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BLUE SHIELD OF CALIFORNIA FOUNDATION
BY JEMMOTT ROLLINS GROUP
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Portraits of Domestic Violence



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Blue Shield Against Violence

Blue Shield is committed to build lasting solutions to end domestic violence
and make California the healthiest State, especially for our most vulnerable
neighbors



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Foreward

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In this report to the Blue Shield of California Foundation, Portraits of Domestic Violence: The African American Experience, Social Action Partners (SoACT) presents a vivid qualitative portrayal of 15 women and men and their experiences with domestic violence. Based upon individual interviews with each participant, all of whom self-identified as Black and as a survivor of domestic violence, the report not only tells each story, but it also reflects on the interactions with the support services and resources. It provides an illustration of the ways gender, race and ethnicity impact on the connections to and benefits from such services.

The people interviewed for this report shared similar experiences with most other domestic violence survivors. Specifically:

- *Experiences with violence in their childhood homes causing difficulty with identifying DV as a problem in their adult relationships.*
- *Barriers to leaving relationships characterized by DV in-*

clude concerns for their children, lack of social support and financial instability.

- *An understanding of factors that contextually contribute to DV including financial difficulties, alcohol and other drug use, toxic masculinity, trauma.*

Women make up 85 percent of the victims of domestic violence and Black women are disproportionately affected compared to their white counterparts. African American women report domestic violence rates that are 35 to 50 percent higher than white women. African American women also use available support services and resources at a lower rate than other women, creating a dilemma for service providers. This report sheds light on that dilemma and affords significant insight into what service providers might begin to do to address this disparity. This includes making time to listen, being respectful and providing culturally competent responses. An understanding of the historical, complicated and difficult relationship between the Black community and policing also has to

inform recommendations and expectations for Black women (and men) in domestic violence relationships. Reporting intimate partner violence requires trust in those receiving the reports and in their capacity to respond appropriately. Portraits of African American survivors touches upon the complexity of serving men and amplifying their voices in our efforts to end domestic violence; while many are perpetrators, we know less about them and those that are victims are hidden behind the faces that shape our perceptions.

The #MeToo movement, which was started by a Black woman, has helped to create a context for understanding the abuse spectrum from sexual harassment and sexual assault to the power and control issues that constitute domestic violence. Black survivors as a group may benefit from this, not only from the general increase in consciousness and awareness, but from the growing understanding that existing services are not meeting their needs. The staggering number of people who responded to the #MeToo movement also underscores the depth of our societal and cultural problem, and

the inadequacy of our responses to one of the most devastating aspects of that problem, domestic violence. The response also demonstrates the degree to which sexual assault and domestic violence go unreported, and this report shines some light on why this is so, particularly for Black women.

Two recent high profile examples illustrate and potentially influence how African American and other women perceive societal support for the plight of survivors of domestic violence. When viewed through the lens of Black women, the response to Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's credible Congressional testimony about a teenage sexual assault by a now powerful man reinforced their collective weariness with reporting sexual assault to authorities. The lesson learned is that there is no benefit to reporting sexual assaults. If upper class, professional and well-educated white women are not believed and then further assaulted by "the system," what chance does an African American poor or working class woman have? Even when the perpetrator is also African American with a his-

tory of abusing his partner, African American women are frequently not believed - and worse - criminally punished for defending themselves. In a Florida case, survivor Marissa Alexander's lawyer put forth a "stand your ground" self-defense to her firing a warning shot at her abuser. That defense was rejected. Alexander was sentenced to 20 years in prison in 2012 in the state that exonerated the killer of young Treyvon Martin who also used the "stand your ground" defense. (She was released last year under a plea deal that required her to plead guilty to aggravated assault and remain under house arrest for two years.) California's prisons hold victims of domestic violence who fight back, sending a very clear message that the protection of Black women is not the mission of the justice system. The stigma, further victimization, condemnation and backlash are an all too familiar nightmare to domestic violence victims who expose themselves, their children and other family members when seeking assistance.

Domestic violence is not a new phenomenon in our society. For centu-

ries, "wife beating" was considered an accepted exercise of a husband's authority. And until very recently, most countries offered little to no legal protection from domestic violence, treating it as a private matter within the home. The testimony of the survivors in this report reveal the toll domestic violence takes on mental, physical, emotional, and social health. Its devastation is intergenerational, cutting across race, class and geography and, not surprisingly, Black women bear an outsized burden. These clear, heart-breaking stories of violence and the insufficient, ineffective and often punitive responses to the victims seeking help demand change.

The stories behind these portraits compel us - their families, neighbors, communities and policy makers- to better understand and respond to their plight. These survivors are not asking for more criminal justice interventions; they seek justice in obtaining services that address their real needs and equitable resources in their communities to support their partners, children and other survivors. They are not asking to be isolated and

driven deeper into poverty, poorer health status and toward services that often traumatize rather than help; they want those responsible to insure adequate housing for all of California's diverse populations, with culturally appropriate services close to that housing. They need health clinics to appropriately diagnose and tend to their deepest wounds, not simply to treat the superficial evidence of the stressors they endure. They want to be heard. They need friends and family to show up for them; for bystanders to stand up and make perpetrators hear that others care; they need communities to lift up their plight and stop asking what the victim did wrong; they need to roll back the rugs and end our collective sweeping their plight under those rugs. Theirs is the universal call for equity and justice, with the expectation that peace and security will exist in their everyday lives.

Now that we know better we must do better. ■

About This Report

With the support of Blue Shield of California Foundation, Social Action Partners (SoACT) embarked on a qualitative study of experiences and challenges faced by Black survivors of domestic violence (DV) in California. This work is the second in a two-part research series which seeks to consider holistically the perspectives of those impacted by intimate partner violence, either as community members or as survivors themselves. In this report, SoACT reviews the research findings and insights from 15 in-depth interviews with women and men across the state. This project seeks to:

- Center the lived experiences of survivors and take account of the impact of domestic violence on their lives, families and communities.
- Reveal experiences and challenges Black survivors face in seeking support.
- Generate recommendations to improve the DV systems-of-care, based on the strengths and weaknesses of the current infrastructure.
- Uncover culturally competent models to serve Black families and communities impacted by domestic violence.

Through its Blue Shield Against Violence initiatives, the Foundation has led the state of California in working to address, prevent and ultimately, end domestic violence. In its mission to serve California's most vulnerable populations, the Foundation and its partners recognize a need to improve the systems which serve Black domestic violence survivors, their families and communities. As a partner to Blue Shield's efforts, SoACT is proud to present these findings and recommendations towards our shared mission of a more just and safe California.

This report provides the Blue Shield of California Foundation, domestic violence advocates and community stakeholders a close look at the resilience, creativity and bravery of survivors in the face of limited support networks and offers their unfiltered feedback on how DV systems can be improved, particularly for Black women and men.

Methodological Approach

To examine how California's DV system can be improved, SoACT interviewed 15 women and men who self-identify as both Black and as a survivor of domestic violence. In March 2018, SoACT contacted more than 10 DV organizations (shelters, support groups, advocacy organizations, etc.) throughout the state in regions with large Black populations. We described our aim to conduct interviews with Black/African-American survivors about their lives, experiences with DV and how they connected to support services. Many organizations were kind enough to pass along our request or directly introduce us to current or former clients. A few additional interviews, including the interview with our only male participant, were gathered through our personal networks. SoACT then followed up with each lead and attempted to schedule interviews with the individual at a time and place convenient to them.

Each interview was conducted in person and held privately between one interviewer and one interviewee. Organizations which distributed our call for participants were often

gracious enough to allow interviews to be held in their offices. This location provided a familiar place for many of the interviewees; for some currently in shelter or taking parenting classes, holding interviews inside an organization they trust was imperative and most accessible for them. In a few instances, interviews were held at the participants' homes at their request. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two and a half hours and were conducted in the Bay Area, Los Angeles and the Inland Empire. Interviews took place from March to late May 2018.

Before every interview, we informed each participant of the goals of the project and described their right to not participate, the option to use a pseudonym for the final report and explained that they could skip any question they wished to ignore. We also worked to emphasize that the project was independent from the organization that might have referred them to us, encouraging them to speak freely about their experiences without fear of repercussion. Each interviewee signed a consent form and received a \$50 gift card for their time.

Each interview was semi-structured, beginning with a set of questions (Appendix A) that were asked of all interviewees but also created space to follow themes as they emerged in the conversation. Each participant was asked to describe themselves, their experiences with domestic violence resources and their recommendations to better serve survivors and their families. We also were attuned to themes around race and whether survivors perceived racism as a contributing factor in their experiences within the DV system.

All interviews were tape recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim. Using the transcripts, SoACT coded each interview using NVivo, a qualitative research tool, to illuminate themes and connections between respondents. To code, we read through each line of transcript text and digitally attached themes or "codes" which represented the content of the statement. Codes were developed inductively as the interviews progressed but we also began with a set of codes related to the projects interests (i.e. "Systems Failure," "Shelter," "Police," "Physical, Sexual, Verbal Abuse," etc.)

After coding all 15 transcripts we used NVivo to discover themes across all interviews. Finally, we picked quotes from interviews which most exemplified the most pressing themes. Quotes are included as they were said with very light editing to assist readability. At the conclusion of the report, we compare the comments of respondents in this study with the sentiments represented in the first research project conducted with Black community leaders.

The interview participants identified as: one mixed race, three as either African or Caribbean immigrants, and as described before, one as male. The remaining respondents are all U.S. born women. Respondents range in age from 16 to 67. When possible and appropriate, we include a photo and the real first name of the participant; pseudonyms are indicated by asterisk. For safety reasons we exclude any additional information that would identify respondents, including the location of the interview. ■

In this report the term "DV system" refers to the combined systems that are responsible for providing services to those experiencing Domestic Violence including: Child Welfare, Courts, Criminal Justice, Health Care, Housing and Shelters.

Executive Summary



Black women in California are disproportionately impacted by domestic violence (DV).

Conversely, resources to support survivors and their families in California are either oversubscribed or underutilized.

This report aims to highlight how Black survivors experience violence, how they find domestic violence resources and presents their recommendations to end intimate partner violence in Black communities. The report pulls from 15 in-depth interviews collected by Social Actions Partners (SoACT) during the spring of 2018.

Core Findings

The Stories of Survivors

Many survivors describe experiencing the cycle of violence, from witnessing abuse in childhood to facing violence into adulthood. Because of the pervasive nature of violence in their lives, many struggled initially to identify DV in their relationships. In hindsight, respondents point to financial difficulty or dependency, drug and alcohol abuse, trauma and toxic masculinity as the cause of DV. Survivors faced difficulty in finding resources and leaving relationships for a myriad of reasons, ranging from concerns for their children, to lack of social support, to financial instability. The experience with abuse seemed to be exacerbated for low-income survivors, who often left abuse only to face more difficulty with basic survival.

Experiences of Men

Men and boys experience the cycle of violence also. Survivors describe the impact on their sons of witnessing or being subjected to violence in the home. Men also describe how they perceive violence and how their experiences may be ignored. Like others, our male interviewee pointed to systemic factors that cultivate violence, including that which is perpetrated by black women.

Interactions with the DV System

Police often act as the first point of contact in DV-related incidents, yet survivors describe law enforcement as cold, unhelpful in connecting to additional resources and lacking empathy. Many interviewees saw their lack of care as stemming from larger racial issues. As a result of these initial negative experiences, many survivors decided not to call the police in the future, often suffering in silence. The Courts and Child Protective Services also can re-injure marginalized women by separating children from mothers experiencing DV. Overall, both state-sanctioned entities were perceived to be racially unequal and sources of victim-blaming. Finally, survivors described great difficulty in finding emergency and long-term housing. While shelter is absolutely necessary for many people experiencing abuse, these services were chronically over-subscribed. Some describe waiting months to find open beds; others described unsanitary conditions or hostile living environments.

Solutions from Survivors

Survivors believe that the sources of DV are material needs, emotional traumas and historical injustice. Therefore, they recommended solutions related to economic justice for Black communities, mental health resources and better treatment from the larger society as ways to reduce DV

The Stories in Context

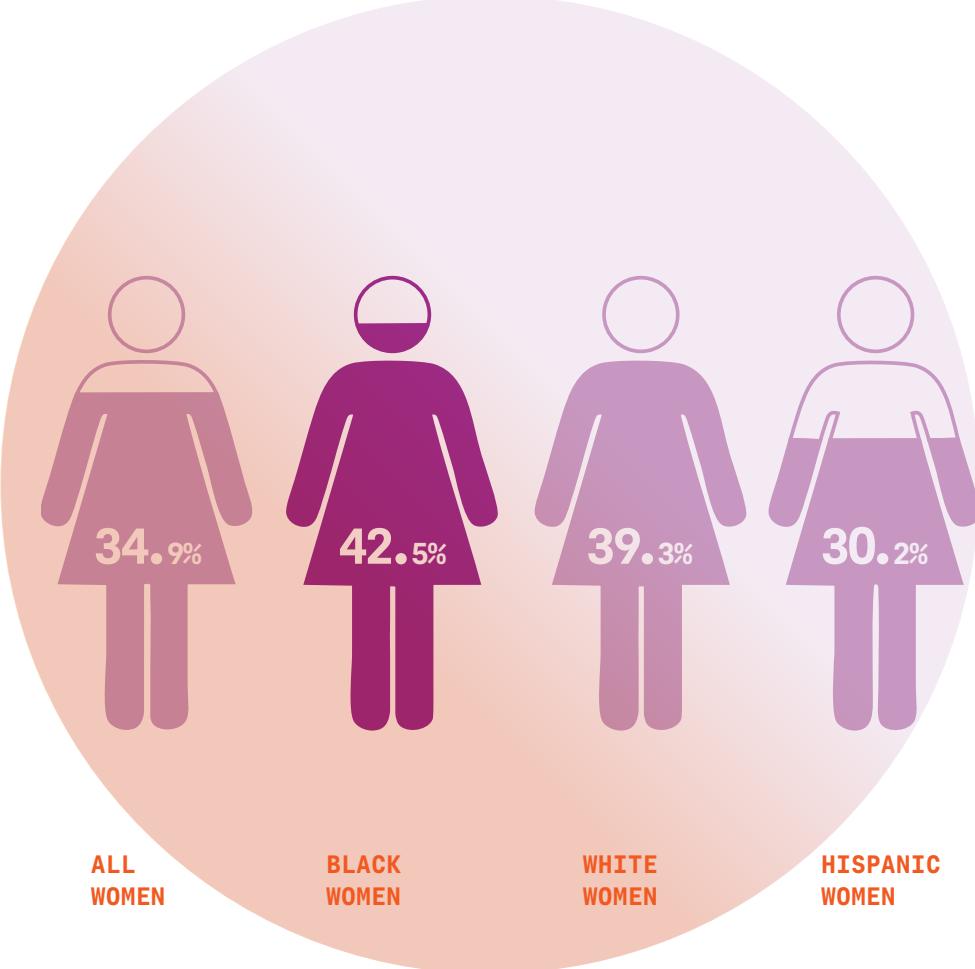
Women in California continue to experience intimate partner violence at extreme rates. According to the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, **34%, or one in three California women report experiencing domestic violence at some point in their lifetimes** (Figure 1). As one of the most populous regions in the country, California holds the largest number of domestic violence survivors in the United States (4,939,000 women in 2012).

In any given year, estimates suggest that more than 700,000 women in California will experience some form of physical violence by an intimate partner.

Despite these unsettling trends, **Black women in California face even higher rates of domestic violence, compared to other racial groups.** 42.5% of Black women report experiencing intimate partner violence, compared to 39.3% of white women and 30.2% of Hispanic women.

Figure 1.

Lifetime Experience of Domestic Violence by Race



Source: National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (2010-2012)

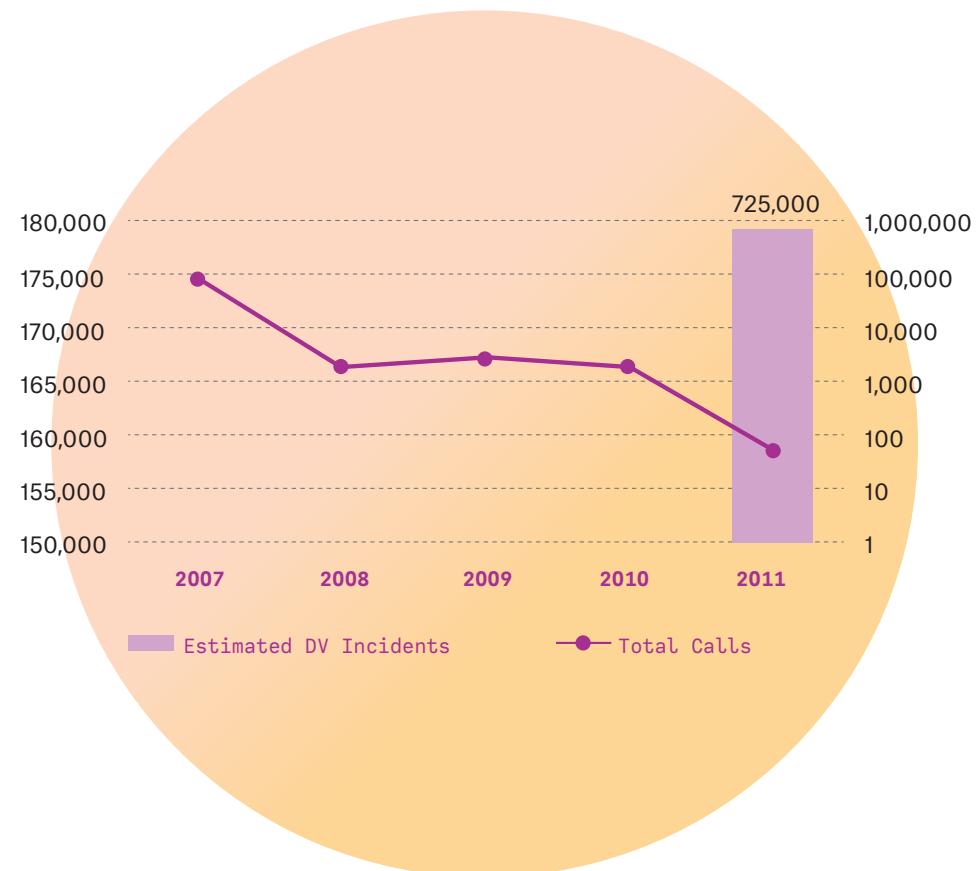
Only a fraction of domestic violence-related incidents in California are ever reported to authorities (**Figure 2**). Of the 725,000 estimated domestic violence instances in 2011, just 158,548 calls were received by California police according to the California Open Justice Initiative - under 22%. The number of domestic violence related calls in California decreased by 9% from 2010 to 2011.

Since police calls reflect just a portion of all domestic violence related incidents, resources offered by non-profit providers are understandably routinely oversubscribed. According to the 2015 Domestic Violence Counts Survey,

in just one day, 17% of all requests for DV services went unmet in California; 72% of unmet requests were for emergency housing. While this data is not disaggregated by race, these trends suggest that California women and Black women in particular- who are overrepresented among domestic violence survivors- experience a significant resource gap after instances of intimate partner violence. With these challenges in mind, the following describes how Black survivors experience these issues and their recommendations to improve the domestic violence infrastructure.

Figure 2.

Total Domestic Violence Police Calls vs. Estimated Domestic Violence Incidents



Sources: CA DOJ Open Justice Initiative;
National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (2010-2012)

Escaping Abuse: Stories of Survivors

Renee first witnessed domestic violence at a young age. On the outside, her family appeared normal and financially stable, supported by her father's work as a dentist in the military. She was born in Germany and, after a pit stop in Kansas, found a permanent home in the Bay Area. Their life seemed conventional, if not picturesque: a two-parent home in a predominately Black professional community in East Oakland. But her father's alcoholism, rage and subsequent violent abuse of her mother tormented their inner family life. Growing up, Renee changed schools twelve times as she, her mother and younger brother attempted to flee the violence. She describes this time period as full of "a lot of trauma."

Lonely and looking for an escape from the instability, Renee found

refuge in a relationship with a boy from her high school. They quickly fell in love and became inseparable – she was pregnant at 19, married at 20. But their relationship was also mired with abuse that she says began at the tender age of 18. She recalls,

"We got together and it was probably always kind of abusive but it didn't really manifest like the in-your-face kind of stuff. But I thought it was attention."

She later described the abuse as physical violence, to which she would normally fight back, verbal abuse and rape. Like many other respondents, Renee describes not being sure her experiences were, in fact, domestic violence, especially at a young age. She says things were made more unclear as she

and her ex-husband began to abuse drugs together.

Renee endured the relationship for about six years, until one day she had enough.

"Leaving was difficult because I was in love with him and you know he loved me in his own strange way. But I think about it, I know there was this incident where I felt like blowing his head off. I knew then, 'Okay, we're done.' I think there was always this fantasy early that, 'Oh, maybe he'll change.' I don't know. I did know I had hit my [limit], so somebody was going to get hurt."

At that time, Renee describes resources as even less available .

"You know, at that time, see we're talking back in ..."

probably we were together around '69, '70. So, in the 70's there wasn't a whole lot of stuff... I don't really remember having any service providers. I just kind of did my own personal development work and that really helped me kind of transform."

After the relationship, she moved in with her brother, raised her daughter and got her bachelor's degree at UC Davis. Now, Renee has turned her pain into power: she's received multiple Masters degrees and is currently pursuing a PhD program. Before going back to school, she led a legal clinic for domestic violence survivors in the Bay Area, using her experience as a survivor to provide compassionate care to clients seeking restraining orders.

In our research, Renee's story represents that of many other survivors. She experienced the cycle of violence from her father and then struggled to identify violence in her own relationship; she faced difficulty in finding resources and describes minimal help from family or friends in escaping abuse. Before moving in with her brother, she says no one in her family intervened or even knew about the abuse; after attending 13 schools, she had few friends to step in either. Yet in other ways, Renee is quite different than other survivors we spoke with: she grew up in a two-parent home and- although not without difficulty- she was raised middle class and went on to become a professional herself. For survivors with fewer resources, often their experiences reflect even higher levels of dysfunction and reliance on social services.

Renee, like others, believes that financial stress is absolutely a contributor to domestic violence.

"I think it's true that abuse is more likely when people are struggling financially. But yeah, you are vulnerable. I mean when you have children you're trying to eat, so a man comes along and they know, again they're master manipulators, they start off saying the perfect thing. Usually they don't start off punching you in the face."

Table 1.

Percent of Population Below the Poverty Line, by Race, Gender and Location, 2016

	White	Black	Latinx	TOTAL
United States	11 %	26 %	23 %	13 %
U.S. Women	13 %	26 %	24 %	15 %
California	14 %	18 %	20 %	14 %
CA Women	16 %	21 %	22 %	17 %

Among all other causes of DV - drug or alcohol abuse, trauma, or a culture of toxic masculinity - financial strain or dependency was labeled as the leading cause of abuse. Survivors described that both the stress of economic difficulty or, in the absence of financial strain, one partner being economically dependent on the other, can lead to disastrous consequences. As African Americans and Black women in particular disproportionately experience poverty compared to other groups, the reflections of respondents likely hold deep implications for the larger population.

Respondents like Brittany* faced extreme financial hardship throughout her life. Brittany currently lives in temporary housing with her children. Twenty-three years ago, Brittany

was born to a 15-year old single mother and quickly placed in foster care. After moving through a few homes she was eventually adopted by a white family, whom she characterizes as interested in keeping her "for the check." Her childhood was full of physical and verbal abuse, neglect and racial antagonism in the home. At 12 she was raped by her adopted mother's boyfriend and conceived a child. Soon she and the baby were both institutionalized; her child to foster care and eventually adoption, and she, due to mounting anger and fights in school, to juvenile hall. Between 13 and 16, she was in and out of detention centers and became a victim of human trafficking. At 18, she married an abusive husband, with whom she would have three children.

She describes leaving the relationship:

"Our last physical situation was in February 2017, where my husband had jumped on me, and that was my final draw with him. He ended up getting arrested, this was his first time getting arrested. I had to leave my house with the kids, and go to a friend's house. And I got the restraining order, and, went through all the ropes that you had to go through. Now we're working on a divorce.

He was released from jail, and he had the key to the house. I wasn't allowed back to the house, because DCF thought that he would come back, which, he did. He burnt up my house, so I had to make a decision what I was going to do.

I had friends, but friends will only go so far, especially the fact that it's me and three."

Enduring the relationship for five years, Brittany finally decided to escape and drove across the country, from the Midwest to California to pursue a career in entertainment. Although Brittany had taken some courses in medical assistance at a community college and had reconnected with her birth mother, she had very little economic or social support. Her mother kept her children for a while as she tried to figure out their new living situation. Her ex-husband continued to threaten her and their children. In need of housing, she googled shelters and came across her current residence that happened to have space available. Before

finding this respite, Brittany found herself in another human trafficking situation upon arriving in California.

"I ended up caught up with a pimp, and I didn't know that was the situation. I met this woman—basically this is my second time going to this store, and I was low on money, and the lady was like, 'Hey, are you okay?' I had already been crying, so like you could tell I had makeup on, and it was looking terrible... I was like, 'Well, I ran out of money. I'm not sure where to go, and what to do, I don't have gas in my car.' I was just venting about everything. She was like, 'Oh, I have friends that can help you get a job, and a place to stay. I guess I was being very gullible, I trusted her."

For about two weeks Brittany lived with the woman and a pimp, trying to plan her escape. Notably, these dramatic events were set in motion after her experience with domestic violence. Many survivors described the abuse itself as bad yet faced perhaps even greater challenges in their attempt to leave. Brittany notes that while she had called police and worked with DCF, she was never referred to a shelter or other support service. Finding shelter was done on her own, under the pressure of escaping human trafficking.

Survivors like Brittany faced a complex set of circumstances that made leaving abuse difficult. Beyond the complications of leaving a relationship in which one feels love and care at times, respondents listed concerns

around their children's safety or continuity of schooling, pressure to keep intact a nuclear Black family amidst stereotypes of rampant single motherhood, and pressure from family and friends to endure bad relationships as reasons they found it difficult to leave. Others spoke to the material hardships: without their abuser, many survivors would experience homelessness or be unable to afford rent. Very few respondents saw turning to friends or family as a viable housing option – either because of shame, the burden it would place on others or simply being isolated with no one to call. ■

Experiences of Men

Respondents routinely alluded to the impact of domestic violence on their children, including their sons. One woman described not being prepared to leave her abuser until she learned he was sexually abusing her 10-year-old son. Another woman was confident the reason her 20-year-old son was serving prison time was because he grew up in a violent home.

"[My son] saw a lot of terrible things when he was growing up, and I don't think he ever gained the ability to cope. As he grew up, he just got angrier and angrier. He would be angry at my boyfriend... angry at me. He got into a lot of fights in school. And I think that's why he's in trouble now... because of that anger."

The cycle of violence deeply impacts the physical and

psychological health of survivors, their children and perpetrators themselves. In our interviews, we spoke with Derrick, a male survivor in his early 40s. He described experiencing violence at the hand of his girlfriend when they would argue.

"On another occasion, she pulled a knife on me and then she tried to hit her own head into a glass window...that night the police came, but she didn't have marks on her. I had marks on me because they were defense marks... both of us went to jail and got probation...After that incident, I just went to her and said I'm so much better than this... look where this got me, it's not worth it..."

Later in his account he describes being provoked in the relationship

to commit violence himself.

"The only time I ever hit a woman in a relationship we were having what seemed like a normal argument. Out of nowhere she just slapped me. And, literally out of reflex, I slapped her back. There was no anger, I didn't feel anything... I've trained in martial arts virtually all my life. To me, once you strike somebody, there's a gender neutrality to that. You're a combatant at that point..."

In his mind, he defines this as a toxic relationship but sees the dynamic of violence itself being much more nuanced than the typical male against female characterization.

"Let's just take the normative occurrence that a brother is

beating up a sister. There are two victimizations that happen. We know how the sister is victimized, but the other part of that that the brother doesn't realize happens with each occurrence is that he's made to be more and more of an animal and that's a self-abusive thing..."

Describing root causes Derrick mentions that while men certainly should not and often do perpetrate physical violence, the abuse men experience often goes overlooked.

"...I've never heard a woman acknowledge that women have their own mode of violence that they operate with...I don't know that women are willing to admit to themselves that they have

a very high sophisticated form of violence... that form of violence is typically not physical...It's very communicative, verbally communicative. She knows everything about you, she studies you, she knows what makes you feel like a man and what emasculates you...when you get into a real fight, she pushes all those buttons, that's how she makes you feel bad, how she manipulates...there's very little discussion about that part of the fight when women are controlling the emotions and tugging at those triggers..."

As a result, he felt that while men needed intervention, communities plagued by socioeconomic disadvantage generally had a penchant for dysfunctional relationships. In fact, in the

current economic climate, Derrick considered Black women as sometimes more advantaged than Black men – another cause of interpersonal strife.

"In terms of the power dynamic, the way it is now, women are more independent of men than men are of women. So, a woman can tell him, 'Hey, I don't need you' and those power dynamics, even though they may be true, begin to feel abusive for the men and the only way they can dominate is physically...she's smarter than you, she's more advanced, she's more polished...but she's not stronger...it's sad, but that's where brothers relapse to..."

This economic imbalance spoke to a larger culture of silence around the pain of Black men in Derrick's interview.

"At a meta level, I think there's got to be some sort of ethos that's bigger than us that we can tap into...the brothers have to identify a higher worth than what society affords us for ourselves. If others won't affirm it for us, then we have to do a better job of affirming for ourselves because it just doesn't seem like anyone else in society is going to affirm that. We'll still be the meal, we'll still be the expendable ones...So regardless of land, regardless of the culture in that land, regardless if you're talking about the college-educated or the imprisoned, there's a very distinct loneliness about being a brother..." ■

Interactions With the DV System

Police

Not all participants in this study sought out or knew about resources when experiencing abuse. However, most survivors had at some point called or encountered the police in the midst of a violent episode. As the first point of contact for so many experiencing intimate partner violence law enforcement ideally provides fair and compassionate care, aids in ensuring the safety of families and the resolution of the immediate conflict, and connects families to resources like shelter, healthcare, legal advice, child care and counseling.

Yet survivors often described their interactions with police as just another embodiment of violence and abuse, this time state-sanctioned. DeWanda, for

instance, endured violence in multiple romantic relationships and describes feeling shamed in her interactions with police officers.

“The police didn’t make me feel very good about myself either because they would say things like, ‘Why are you staying? You need to leave. What’s wrong with you?’ And then, even if I said, ‘I want maybe a citizen’s arrest.’ They would not take the people to jail. Sometimes they wouldn’t even listen to me talking about the incident. They didn’t have an ear for it. They just made me feel like don’t call them because they’re not going to help you.”

At the time she called law enforcement, DeWanda describes feeling as if something was wrong with her, instead of considering her relationships to

be dysfunctional. She also did not know about any other resources and despite multiple police calls, only connected to a shelter much later through a friend. She recalls that perhaps a police officer once gave her the contact information to a shelter, but says,

“They didn’t give me real help or connect me to the shelter. It was a telephone number. I don’t count that as a connection.”

Her comment denotes a need for a much deeper level of assistance of which she did not receive.

DeWanda was not the only one to express feeling shamed. Chantel remarks,

“It’s very frustrating because you’re going to [police] for help and you’re scared and you’re

nervous. I think they are so saturated and so de-sensitized about DV because they see it so much. Then, they have their repeat offenders and it’s like, ‘Look guys, just don’t keep calling here if you’re not going to try to leave.’ ... Any support that you got, you got it yourself.”

As survivors, Black women particularly felt they received this message and were thereafter discouraged from seeking help.

In many interviews, respondents felt strongly that poor treatment from police coincided with larger racial animus. The following excerpts from Tilly and Kim illuminate how survivors perceive the actions of officers as racially motivated:

TILLY: Now that I can honestly say that felt like [the police] treated me like any other black girl on earth because in their eyes, they're just like well, there's nothing we can do about it. You might as well let him back anyways; he got mail coming here, there's nothing we can do.

Interviewer: How many times did you interact with the police during your DV experience?

KIM: I called the police maybe three or four. One, my car got

stolen by him. Then, another couple of times, something had broke out where he was hitting on me and my kid and I had to call the police.

How did the police treat you?

KIM: Very shallow, not like they would've a white woman. Definitely not what they would've a white woman. They treated me like it's your fault, kind of like, "You got yourself into this situation. We can give you these resources, but we can't get him out of your home," like they're not the resource.

How did interacting with them make you feel?

KIM: Very insecure. They're very judgmental.

Kim's interaction with police was further complicated in that she experienced violence while also dealing with her own bipolar schizophrenia. Lack of empathy from police exposes issues on a few fronts: poor support for Black communities, domestic violence survivors and those with mental health needs.

Survivors with these types of experiences adamantly concurred: negative experiences prevented them from calling police in the future. As a result, families often suffered in silence without much hope for assistance. At the time of the interview, another respondent, Danesha, was still grappling with the recent death of her child's father at the hands of police. He was shot to death during a domestic violence call from another woman. She was dealing with both feelings of

sadness and the injustice of his murder, was conflicted because she also experienced abuse from him, and was afraid of seeking assistance from law enforcement in the future because of its evidently deadly consequences. She now believes,

"I'm very against calling the police because I think that when they come, man, it better be somebody that really is evil and needs to get got...African American women, we don't call them as much because police treat our men different than the other men."

Racial dynamics that frame the conflict around mass incarceration and police shooting of unarmed men typically center on the experiences of Black men. Our interviews revealed how racial insensitivity carries serious

consequences for Black women. Whether protecting their batterers from harm or attempting to avoid shame and judgment themselves, law enforcement was considered by many a hostile presence in their lives. A few survivors themselves had been taken to jail for fighting back, an act which they felt would not have occurred to white women.

Police are perceived by many survivors seeking assistance as unhelpful and uncaring, if not lethally destructive. As often the first access point to services, when Black survivors hesitate to involve police, it follows that they also miss out on vital resources for themselves and their families.

Court & Child Protective Services

While most encountered the police, not all survivors reported interactions with the court system or social services. For survivors with children, the court system often assisted in settling child support or custody issues. For others, they visited courts to press charges against an abuser or seek out a restraining order. Finally, a small group of respondents reported court interactions related to their own convictions. Francesca, for example, experienced abuse from her boyfriend. They lived together, and in addition to welfare payments, she survived and fed her children from his monetary contributions. Their financial interdependence is why

Francesca says she never called police or left the relationship. Still, unbeknownst to her and against her will, Francesca's mother called Child Protective Services about the abuse. With tears in her eyes she explains,

"I have never had a run in with Child Protective Services ever in my life before this situation. I love my kids. Never had a call, CPS never came by my house, nothing. And then when they came to my house, they came to take my kids. I was like... I didn't have no chance. And it feels like I've been having to do everything almost by myself because CPS come in to take the kids and that's just it. The court order you to do everything and they expect for you to be able to do it on your own, knowing that sometimes when you have kids,

sometimes that's your source of income. You know, your kids are your source of income.

Francesca lost her kids and was ordered by the court to find another place to live. But without children in her custody, welfare stopped her payments, therefore preventing her from putting down a deposit a new apartment. Instead of receiving support as a survivor, Francesca was criminalized as a bad parent for enduring abuse and forced to work her way out of this predicament. She goes on,

"There was a report stating that I was addicted to ecstasy. However, when they came out to my house, said here's your court date, we need you to drug test tomorrow. So they came out with the intent to

take my kids regardless. House full of food, house clean, kids clean, they didn't care. Went to drug test the next day and didn't have ecstasy in my system but I had marijuana, I was smoking marijuana. Now I have to go to parenting classes for some months and outpatient classes for three months for marijuana to get my kids back...

My youngest daughter is actually in foster care now and my oldest daughter is with her father, 'cause they have two different fathers. I get to see my oldest daughter once a month because they moved her all the way to Alameda County which is up north. And my youngest daughter, I get to see her every week. But they don't even think about the strain it has on the

child as well. You know, seeing their parents come and go that's hard for them as well. Just as hard as it is for me, it's hard for my daughter. Both of them. It's hard for her to understand why she's not with me. And I have to tell her mommy's in school right now."

Francesca never admitted to the court that she experienced violence and since this incident she's broken up with her boyfriend. She acknowledges that the environment was not ideal for children. Yet Francesca believes that with no prior issues, she should have been granted resources. Instead, because of the abuse she suffered, her world turned upside down. She lost her apartment, had to move to prove her stability to the court, found a job to support herself

and has classes three times a week, along with random drug tests. As California moves to legalize marijuana, it leaves one to speculate why the drug classes are necessary as a part of her reunification plan. Meanwhile, her batterer experienced no prison time, no classes – according to Francesca, she endured all the consequences for her own abuse.

Francesca is a mother who cares deeply about her children. This was evident through her tears as she talked about the whole ordeal and how frustrated she felt with them being taken from her. Like others, she felt that if she were white, her children would not have been taken. In this case and others, the court system and CPS worked together to make life more difficult for a family already experiencing challenges.

Shelter

As revealed in the annual Domestic Violence Counts survey, there is a serious need for more emergency and long-term housing. In almost all situations, a person leaving domestic violence is without a home, and lacking economic or social resources as often is the case, many need assistance finding shelter. As stated before, survivors describe difficulty in knowing about housing resources. After resources are made available, it is often difficult to find a shelter with open beds.

For example, Tilly faced eviction after her boyfriend broke the door in her home. She called 211 to try to find resources for homelessness, and upon learning

about her situation, was referred to a DV shelter. She called, only to find out they had no room, but she was given the number to another shelter.

Interviewer: How many shelters do you feel like you called?

Over 60.

Over 60? Are you serious?

Because there's 20-something out here, and then there's 29, no ...Wait... 29 in LA County and then 20-something up north. So I called about 50. And every time I called one, they gave me five more numbers to call.

So you would just go down the list?

Some of the numbers don't

answer, some of the numbers just busy, some of them they don't got no rooms. You know, it's just a lot of stuff.

And you've been calling for six months?

Yeah - because my lease was up in November, I had got evicted. Because that last month I wasn't able to pay the rent because he kicked me out. I don't know. I was just going through a lot. He took my tax money last year so it was hard for me to do a lot of stuff. And I'm self-employed.

In addition to domestic violence, Tilly faced challenges that resulted from the intersection of work and housing. Like many others, perhaps her situation would not have been so difficult

with more stable income or housing. Finally, after six months, she found an open space at a shelter and currently is in search of long-term housing. She fears that her eviction will make finding a place to live impossible; so far, all landlords have turned her down.

Once in housing, survivors noted difficulty with short-term options. Brenda noted,

"At the end of the 60 days, I just called [my batterer], like, come pick me up. My little vacation is over. Because I had nowhere else to go."

Still others noted that some shelters struggled with cleanliness, placed families in tight quarters or had challenges protecting families from others experiencing mental health

episodes in the shelter.

When asked for the most important intervention for survivors, 95% of interviewees said shelter or housing should be the top priority. However, they were adamant that these solutions should include safe, clean long-term housing that was easy to access. ■



Solutions From Survivors

With their collective wisdom and experience, we asked survivors to recommend ways the DV infrastructure could better support Black families.

Their recommendations fell into four categories: 1) economic support and help with basic needs, 2) assistance in dealing with traumas like racism and the cycle of violence, and 3) promote healthy communications.

Interviewees respond to the question:

“What would your community need to live in a world without domestic violence?”

“I would say the prices, because a lot of people have to get in relationships to live together here, because no one can really just afford it. So it’s like what I’ve noticed is that people are like jumping into relationships so that they have a place to stay, and that they’re not homeless, because nobody can really just afford the rent here. It’s super, super high. And I’m just like, that’s just what I’ve noticed, is that people are jumping into relationships, and then the relationships are not healthy, and they’re not good, and they’re ending up bad. And some people end up in marriage because they end up having kids, and then people don’t want to leave because there’s kids involved, or because they’re not going to have somewhere to stay if they leave, because that’s all they had.” —Amber

“Get the drugs. Get the drugs and the parasitic people out. It’s like, ‘Who are the parasitic people?’ You can’t be judgmental, but I think they know who they are. It’s like the drug dealers, but the drug dealers are victims themselves. It’s a vicious cycle. They need money for food. You know what I’m saying?”—Kim

“I would think first of all that no one should get married unless they have counseling. First of all there really needs to be an understanding so it probably needs to even start in elementary school. So, you’ve got to do education. You’ve got to offer therapy or something for people to work through whatever’s going on with them. We’ve got to address the plight of African Americans in this country, we are not safe, we do not feel safe. And there’s a stress level that then activates other things. So, I think there’s so many levels of things that have to be addressed, economic, the whole system. And how we are accepted in the system has to change.” —Renee

“That’s a lot of self-awareness that we should practice within our own lives, so that we don’t create domestic violence type situations. And then, earning living wages. More services for drug and alcohol people who are having struggles in that area. And then, having good trauma informed interventions because people are walking around in a lot of pain from domestic violence, gun violence. The whole world is kind of twisted now and it’s hard sometimes to be okay with that.” —DeWanda

From their responses, we see that survivors identify their problems as a complex web of economic, emotional and historical issues plaguing their communities as a whole. None called for tougher policing; rather they lifted up the importance of basic needs, like housing and transportation for survivors and mental health resources for all involved. ■

Recommendations

Black domestic violence survivors in California face significant obstacles in navigating the current domestic violence infrastructure. Through the stories of Black survivors themselves, the challenges are clear: an unjust social services system and a strapped domestic violence infrastructure.

Towards a more culturally competent domestic violence movement, SoACT recommends:

Convene domestic violence service providers and invest in holistic systems improvements across the infrastructure.

Police, social services, hospitals, shelters and legal entities all play important roles in the DV system. At present, these systems need improvements in how they manage cases, refer survivors to other resources and treat families with dignity. These entities need additional support (resources and training) to create environments of refuge for Black survivors, as opposed to perpetuating systemic violence on an already vulnerable population.

Re-design the DV service pathway.

Typically police act as the first contact point for DV services. Through promotion of alternative entry-points (i.e. the hotline, DV shelters, or new alternatives), Black populations can receive more compassionate and equi-

table care, reducing the time it takes survivors to escape unhealthy dynamics.

Invest in creative emergency, long-term and permanent housing solutions.

California as a whole already suffers from a shortage of affordable housing, placing domestic violence survivors on a long list of other populations who also need access to shelter. We recommend a creative partnership with foster care systems, homeless service providers, and veterans, disabled and DV organizations to collectively design a solution that serves the unique needs of these vulnerable groups. DV survivors often fall into many of these categories, yet the lack of safe, clean and long-term housing, again, prevents survivors from escaping abuse. As Black communities disproportionately experience poverty, the lack of housing at present incentivizes remaining in dysfunctional situations to keep a roof over one's head.

Support the development of programs focused on community prevention: mental health support, racial healing and economic justice.

Survivors see domestic violence as a product of a complex web of economic, historical and emotional traumas. Their foremost request is for material supports related to housing and transportation, along with mental health resources throughout the community. In the interest of solutions which center the voices of survivors and communities, initiatives which speak to the material and emotional needs of the community speak to what survivors think is needed most.

Consider policy interventions that would re-frame the role of the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) in separating families impacted by domestic violence.

This report supports several potential spaces for policy intervention: making financial resources available for survivors to leave destructive relationships, stabilize funding for DV initiatives, and engaging in anti-poverty work to address the root causes of DV would all be worthy causes. However, one of the most immediate policy interventions may be reorganizing the procedures of The Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) intervention. At present, leaders express that Black women are discouraged from seeking assistance in fear of being separated from their children. This is a deeply consequential problem that could be remedied directly.

Continue to lift the voices of marginalized communities through the dissemination of these findings.

Promote the insights provided by this study to a larger number of domestic violence leaders through Blue Shield's existing channels, including the webinar series, future leadership meetings and the newsletter. ■

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About Us





In low income communities of color and with culturally specific organizations, SoACT is committed to providing culturally responsive organizational capacity building. We assist in program development, capacity building, fund development and building strong collaborations. In the fields of women's health, preventing violence and advancing social justice, we've worked with a range of partner organizations on systems improvements, innovation, strengthening social support networks and ending violence.

Recent efforts include technical assistance and program planning with First 5 LA, Los Angeles Homeless Housing Agency, SLATE Z – South Los Angeles Transit Empowerment Zone and small community organizations including Community Reflections, a legacy arts organizations in South Los Angeles, and more!

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Project Manager
Fran Jemmott

For over forty years, Fran Jemmott has contributed significant program development to improve community health outcomes in African American Communities. She is a founder of the California Black Women's Health Project; lead consultant for the Strong Field Project for Blue Shield of CA Foundation; former Program Director for Women's Health at the California Wellness Foundation (1996 – 2003); former Board Chair of Public Health Advocacy; and currently serves on the Board of CompassPoint Non-Profit Services.

Fran's life work is centered around using informal helping networks to complement formal services for prevention as well as interventions. She believes that restoring natural helping networks in marginalized communities will contribute to long term, sustainable and culturally grounded approaches to solving persistent problems including interpersonal violence.



Research Lead & Report Author:
Jasmine Hill

Jasmine Hill is a social justice consultant, educator and PhD candidate in Sociology at Stanford University. As a mixed-methods researcher, her work is focused on improving the economic conditions of low-income people of color in the United States and contributing to the theoretical frameworks which describe how racial inequalities persist. Jasmine works with activists, non-profits, schools and foundations as a research consultant, facilitator, and strategist on social change initiatives. She's taught courses on sociological theory, race, and inequality at Stanford University, UCLA, Mills College, and Bunche Continuation High School in West Oakland. Jasmine is co-editor of "Inequality in the 21st Century" with David B. Grusky (2017; Westfield Press). She received her Bachelor of Arts Degree in Communication Studies with honors from the University of California, Los Angeles, and her Masters in Sociology from Stanford University.



Community Outreach & Coordination
Carlene Davis

Carlene Davis is a collective impact leader and strategist for positive social change. Her work is focused on building the capacity of women, families and communities to navigate and challenge policy and system barriers that prevent them from realizing their full and desired potential. Carlene's leadership for the Culturally Responsive DV Network led to successful transition from consultant to participant leadership and she served as Project Leader for the Movement Mobilization Institute. The Institute convened DV leaders to promote radical changes that would center the needs and services of Black Women throughout the DV field. Carlene received her Bachelor of Arts Degree in Political Science from the University of California, Berkeley and her Masters of Public Affairs from the University of Texas at Austin (LBJ School). Ms. Davis was recently selected as a 2017 Robert Woods Johnson Culture of Health Leader fellow.



Research Associate:
Lanette Jimerson, PhD

Lanette Jimerson is a scholar, consultant and educator. Her research focuses on access to literacy for under served populations—particularly youth and young adults who have experienced homelessness, domestic violence and sexual exploitation. Ms. Jimerson has been recognized for her work in the community by the Black Women's Health Project, the Black Women Organized for Political Action, and the African American Regional Educational Alliances. Lanette received her doctorate in education from the University of California, Berkeley.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

Interviewer Introduction

Our goal is to improve the services available to Black women experiencing abuse and their families, so today I want to hear about your life, your experiences with domestic violence and your thoughts on what can be done to prevent violence in the future. We can skip any question you don't wish to answer, take breaks or stop when you need to. At the end, you can choose to have your picture taken and decide if you'd like to use your real name in the final report. With your permission, I'm going to tape-record our discussion just so I can write notes later.

(Walk through consent form & collect signature)

Personal Biography

- 1.** Before we dive in I'm interested in learning about your life, from childhood up to this point. Could you take about 1-3 minutes to tell me about yourself?
- 2.** What are signs of domestic violence between intimate partners?
- 3.** Some people who experience domestic violence know right away a situation is abusive, and other times, people say they didn't know right away that something was wrong. What was the situation like for you?
- 4.** Some people say abuse is more likely when people are struggling financially, other people say it doesn't matter. What do you think?
- 5.** What are the root causes of domestic violence?
- 6.** When you were experiencing abuse, did anyone know?
- 7.** When you were experiencing abuse, what impact did this have on your children?
- 8.** How did your community (family/friends) respond when you experienced DV?
- 9.** What made leaving the relationship difficult for you?
- 10.** At that time, did you know about any resources for people experiencing abuse?

continues...

**Experiences
with Providers**

- 11.** After you experienced abuse [use their terminology], what happened next?
- 12.** How did you hear about these resources?
- 13.** I want to hear your thoughts about different services, so I'll list off a bunch of types of assistance. Say yes if you've ever used any of these resources: shelter, police, social services, family court, health clinic, nurse, therapy, pastor.

For each service mentioned:

- How long/how many times did you interact with [service]?
 - How did [service] treat you?
 - How did you feel interacting with them?
 - What did [service] do for you?
 - What did you like about [service]?
 - What could've improved the interaction? Or, what didn't you like about [service]?
 - How would you describe their level of compassion?
 - How would you describe their level of organization?
 - Did [service] connect you to other resources?
 - How would your experience have been if you weren't black?
 - Who uses [service] the most? (Racial demographics, age, income, etc.)
- 14.** After a person experiences abuse, what should happen next?
 - 15.** Looking back, are there any services you wish you could've used but you didn't know about then? Any support you used that you wish you would've avoided?

Recommendations

- 16.** On a scale from 1-5, (*1 – not a problem or 5 – a huge problem*) how much of a problem is domestic violence in the Black community?
- 17.** Thinking about your community, what would need to change to live in a world without domestic violence?
- 18.** After a person is found responsible for committing domestic violence, what should happen next?
- 19.** If someone wanted to give a lot of money to better serve Black women experiencing abuse, what should they put it toward?
- 20.** What do people need to know about domestic violence survivors?

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