



Addressing domestic, sexual violence in the black community

Holistic approach involving whole family is required

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While national trends in overall reported rates of sexual and domestic violence have generally been declining over the past two decades, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health says there are segments of the state's population that face higher rates of sexual and domestic violence and insufficient access to services. Consequently, and unsurprisingly, they have poorer outcomes.

Black women, in particular, are one such segment. Black women are four times more likely to be killed from intimate partner violence and make up 22 percent of sexual and domestic violence cases nationwide, despite being only 8 percent of the population. It's important to call attention to this for many reasons, not the least of which is the decades of evidence demonstrating that sexual and domestic violence has a direct link to family homelessness.

In Massachusetts there are more than 13,000 individuals in homeless families, according to the most recent annual homeless assessment report from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. African Americans account for 51 percent of all people in families with children experiencing homelessness nationwide, according to the same study.

In our work at Brookview, we know that addressing sexual and domestic violence within black communities is one key piece of the puzzle to solving family homelessness. This is partly due to unique, culturally rooted differences that are often overlooked by housing providers, property managers, case managers, and others, in part because incidents of sexual and domestic violence are chronically under-reported.

There are a host of reasons for this. Many people in black communities fear calling 911 because of past abusive experiences with authorities, and, despite the fact that nearly 1 in 4 black women are raped in their lifetime, the community often feels that race-based issues should be placed in front of sex-based ones.

There is also the belief that one will be judged by the community for reporting other community members to the authorities, and many hold spiritual beliefs that discourage divorce and encourage people to focus on forgiveness and prayer instead. Finally, there are negative viewpoints about mental health services and “getting help” in general, even though 1 in 3 actually receive mental health treatment.

Addressing sexual and domestic violence in black communities must be different. It must contain a more holistic approach that focuses on healing the entire family. Additionally, housing providers and property managers, who are often intrinsically involved, must have a working understanding of the immediate steps to take in the interest of safety for not only those involved, but for the other residents. Housing providers, you are not alone in this work; I encourage you to reach out to your local programs for support, referrals, consultation, and training. For our part, Brookview is actively working with providers to consider the ways in which sexual and domestic violence may be an unseen, underlying factor in their dealings with residents.

Our hope is that by offering solutions that may prevent sexual and domestic violence survivors from losing their housing and entering the homelessness system in the first place, we can strengthen the community at large.

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