

## PRIMARY PREVENTION OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS

African Americans comprise 2.5% of New Mexico’s population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014) and are disproportionately at risk for experiencing sexual violence (Caponera, 2014). Sexual violence of African Americans has occurred in a unique historical context and was deeply engrained in the institution of slavery (Sommerville, 2004). In the 1800s, rape laws were race-specific: whereas an African American man could be put to death for raping a white woman, there were no legal sanctions for white men raping African American women (Sommerville, 2004). These policies and practices were fueled by and contributed to a belief that African American women were hypersexual and invited sexual assault (West & Johnson, 2013).

- According to the National Violence Against Women survey, 18.8% of African American women reported being raped sometime in their lifetime (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006).
- The elevated risk of African Americans for sexual assault must also be understood in reference to current day contexts that put marginalized people at greater risk. There is great diversity within the African American community, and certain groups are more vulnerable: those who are poor, living with HIV, who identify or express themselves as bisexual, lesbian, transgender or queer, or who are incarcerated.
- According to a report from the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, “Incarcerated at between 2 and 3 time the rate of White women, Black women are overrepresented in the criminal legal system. Depending on the study, more than half of incarcerated women were raped or experienced criminal sexual penetration before coming to prison” (West & Johnson, 2013).

**Social determinants:** Social determinants of health include societal factors that contribute to health. For example, poverty may make it more difficult to avoid unsafe environments; social norms around gender roles, inequality, and expression are directly related to sexual violence (Bott, 2010); and norms of secrecy and privacy contribute to spousal sexual assault and child abuse (Davis et al., 2006). Community responses of disbelief and victim-blaming not only cause harm to survivors, they also perpetuate a permissive environment that allows future perpetration. Programs that focus on victims protecting themselves, especially child victims, do not reduce victimization (Finkelhor, 2009). Only by changing the societal factors that permit sexual violence will we be able to substantially reduce sexual violence.

**4%** of survivors reporting to service providers were African American although African Americans only comprise **2.5%** of the population in NM.

(Caponera, 2014)

The lifetime incidence of rape among African American youth in NM is **1.7** times higher than among non-African American youth.

(Green et al., 2015)

**6%** of victims and **9%** of offenders in assaults reported to law enforcement in Bernalillo County were African American.

(Caponera, 2014)

### Evidenced-Based and Promising Practices:

So far no sexual violence prevention curricula for African Americans have been shown to be effective in preventing sexual violence victimization or perpetration. Research shows that the best way to stop sexual violence is through primary prevention strategies. Successful prevention efforts combine multiple strategies aimed at reducing risk factors for sexual violence perpetration and victimization related to cultural norms, beliefs and behaviors at the individual, relationship, community and society levels (Davis et al., 2006). Strategies may include programs, policies and environmental changes. Effective prevention programs are comprehensive; employ a variety of teaching methods; provide multiple sessions; are based in behavior-change theory; foster the development of positive relationships; are appropriately timed; and are developed in conjunction with the targeted community so practices are culturally and socially relevant (Nation et al., 2003). Cultural sensitivity includes trauma informed prevention specialists and providers who are educated about African American history, are ethnically diverse and from African American communities. Prevention should take a strengths-based approach.

The following programs may be effective with African American populations, although culturally specific programming should be developed and evaluated specifically with African Americans:

- **Safe Dates:**  
<http://www.hazelden.org/web/go/safedates>
- **Men Can Stop Rape:**  
<http://www.mencanstoprape.org/>
- **Coaching Boys Into Men:**  
<http://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/engaging-men/coaching-boys-into-men/>

Research continues on effective sexual violence prevention programming and policies. Go to <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/sexualviolence/index.html> for the most up-to-date information.

### Gaps:

- Sexual assaults are vastly underreported. Reasons for underreporting include concerns about system response, concerns about confidentiality in small communities, a long history of law enforcement abuse of authority and disproportionate sentencing based on race, and historical trauma.
- There is a clear need for more research and better data regarding African American populations.
- There is a need for culturally specific, evidence-based sexual violence prevention strategies and program evaluation developed by or in collaboration with African American communities.

### Community Resources:

**New Mexico Rape Crisis Centers:** Located in Albuquerque, Farmington, Las Cruces, Portales, Santa Fe, Silver City and Taos. Rape crisis centers provide crisis intervention, sexual assault exams, counseling, advocacy, outreach and prevention services. Contact for individual centers can be found at the New Mexico Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs website: <http://nmcsap.org/>

**Mental Health Center Sexual Abuse Program Coordinators:** Located in each NM Behavioral Health Service Division-funded mental health center in the state. Contact information for each location can be found on the New Mexico Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs website: <http://nmcsap.org/>

“Because really those things [sexual violence and racism] don’t operate in isolation of each other. Those are all interconnected forms of violence and you can’t call yourselves doing anti-sexual violence work without also doing anti-oppression work . . . I think homelessness is a form of violence, I think that women and children living on the streets is a form of violence, I think that the vulnerability for women in that situation is a form of violence, I think racism is a form of violence. I think the disproportionate number of people of color that are in our prison and jail system is a horrendous form of violence.”

- Focus Group Participant