Chapter 1

Violence in the Black Family: What We Know, Where Do We Go?

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Introduction

Twenty years ago research on the relationships between domestic violence and culture was not acknowledged as being worthy of scholarly investigation. The prevailing beliefs supported race neutral approaches both for research and for practice and presented obstacles for those who wanted to examine the relationship between race, ethnicity, culture, and violence. It was not only difficult to obtain funding for research studies, but many peer reviewers for leading journals were not supportive of such research as well. Despite the growing literature on domestic violence, significant deficits remained in the research, theory, and practice for families and communities of color (Hampton & Yung, 1996).

Because many researchers and practitioners persisted in spite of the obstacles, a greater appreciation for interpersonal violence in communities of color, especially among African-American families, emerged in the late 1980s (Bell & Hill-Chance, 1991; Coley & Beckett, 1988; Hampton, 1987; Lockhart & White, 1989). One explanation for this was the realization that the disproportionate mortality and morbidity experienced in some communities of color was a direct consequence of violence. A primary contributor to the recognition perception of minority violence as a public health problem came from the Task Force on Black and Minority Health of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS, 1985). Included in this report were studies that examined the link between violence and health outcomes (Hampton, 1986).

In this chapter, we describe what we know about violence in African-American families and review the research that suggests where we should
be focusing our efforts in the not too distant future. Specifically, we address the following questions: (a) What do we know about violence in African-American families; (b) What are the prevailing conceptual frameworks that might help us understand violence in the African-American community; and (c) What are some of the promising work being done in the field?

What We Know About Violence in African-American Families?

The term domestic violence has had many meanings over the last 20 years. It is commonly associated with wife beating or spousal violence. In addition, it has been used to refer to a broad range of acts of interpersonal violence involving victims and offenders who are in some way related to one another. For example, domestic violence may refer to child abuse, sibling violence, intimate partner abuse, or even elder abuse (Gelles, 1997). Given that the primary focus of this chapter is on violence between men and women who are involved in an intimate romantic relationship, we have chosen to use the term “intimate partner violence” to characterize the specific relational context for the discussion that follows. The term intimate partner violence is generally used to refer to acts of violence that occur between current or former spouses, boyfriends, or girlfriends. Moreover, it tends to include violence between persons who have a current or former marital, dating, or cohabiting relationship (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000).

African Americans are disproportionately represented among victims of intimate partner violence. One of the earliest sources of national data on the prevalence and incidence of intimate partner violence among African Americans are the two national family violence surveys conducted by Murray Straus and his colleagues. In both the First and Second National Family Violence Surveys, Straus and his colleagues reported that African-American males had higher rates of overall and severe violence toward their wives than did white husbands (Straus & Gelles, 1986; Straus et al., 1980). For example, in the second survey, African-American families self-reported higher rates of husband-to-wife violence (207 per 1000) than did white families (115 per 1000). This survey indicated that African-American marriages were at significantly greater risk for violence, with rates of severe assault 2.4 times than that of their white counterparts (Hampton & Gelles, 1994).

More recent studies report that African Americans experience higher rates of intimate partner violence compared to whites. For example, estimates from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) indicate that both African-American men and women were victimized by intimate partners at significantly higher rates than persons of any other race between 1993 and 1998 (Rennison & Welchans, 2000). African-American women experienced intimate partner violence at a rate 35% higher than that of