection between family violence and dating violence appears to be influenced by race, gender, socioeconomic status, and family structure. Foshee and her associates found that the strongest association between mothers' use of corporal punishment and dating violence initiation was among those whose mothers had low levels of education. Being hit with the intention of harm predicted dating violence perpetration by black adolescents living in two-parent households, but not those living in one-parent households. Witnessing parental violence, on the other hand, predicted dating violence perpetration by black adolescents living in one-parent households, but not by those living in two-parent households.

Other researchers found an association between more approving attitudes toward dating violence and exposure to rap music and videos. Johnson and his colleagues divided their sample of low-income African American youths into two groups. One group viewed nonviolent rap videos, which contained images of women in sexually subordinate roles. The second group did not view any videos. Next, both groups read a story that involved teen dating violence perpetrated by a hypothetical male who shoved his girlfriend after she kissed another boy. Acceptance of violence was measured by such items as "Should John have pushed and shoved his

girlfriend?" Acceptance of the use of violence did not vary as a function of video exposure for males. The boys who did not view rap videos were equally accepting of dating violence as boys who were exposed to the videos. In contrast, black girls who were exposed to the videos showed greater acceptance of dating violence in the scenario than girls who did not see the videos. However, it is not known if exposure to sexualized images of black women increases the risk of dating violence in the lives of black adolescents. Future research on the links between premarital abuse and popular culture, in the form of music and media, is required.

Premarital abuse can undermine the mental and physical health of some victims. Salazar and colleagues measured physical, emotional, and verbal dating violence among 522 low-income African American adolescent females who resided in a southern city. Most physically abused girls (69 percent) were extremely upset over the incident. Victims also reported less social support from friends and family, lowered self-esteem, depression, and a more negative body image. Using this same group of black adolescent girls, Wingood and associates discovered that 18 percent had been physically abused-defined as punched, hit, or pushed by a boyfriend—in the six months prior to the survey. When compared with their nonvictimized counterparts, abused girls were 2.8 times more likely to have a sexually transmitted disease and half as likely to use condoms consistently. These unhealthy sexual practices can elevate the risk of AIDS/HIV and contribute to unplanned pregnancy and reproductive health problems.

African American women may face additional challenges when they attempt to terminate their abusive dating relationships. Some black women fear that disclosing violence will reinforce negative stereotypes, such as the belief that African American relationships are inherently dysfunctional. The perceived scarcity of eligible black men can make other women reluctant to end violent partnerships. Despite these challenges, April Few and Patricia Bell-Scott discovered that black college women were able to successfully terminate their violent relationships. After they identified their victimization, they separated from the abusive partner and sought support from family members and friends. Utilizing self-help books, spirituality, and therapy also fostered their healing process.

### **Intervention and Prevention**

According to researchers, improving the employment status, job conditions, and economic well-being

of African Americans should drastically reduce the rates of dating violence. Limiting exposure to child abuse, violence in the family of origin, and community violence should also reduce dating violence among black couples. Finally, education is important. Sexual assault and dating violence programs should begin in middle school. Based on preliminary research, these programs effectively increase black students' knowledge about dating violence and improve their attitudes, making them less accepting of premarital abuse. A special effort should be made to reach black boys, who are sometimes reluctant to discuss intimate relationships. Single-sex groups may increase their comfort level. If dating violence does occur, middle-school children anticipate seeking parental and peer support. Effective intervention requires that parents, community members, and public and social service providers be prepared to assist these children. Culturally sensitive education should be provided to adolescents and young adults as well. Research suggests that black male undergraduates are receptive to rape prevention programs, particularly if these programs include culturally sensitive content, such as specific information about race-related rape myths. However, primary prevention is the ultimate goal. It is necessary to reach black youths and young adults before coercive dating patterns are established and to give them tools to prevent relationship conflict from escalating.

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See also African American Community, Domestic Violence in; Cohabiting Violence; Date Rape; Dating Violence; Education as a Risk Factor for Domestic Violence; Minorities and Families in America, Introduction to; Social Class and Domestic Violence

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### DEPRESSION AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

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